THE BARBER OF DAMASCUS

NOUVEAU LITERACY IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY OTTOMAN LEVANT

Dana Sajdi

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Introduction

A book in a dream means power.

He who sees a book in his hand in a dream will acquire power.

\textit{\'Abd al-Ghan\i\ Al-N\'abulus\i\ (D. 1731)}

It is not fitting that anyone who possesses even a small amount of knowledge should allow himself to be forgotten.

\textit{Shams al-D\'in Muhammad ibn \textja\l\晋\textja\ Dimashqi (D. 1546)}\textsuperscript{2}

This book arises from a footnote—note 13 on page 188 of Tarif Khalidi’s book \textit{Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period}—upon which I chanced more than a decade and a half ago.\textsuperscript{3} Before I divulge the contents of that fateful footnote, a bit of background is in order. Envious of the feats of modern European historiography, which had managed famously to uncover the history and reconstruct the worldview of the sixteenth-century Friulian miller, Menocchio,\textsuperscript{4} I set out to retrieve “commoners” from the history of the medieval Levant (by which I mean Bilad al-Sham—the area covering the present day states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, (see Map 1). Individuals wiser than me warned of the monumental obstacles ahead: our main (perhaps only) sources for the medieval period are histories written by ‘ulam\'a\’ (singular, \textja\l\晋, scholars of religion, who are equivalent to today’s academics), largely about themselves and for themselves. The social historian, then, is left with only one textual window to the social history of the medieval past, and it is a window with a very limited aperture. Obstinate to the extreme, and all-too-naively, I decided to prove that “\textja\l\晋\textja\mology” could not possibly be “almost all the social history that we will ever have.”\textsuperscript{5} I spent a year canvassing the historiographical production of medieval Levantine ‘ulam\'a’ in the hope of delivering up the commoners, but to no avail. I was in a state of dejection when I chanced upon footnote
CHAPTER I
The Disorders of a New Order
The Levant in the Long Eighteenth Century

It is worth reiterating that it is not so much the literacy of the eighteenth-century barber that is surprising, it is his authority. This chapter investigates the sources of the authority of our nouveau literates. What is it that impelled or gave confidence to a barber, a Greek Orthodox priest, a couple of Shi‘i farmers, a Samaritan scribe, a Ḥimṣi court scribe, and a couple of Damascene soldiers to write? What is it in the social and cultural landscape of the eighteenth-century Levant that prompted these people, whose professions, strictly speaking, fell outside the learned professions and especially history writing, to write chronicles? In short, this chapter is about nouveau literacy as a social phenomenon.

In search of the sources of the nouveau literates’ authority, I focus on Damascus, the city in which the barber was born, and which was undeniably his own. Ibn Budayr’s possession of the city is evident in his marking of the city’s features: its neighborhoods, streets, bazaars, bathhouses, coffeehouses, shops, colleges, and mosques. In his chronicle, a cartography emerges in which the city is not just a list of places but a veritable habitat. It is home to all kinds of people: notables, scholars, merchants, soldiers, mystics, shopkeepers, prostitutes, and possessed individuals. It is a city where natural beauty and divine grace abound, but it is also a place of mysterious murders and curious suicides, of immoral revelry and marital infidelities. It is the hometown of the great Sufi thinker ‘Abd al-Ghanî al-Nâbulusî, the poet laureate Bahlûl, and the impossibly seductive prostitute Salamûn. Despite Ibn Budayr’s anger over and frustration with the corruption and disorder in the city, the barber narrates his Damascus lovingly, proudly, and protectively.

Damascus is important not only because it is the barber’s home. It happens to be one of the five most important cities in the Ottoman Empire and a chief provincial capital. It is the center of Ottoman rule in the region, and a recipient of imperial orders, benefits, and personnel. It is the node from
For the barber Shīhāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Budayr to write a book is an event of authorial boldness—"bold" because his profession is not historically associated with writing or learned culture. His boldness arose from a condition of social flux that prompted him to document a momentous history in a book of history. His chronicle is history-filled because it records the passage of events in time, and also because it discloses processes of historical negotiation, glimpses of how he managed change and adapted to it, how he displayed recently acquired privileges, and how he restyled himself in ways he thought appropriate for his new and improved social position. The chronicle, then, is the mirror of our nouveau literate in his new residence. It shows us the "turbans" he donned in braving an unfamiliar, sometimes frightful, and at other times welcoming, new world.

