‘Alī ibn ‘U바IDAr-RaIḥānī
A forgotten belletrist (adīb) and Pahlavi translator

by

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Rudolf Sellheim zum 65. Geburtstag

The medieval Muslim geographer and bibliographer Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. 626/1229),1 in his great bio-bibliographical compendium Muʿğam al-udabāʾ, dedicated a few pages to the life and works of the tenth-century theologian, historian, litterateur, philosopher, and geographer Abū Zaid Ahmad b. Sahl al-Balḥī (ca. 236–322/850–933).2 In his attempt to demonstrate Abū Zaid’s eminence among Muslim scholars in a dramatic manner, he wrote (3:78–79):

I heard some literary learned man saying: “There is unanimous agreement among the literati in literature (kalām) there are three preeminent stylists: al-Ǧāḥiz, ‘Alī b. ‘Ubaída al-Laṭafī, and Abū Zaid al-Balḥī. Among these, the one whose mastery of speech surpasses his meaning is al-Ǧāḥiz; the one whose meaning exceeds his mastery of speech is ‘Alī b. ‘Ubaída; but the one whose speech matches his meaning is Abū Zaid.”

Yāqūt found no better words for describing Abū Zaid al-Balḥī’s grandeur than comparing him with two outstanding men of letters among his predecessors: al-Ǧāḥiz and ‘Alī b. ‘Ubaída. Abū Zaid was indeed a distinguished Muʿṭazīlīe theologian whose superior style attracted the attention of Arabic writing authors after his time.3 Abū Ḥayīyān at-Tauḥīdī (d. 414/1023), an imposing literary critic and an admirer of al-Ǧāḥiz, in his book an-Naẓāʾīr, wrote

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that in Iraq people regarded Abū Zaid al-Balhī as the Ġāhīz of Ḥurāsān.4 al-Ǧāhīz (d. 255/868), another prominent Muḥtazilite theorist, is without doubt one of the most acclaimed writers of the Arabic language in classical times whose towering position is not contested by any Arab author. The literary stylist ʿAlī b. ʿUbaida, whose depth of meaning and ideas are said to have surpassed those of al-Ǧāhīz, is the least known of the three, but by no means the least illustrious. In his biographical notes on ʿAlī b. ʿUbaida, Yāqūt wrote (14:51–52): “Some people prefer him to al-Ǧāhīz in eloquence and excellence of literary composition…” A man of such stature is clearly entitled to be accorded a dignified place in the annals of classical Arabic literature, but he is not.

One reason for this is surely the discouraging fact that other than a highly corrupt and at times fully unintelligible list of about sixty “books” attributed to him first of all by Ibn an-Nadīm (d. 380/990),5 and other biographical dictionaries which depend upon him, there seems to be little mention of him in the sources. The same paucity of information surrounds the lives and ideas of many great men of letters in this period. The case of ʿAlī b. ʿUbaida depicts, on the one hand, the fragmentary nature of our knowledge about classical Arabic literature, on the other, the deformation and mutilation to which a rich cultural tradition has been exposed.6 In fact this prolific author and noted scholar seems to have enjoyed a considerable reputation among his contemporaries. After his death, however, his books were consigned to oblivion, and later authors made only incidental mention of him. He has not fared much better in modern scholarship. Although at least since the time of Flügel’s pioneering edition of Ibn an-Nadīm’s al-Ǧīrīst in the second half of the nineteenth century, the orientalists have been familiar with ʿAlī b. ʿUbaida and the titles of his works, to my knowledge, modern research has not yet produced any study of his life, ideas, and literary output. Brockelmann did not mention him in his now classic Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur. What is even more surprising is that Sezgin’s monumental Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums, despite its vast extent and its advantage of being restricted to the cultural heritage of early centuries, has not, as yet, referred to him on more than two occasions, and that only in passing.7

My first encounter with ʿAlī b. ʿUbaida and my awareness of his importance

4 Yāqūt (Muḥgam al-udabā, 3:79) has an-Nazāʿīr, but perhaps it should be read al-Baṣṭāʿir. See Abū Ḥāyān at-Tauhīdī, al-Baṣṭāʿir waḏ-ḏahābīr, 4 vols. (Damascus 1964–69), 2:380.
6 Muḥammad Arkoun (“La conquête du bonheur selon al-ʿĀmīr,” Studia Islamica 22 [1965], p. 56) speaks in similar terms about the tenth-century philosopher Abū l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmīrī. This is a good indication that the scarcity of our knowledge is not limited only to this early period.