
TEXTS AND MANUSCRIPTS: DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH

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JŪDA AL-KHATTĪ. THE EXCELLENCE OF CALLIGRAPHY. AL-ZABĪDĪ'S SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF CALLIGRAPHY. A TRANSLATION OF THE FINAL CHAPTER OF THE AUTHOR'S ḤIKMAT AL-ISHRĀQ (CAIRO, 1184/1771), WITH AN INTRODUCTION* [1]

In 1752 an Indian Muslim *savant* paid a visit to Ottoman Egypt, where he settled and spent the rest of his life. Shaykh Abū al-Fayḍ al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Razzāq, better known as Murtaḍa al-Ḥusaynī al-Zabīdī al-Ḥanafī — or simply Murtaḍa al-Zabīdī — was born in India in 1732. He became an itinerant scholar who made the Pilgrimage several times. He visited Egypt at the suggestion of his teacher Shaykh ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-‘Aydārūs, who described the country to him in glowing terms. He also initiated him as a *ṣūfī* and licensed him to teach his works. Al-Zabīdī was not to be disappointed with his decision to come to Cairo. He received the patronage of Ismā‘īl Kadkhudā ‘Azabān, and travelled the length and breadth of the country, in the course of which he seems to have been held in high esteem on all sides [2]. According to his biographer al-Jabartī, the paeons of praise recited in his honour, both in prose and verse, would if collected, have filled a fat volume. His *magnum opus*, completed in 1767, was the compilation of an Arabic dictionary, the *Tāj al-‘arūs fī sharḥ al-qāmūs*, which was a commentary on the earlier dictionary of al-Fīrūzābādī, the *Qāmūs al-muḥīt* [3].

Around 1770 al-Zabīdī started work on another much smaller work, on the art of calligraphy, called the *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq ilā kuttāb al-āfāq* [4]. By the time of the author's arrival in Egypt the country had been an Ottoman province for 250 years. Politically, Ottoman control was purely nominal: the governors sent from Istanbul, rarely remained for more than a few years at a time; their power was almost non-existent and the country was in the hands of local Mamlūk rulers or *beys*. Culturally, however, Egypt was firmly part of the Ottoman world, with Ottoman tastes and fashions penetrating even to the

level of such relatively inconsequential areas as book-binding, calligraphy and manuscript illumination.

The *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq*, was composed for the calligrapher Ḥasan b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Rūmī, called *al-Rushdī*, who after the death of Ismā‘īl Wabhī in 1773—74, became Chief Writing-Master (*shaykh al-muktibīn*). The date of completion of the work is 12 *dhu* al-ḥijja 1184 / March 1771 [5].

The final chapter in al-Zabīdī's handbook on calligraphy is entitled: “An account of the noble scribes from the time of the Prophet ... until our own time, arranged in good order and instructively presented”. This is not however, a simple chain of authorities. Al-Zabīdī was clearly trying to link two separate calligraphic traditions — the earlier Arab/Mamlūk one with the Ottoman one, which by the 18th century was dominant in Egypt.

Like other histories of Ottoman calligraphy, the summary consists of the *silsila*, or *catena* of calligraphers from Ibn Muqla onwards. However, it is traced through Ibn al-Bawwāb to Yāqūt al-Mawṣilī, who died in 1221 and not, as one would expect, Yāqūt al-Musta‘īmī, who died in 1298. As al-Zabīdī gives the biography of Yāqūt al-Mawṣilī at some length, we may presume that he was not confusing him with his more famous namesake, but was tracing the lesser known calligraphic branch of Syria and Egypt under the Mamlūks which culminated in the work of ‘Abd al-Raḥman b. al-Ṣā‘igh (d. 1441—42) [6]. Al-Zabīdī seems to have done his best to trace this Mamlūk branch, for he refers several times to the various works which he has consulted in the course of his research. Indeed the information given in this part of the chapter was not conveniently available elsewhere in earlier works [7].

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