

Essays
in Arabic Literary Biography II:
1350–1850

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Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350-1850

Introduction

JOSEPH E. LOWRY and DEVIN J. STEWART

This volume contains biographical essays on thirty-eight Arabic literary figures who lived between 1350 and 1850, a period of time almost uniformly dismissed by scholars of Arabic literature as lacking in literary achievements. This negative judgment is so overwhelming and persistent, and the terms in which it is expressed so provocative, that a brief survey of a few key pronouncements seems appropriate.

In the 1992 volume on *Modern Arabic Literature* in the Cambridge History of Arabic Literature the editor writes in his introduction that “The Arabs had started their steady decline early in the sixteenth century” (at 2; for full references see the Bibliography). Although “historians of literature may have exaggerated the decline, the period is no doubt characterized by the absence of creativity and loss of vigour;” it is an “age of commentaries and compendia.” Worse yet, by the eighteenth century, Arabic prose writing exhibited “an excessively ornate, artificial type of style,” literary work altogether “lacked seriousness,” and those who “cared for content... employed an undistinguished... style... devoid of literary merit.” Themes in creative writing were “conventional;” poetry, for example, consisted of “empty panegyrics,” “celebrations of trivial social occasions” and “lifeless and passionless love poems.” Unsurprisingly, then, the “Ottoman period marks the nadir of Arabic literature,” the “literature of an exhausted, inward-looking culture.” Incredibly, this dismissal of over four centuries of Arabic literature represented progress in the field.

Three decades earlier, the great Arabist Sir Hamilton Alexander Roskeen Gibb divided his *Arabic Literature* into chapters on “The Heroic

Age,” “The Age of Expansion,” “The Golden Age,” “The Silver Age” and “The Age of the Mamlūks,” this last covering five and a half centuries, from 1258-1800. Gibb locates decline early indeed: “the output was enormous..., but the qualities of originality, virility, and imagination, weak from the first, die away completely by the sixteenth century” (142). Gibb was echoing a conclusion found earlier in the century. In his pioneering *A Literary History of the Arabs*, first published in 1907, R. A. Nicholson, a gifted scholar and translator, glumly finds that the period in Arabic literary history stretching from the Mongol invasions (mid-13th century) to the early twentieth century “forms, one must admit, a melancholy conclusion to a glorious history” (442).

Even now, the view of the period in question as sterile and dull persists. Robert Irwin, the learned compiler of the recent Penguin anthology of classical Arabic literature (1999), though recognizing that the problem is not free from nuance, notes that “there does appear to have been a decline both in quantity and quality of original writing in that period,” “[h]orizons seemed to have shrunk” and Arabic poetry and fiction were “mostly conventional and backward-looking” (448).

Clearly, the time has arrived for a reassessment.

It is true—cultural generalizations aside—that difficulties confront the student of late pre-modern and early modern Arabic literature. The majority of works from this period remain a vast and mostly unexplored and unedited corpus, a situation that both results from and reinforces scholarly inertia. In addition, a dearth of second-

dary literature remains both a cause and an effect of the field's failure to examine the literature of these centuries. A small number of surveys in Arabic, the very recent (2006) volume of the Cambridge History of Arabic literature on the so-called "post-classical period," a short study by C. E. Bosworth (1989) and a few scattered articles are nearly all that is currently available. In general, the literature and literary history of this time remain poorly understood, although the study of the period's social history has begun to make advances. Finally, of particular note are the ideological factors that have negatively conditioned modern Western scholarly attitudes to Islamic cultural production generally in the late pre-modern and early modern periods.

These points, and others, conspire to make this introduction emphatically provisional. Nonetheless, the essays that make up this volume aim to provide the kind of historical, biographical and analytical detail that has been largely absent from earlier studies and that could form the starting-point for a more measured and better-informed reading of the texts themselves. Whether the resulting picture will lead to a revised view of the aesthetic qualities of the literature of these centuries is unclear (it well might). Yet the attempt in this volume to survey authors' literary production, situate it in local and also in larger contexts and identify the factors that conditioned the literature produced by individual writers during these centuries is long overdue.

