THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE SCIENCES AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF PHILOLOGY IN CLASSICAL ISLAM

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As is well known, the term *adab* (lit. "good behaviour", "good custom") has a large variety of acceptations and is ill-defined in most of them. This makes it difficult to speak about it in general terms and, consequently, it is not rare to find disagreements and obscurities in the secondary literature due to different conceptions and definitions. The semantic history of the term was first traced in the classic study by Carlo-Alfonso Nallino. ¹ Although he does not always provide references to corroborate his story, his intuitive vision of the semantic development, or rather developments in the plural, appears very convincing. It is interesting to note that the diagram, which he provides in order to show the genealogy of the various meanings of *adab,* does not quite tally with the text itself—a sign that Nallino was still grappling with the details of the semantic processes. Nallino’s results were summarised without much modification by Francesco Gabrieli in the entry "Adab" in the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam.*² The early history of the term was recently reviewed by Seeger A. Bonebakker, who questioned, and corrected, some of Nallino’s findings.³ For the present purpose it is not necessary to enter into this discussion again; suffice it to say that, when Islamic culture reached maturity in the fourth/tenth century, *adab* had three

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¹ In the "Introduction" to his *La Littérature arabe des origines à l'époque de la dynastie umayyade. Leçons professées en arabe à l'Université du Caire; traduction française* par Charles Pellat d’après la version italienne de Maria Nallino (Paris 1950) 7-28. The original lectures were given in 1910-11 and never published (?). The Italian version done by Nallino’s daughter was published in: C.A. Nallino, *Raccolta di scritti editi ed inediti*, vol.6 (Rome 1948).


³ S.A. Bonebakker, "Early Arabic Literature and the Term Adab", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984) 389-421. On p.389 n.1, the article is identified as the pre-publication of a contribution written in 1975 for the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature.* However, in its 'republished' form as chapter 1 ("Adab and the Concept of Belles-Lettres"), in: J. Ashtiany et al. (eds.), *'Abbasid Belles-Lettres* (Cambridge 1990) 16-30, it appears to be heavily edited.
major acceptations\textsuperscript{4} that were categorically different from each other: 1) "good, correct, polite behaviour", 2) "a genre of anecdotal and anthological literature which serves as a quarry of quotable materials (muḥādarāt) for the bel-esprit", and 3) "a body of knowledge in the linguistic and literary field which comprises the genre of literature just mentioned, but includes further ancillary disciplines like grammar etc."

The question addressed in this paper is whether adab during the acme of Abbasid culture embodied a separate and distinctive ideal of education and intellectual pursuit, parallel to, for example, that of the faqīh, the ḥakīm, and the faqīr. We are thus dealing, first and foremost, with the third meaning of the term—one which might be rendered with the less ambiguous expression al-‘ulūm al-adabiyya. If we can find an answer to our question, that would be helpful indeed in characterising the physiognomy of classical Islamic culture. Underlying this is, of course, a less far-reaching and more modest question: Are the ‘ulūm adabiyya an independent and internally coherent system of disciplines and where do they have their place in relation to the other groups of ‘ulūm? One way to approach this question is to take a closer look at the literature devoted to the division of the sciences. This literature, characteristically, began to flourish in the fourth/tenth century, in what Adam Mez and, following him, Joel Kraemer have called the "renaissance" of Islam. This was a time when most Islamic sciences and disciplines were engaged in a conscious reflection upon their past in order to find their internal norm and their place in the overall system of meaning. Typical manifestations of this trend are the writing of handbooks, the formulation of usūl, i.e., methodological meta-discourses for various disciplines (above all fiqh and nahw), and the interest in the division of sciences. This latter endeavour was certainly brought about under the influence of the Greek philosophical heritage, and in more than one sense: 1) the classical divisions of philosophy, usually on the basis of the Corpus Aristotelicum, served as a model, and already al-Kindī produced a work of this kind;\textsuperscript{5} 2) the reception of a number of new

\textsuperscript{4} And several minor ones, among them even "mathematics".

\textsuperscript{5} Ch. Hein, Definition und Einteilung der Philosophie. Von der späntantiken Einleitungsliteratur zur arabischen Enzyklopädie (Bern 1985); A. Cortabarria Beitía, "La Classification des sciences chez al-Kindī", Mélanges de l'institut dominicain d'études orientales 11 (1972) 49-76.