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TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME

Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg

EDITED BY

SYLVIA AKAR, JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA
& INKA NOKSO-KOIVISTO



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Edited by Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila & Inka Nokso-Koivisto
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A JOURNEY TO ST PETERSBURG: ON THE FATE OF THE MANUSCRIPT *KITĀB RIḤLAT AL-SHITĀ' WA-L-ṢAIF* BY MUḤAMMAD AL-ḤUSAINĪ

Milana Iliushina

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The collection of Arabic manuscripts of St Petersburg State University covers a wide range of both literary and scientific works. Regardless of its relatively limited corpus, the collection includes autographs and unique and precious manuscripts. A remarkable contribution to the development of Arabic studies in Russia was made by Shaikh Muḥammad 'Ayyād al-Ṭanṭāwī (1810–1861). The Oriental Department of the Scientific Library of St Petersburg State University has in its possession a number of Arabic manuscripts collected by Shaikh al-Ṭanṭāwī, copied by him or supplied with comments in his handwriting. Shaikh al-Ṭanṭāwī's notes, made when he was reading or indicating the date when a manuscript was acquired, help to clear up some facts of his biography.

The life of Shaikh al-Ṭanṭāwī in St Petersburg began in 1840 when “with the highest approbation he was summoned from Egypt to teach Arabic literature arts at the Instruction and Training Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs”.¹ On 29 June 1840 – after a three month journey, two-thirds of which was spent waiting in quarantines and a long stop in Moguelev – the Shaikh arrived in the capital of Russia.²

He did not lose touch with his homeland, however. Shaikh Muḥammad 'Ayyād al-Ṭanṭāwī mentioned one of his trips to Egypt in his *Description of Russia*. And a note in Ms.O. no. 729 *Kitāb al-Ṣādīḥ wa-l-Bāghim*, the poetic version of *Kalīla wa-Dimna* by Ibn al-Habbārī (d. 1110), along with some other materials, made it possible for academician I.Y. Krachkovsky to verify that Shaikh al-Ṭanṭāwī visited Egypt in the summer of 1844. Further on in his book, Krachkovsky states that, “as there is no available evidence of other al-Ṭanṭāwī trips to Egypt, we

1 Krachkovsky 1929: 31.

2 Krachkovsky 1929: 35.

may suggest that he did not pay any more visits to his homeland”.³ However, a postscript on a page of the manuscript Ms.O. no. 366 testifies to the fact that the Shaikh did indeed return to the Middle East at least one more time in 1842.

The manuscript (Ms.O. no. 366) from the Oriental Department of the Scientific Library of St Petersburg State University contains 160 sheets. The text is written in China ink on paper manufactured in Russia. The chapter titles are in red ink. The manuscript is leather-bound with gold stamping. The inner front cover of the manuscript is in marbled paper, unusual in that the older technology of manufacturing marbled paper had practically fallen out of use by the time that this manuscript was bound, and paper was most often painted with a marble faux finish.

The first 11 sheets of the manuscript are devoted to an anonymous Persian treatise on Mecca and a Meccan temple, entitled *The Treatise on dimensions in Mecca the honoured (Makka al-mukarrama)*. This work gives measurements and descriptions of holy places in Mecca, as well as historical data on different buildings, and it is written in *nastaliq* script.

The treatise is followed by the *Kitāb riḥlat al-shitā’ wa-l-ṣaif (Book of the winter and summer journey)* the first page of which is ornamented in colours with *‘unwān*. The writing on each page occupies an area of approximately 7.5 by 15.5 cm, and up to the 30th sheet it is framed by two red lines. There are 19 lines on each sheet written in *naskhi* script. The title of the *Book of the winter and summer journey* contains the words from the second *ayat* of the *surat al-Quraish*. The author of the *Book of the winter and summer journey*, Muḥammad al-Ḥusainī (also known as Muḥammad Kibrīt), was born in Medina in 1603 and died there in 1659.

Muḥammad al-Ḥusainī recounts in refined language his travels with an Egyptian caravan from the Holy Cities (Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, and Safed) through the Sinai Peninsula to Cairo and Alexandria, then by sea to Istanbul, and back to Mecca along a Syrian caravan route for pilgrims, through Damascus and al-Karak. The prose of the book is reinforced by segments of poetic diction. Over 2,000 *baits* by a variety of poets of different epochs, including al-Ḥusainī himself, adorn the text of the *Book of the winter and summer journey*.

The narration abounds with digressions from its logical flow. A good example is seen in a story about the beautiful sights of Bulaq, a district in Cairo, (fol. 63a, *Min maḥāsini Miṣr Būlāq*). Supplemented with information about Egyptian antiquities, it smoothly transitions into a speculation on the virtues of striving for knowledge, on how important it is to study *hadiths* and *fiqh*, and on the qualities of a scholar, apropos of which Muḥammad al-Ḥusainī reminds the reader that sharing secrets and lending money to friends leads to disgrace, and that a friend

3 Krachkovsky 1929: 40.

in need is a friend indeed, after which the subject turns to love, passion, beauty, and so forth. As a result, no more than five lines tell about Bulaq itself, while the other problems recounted in detail fill about six sheets of the manuscript. There is no coincidence, however, in the author's choice of this style; he chooses it deliberately and warns the reader thereof in his foreword to the book. Moreover, it is thanks to his being liberal with words – not to say verbosity – and his readiness to put down in words everything that attracts his attention that we have the good fortune to learn precious details about the everyday life, worries and joys of Egyptian pilgrims returning home after completing the *ḥajj*.