Beginnings

The wider world might never have come to know about Arabic literature but for the appearance in the early seventh century of a new Abrahamic faith—Islam—that mobilized the inhabitants of Arabia. Arabic-speaking tribesmen poured out of the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent territories spreading, by the mid-eighth century, from Spain to India. With the establishment of an Arabo-Islamic state ruled by caliphs—first in Medina under the so-called Rightly Guided or Orthodox Caliphs (632-61), then in Damascus under the Umayyads (661-750) and finally in Baghdad under the Abbasids (750-1258)—Arabic literature, and all manner of

Arabic writing more generally, came to be cultivated, studied, patronized and produced on a massive scale.

Rule by Arabs, coupled with an Arabic scripture—the Qur'an, which served as the basis of the emergent religion of Islam and so provided substantial ideological justification for Arab rule—led to the privileging of Arabic as a vehicle of literary expression. The divine status of the Qur'an, a nearly unmediated record of God's speech in Arabic, reinforced the perception of Arabic as the language of prestige (the Qur'an itself tells us that it is an Arabic Qur'an, in a clear Arabic tongue); the Arabs' political success reinforced its status as the language of power.

Thus, Arabic, seen as the exclusive, or at least superior, medium of divine communication to humanity, became a marker of social status, and a wide range of persons of diverse interests, backgrounds, religious affiliations, cultural orientations and so on learned and cultivated the Arabic language. Ambitious members of non-Arabic speaking subject populations could hardly pursue their material interests without knowing Arabic, and of course it was to the advantage of elites and those who aspired to serve them to promote Arabic as uniquely pure, rich in expressive possibilities and, crucially, as an idiom appropriate to a learned and eloquent ruling class. It thus became not only important to read and write Arabic well, but also to be able to speak it eloquently; conversely, infelicitous expressions and solecisms betrayed the social climber as awkward and unworthy of advancement and reward. That social pressures and material incentives were connected with the mastery of Arabic can be seen in the roles played by many ethnic Iranians in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries in the development of Arabic literary style and in the founding of the fields of Arabic grammar and lexicography. It is ironic that these persons helped to establish the 'pure' Arabic of the Arabs and of Arabia as the standard of correct usage and thereby enhanced the ideologically driven privileging of the Arabic language in connection with Arab rule.

Of particular importance to the development of Arabic literature and Arabic writing more generally was the encouragement of the early

Abbasid ruling elites, who patronized the exploration of the Arab and Arabian past and its literary remains, the linguistic study of the Qur'an, Arabic linguistics and lexicography more generally and the elaboration of religious sciences in Arabic. They also contributed to the study of ancient Greek, Iranian and Indian philosophical, scientific and wisdom literature and funded translations from these languages, sometimes through Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic), into Arabic. This translation movement also contributed greatly to the development of a learned and technically sophisticated Arabic prose idiom. To this emergent literary language bureaucrats of Iranian heritage also contributed. As chancery secretaries, they enriched Arabic prose by transmitting the legacy of Persian statecraft in Arabic and developing an effective, edifying and aesthetically ambitious prose style in their official correspondence.

The Abbasid caliphs themselves were often direct patrons and consumers of the most sophisticated works of belletristic literature, most famously of panegyric odes in which poets of legendary talent made highly innovative uses of pre-Islamic poetic forms and images. Caliphs, ministers, and merchants of enormous wealth, entertaining themselves in sumptuous palaces and mansions by employing a vast array of intellectuals and litterateurs, have long attracted the gaze of historians of Arabic literature. Indeed, the pre-modern Arabic literary tradition itself glorifies the refined literary culture of this period in countless anecdotes that portray the wit and wisdom of the producers of such literature and also their generous, receptive and, occasionally, even gifted patrons. Justifiably, scholars continue to view the early Abbasid period (from ca. 750-1000) as a foundational epoch in the history of Arabic literature—eloquent testimony to the capacity of Abbasid literature to convince us even today of the precedence of its ruling and cultural elites.

Change

The factors that made Arabic literature into world literature in the early Abbasid period resulted from a particular convergence of power, politics, wealth, religion, culture, and language.

The Arabic literature of later periods was, of course, subject to the same kinds of forces, but in much different combinations, proportions and alignments, and with much different consequences. To make sense of post-Abbasid literature, these differences must be understood.

