



## ABŪ BAKR AL-KHUWĀRIZMĪ: SOURCES, SCHOLARSHIP AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HIS SCHOLARLY BIOGRAPHY

**Sulaymonova Khulkar Muminjonovna**

Doctoral student of Alisher Navoi Tashkent State University of Uzbek Language and Literature, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philology

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5448-1332>

[sulaymonovahulkar17@gmail.com](mailto:sulaymonovahulkar17@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the history of research on the life and literary legacy of Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-‘Abbās al-Khuwārizmī (935–993), one of the prominent representatives of the tenth-century Arab-Islamic literary milieu, and analyzes the sources that contribute to the reconstruction of his scholarly biography. The study comparatively investigates biographical dictionaries (tadhkiras) and historical-bibliographical works compiled by his contemporaries, the author’s own writings particularly the collection Rasā'il al-Khuwārizmī as well as scholarly studies produced in Orientalist scholarship from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. As a result, the process of studying al-Khuwārizmī’s literary heritage is divided into three principal stages, and the most significant sources for reconstructing his scientific biography are systematized. The findings of the research contribute to clarifying the methodological foundations of Khuwārizmī studies and provide an important scholarly basis for future investigations of the author’s legacy.*

### Introduction

The study of the lives and activities of individual authors occupies a significant methodological position in the investigation of the history of classical Eastern literature. Literary development manifests itself not merely within a particular historical period or geographical region but also through the intellectual and creative activities of specific literary figures. Therefore, reconstructing an author's biography, identifying the social and cultural environment in which they lived,

examining their scholarly and literary networks, and determining the circumstances surrounding the creation of their works constitute essential prerequisites for an objective understanding of literary history.

One of the most distinguished representatives of tenth-century Arabic literature is Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-‘Abbās al-Khuwārizmī. Although he achieved considerable fame during his lifetime as a poet, man of letters, lexicographer, and scholar, his life and literary activity have not yet been studied



comprehensively. In particular, because information concerning his scholarly biography has survived in a fragmented form across numerous sources, the systematic collection, critical evaluation, and synthesis of the available evidence remain an important scholarly task.

### Literature Review

The number of specialized studies devoted to the life and works of Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī remains relatively limited. While his literary heritage has received little attention in Uzbek literary scholarship, several substantial contributions have been produced by Arab researchers.

One of the earliest comprehensive studies of the literary environment of Khwārizm is *Al-Adab al-ʿArabī fī Iqlīm Khwārizm* by Hind Husayn Ṭāhā, which represents a pioneering attempt to examine the region's Arabic literary culture in a systematic manner [Ṭāhā, 1976]. The author devotes particular attention to al-Khuwārizmī's poetic and prose heritage and seeks to define his place within the literary life of the tenth century. Likewise, the studies of ʿĀʾid Saʿd al-Ḥārithī [al-Ḥārithī, 1977], Aḥmad Amīn Muṣṭafā [Muṣṭafā, 1985], Sayyid Ibrāhīm Muḥammad al-Dadd [al-Dadd, 1985], and Maʾmūn ibn Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Jannān [al-Jannān, 1993] constitute important milestones in the development of Khuwārizmī studies.

Nevertheless, these studies reveal certain methodological shortcomings. In particular, some biographical details are interpreted inconsistently, while a number of scholarly conclusions are not sufficiently verified through primary sources. Consequently, there remains a need to reassess existing scholarly views

and evaluate them in light of newly identified evidence.

### Research Methodology

This study employs historical-comparative, source-critical, biographical, descriptive, and hermeneutic methods of analysis. The principal sources include the works of Abū Manṣūr al-Thaʿālibī, al-Samʿānī, Ibn Khallikān, Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, and Kātib Ḥalebi (Ḥājjī Khalīfa), as well as al-Khuwārizmī's own collection of letters, *Rasāʾil*.

### Analysis and Results

Textual scholar Sh. Amonov proposes that the sources used in reconstructing the biography of a literary figure may be classified into the following categories:

1. Historical and biographical works (*tadhkiras*) compiled by the poet's contemporaries;
2. The author's own writings;
3. Anthologies, academic studies, textbooks, and dissertations [Amonov, 2023: 13–14].

