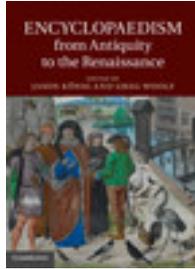


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## 16 | Why was the fourteenth century a century of Arabic encyclopaedism?

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The Mamluk period in Egypt and the Levant (1250–1517) has often been described as a golden age of Arabic encyclopaedic literature. It witnessed the writing of large-scale compendia by such figures as Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī (d. 1333), Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī (d. 1349), and Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418) whose works are vast, multi-themed collections spanning thousands of pages and containing material from a wide range of disciplines. In addition to the behemoths of this encyclopaedic triumvirate, the period was replete with a variety of other, more modestly proportioned, but no less omnivorous works, to say nothing of the many compendious manuals, handbooks, and dictionaries for which Mamluk literature is justly famous.

The goal of this essay is to explore the factors that contributed to this boom of encyclopaedism. In the course of doing so, I aim to shed light on the sociology of scholarship in the Mamluk empire and the ways in which an educated class of religious scholars, scribes, and littérateurs developed strategies for documenting and classifying an ever-growing corpus of accumulated knowledge.

### In search of Arabic encyclopaedism

While the history of encyclopaedic writing in the medieval European tradition has been well charted, from its origins in Isidore de Seville’s seventh-century *Etymologiae*, to the massive thirteenth-century *Speculum Maius* of Vincent de Beauvais and beyond, the history of medieval Islamic encyclopaedism remains relatively obscure. In a 1966 article about encyclopaedias in the Arab world, the French scholar Charles Pellat claimed that, to his knowledge, no such survey had ever been written on the subject.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Pellat had been scooped over a hundred years earlier by the Austrian orientalist Joseph Freiherr von Hammer-Purgstall, who produced an initial survey of encyclopaedias written in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish,<sup>2</sup> drawn from

<sup>1</sup> Pellat (1966) 631, n. 1.    <sup>2</sup> Hammer-Purgstall (1856–9).

various bibliographical sources.<sup>3</sup> The range of works in Hammer-Purgstall's list was expansive, cutting across generic and disciplinary boundaries, but consisted primarily of classifications of the sciences such as al-Fārābī's (d. 950) *Iḥṣā' al-'ulūm* (*Enumeration of the Sciences*), and technical treatises on disciplinary terminology such as Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī's (d. 997–8) *Mafātīḥ al-'ulūm* (*Keys to the Sciences*).

By contrast, the conception of Arabic encyclopaedism elaborated by Charles Pellat one century later was firmly rooted in the world of *adab* (belles-lettres and other edifying literature) and the writings of its greatest practitioners, figures such as al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 869), Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 940), and al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956). Surveying Arabic literary history from its beginnings through its nineteenth-century 'renaissance', Pellat outlined the contours of an Arabic encyclopaedic canon. He included works of a broadly compilatory character, such as the literary anthologies of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī (d. 1038) and Ibn Maṣṣūr's (d. 1311) famous dictionary *Lisān al-'Arab* (*The Arab Tongue*), but he was careful to distinguish them from what he deemed to be full-fledged encyclopaedias, the greatest exemplar of which was the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (*Epistles of the Sincere Brethren*), an esoteric compendium of the sciences written by an anonymous brotherhood in the tenth century.

The differences in Hammer-Purgstall and Pellat's treatments stem, in part, from the nebulous character of the phenomenon they were investigating. Defining the term 'encyclopaedia' is a thorny old problem, to which the literature on this subject tirelessly attests. Within the European tradition, the word has been used in different ways over the course of its history, and remains something of a contested category among scholars of encyclopaedic literature. As Ann Blair shows in chapter 18, the modern notion of the encyclopaedia as a bulky yet easily navigated reference work of multidisciplinary scope did not emerge until the eighteenth century, prior to which very few works called themselves encyclopaedias and those that did bore little resemblance to what we think of as encyclopaedic today.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the word's relatively recent vintage, however, scholars have traced the history of European encyclopaedism to the late classical and medieval periods, identifying works by such figures as Martianus Capella, Casiodorus, Isidore de Seville, and Vincent de Beauvais as encyclopaedias *avant la lettre*. The fact of the term's inexistence in the Middle Ages, however, would seem to represent a methodological problem, as Jacques Le

<sup>3</sup> Hammer-Purgstall (1856–9)'s sources included Ḥajjī Khalifa's *Kashf al-zunūn 'an asāmi al-kutub wa 'l-funūn* (Flügel edition), Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, Casiri's *Bibliotheca Arabico-Hispana Escorialensis*, and various other manuscript catalogues.