By the second half of the fourteenth century, where the essays in this volume begin, the context of Arabic literary production, and of Arabic writing more generally, had undergone fundamental transformations. These developments resulted in part from vastly changed geo-political circumstances and important innovations in the development of religious institutions, both of which altered the social and economic contexts in which literature was produced.

Of special significance was a fundamental change in the ethnic composition of the ruling elites, which decisively altered the environment for the patronage of Arabic writing. A series of mass migrations of Turkish and Mongol peoples into the central Islamic lands in the eleventh, thirteenth and fifteenth centuries resulted in the domination of Arabic-speaking (and other) populations by Central Asian groups for many centuries. These originally nomadic migrants acquired political power across wide swaths of the Muslim world: Iran, Iraq and Syro-Palestine in particular, but also Egypt, Anatolia and even India. The domination of Muslim societies by Central Asian peoples and the process of their assimilation culminated in the three great absolutist empires that rose to prominence in the early sixteenth century: the Ottomans (late 13th century to 1924, Anatolia and Arabic-speaking regions), the Safavids (1501-1722, Iran) and the Mughals (1526-1858, India).

The Turks and Mongols, nomadic and often of pagan (or at least eclectic) background, possessed neither strong claims to legitimacy of rule in Islamic terms nor, initially, ties to local constituencies. In many instances, however, these political deficits were remedied by forging alliances with local scholarly-religious elites, especially through the patronage of religious institutions such as mosques, law colleges (*madrasahs*) and other establishments of religious study, worship and contemplation. Sponsorship of such institutions lent visible, symbolically effective support to the bearers of

religious tradition, promoted ties to local networks of civilian notables, and also induced the scholars to become dependent on the interest and largesse of the alien rulers. Institutions of learning provided employment opportunities for teachers of the religious sciences and ancillary subjects as well as stipends for their students—all such study began with a thorough grounding in Arabic language and literature as a propaedeutic to the fuller study of the Qur'an, Islamic law and other subjects. Support of these institutions and their curriculum was a hallmark of Muslim rule in this period, beginning especially under the Turkish Seljuqs in Iraq and Iran (1040-1194) and continuing under the Turkish Zangids in Mesopotamia (1127-1251), the Kurdish Ayyubids in Egypt and Syria (1169-1250s), the Turkish and Circassian Mamluks in Syria and Egypt (1250-1517), and thereafter under the Ottomans (who overthrew the Mamluks in 1517), the Safavids and the Mughals. Thus, the focus of patronage shifted from the courtly and occasionally even qualifiedly 'secular' contexts of early Abbasid times to institutions that regularized the production and reproduction of religious knowledge, the foundation of which was the study of Arabic.

The proliferation of educational institutions and opportunities both contributed to and reflected the growing numbers of professional religious scholars ('*ulamā'*, ulema) from the eleventh century on. These intellectuals, including most of the writers studied in this volume, worked not only as clerics, mosque officials, teachers of language and literature and professors of the religious sciences, but also in government as chancery secretaries, judges, notaries and even as advisors to and personal envoys of high government officials. In these latter, governmental capacities they were often responsible for drafting official documents and correspondence, in which, as under the early Abbasids, a fluid prose style, frequent and apposite literary allusion and fine penmanship were valued. The early Abbasid chancery secretaries, however, had remained culturally, socially and intellectually distinct from those engaged in the study of the emergent religious sciences. In the late and post-Abbasid world these literate

bureaucrats had become partly incorporated into the larger group of clerically trained professionals. Thus, the class of the literate elite as a whole had become more homogeneous because of a shared educational background, but also more diverse because of the substantial increase in its numbers.

The late pre-modern rise in the numbers of scholars was probably also accompanied by an increase in literacy, entailing a heightened familiarity with the literary canon. There was also an associated growth in economic opportunities for this "civilian elite," and it is perhaps useful to think of them, in the late pre-modern period, as a kind of upwardly-mobile upper-middle social stratum. These developments, in conjunction with the changed environment for patronage and the expansion and support of educational institutions, meant that the '*ulamā'* became primary bearers, producers and consumers of Arabic literary culture. The (comparatively) narrow literary elitism of the early Abbasid period was replaced by a wider diffusion of learning, and an increased range of tastes, interests and abilities. Although courtly litterateurs did not cease to exist, literature ceased to be the exclusive preserve of courts and became more often a means of communication among the educated, even though mastery of the literary codes and canon remained a potentially important means of acquiring and differentiating status within the scholarly community.