Undoubtedly, this classification provides an important scholarly framework for the reconstruction of an author's biography. While acknowledging the validity of this approach, we argue that a chronological method should also be employed in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of a writer's life and career. A chronological perspective makes it possible to organize information according to its temporal context and source, thereby facilitating a coherent analysis of the different stages in the study of a literary figure.

From this perspective, research devoted to Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī and



his literary heritage within the broader framework of world literature and the Islamic literary tradition may be conditionally divided into three major stages.

### *Stage I: From al-Khwarizmi's Lifetime to the Nineteenth Century*

This stage is represented by information preserved in the works of historians, biographers, and literary scholars who either witnessed al-Khwarizmi's life directly or lived relatively close to his time. Valuable accounts concerning his personality and literary legacy are found in the writings of al-Sam'ani, Ibn Khallikan, al-Tha'libi, and Yaqut al-Hamawi. These testimonies are particularly significant because they preserve biographical facts and provide the earliest literary assessments of the author.

### *Stage II: The Development of Khwarizmi Studies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*

During this period, al-Khwarizmi's heritage gradually attracted the attention of Orientalists, Islamicists, and literary historians in both Asia and Europe. His works were identified, introduced into scholarly circulation, and subjected to comparative analysis. Research conducted by European, Russian, and Turkish Orientalists, as well as by scholars of Islamic civilization, played a particularly important role in this process. Despite these advances, investigations of this period remained largely confined to source studies and bibliographical documentation. Al-Khwarizmi's literary activity was generally examined within the broader context of Islamic literary traditions

rather than as an independent field of study.

### *Stage III: New Directions in Twenty-First-Century Scholarship*

In recent decades, the personality and literary legacy of al-Khwarizmi have increasingly been examined through new methodological approaches. Contemporary research addresses historical, literary, stylistic, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of his works. Particular attention has been devoted to questions concerning the genre characteristics, stylistic features, artistic value, and historical significance of works such as *Diwān al-Rasā'il* and *Diwān al-Shi'r*.

Moreover, both his prose and poetic writings are now being studied within the broader context of Eastern literary traditions. Interest in al-Khwarizmi's work, however, began during his own lifetime. Numerous contemporary authors referred to him with admiration and respect.

Among his contemporaries, the most reliable source of information is undoubtedly his close disciple and friend, Abū Manṣūr al-Tha'libī (961–1038). In his celebrated biographical anthology *Yatimat al-Dahr*, al-Tha'libī praises his teacher as "the wisest man of his age, an ocean of literature, the standard-bearer of prose and poetry, and a universe of excellence and intellect" [al-Tha'libī, 1976: 227].

He preserves numerous poetic and prose excerpts from al-Khwarizmi's works, including *Diwān al-Shi'r* (Collected Poems), *al-Rasā'il* (Letters), and *Amthāl* (Proverbs). In addition, somewhat later, al-Sam'ani (1113–1167) devoted two separate entries to al-



Khuwārizmī in his *Kitāb al-Ansāb*, providing important information concerning both his biography and literary achievements.

Al-Samʿānī records the following information: “Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-ʿAbbās al-Khuwārizmī al-Ṭabarakhzī was among the distinguished poets. His father was from Ṭabaristān, while his mother was from Khwārizm. Therefore, the two *nisbas* were combined and abbreviated into the form al-Ṭabarakhzī. He became well known by this appellation. I have already mentioned him under the letter *khā*ʾ, but since he was also known by this *nisba*, I have referred to him once again under the letter *ṭā*ʾ. This is Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī. He possessed an exceptional command of Arabic philology and its methodologies and was an outstanding poet. In Baghdad, he studied ḥadīth under Abū ʿAlī Ismāʿīl ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣaffār, Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn Kāmil al-Qāḍī, and others. He died in Nishapur in Ramaḍān 383 AH (994 CE).” This account provides important biographical information and valuable observations concerning al-Khuwārizmī’s scholarly legacy. According to al-Samʿānī, Abū Bakr was a highly accomplished scholar of lexicography, Arab genealogy, and onomastics, whose intellectual abilities astonished many of his contemporaries.

