

MESKAWAYH, ABU 'ALI AḤMAD

MESKAWAYH, ABU 'ALI AḤMAD b. Moḥammad [Ebn], Persian chancery official and treasury clerk of the [Buyid](#) period, boon companion, litterateur and accomplished writer in Arabic on a variety of topics, including history, theology, philosophy and medicine (d. 421/1030). His name appears variously in the sources as “Ebn Meskawayh” and “Meskawayh,” with the former form more probably correct. Although Yāqut, who calls him “Meskawayh,” states that he was a convert from Zoroastrianism (II, p. 91), it is more likely that one of his ancestors bore the name “Meskawayh” and converted to Islam before him. At any event, Ebn Meskawayh does not come across at all as a religious zealot in his works, and this was possibly due to the influence of his Magian background on his intellectual formation. Very little is known about his early life. According to the Persian biographer of Shi'ite ulama, Moḥammad-Bāqer K'ānsāri (pp. 70-71), he was born at Ray, and it would seem very likely that he grew up in the province of [Jebāl](#). He must have received training as a *kāteb*, or secretary (see [DABIR](#)), before 340/952, around which time he served as a secretary and boon companion (*nadim*) to [Abu Moḥammad Hasan Mohallabi](#) (d. 352/963), the vizier of the Buyid amir [Mo'ezz-al-Dawla](#) (d. 356/967). He lived mainly in Baghdad and thus enjoyed a wealth of amenities and contacts in what was still the cultural, if not the political, hub of the central and eastern Islamic world. After serving Mohallabi for twelve years he then spent seven years with another major Buyid vizier, [Ebn al-Amid](#) (d. 360/971) at the court of Rokn-al-Dawla in Ray. He apparently served both as librarian and keeper of the state papers and archives in the official chancery (the sources usually call him *al-kāzen*, “custodian, keeper,” as in Yāqut, II, pp. 88, 95; Ebn al-Qefti, *Tariḳal-ḥokamā*; p. 331; Tawḥidi, p. 346), and also as tutor to the vizier's son, Abu'l-Faṭḥ. Ebn Meskawayh himself praises the richness of Ebn al-Amid's library, and he personally saved it from destruction in 355/966, when a band of religious warriors from Khorasan passed through Ray on their way to the Byzantine wars; the library amounted to 100 camel's loads, according to his explicit statement (Margoliouth and Amedroz, *Eclipse* II, p. 224; V, p. 237).

After Ebn al-Amid's death, Ebn Meskawayh probably continued in the service of his son Abu'l-Faṭḥ; in 364/975 he came to Baghdad with Abu'l-Faṭḥ and a Buyid army. He rejected an opportunity to serve under the Šāḥeb Esmā'il b. Abbād at Isfahan under Mo'ayyed-al-Dawla, since he considered himself at least the equal of the Šāḥeb; but soon after 367/978 he entered the service of 'Azod-al-Dawla (q.v.; d. 372/982) at his court in Shiraz. He must have been already well-acquainted with the emir, since Ebn al-Amid had in the past been his tutor, but now for the first time he found himself directly in his service. He seems to have served as a *kāzen* in the sense of “financial official;” certainly, he always expresses a keen interest in financial matters in his *Tajāreb al-omam*, making this history a valuable contemporary source on taxation policy and the spread of the [eqtā](#) (q.v.), or land-grant system, in Iraq and western Persia. After 'Azod-al-Dawla's death, Ebn Meskawayh probably served under his son Šamšām-al-Dawla (d. 388/998) in Ray, since he is mentioned as one of the boon companions of Šamšām-al-Dawla's vizier, Ebn

Sa'dān. Certain sources (e.g. Yāqut, II, p. 90) mention further that he served Bahā'-al-Dawla (d. 403/1012; see [BUYIDS](#)), Šamšām-al-Dawla's brother and rival in Fārs, though this is not known for certain.