Increasing bureaucratization and attendant careerism, especially in the context of the comparatively well-organized absolutist states of the sixteenth century and after, sharpened the competition for civilian posts. At the same time, scholars enjoyed considerable lateral professional mobility, and those who had marketable skills or were particularly good at self-promotion, or both, could successfully offer their abilities in lands far from their places of birth. Arabic, a language of international scholarly exchange, enabled scholars to travel enormous distances in pursuit of learning, employment and patronage. Itinerant scholars were crucial for the spread and cultivation of Arabic learning in the centuries covered by this volume, especially outside the dominantly Arabic-speaking lands. Arabophone scholars traveled to Istanbul, Isfa-

han and Delhi, and to lesser centers of political gravity, to seek employment or official approval and reward for their various projects. Those projects did not always involve belletristic literature in Arabic, yet a result of successful pursuit of patronage could often lead those scholars to become, directly or indirectly, teachers of the Arabic literary tradition in the broad sense. Some enterprising scholars traveled even further afield, to Southeast Asia, South India, sub-Saharan Africa or even China, and brought with them knowledge of Arabic literary traditions while working as teachers, civil servants, judges, or professors of religious law.

Various social networks contributed to the internationalization of the labor market for the educated, including private associations that filled the gaps left by inherent limitations in the power of pre-modern states. Sunni jurists, for example, were affiliated with one of four competing professional associations (sometimes referred to as ‘law schools,’ *madhāhib*, sg. *madhab*) that, among other things, facilitated cross-border travel, education and employment (they have been likened to guilds).

Equally or even more important were the Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*, sg. *ṭarīqah*), which played an increasingly central role in many areas of social life in the Muslim world in the late pre-modern period and to which many of the authors studied in this volume belonged. Although these orders served a pietistic function—ostensibly putting their adherents in contact with an unbroken spiritual, charismatic lineage stretching back to the Prophet Muḥammad—they also functioned as, or in tandem with, social and commercial networks and generated significant cultural activity, including Arabic writing of various kinds. The international character of these orders led them to play a special role in the spread of Arabic learning and also in the production of texts that aimed partly to satisfy aesthetic goals in the context of worship and theological speculation. Mystical poetry in Arabic (as in Persian and other Islamicate languages) was a conspicuous site of literary play, and the dense field of imagery and allusion in the writings of the Sufis was equally at home in Fez (North Africa) or Aceh (Sumatra). Sufi instruction and social affiliations may also have contributed to the general increase in literacy in Mam-

luk and Ottoman times.

Thus, Sufism, in conjunction with the internationalization of scholarly and intellectual career opportunities, along with the far-flung routes followed by Muslim traders, contributed to the spread of Islam, and with it of Arabic, into Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and other non-Arabophone regions. Consequently, a wide range of Arabic words and phrases became current in vernacular Islamicate languages and literatures.

Although the history of Arabic literature is closely connected with the religion of Islam, many important writers of Arabic were non-Muslims. Christians played a key role in the early Abbasid translation movement, and Jews in Arab lands developed a distinctive Arabic literature written in Hebrew characters (Judaeo-Arabic). In the period covered by this volume, Arabic writing by Christians, especially by clerics—as opposed to writing in the liturgical languages of Syriac and Coptic—seems to be on the ascendant, as exemplified by the careers of several of the authors studied here. This development continued and bore in important ways on the Arabic literary culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Finally, it should be noted that there is also now some evidence that the general increase in literacy encompassed an emergent class of artisans and merchants—apart from scholarly elites—who began both to consume and to produce works of literature. This trend makes itself felt in certain Mamluk-period literary works and continues to evolve throughout the Ottoman period—though it must be emphasized that research on the social background to the production and consumption of literature in these periods is at a very early stage. Still, it seems that Arabic literature acquired a much broader social base in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods than it had had earlier.