<sup>4</sup> See Blair (2010); Blair (2006); Henningsen (1966); Simone (1976); Fowler (1997); Bos (1989).

Goff has argued. In a seminal essay, 'Pourquoi le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle a-t-il été plus particulièrement un siècle d'encyclopédisme?' Le Goff suggested that historians should not continue to employ an ambiguous Renaissance category in studying the history of medieval European encyclopaedism, but should rather approach this phenomenon in its own terms. Alas, the challenge of excavating a historically grounded medieval discourse on encyclopaedism has had few takers, given the diversity of the works under consideration and the wide chronological span involved.<sup>5</sup>

If problems of definition and generic classification are present, therefore, in the European context, it is not surprising that they should be compounded upon entering a different intellectual tradition altogether. Indeed, one would be justified in wondering what utility the term 'encyclopaedia' has for the analysis of texts in Arabic, Chinese, Persian, or Malay when its status as a stable category in European literature – particularly before the mid-eighteenth century – is tenuous. In other words, just how 'translatable' is the notion of an encyclopaedia, if one is unsure of what it means in the first place?

Two interpretive strategies suggest themselves at this juncture. On the one hand, scholars working on non-European literatures might eschew the term 'encyclopaedia' altogether and rely solely upon an indigenous nomenclature. Alternatively, the term may be accepted as an analytic category in which a wide range of texts from many different intellectual traditions participate. The challenge of the latter approach is that it seems to bring us back to the question of definition: what essential elements define the encyclopaedia *qua* analytic category? Is there a set of parameters that can encompass texts as chronologically, linguistically, structurally, and materially disparate as Isidore's *Etymologiae*, Wang Qi's *Sancai tuhui*, al-Nuwayrī's *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and the online *Wikipedia*?

While these methodological questions are not the primary focus of this study, they provide a useful entry into the topic at hand. Explaining the foundations of Mamluk encyclopaedism requires one to come to grips with what type of phenomenon it was. Did it amount to something as self-conscious and formally defined as an indigenous genre, or should one speak instead of a diffuse encyclopaedic 'ethos' pervading multiple genres and intellectual traditions during this period?

As in the medieval European context, there is no single, straightforward equivalent for the term 'encyclopaedia' in classical Arabic literature.<sup>6</sup> Each work bears a unique title, as is the case for texts in various classical genres.

<sup>5</sup> Le Goff (1994) 25. See also Ribémont (1997).

<sup>6</sup> The terms *dā'irat al-ma'ārif* and *mawsū'a*, which are used in modern parlance, did not emerge until the twentieth century: see Pellat (1991).

However, while medieval Arabic dictionaries, for example, also displayed a multiplicity of titles, the status of lexicography as a self-conscious scholarly discipline with its roots in the earliest history of Islamic civilisation is unambiguous. The subject was taught for centuries alongside other topics such as grammar and prosody, and the author of a dictionary was regularly identified by his biographers as a lexicographer (*lughawī*).

No such professional categories or labels existed for encyclopaedists and their works. The author of an encyclopaedia was typically identified as a master of the discipline in which his work was primarily rooted, even if it contained materials from other disciplines. The three most well-known representatives of the Mamluk encyclopaedic movement are prime examples. Al-Nuwayrī, al-ʿUmārī, and al-Qalqashandī's works situate themselves squarely within the traditions of, respectively: *adab* (belles-lettres); *masālik wa-mamālik* (geography); and *inshāʾ* (epistolography), even though each of these works overflows with material unrelated to its stated focus.

The works' prefaces and authorial interventions lend further weight to the impression that their authors saw themselves as working within three separate disciplines, rather than a common encyclopaedic genre. Al-ʿUmārī states that he compiled his *Masālik al-abṣār* as a corrective to all of the outdated and inaccurate books about geography,<sup>7</sup> and al-Qalqashandī identifies other scribal manuals as the inspiration for his own *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā*.<sup>8</sup> As for al-Nuwayrī, despite his insistence that his thirty-volume compendium was a work of *adab*, his biographers and later manuscript copyists regularly mistook the work for a historical chronicle, no doubt because of the extensive amount of historical material included within it. No one, however, called it an encyclopaedia.