Al-Samʿānī also preserves an anecdote illustrating the poet’s remarkable wit. According to the narrative, Abū Bakr once appeared before the renowned vizier and poet Ṣāḥib ibn ʿAbbād wearing old and modest clothing. Some members of the gathering sought to ridicule him. One of them,

assuming that al-Khuwārizmī did not know Arabic well, remarked: “Who is this dog?” Abū Bakr immediately replied in eloquent Arabic: “The real dog is the one who does not know twenty languages.”

By this response, he alluded both to his own mastery of numerous languages and to the ignorance of the individual who had insulted him. Impressed by his intelligence and presence of mind, those present immediately accorded him the respect he deserved.

Furthermore, relying on al-Ḥākim Abū ʿAbd Allāh’s *History of Nishapur*, al-Samʿānī records that Abū Bakr studied in Baghdad under Abū ʿAlī Ismāʿīl ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣaffār and several other distinguished scholars of his time [Kamoliddinov, 1991].

Ibn Khallikān, in his celebrated biographical dictionary *Wafayāt al-Aʿyān*, drew extensively upon al-Samʿānī’s account when writing about Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī. However, he also relates another anecdote demonstrating the poet’s extraordinary intellectual abilities.

According to Ibn Khallikān, Abū Bakr once sought permission to enter the audience of the vizier Ṣāḥib ibn ʿAbbād. A servant informed him that the vizier would only receive a person capable of reciting twenty thousand verses composed by Bedouin Arab poets. Abū Bakr responded by asking: “Do you mean twenty thousand verses composed by male poets or by female poets?” Upon hearing this reply, Ṣāḥib ibn ʿAbbād reportedly exclaimed: “This can only be Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī! Let him enter immediately!” The vizier then welcomed him with great honor and respect [de Slane, 1868: 108–110].



Ibn al-Athīr also left valuable remarks concerning Abū Bakr in the marginal notes of his historical work *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh* [Tornberg, 1867: 523–524].

Another important source is Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, who visited Khwārizm in 1219. In his encyclopedic work *Muʿjam al-Udabāʾ*, he mentions Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī on numerous occasions among other scholars and men of letters from Khwārizm and preserves valuable information regarding his biography and literary activity. This work constitutes an important source for understanding the literary environment of Khwārizm, al-Khwārizmī's place within it, his literary style, and his relationships with prominent intellectual figures of the period.

Likewise, the famous Ottoman bibliographer Ḥājji Khalīfa (Kātib Ḥelebi), in his *Kashf al-Zunūn*, provides bibliographical information concerning al-Khwārizmī's works and their contents.

The sources produced between al-Khwārizmī's lifetime and the nineteenth century primarily consist of praise and admiration for the author, together with poetic quotations extracted from his writings. Critical scholarly evaluation, however, is largely absent from these early accounts.

A new stage in the study of al-Khwārizmī began during the twentieth century. The Palestinian scholar Hind Husayn Ṭāhā, author of an encyclopedic study of Khwārizmian culture, devoted particular attention to his personality and literary legacy. In her book *Al-Adab al-ʿArabī fī Iqlīm Khwārizm* ("Arabic Literature in the Region of Khwārizm"),

she discusses al-Khwārizmī's life and works in two separate sections and examines his poetic and prose heritage independently.

Ṭāhā explains that two principal reasons motivated her decision to devote her master's thesis to this subject. First, from her student years onward she developed a profound interest in the literary history of Khwārizm. Consequently, she painstakingly collected every piece of information related to the region, devoted herself to extensive research, and searched for relevant sources with exceptional persistence. Second, despite its scholarly significance and originality, the topic had long remained neglected by researchers.

As a result of many years of dedicated work, her monumental 519-page study *Al-Adab al-ʿArabī fī Iqlīm Khwārizm* was published in Baghdad in 1976.

The significance of Hind Husayn Ṭāhā's contribution to the study of Khwārizmian literary history was first introduced to Uzbek scholarship by Ismatulla Abdullaev [Abdullaev, 2002]. In his article "A Major Study on the Literature of Khwārizm", the scholar highly praised the Arab researcher's dedication to the history, culture, and literature of Khwārizm: "We, Uzbek scholars, must acknowledge that the Palestinian researcher, who lived thousands of kilometers away from our homeland and had never seen Khwārizm, nevertheless developed a profound love for its literature. Having devoted many years of painstaking effort and endured considerable difficulties, she succeeded in producing a work of exceptional value for the history of our literature. We



should recognize this as a truly meritorious scholarly achievement and express our gratitude to Hind Husayn Ṭāhā” [Abdullaev, 2008: 359–360].