This, then, is the story of Ibn Budayr. More accurately, this is an attempt at constructing his social biography. Here, we will go on a journey in the footsteps of the barber as he traverses physical, social, and textual worlds. This biographical study of the barber is therefore an inquiry into the social conditions that allowed the man and the book to be. I consider the immediate circumstances that enabled this particular barber to become an author-historian. I attempt to tease out the social strategies he employs and discursive practices he appropriates as he treads, manages, and benefits from his new situation among the learned elite. The barber-author politicks in order to enter and acquire, and his politicking reveals the novelty of his (cultural) acquisitions. In order to understand the full significance of his maneuvers, we must first explore the society of a few highly placed individuals, more specifically scholars and mystics: their
CHAPTER 3

“Cheap” Monumentality

The Nouveau Literates and Their Texts

In his endeavor to write history, the barber was not alone. In the eighteenth-century Levant, a host of other non-'ulamā’ chose to write records of events they witnessed during their lifetime. Whether coincidentally or not, Ibn Kannān (the proud owner of a remodeled reception hall and an enchanted reveler and picnicker) was the last Levantine 'ālim known to have written a chronicle. The 'ulamā’ hegemony over the production of historical knowledge was finally completely broken; their “monopoly over time” had ceased. The text of the chronicle was now open to other people, those whose professions and lifestyles were not directly associated with Islamic learned culture: two soldiers from Damascus, a Shi‘i farmer and his son from southern Lebanon, a Ḥimṣi judicial court clerk, a Samaritan scribe from Nablus, a Damascene Greek Orthodox priest, and of course our barber of Damascus (Map 1). The convergence of so many people of such different backgrounds on the text of the chronicle cannot be attributed to mere coincidence. This is the “literary disorder” that is nouveau literacy.

Aside from variety of background among the new authors and their choice to write in the same genre of contemporary history, what else unifies our texts into a phenomenon? The answer, in one word, is language, which was decidedly not the language of the ‘ulamā’. The authors’ indiscriminate use of the varied registers of Arabic, including “colloquial Arabic,” is reflective of not only the degree of freedom that the eighteenth-century history text allowed but also the distance of its new authors from learned culture. Thus, after I traverse the Levant in search of our new authors’ histories—their biographies, communities, and texts—I will consider their use of language. The exploration of the linguistic attributes of the nouveau literates’ texts will take us to the next question: For whom were these histories written? A part of this chapter will offer tentative answers about the reception and circulation of our non-'ulamā’ chronicles.
CHAPTER 4

Authority and History

The Genealogy of the Eighteenth-Century Levantine
Contemporary Chronicle

The recording of contemporary events has been undertaken, in one guise or another, from the earliest period of Arabic-Islamic historiography itself. However, it took a thousand years for the writing of contemporary history to metamorphose to the point where the fully developed genre of the contemporary chronicle readily lent itself to being appropriated by a quite different cast of historians: the barber, the farmers, the court clerk, the Samaritan scribe, the soldiers, and the priest. Not only did the identity of the authors of the contemporary chronicle change, but so did the language in which the chronicles were written, from classical to colloquial Arabic. But where did the eighteenth-century Levantine contemporary chronicle come from? What is the place of this phenomenon in the history of Arabic-Islamic and Ottoman historiography?

This chapter traces the genealogy of the contemporary chronicle in Arabic-Islamic historiography, which is the genealogy of the writing of contemporary history in the eighteenth-century Levant. In the following, I attempt to identify the earliest ancestors of this genre in the notebooks of scholars in the eighth century, and to chart its subsequent appearances in guises such as the “ta’rikh-diary” (chronicle-diary) and the dhayl (supplementary history), until we reach its unique Levantine manifestation of the eighteenth century. I will try specifically to trace the transformation in historical vision that led to the emergence of two defining features of the contemporary chronicle: the overriding interest in the here and now, and the pervasive authorial I. These two features are quite significant, as they indicate the transformation of history from a project about the past to a project about the present, and concomitantly the gradual release of the chronicler from the “clasp” of an elite scholarly community and his acquisition of relatively independent authority. In tracing the history of the transformation of the literary form, I examine a range of issues related
Get up, examine the events of the age, and contemplate!
And act according to your reason—in order that you *remember* them!