In what sense, then, is it meaningful to speak of a Mamluk 'encyclopaedic movement' at all, if its primary exemplars were not regarded – and did not regard themselves – as participating in any such movement? What justifies the treatment of these works as a unified field? Here it may be fruitful to return to the second of the two interpretive strategies discussed above. Construing encyclopaedism as an analytic category of compositional features – such as exhaustiveness, multidisciplinary, systematic organisation, etc. – represents a way to address the question of what conditions promoted the prevalence of this mode of textual production across various

<sup>7</sup> al-ʿUmārī states that most of the available texts on geography contain old information, stories about past kings and nations, and obsolete technical vocabulary: see al-ʿUmārī (1924) 2.

<sup>8</sup> The models al-Qalqashandī aimed to surpass include al-ʿUmārī's *al-Taʾrīf bi-muṣṭalaḥ al-sharīf* and Ibn Nāẓir al-Jayshī's *Tathqīf al-taʾrīf*.

intellectual projects. I am referring, here, not simply to the encyclopaedic works discussed above but to a wider range of compilatory texts – including biographical dictionaries, literary anthologies, universal and specialised lexicons, and professional manuals – all dependent upon the fundamental processes of collecting and ordering knowledge.

Naturally, the production of such works was not unique to the Mamluk period. The texts under consideration, however, tend to differ dramatically from their forebears by virtue of their vastly expanded thematic scope and systematic organisation, the diversity of their source materials, and their elephantine proportions – features which, taken in the aggregate, give the literature of the fourteenth century its encyclopaedic quality. Furthermore, it is not just the quality of such texts that is notable, but also the preponderance: the sheer number of expansive compilatory works produced under the auspices of the Mamluk sultans rivals that of almost any other premodern Islamic polity. Why was this the case? What led to the rise of large-scale compilation as the predominant activity of the Egyptian and Syrian learned elite during the period in question? Or, to put it another way: why was the fourteenth century a century of Arabic encyclopaedism?

## Centres of knowledge and power

In Islamic history, the year 1258 looms large. In February, the armies of the Mongol Ilkhanids sacked the Abbasid capital at Baghdad, bringing an end to a dynasty that had reigned – through periods of glory and ignominy – for half a millennium. The ferocity of the attack is the stuff of legend: hundreds of thousands were said to have been slaughtered, buildings were razed to the ground, and the historic libraries of the city were gutted and destroyed, making the waters of the Tigris run black with the ink of discarded books. Following its victory at Baghdad, the Mongol army marched west where, two years later, it would be defeated decisively by the Mamluks at the Battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt.

The traditional narrative has held that after the fall of Baghdad, Cairo inherited its mantle as the political and cultural epicentre of the Muslim world.<sup>9</sup> Scholars and poets fled from Iraq, finding a welcome home in the colleges of the Mamluk realms even as they spread the news of smoking libraries to their counterparts in Egypt and Syria. The sense of terror that this catastrophe provoked, so the theory goes, was one of the principal

<sup>9</sup> See Chapoutot-Remadi (1991); Blachère (1970).

factors leading to the rise of the Mamluk encyclopaedic movement, which aimed to forestall the loss of an entire civilisation's intellectual heritage.<sup>10</sup>

One can understand the attraction of this hypothesis given the existence of a similar discourse in the context of Renaissance encyclopaedism, but there is very little primary evidence from the sources themselves that bears out this view.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, recent scholarship on the Mongol conquests has complicated the picture of a glorious cultural capital ravaged by alien marauders. Literary reports about Baghdad suggest that the city seemed to have been a cultural backwater long before the Mongols sacked it,<sup>12</sup> and we now know that the post-conquest flow of emigrants was not unidirectional: some escaped from the oncoming tide of the Mongol advance only to duck back behind it once the armies reached as far as Syria.<sup>13</sup>

These qualifications notwithstanding, there can be little doubt that in the two and a half centuries following the sack of Baghdad, the cosmopolitan centers of the Mamluk realms became magnets for scholars and students from all over the Muslim world. The stability and security provided by a rapidly consolidating imperial state represented a fundamental break with several centuries of fractiousness and political turmoil in the central Islamic lands. Among the consequences of this new order was the emergence of an increasingly universal vision in much of the historical and geographical literature of the period, which began to regard its object of study as the Islamic world writ large, rather than a more narrowly defined region or

<sup>10</sup> 'The [invasion] certainly provoked serious disquiet which was translated into the composition of enormous encyclopaedias intended to some extent to preserve the acquisitions of preceding generations at the moment when the Arabo-Islamic world could be seen as despairing of achieving new progress and felt itself threatened by the worst calamities. In the following centuries, the Black Death (749/1348) was further to aggravate this feeling of insecurity': see Pellat (1991) 906.