Arabic literature, 1350-1850

During the centuries covered by this volume, Arabic was being written from Central Asia to the southern tip of India, from the Balkans to Ghana and Zanzibar and from Morocco to Sumatra, furnishing a vast array of regions, cul-

tures and peoples with a scholarly, literary and liturgical language. In most of these regions, however, Arabic had to compete with other literary languages, such as Persian, Turkish, Urdu or Malay. The waning of Abbasid rule in the ninth and tenth centuries and after led to the rise of local centers of political power, patronage and cultural activity. Non-Arab rulers, outside Arabophone lands, began to patronize literature in their own languages. The appearance of Islamicate vernacular literatures, beginning in the tenth century with Persian literature, spread to other regions, with Turkish, and later, Urdu, Swahili, Malay and other languages, all of which came to be written in the Arabic script.

Persianate forms of cultural expression, especially in literature, enjoyed the special favor of the Turkish and Mongol ruling elites and left a particularly deep imprint on Turkish and Urdu literature. Bi- and even trilingualism were not uncommon; Persian and Turkish authors could be assumed to know Arabic and might themselves compose literary, scientific or religious works in it. Simultaneously, such authors, when writing in their vernaculars, were affected at many levels by the omnipresence of the Arabic religious and literary tradition, leading to a complex, multi-lingual intertextuality. During this supposed period of decadence, it is therefore appropriate to speak of a flowering of Islamicate literatures in languages other than Arabic, frequently in subtle and intricate dialogue with Arabic literary forms and genres.

As in the earliest phases of Arabic literary history, poetry remains the prime vehicle of artistic literary expression in this period. The *qaṣīdah*, the polythematic ode that existed since pre-Islamic times, continued to be composed, but many developments had taken place in regard to poetic form and practice in the intervening centuries. In Abbasid times, the *qaṣīdah* had evolved, with the pressures and opportunities of patronage, into the panegyric form par excellence, though shorter poems were also common, and monothematic poetry was composed on themes of love, asceticism, wine, hunting, nature and so on. However, the opportunities for poets to have their grand panegyric odes publicly performed, patronized and appreciated by the ruler and an audience of *cognoscenti* had

dwindled with the disappearance of the Arab ruling class. Making one's living as a court poet in the Arabic-speaking world ceased to be viable in the way it had been in the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods.

During this period three developments in poetry are of special note: First, new poetic forms come into being, or gain in popularity. Among these are two strophic forms, the *muwashshah* and the *zajal*, that migrated from Muslim Spain. Granada, the last outpost of Muslim rule and cultural life in Spain, had fallen to the Christian reconquest in 1492. Although Muslims were not officially expelled from the Iberian peninsula until 1609, large numbers of them had already begun to migrate from Spain to North Africa, Egypt and Syria in earlier centuries, and Andalusian immigrant communities in North Africa continued to cultivate their regional literary, musical and other cultural traditions, maintaining a distinct identity.

Second, much poetry came to be self-referential or self-consciously intertextual, referring to earlier well-known poems, elaborating on such poems by the use of specific forms involving complex (and playful) methods of quotation or variation, displaying virtuoso deployments of rhetorical devices, and so on. Various poetic techniques also developed to highlight intertextual relationships between newer and older poems, such as the *takhmīs* (quintain) a form that incorporated a pre-existing poem into a larger poetic elaboration using variations of the underlying poem's rhyme-scheme. Also, poems that seek to demonstrate the entire catalog of rhetorical devices collectively termed *badī'* appear (such a poem is called a *badī'iyah*, a "badī'-poem"). These formal innovations continue trends that were begun under the Abbasids.

Third, and related to the first development, so-called colloquial forms emerge, in which spoken (as opposed to formal, written) Arabic is employed to varying degrees. The *zajal*, for example, can employ a refrain in the colloquial language. Other forms seem to have been more strictly colloquial, such as the *dūbayt* (named using the Persian term for "couplet"), the *qūmā*, the *kān wa-kān* or the *mawwāl*. By the fourteenth century, the existence of colloquial, or mixed formal-colloquial poetic sub-genres had become a topic

treated by literary theorists; their interest in this topic shows that such poetry had gained a measure of acceptance among the educated elites.