—IBN BUDAYR

The act of authorship by the barber Ibn Budayr is something apparently unprecedented for a member of his profession. The striking aspect of Ibn Budayr’s decision is not, of course, the fact of the barber’s will to memory, but rather his choice of the form of this memory: namely, a chronicle, or *tārikh*, the scholarly form conceived and mostly perpetuated by the learned elite. In examining the barber’s book, the immediate questions that come to mind are: Why does Ibn Budayr appropriate this scholarly genre to preserve his memory? How does he effect this appropriation? Is the barber’s historiographical act merely mimetic of the scholarly form? Or does he draw on available nonscholarly memorial and narrative genres? In short, what does the barber do to the contemporary chronicle, and what does the contemporary chronicle do for him?

In attempting to answer these questions, I aim to show how this hair cutter, beard shaver, and circumciser trimmed and coiffed the elite literary form of the contemporary chronicle for his own ends. This chapter explores various aspects of the barber’s history: his manipulation of the standard content of the contemporary chronicle; his specific use of literary registers, that is, rhymed prose, and/or poetry; and his use of language, meaning his negotiation between the so-called classical Arabic and Levantine vernacular. The treatment of the literary and linguistic aspects of the text allows us to make some conjectures about the barber’s intended or implied audience.

The overarching goal here is to demonstrate how Ibn Budayr injects the elite chronicle form with elements of the popular oral epic so as to
Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qāsimī (d. 1900) was an interesting man. He was a scholar and a teacher who belonged to what became a famous Damascene scholarly "dynasty,"¹ and a joyous host whose house was famous for literary and musical salons.² Though we are interested in al-Qāsimī mainly for his adaptation of Ibn Budayr’s chronicle, his greatest achievement lay not in the intellectual realm but in the fact of his progeny: his son Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914) was one of the most important figures of the Islamic reform movement (ṣalāḥīyya) in Syria, a movement that proposed a return to and search in the original scriptural sources for the revival of faith, state, and society.³ Jamāl publicized his views and engaged in debates in various newspapers and journals, which had global circulation.⁴ Print was Jamāl’s medium. The times changed, and print became the sign of the times.

This chapter tells the story of the later reincarnation of Ibn Budayr’s chronicle. It is about the adaptation of the text at the heavy editorial hand of Muḥammad Saʿīd al-Qāsimī. It will be remembered that al-Qāsimī’s bowdlerized edition, which was completed sometime before his death (in 1900) and eventually printed in 1959, is the version of the work that is widely used by historians today. I juxtapose the two versions—the barber’s original text and the amended al-Qāsimī version—with the goal of examining the editor’s alterations; of identifying his motives, whether implicit or explicit; and gauging the overall effect of the bowdlerized text. We shall see that the editor’s alterations, omissions, and additions are not simply about improving style and language. Rather the editor, though somewhat mindful of retaining the general meaning of the chronicle, paradoxically attempts to revert the text, from its original constitution as a hybrid product with a subversive message and a performative function, into a relatively orderly chronicle concerned with sultans and governors. In his attempt to make the text conform with the scholarly form, the
Conclusion

From Nouveau Literacy to Print Journalism

I have dubbed the protagonist of this study (the barber) and his “side-kicks” (a Shi'i farmer and his son, a Greek Orthodox priest, two soldiers, a Samaritan scribe, and a judicial court clerk) nouveau literates. “Nouveau” because their cultural wealth was newly acquired, and a consequence of a changed political and social landscape. This new landscape is exemplified by the rise and dominance of new local households, whose power allowed fresh opportunities for clientele and patronage. Each of our new authors, whether individually or as a representative of a larger community, found in this changed order a chance to gain and a possibility to lose. Thus, both eager and anxious, our new authors hoped to strategize and negotiate in uncertain times. To do this, they all employed the fact of their literacy. More strikingly, of all the Arabic literary genres, our authors chose to write in the same literary form: the contemporary chronicle.

Although it witnessed various singular appropriations by people outside the ranks of the 'ulama', the Arabic chronicle was historically bound up by the authority of Muslim scholars in their perpetual effort to bolster the Islamic political order. What is unusual about the phenomenon of nouveau literacy is the fact that so many people of so many differing backgrounds found in the chronicle an opportunity to write, and by the by insert themselves into history. It represents authorship by people who were not the accustomed subjects of scholarly history, and who did not habitually represent themselves in historiography. This is, then, a new kind of literacy.

What made this phenomenon possible is not only a reshuffle in the social map but also a literary form that was gradually let loose over the centuries. As the 'ulama' ceased to conceive of history as a collective sequential exercise to be handed down from one generation of scholarly authorities to the next, the subject and the generic limits of history also changed. By the Ottoman period, the chronicle infected and was infected