SECOND CHAPTER

THE HISTORICAL PERSONALITY OF ASH‘AB

There are obvious elements of legend in the Ash‘ab story. They were already recognized as such by medieval authors 1). There also is much in it that might easily be suspected of being unhistorical. Critical minds might, therefore, wish to declare it completely void of any historicity. But from its internal coherence and the facts of its literary transmission, the Ash‘ab story can be proven to possess a historical kernel.

The fullest information on Ash‘ab is contained in the Kitāb al-Aghānī. This means that in the first half of the tenth century, the Ash‘ab story was fully developed. Not much later, the alleged date of Ash‘ab’s death (154/771) appears to have been accepted into historical literature 2), after at-Tabarî had mentioned Ash‘ab only incidentally. Our oldest direct references to Ash‘ab are found in al-Jahiz (d. 255/869) and Ibn Quintaybah (d. 276/889 or 270/884), who are closely followed in time by Ibn ar-Rûmî (221/836-283/896). This leads us back into the first half of the ninth century. And if az-Zubayr b. Bakkâr wrote a monograph on Ash‘ab, as it would seem to be very likely, a substantial amount of material on him was already available in written form at that time.

An analysis of the sources of the Kitāb al-Aghānī points into the same direction. Its article on Ash‘ab quite obviously is a composite from various sources which were put together without any noticeable attempt at harmonizing them. Most of them, we can be sure, must at some time have existed in written form, even if they reached the author of Agh. through oral transmission (or he pretends that they reached him orally). References

1) Dhahabi, Mīzān (quoted by Ibn Ḥajar, Līsān), thus doubts that Ash‘ab was born during the caliphate of ‘Uthmān and reached the age of 120 years. On the theory of two Ash‘abs, cf. below, p. 29.

2) Cf. Ta’rikh Baghdād; Ta’rikh Dimashq; Ibn al-Athîr; Dhahabi, Duwal and Mīzān; Kutubî, Fawâdî; Ibn Kathîr; Ibn Ḥajar, Līsān; Ibn al-‘Imâd. It is regrettable that the relevant part of Maskawayh’s Ta’ārib al-umam, which is the earliest preserved large history after at-Tabarî that might have referred to Ash‘ab under his supposed date of death, is not yet published. Ibn al-Jawzi’s Munâṣâf and adh-Dhahabi’s Ta’rikh al-Islām certainly contain biographies of Ash‘ab under the year 154.
to the son and grandson of Ash'ab in the chains of transmitters can hardly be denied authenticity. It further is remarkable that all the famous historians of the early ninth century, such as al-Madā'īnī, Ibn Zabâlah, al-Haytham b. ʿAdî, ʿUmar b. Shabbâh, and az-Zubayr b. Bakkâr, are quoted as transmitters of information about Ash'ab. Since it is known how closely az-Zubayr b. Bakkâr is identified with the Ash'ab story, we would hardly be justified to consider the use of his and their names as a gratuitous forgery 1). However, we are not in a position to tell whether all of these historians included Ash'ab in their published works 2).

Among the written sources which are mentioned in Agh., we may discount as too recent the references to written information derived from Ibn al-Washshâr (texts, no. 66) and an anonymous work (no. 55) 3). The 'book' of al-Qâsim b. Yûsuf (no. 114) might possibly date from the first half of the ninth century, though the author has not yet been identified with any certainty. More useful is the reference to a History of Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdî, which was transmitted on Ibrâhîm's authority by Yûsuf b. Ibrâhîm called Ibn ad-Dâyah (no. 65). Yûsuf is also quoted elsewhere as a transmitter of oral information from Ibn al-Mahdî (nos. 3 and 87). He had close relations with Ibn al-Mahdî, and he was the father of the famous author, Aḥmad b. ad-Dâyah, who wrote a History of Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdî which presumably was an edition of the material collected by his father. The work referred to in Agh. seems to have been this History of Ibrâhîm b. al-Mahdî. There is no conceivable reason why the two Ibn ad-Dâyahs should have introduced the figure of Ash'ab into the history of Ibn al-Mahdî if there was no historical basis for it.

All the available evidence thus leads one to believe that the Ash’ab story was fully developed in most details around the year

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1) As far as al-Aṣma’î is concerned, the situation might be different. Al-Aṣma’î’s name appears to have been used as that of an fictitious authority at a very early date.

2) I had no opportunity of perusing the preserved portions of az-Zubayr b. Bakkâr’s works, in order to see whether they contain references to Ash’ab. However, since a work such as the *Nasab Quraysh (Kitâb an-Nasab)*, for instance, was written in praise of the Qurashites, it would not be surprising if no mention were made in it of Ash’ab stories in which some Qurashites cut little dignified figures. [In fact, Ash’ab is not mentioned in Muṣ’ab’s *Nasab Quraysh* (ed. by É. Lévi-Provençal, Cairo 1953).]

3) It is possible that Aḥmad b. al-Hârîth al-Kharrâz (cf. no. 55) was the author, or rather editor, of the work.