Indeed, the importance of Ṭāhā’s research can hardly be overstated. Her study covers 518 years of literary history, from the Arab conquest of Khwārizm in 712 CE to the collapse of the Khwārizmshāh state in 1230 CE. Within this broad chronological framework, she provides a thorough analysis of Arabic poetic and prose works produced in Khwārizm and devotes substantial attention to the literary activities of a number of poets and prose writers.

Particularly noteworthy are her studies of Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī, who created some of the finest examples of the *rasā’il* genre in Arabic literature, and Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd al-Zamakhsharī, celebrated throughout the Arab world as *Fakhr al-Khwārizm* (“The Pride of Khwārizm”). Especially in Chapter One, Section Two, and Chapter Two, Section Three of her book, al-Khwārizmī’s poetic and prose heritage is examined with remarkable precision and scholarly sensitivity.

It should also be emphasized that interest among Arab literary scholars in the works of Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī increased considerably following the publication of *Arabic Literature in the Region of Khwārizm*. Subsequently, a number of substantial articles and studies devoted to the author’s life and scholarly biography appeared.

However, it must be stressed that the most reliable source for reconstructing the biography of Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī is undoubtedly his own collection of letters, *Rasā’il al-*

*Khwārizmī* (“The Letters of al-Khwārizmī”). This work consists of correspondence addressed throughout his lifetime to contemporaries occupying various social and intellectual positions, including rulers, emirs, viziers, government officials, poets, scholars, and men of letters.

While addressing specific recipients, the author frequently includes valuable autobiographical remarks that illuminate different aspects of his life. One notable example appears in the letter entitled “**To the Khwārizmshāh**”, where he writes: “The Amir knows well that my late father left behind such wealth that, had it been distributed among the inhabitants of a city, it would have sufficed for all of them. Had it been given to all the poor of the world, it would have made them wealthy. Yet the vicissitudes of fate confronted me openly in Khwārizm and waged war against me, while secretly devising intrigues. In the end, I departed from that land with nothing in my hands. Once I was renowned for my wealth like the Ka’ba itself; now I have become as poor as a stone. Once I was honored like a festive day; now I am impoverished like a needy pilgrim clothed in the garments of *iḥrām*.” [Al-Khwārizmī, 1970: 186–187].

This passage provides important evidence concerning several controversial aspects of al-Khwārizmī’s biography. First, contrary to the assertions of some researchers, it indicates that it was not his mother but rather his father who was a native of Khwārizm and who was known as a wealthy and influential member of society. Second, the letter suggests that



al-Khuwārizmī did not leave his homeland primarily in pursuit of knowledge, as some scholars have claimed. Instead, he appears to have been compelled to abandon his native land because of injustice, adversity, and a series of personal trials.

Furthermore, as Abū Maṣūʿ al-Thaʿālibī attests, before leaving Khwārizm, al-Khuwārizmī had already acquired extensive learning and attained a considerable degree of fame. During the subsequent years of exile, he participated in literary gatherings in various cities and spent a significant period teaching in Nishapur, where he educated and mentored a number of distinguished individuals.

### Conclusion

The history of research on the literary heritage of Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī encompasses nearly a millennium of scholarly tradition. While the earliest information concerning the author was preserved in the works of his contemporaries and near-

contemporaries, Orientalist scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries played a decisive role in introducing his legacy into modern academic discourse. From the second half of the twentieth century onward, Khuwārizmī studies gradually emerged as an independent field of research.

The findings of the present study demonstrate that the most important sources for reconstructing the scholarly biography of Abū Bakr al-Khuwārizmī are the biographical anthologies (*tadhkiras*) compiled by his contemporaries, together with the author's own writings, particularly the collection *Rasā'il al-Khuwārizmī*. Future investigations focusing on the manuscript geography of *Rasā'il al-Khuwārizmī*, the genealogy of its textual tradition, and comparative studies of its epistolary heritage may contribute to the formation of new and promising directions within the field of Khuwārizmī studies.

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