The increased importance of so-called colloquial forms more generally, not only in poetry, is shown by the emergence of oral epics such as the Banū Hilāl cycle of tales, the 1001 Nights, popular romances involving folk heroes, and even the conspicuous deployment of a more relaxed register of Arabic in historiographical writing, beginning especially with some of the historians of Mamluk Egypt and continuing into the Ottoman period. In the Abbasid context, writers of Arabic had problematized the relationship between colloquial Arabic and formal, written Arabic with a view to privileging the latter and criticizing the former as a deviation from the classical norm. The acceptance and cultivation of colloquial and semi-colloquial literature in the late pre-modern and early modern periods reflects, by contrast, a broadening of literary markets, tastes and abilities consistent with the horizontal and vertical expansion of the class of literate professionals, and also with the increasing capacity of other social strata to become consumers of literature.

On the surface, prose forms exhibit more stability in the late pre-modern and early modern periods. However, anthologizing—an important literary activity in Abbasid times—becomes more than the process of collecting apposite anecdotes and evolves into a virtuoso art. Anthologies themselves display innovative formal developments, and other genres (even travel literature, for example) are treated by their authors as opportunities for anthologizing. Such works are not mere repackagings of the literary tradition, but innovative manipulations of that tradition in ways that appealed to contemporary developments in literary taste and sensibilities. Where the Abbasid authors had sought with their compilations to distill a canon from raw materials (a project connected with the ideological foundations of Abbasid rule), late pre-modern and early modern anthologists reinterpreted the canon in ways that appealed to an expanding readership.

Commentaries provided a similar opportunity for displays of wit and erudition and could themselves tend in the direction of an anthology.

In such cases, a classic work of literature would provide the pretext for the creation of an entirely new text with attendant possibilities of intertextual play and thematic expansion in unexpected directions. Such forms, which celebrated and also exploited the well known literary works of earlier centuries, resembled the new poetic forms that depended on quotation and allusion to earlier poems. It has been noted that the base texts used for such literary commentaries were frequently those of authors who post-dated the ‘golden age’ of Abbasid literature. This may suggest a shift in literary sensibilities, at least in the Mamluk period. Outside the context of belletristic literature, recent scholarship on Islamic theology, philosophy and law in this period has identified the use of commentaries on earlier works as the primary method of recording contemporary doctrinal innovation.

The professional literature of the upper echelons of the scholarly elite—law, theology, grammar, formal historiography and especially biographical works on the careers of religious scholars—continued to be written and remained important branches of official academic writing.

Because the literature of these centuries, whether poetry or prose, was mostly produced by and for the class of literate professionals, it served the internal communications needs of this class (as emphasized by Thomas Bauer, 2005). The social gulf that had previously characterized the relationship of producer (litterateur) to consumer (royal patron) had therefore narrowed considerably, and one might speculate that an important social function of much of the period’s literature was to reinforce class solidarity among the ranks of scholars, notwithstanding the intense competition for status, positions and material advancement within that class.

Decadence, decline and doubts

No account of the background to late pre-modern and early modern Arabic literary production would be complete without a brief discussion of modern scholarly attitudes toward this time period. The paradigm of decadence and decline with which previous scholarship has approached the literature of these centuries, and which, in an ironic way, lends the period in

question a kind of negative coherence, has been pernicious. The quotations with which this introduction began show how entrenched such attitudes are. The alleged period of decline covers a temporal span defined variously as lasting three, four, six, or ten centuries. The beginning of this period is assigned to diverse historical moments: the fall of Baghdad to the Buwayhids in 945, to the Seljuqs in 1055, or, most spectacularly, to the Mongols in 1258; or it is assigned to the period of Ottoman control over the Middle East, beginning with their conquest of Syria and Egypt in 1516-17. The end of the period comes, according to most previous scholarship, with the influence of the modern European national literatures, especially French and then English, on Arabic literature—the roles of German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish literature were more limited. By the early twentieth century, the decadence is itself thought to be in decline. European works had been translated in large numbers, and works modeled on them had been produced in Arabic. New genres thought to be based exclusively on European models—the play, the short story, the novel, free verse—gained increasing prominence on the Arabic literary scene.

A linchpin of the ‘decline thesis,’ at least as it is mapped onto the Arab world, is Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798. This event is often taken as a convenient marker for the beginning of the end of the decadence, a watershed in Arab cultural history, after which a native confession of general cultural and technological stultification, if not backwardness, leads to the studied emulation of European models in all domains of cultural activity. Napoleon’s invasion is portrayed as a beneficial kind of shock treatment, a desperately needed external stimulus that prods a reluctant, exhausted and inward-looking civilization towards progress and modernity.

