

Introduction

Imam ‘Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam and the first Imam of the Ahlul Bayt, is well known for his abiding contribution to spiritual thought. In the Arabic world he’s just as famous for being a great jurist and man of letters.

The historian Masudi (Murooj-uz-Zahab Masudi Vol. II, p. 33. Egypt), recognised Imam ‘Ali as being the source of no less than 480 treaties, lectures and epistles on a variety of subjects dealing with philosophy, religion, law and politics, as collected by Zaid Ibn Wahab in the Imam’s own life time. These contributions are held in such high regard, both for their contents as well as intrinsic literary worth, that some of his masterpieces stimulated into being many subjects of study in Muslim colleges and universities.

Imam ‘Ali’s reputation was such, that it seems to have even reached to Europe by the time of the Renaissance, as we find that Edward Powcock (1604–1691) a professor at the University of Oxford, in 1639 delivered a series of lectures on his “Rhetoric”, and was responsible for publishing the first translation of his “Sayings” into English.

Here we present Imam ‘Ali’s famous letter of advice while Caliph, to the Governor of Egypt, Malik al-Ashtar, which is based on the translation by Rasheed Turabi. The letter, according to Fehrist at-Tusi (p.33) was first copied during the time of Imam ‘Ali himself by Asbagh bin Nabata and then later on reproduced or referred to in their writings by various Muslim scholars, chief of them being Nasr ibn Mazahim (148 A.H.), Jahiz Basari (255 A.H.) Syed Razi (404 A.H.) Ibn Abil Hidaid and Allama Mustafa Bek Najib, the great living scholar of Egypt. The latter scholar, regarded this letter “as a basic guide in Islamic administration.”