Muḥammad al-Ḥusainī made his trip in 1629–1630 under the rule of Murād IV (1623–1639).⁴ The Arab literature of that period was based and relied upon a common tradition rooted in the past, being still mainly of a mediaeval type. Of other notable prosaic genres, *riḥla* exerted remarkable influence on the new Arabic literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵ The genres of local geographic descriptions (*faḍā'il*) and traveling (*riḥla*) were most widespread in Syria and neighbouring countries in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. Journeys of this epoch tended to be made to and within Turkey.⁶ Being a political and cultural center, Istanbul attracted educated and cultured people from all corners of the empire, including the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina.⁷ The *Book of the winter and summer journey* can be considered a typical example of *adab* literature of this time written in the genre of *riḥla*.

Krachkovsky writes that the *Book of the winter and summer journey* is found in numerous manuscripts, as well as in an old and practically inaccessible edition published in Cairo.⁸ Manuscript copies of the *Book of the winter and summer journey* by Muḥammad al-Ḥusainī are in the possession of Cambridge University and of the French National Library (Bibliothèque Nationale de France) in Paris. The *Book of the winter and summer journey* saw its first publication in 1824, when it was released by the publishing house of al-Maktab al-Islāmī. It was also published in Egypt in 1876, and then in Beirut in 1965. The most recent published version of the *Book of the winter and summer journey* came out in 2004.

The title page of the *Book of the winter and summer journey* includes a notation that Shaikh Muḥammad al-Ṭanṭāwī started studying this work while in quarantine in Constantinople in 1842 and finished the study in St Petersburg. The Shaikh adds, “This book is invaluable, precious; it reveals a highly educated

4 Krachkovsky 2004: 708.

5 Filshinsky 1991: 476, 479.

6 Krachkovsky 2004: 656, 666.

7 Filshinsky 1991: 476.

8 Krachkovsky 2004: 708.

author, who, despite all the vicissitudes of time and enmity towards him, says [...] The world seems sweet for those who do not know it and bitter for those who are clever.”

Another notation on the same page testifies to the fact that Shaikh al-Ṭaṭṭāwī presented the manuscript to Muḥammad Khalīl, a Kokand envoy at the Russian Tsar’s court. Both notations are in the copyist’s handwriting. Therefore, the copy in question is a copy of the manuscript that Shaikh al-Ṭaṭṭāwī had at his disposal on his way to St Petersburg, and it was made after the manuscript had come into Khalīl’s possession.

We now meet a new person in our story, A.K. Kazembek (1802–1870), who would later become the first Dean of the Faculty of Asian and African Studies at St Petersburg University. For more than twenty years, he worked in Kazan. And there he purchased this copy, which had been made from the manuscript presented by Shaikh al-Ṭaṭṭāwī to the Kokand envoy. Shortly thereafter, it was bought from him by Kazan University (for ten silver rubles). Thus, we see the *Kitāb al-riḥla* travelling from the Middle East to St Petersburg, then probably to Central Asia and, as a copy, to Kazan.

Meanwhile, in 1849 Kazembek himself moved to St Petersburg to work at the University, where the Faculty of Asian and African Studies officially opened in 1855. Also in 1855, many books and manuscripts in Oriental languages were transferred from Kazan University to the library of St Petersburg State University. Among them was the copy of *Kitāb al-riḥla*, marking the end of the journey of Muḥammad al-Ḥusainī’s book. The Faculty of Asian and African Studies became home to the *Kitāb al-riḥla*. Joining it would be two owners of handwritten copies of the book, the eminent scholars M.A. al-Ṭaṭṭāwī and A.K. Kazembek.

Needless to say, the contents of the manuscript – the text as such – is of the highest importance. However, of no less interest, being a result of the everyday cultural activity of man, are notes in the margins and notations on the title page, cover, and first and last pages of the manuscript. The simple record of someone reading the manuscript or passing it on to another person is, in fact, a kind of translation of a life episode into the language of culture, whereby it is transformed into text. Such records introduce new information into the collective memory, making it part of our cultural property, especially if we consider culture as “a container filled with information of human communities and of the humanity as a whole”.⁹ Of special note is the fact that, in the *Book of the winter and summer journey*, the author touches upon the question of *writing-eternity-memory*. He recollects the words ascribed by him to Alexander the Great, “those

9 Lotman 2010: 59.

who mentioned my name in what will withstand the ravages of time will make me linger on in public memory for ages” (fol. 158b), supplementing the quotation with the poetic lines, “what is woven by hands will perish, but what is woven by *qalams* will remain for us for ages” (fol. 158b).

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