Encyclopaedism in the Mamluk Period: The Composition of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī’s (D. 1333) Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab

Abstract
This dissertation explores the emergence of a golden age of Arabic encyclopaedic literature in the scholarly centers of Egypt and Syria during the Mamluk Empire (1250-1517). At the heart of the project is a study of Shihāb al-Dīn Ahmad b. Ṭāhir b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 1333) Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab (‘The Ultimate Ambition in the Branches of Erudition’), a 31-volume encyclopaedic work composed at the beginning of the 14th century and divided into five parts: (i) heaven and earth; (ii) the human being; (iii) animals; (iv) plants; and (v) the history of the world.

My study examines the formal arrangement, thematic contents, and codicological features of this seminal work, arguing that the rise of encyclopaedism in this period was emblematic of a certain intellectual ethos, a systematic approach to the classification of knowledge which emerged in the discursive context of a rapidly centralizing imperial state. I argue that the Nihāya grew out of an amalgam of several genres (including the adab anthology, the cosmographical compendium, the chancery scribe manual, the dynastic chronicle, and the commonplace book), developing into a new form and serving a different purpose from its literary predecessors. Such texts, long considered tokens of intellectual and cultural decadence, demonstrate the strategies used by Mamluk religious scholars, chancery scribes, and littérateurs to navigate an ever-growing corpus of accumulated knowledge.

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Muhanna, Elias (2012): Encyclopaedism in the Mamluk Period: The Composition of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 1333) Nihāyat al-ʿArab fī Funūn al-Adab. PhD. Diss. Harvard. Google Scholar. Muhanna, Elias (2013): “Why Was the Fourteenth Century a Century of Arabic Encyclopaedism”. In: Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance. Edited by Jason König and Greg Woolf. Cambridge: CUP, 343–355. Google Scholar. Al-Nuwayrī offers religious grounds for the scuffle that marked the rebellion, while al-Maqrīzī provides a homophobic pretext for the same incident. It will be demonstrated in the following discussion that, according to the merchants’ account, the rebellion was rooted in grievances held by the silk-weavers in Alexandria against economic policies imposed by al-Karakī. Further, while al-Nuwayrī and al-Maqrīzī reduce their narrative to an isolated incident, al-Jazarī’s account shows that the scuffle is one of a series of related events. It will also be demonstrated that religious and homophobic g 2012: Elias Ibrahim Muhanna, Harvard University, “Encyclopaedism of the Mamluk Period: The Composition of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 1333) Nihāyat al-ʿArab fi Funūn al-Adab”. 2013: No prize was awarded. 2014: Noah Gardiner, University of Michigan, “Esotericism in a manuscript culture: Ahmad al-Buni and his readers through the Mamluk period”. 2015: No prize was awarded. 2016: No prize was awarded. *Given the outstanding quality of the two dissertations submitted for the 2011 prize, the Committee unanimously decided to award it jointly to the two candidates.