On the one hand, the self-serving nature of this narrative seems obvious: The trajectory of decline exhibits a clear inverse correlation with a traditional periodization of pre-modern and modern European history that suggests ascendancy: dark ages, middle ages, renaissance, enlightenment, industrial revolution, modernity, and so on. The narrative of decline is thus more the triumphalist self-narrative of the con-

querors and colonizers, and it enables and makes durable interpretations such as that of Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt as a long-overdue awakening—of the conquered and colonized. This point can be put differently: The West, in such narratives, styles itself as the sole agent of historical progress; others play the role of bystanders or passive recipients of a modernity created elsewhere. This narrative does not accommodate the possibility of multiple centers, let alone of alternative (and above all non-Western) models of progress and modernity.

On the other hand, the decline paradigm was also employed by indigenous writers to describe the trajectory of their own cultural history in these centuries. The age of decadence (in Arabic *‘asr al-inhītāṭ*) is opposed to the renaissance or awakening (Arabic *nahdah*) that is claimed to characterize cultural production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is perhaps surprising that, in an age of incipient nationalism and confrontation with colonialism, such dubious binary oppositions should become domesticated. An archaeology of the notion of decadence or *inhītāṭ* as it evolved in Arab thought has hardly been undertaken (Albert Hourani’s now classic *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* is a beginning, but is also invested in the traditional decline paradigm). One might speculate that the notions of decline and renaissance appeared useful to Arab nationalists who wished to attribute cultural stagnation to the long period of Ottoman rule in Arab lands. It also seems likely that indigenous elites used the projects of ‘Westernization’ and ‘modernization’ to pursue their own local political agenda; presenting themselves as enlightened reformers, they were able to draw on Western discourses and resources in the service of that agenda.

This volume

The consequences of the paradigm of decadence and decline for the study of Arabic literature in the five centuries covered by this volume have been disastrous, leading, at the least, to the wholesale dismissal of the period’s literature. Thus, given the state of the field, this introduction can only indicate in a very general

way some aspects of the context in which Arabic literature was being written during this time. Numerous issues remain to be explored.

This introduction has focused mostly on the Arabic-speaking lands under Mamluk and Ottoman control. The portrayal of specific trends and features of the context in which literature was produced is mostly based on conditions obtaining during the Mamluk period, conjecturally extrapolated into Ottoman times (and, for that matter, the whole presentation is heavily indebted to the important 2005 article of Thomas Bauer on Mamluk literature). This account has therefore likely privileged developments in provincial capitals, especially Cairo and Damascus, and ignored important centers of Arabic writing such as North Africa, Anatolia (and other Ottoman provinces, in Southeast Europe for example), Iran, India, sub-Saharan Africa, and even Southeast Asia. No doubt there are critical regional differences that require a fuller exploration. Ideally, developments should be traced more fully into the Ottoman period, and the crucial developments within that period portrayed in more detail (the pioneering studies by Gran [1998, orig. 1979] and Hanna [2003] are an important beginning).

Deciding on which authors to include was particularly challenging. A conscious and reasonably successful effort was made to have an even distribution of authors across the late fourteenth through early nineteenth centuries. Because authors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are somewhat better studied, it was decided to leave out a few more well-known figures, such as the two towering figures in Arabic historiographical writing, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) and al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442). An even geographical distribution of authors across Arabic-writing cultural areas was more difficult to achieve, and North Africa (especially) and sub-Saharan Africa deserve more space. In addition, a slight shading in the direction of belletristic literature was attempted, but not always easy to sustain, since so many authors wrote in many different genres. That fact, coupled with the importance of religious scholars to intellectual and literary life, has possibly skewed the subjects of these studies in the direction of academic figures. In any event, the

term ‘literature’ has been given a wide construction in this volume.

The pressures of publication, previous commitments and heavy workloads conspired to keep a few originally planned subjects from appearing in this volume: The great jurist Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497) was a member of an important scholarly family and a major writer of the late Mamluk period. Aḥmad Bābā al-Timbuktī (d. 1627), an important scholar of Arabic and Islamic studies active in the scholarly center of Timbuktu and Morocco, exemplifies the geographical scope of Arabic writing and culture in this period. ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1731), an unusually prolific writer, scholar and mystic, was a key Syrian intellectual in the Ottoman period. Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Tahānawī (d. after 1745), an Indian scholar whose dense thesaurus of technical terms from the Islamic intellectual tradition remains an important source for modern scholarship, provides yet another example of the vigor of the Arabic literary and intellectual tradition in India in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (d. 1825), member of a prominent scholarly family of eighteenth-century Egypt, chronicled Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt and was also friend and colleague to several figures who appear in this volume.