The details of Ebn Meskawayh's life are obscure in the period starting from Ebn Sa'dān's execution in 375/985 until his own death at an advanced age on Šafar 421/ February 1030 (according to K'vānsāri again, *loc. cit.*) at Isfahan, then under Kakuīd rule. Some vague references in the sources connect him with [K'vārazm](#) and its shahs (presumably the Ma'munids of Gorgānj, 385-408/995-1017, who were the patrons of such eminent scholars of the time as [Avicenna](#) and [Biruni](#)), but there is no solid evidence for this, and it is remarkable that Ṭa'ālebi, for instance, should not mention his presence there. Ebn Meskawayh had extended his history, the *Tajāreb al-omam*, up to the year 369/979-80, working on its completion until 372/982-83, but nothing is known for certain about his life after his associations with Ebn Sa'dān and [Abu Ḥayyān Tawhīdī](#). Yāqut (II, pp. 95-96) cites a spiritual testament (*waṣīya*) of his, but he is probably quoting here from Abu Ḥayyān.

Ebn Meskawayh was a prominent figure in the intellectual and cultural life of his time. He engaged in correspondence with figures like Abu Ḥayyān and [Badi'-al-Zamān Hamadāni](#). He was, it seems, an accomplished writer in the style of *badi'* (rhetorical embellishment) and a fluent poet; examples of his verse are quoted by Ṭa'ālebi in his biographical notice on him (I, pp. 96-100). Ebn Meskawayh was also fascinated by alchemy, including the transmutation of base metals, and by the occult sciences. His general attitude towards Islam seems to have been a mild one; he displays a philosophical and somewhat rationalist approach to religion characteristic of certain circles of his time, such as that of the [Ekwān al-Safā](#) (Brethren of Purity) of Baṣra. Another of his interests was medicine, a science much encouraged by his master 'Azod-al-Dawla; it may well have been for the Buyid amir that he wrote his two works on pharmacology, which are listed by Ebn al-Qeṭṭī (p. 331) but are not otherwise known.

The sources list some nine works by Ebn Meskawayh, including two works on theology and an anthology of poetry. But it was firstly as an historian, and secondly as a writer on philosophy and ethics, that his lasting reputation as an author of major importance was established. His *Tajāreb al-omam wa ta'āqeb* (or *awāqeb*) *al-hemam* ("Experiences of the nations and consequences of high ambitions") is an outstanding piece of work. In form a general history extending as far as the death of 'Azod-al-Dawla in 372/982, it is remarkable for its secular and philosophical attitude to events. For the period until the early 4th/10th century, he offers an abridgement of Ṭabari's chronicle, dispensing with the annalistic division of the early Islamic period and concentrating on the essentials. From the point where Ṭabari's chronicle comes to an end (302/915) up to the point where his contemporary history begins, Ebn Meskawayh's chief source is the largely lost history of Ṭābet b. Senān of the famous family of Sabians from [Harrān](#). Thereafter he relies on eyewitness reports from contemporaries, such as Mohallabi, Ebn al-'Amid, and other secretaries of the Buyids. In his history, Ebn Meskawayh's explicit intention was to point out the practical guidance that examples from history and experience can offer. Hence his contemptuous dismissal, at the

outset of the book, of “entertaining stories and idle tales (*al-asmār wa’l-ḵorāfāt*) which merely have a soporific effect on the reader.” Moreover, he openly eschewed dwelling upon the element of religious motivation in history, to the extent that he even omitted the sacred biography of the Prophet himself; as he explained, he was concerned with the achievements of ordinary human beings and not with those achievements, reached with divine or supernatural aid, of saints and prophets, since they can provide no practical guidance for ordinary men (see Rosenthal, pp. 141-42).

Ebn Meskawayh’s major work in the field of philosophy is his *Tahḍīb al-aḵlāq wa-taḥṯir al-aṙāq*. This manual of philosophy and ethics aims to provide the student with a lucid exposition of the main elements of the *falsafa* (q.v.) tradition. Its success is confirmed by the wide diffusion of the work and the efforts of later scholars in the field of philosophical and practical ethics to build upon its foundations, including Naṣir-al-Din Ṭusi (597-672/1201-74) in his [Aḵlāq-e nāseri](#). One should mention here also Ebn Meskawayh’s *Ketāb al-ḥekma al-ḵāleda* (“Book of eternal wisdom”), an Arabic translation of the Persian *Jāvidān ḵerad*, one manuscript of which bears the title *Ketāb ādāb al-Arab wa’l-Fors*. It is probably the philosophical tinge in all his works that, as Mohammed Arkoun has noted, made Ebn Meskawayh distinctly more acceptable to the Shi’ite Persian cultural milieu than to the more strictly orthodox Sunnite one; he himself could best be characterized as an adherent of philosophical Shi’ism, comparable with the *Eḵwān al-Ṣafā*:

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