In the course of planning and preparing this volume, additional figures who might have been included suggested themselves, often as a result of reading the contributors’ essays. These include, to name only a few: Muḡhultāy (d. 1362), a prolific Cairene author who wrote in many different genres; Ibn ‘Arabshāh (d. 1450), multilingual historian, belletrist and confidant of an Ottoman sultan; Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafā Ṭāshkōprūzādah (d. 1561), Ottoman religious scholar who wrote several works including a biographical dictionary of Ottoman-period scholars; Darwīsh ibn Muḥammad al-Ṭāluwī (or Ṭālawī, d. 1605), a Syrian literary figure of the early Ottoman period who compiled an important anthology; and Ḥājjī Khalīfah (Kātib Čelebi, d. 1657), Ottoman bureaucrat and writer whose bibliographical dictionary, the *Kashf al-ẓunūn ‘an asāmī al-kutub wa’l-funūn* (The Alleviator of Conjectures about the Names of Books and

Fields of Endeavor), remains a major source for modern scholarship.

These twelve names, to which more could be added, already form the potential nucleus of a supplement to the present work; it is to be hoped that scholars will take up the challenge.

Format

This volume was originally conceived as one of a series of four volumes on Arabic literature, under the general editorship of Roger Allen, to be published as part of the Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB), a major, multi-volume reference work on literary history. It was therefore initially prepared using the editorial guidelines of the DLB. As a rule, DLB entries begin with a chronological list of the author's works, first editions of works, and translations (where applicable). These front rubrics are followed by a biographical essay. Bibliographical references come at the end. The text of a DLB entry is required to be organized strictly chronologically, to focus on an individual author's works in the context of the author's biographical data, and to keep textual analysis to a minimum. References are not used, except for very occasional parenthetical citations. Cross-referencing is facilitated by putting the names of subjects of entries in boldface type when they first appear in another entry. Because the entries in this volume were originally prepared according to this format, it has been retained in its general contours, although considerable variation has been allowed in the front rubrics of entries, in which authors' works are listed. It should be noted that many of the contributors to this volume, left to their own devices, might have opted for a less homogenizing organizational framework, one dictated more by the material itself and by individual contributors' own interpretive choices.

Acknowledgments

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generously offering a home to this briefly orphaned volume. Professor Guth was also very generous in responding to many queries about the preparation of the manuscript. Thanks are also due to Professor Shawkat M. Toorawa (Cornell University), co-editor, with Professor Michael Cooperson (UCLA), of the DLB volume that was the first in this series of collected essays in Arabic literary biography (and the only one published as part of the DLB), for advice on and assistance with the editing of this volume. Professor Toorawa also generously agreed to help with proofreading. Professor Nasser Rabbat (MIT) provided invaluable, expert guidance on appropriate cover images. Professor Robert Morrison (Bowdoin College) advised on a matter of astronomy. Dr. Jay Treat (University of Pennsylvania) provided technical guidance on intricacies of word processing. Herb Wolfson, Esq., assisted with tracking down and licensing images. Nick Harris (University of Pennsylvania) assisted with bibliographical matters and proofreading. Robert Riggs (University of Pennsylvania) provided valuable editorial assistance at the initial stages of this project.

Of course, the contributors to this volume deserve high praise. They have put up with editorial intrusions and delays, remained generous with their expertise and research and shown remarkable patience with their editors. Their outstanding contributions have made this a most rewarding volume to edit. For them is reserved the distinction of having made truly pioneering contributions to the study of a rich but unjustly neglected period of Arabic literature.

SELECTED FURTHER READINGS

- M. G. Zubaid Ahmad, *The Contribution of Indo-Pakistan to Arabic Literature* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1946);
 Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage: The Development of its Genres and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998);
 — and D. S. Richards, eds., *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006);
 M. M. Badawi, ed., *Modern Arabic Literature*,