<sup>11</sup> See Ann Blair's contribution in chapter 18, which documents the efforts of Renaissance compilers to prevent 'a repetition of the traumatic loss of ancient learning of which they were keenly aware' (p. 382).

<sup>12</sup> As Michael Cooperson has shown, the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr (d. 1217) visited Baghdad as early as 1184 and described it as something of an intellectual wasteland: 'This ancient city, though it still serves as the Abbasid capital, has lost much of its distinctive character and retains only its famous name. Compared to what it once was – before it fell victim to recurrent misfortunes and repeated calamities – the city resembles a vanished encampment or a passing phantom': see Cooperson (1996) 99.

<sup>13</sup> The Baghdad-based philosopher Ibn Kammūna (d. 1284–5) was one such example. He moved to Aleppo following the sack of Baghdad, but then returned to the east when the Mongols sacked Aleppo in 1260: see Langermann (2007) 14. In other instances, the Mongols singled out scholars as booty but then patronised them, as was the case of the astronomer al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274), who built his famed observatory under the auspices of Hülegü at Maragha, where a library was also built with the books carried off from the conquests of Iraq and Syria: see DeWeese (2006); Gilli-Elewy (2000).

time span.<sup>14</sup> This is borne out in remarkable fashion by Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umārī, the author of the encyclopaedic *Masālik al-abṣār*, who states in the preface of his work that he would not have been able to produce such a text had it not been for his position as a high-ranking secretary in the bureaucracy of a powerful empire, which enabled him to meet travellers from all over the Islamic and Mediterranean worlds. As Zayde Antrim has argued, it was only through ‘the lens of empire [that he was] able to see and describe the diverse and distant lands, from India and Iran, to Mali and Ethiopia, to Morocco and Spain, that together constituted for al-‘Umārī the “realms of Islam”’.<sup>15</sup>

The case of al-‘Umārī was not unique; all three members of the Mamluk encyclopaedic triumvirate served as career bureaucrats within the imperial government, as did many other scholars and compilers. Meanwhile, those who did not work as direct servants of the state were similarly implicated within the aggregative ethos of the time by virtue of their participation in an increasingly institutionalised scholarly system. As is well known, the Mamluk period witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of educational institutions – particularly *madrasas*, colleges of Islamic law – in its urban centers, in which a variety of subjects were taught.<sup>16</sup> Prior to this period, however, and for much of Islamic history, education did not take place in *madrasas*, but was rather conducted through informal associations between independent scholars who often traveled great distances in pursuit of knowledge, and typically had to find alternate means to sustain themselves while carrying out their scholarly endeavours.<sup>17</sup> In the Mamluk empire, this

<sup>14</sup> As Zayde Antrim has shown in her study of place and belonging in medieval Syria, Mamluk geographers exhibited a ‘broader vision of place’ than their antecedents, whose own writings reflected a preoccupation with more circumscribed territorial referents. Particularly in the fourteenth century, which represented ‘the height of prosperity and stability in medieval Syria’, Antrim argues that the region’s inhabitants conceived of themselves ‘as belonging to and in an empire billed as Dār al-Islām [the Abode of Islam]’: see Antrim (2004) 280–1.

<sup>15</sup> Antrim (2004) 333.

<sup>16</sup> The historical development of the *madrasa* was studied in magisterial fashion by the late George Makdisi, who argued that the first institutional locus of instruction in the Islamic sciences was the *maṣjid* (mosque). Over time, mosques became centres for jurisprudential activity, as Muslims sought to connect their study of scripture and tradition with the legal and social questions facing society. The turning point for the mosque as an educational space, says Makdisi, occurred in the mid-ninth century when the demand for such legal instruction grew, prompting the building of larger mosques with attached *khan* (inns), for out-of-town students and teachers. The final step in the development of the *madrasa* took place in the eleventh century, and was marked by the combination of the duties of the *maṣjid* and those of the *khan* in a single institution under a single endowment (*waqf*). See Makdisi (1981); Pedersen (1986).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Chamberlain, in his study of knowledge and social practice in medieval Damascus, emphasises the political–financial aspect of *madrasas* and the degree to which they represented lucrative positions (*manāṣib*) for scholars, who jockeyed endlessly with each other for the

activity took on an increasingly institutional character through the creation of salaried positions in a wide range of educational loci – a development which presaged, as Joan Gilbert has argued, the emergence of a ‘profession-alized and bureaucratized’ scholarly class.<sup>18</sup>

A distinctive token of the self-consciously corporate nature of this class was the explosion of biographical literature during this period, primarily in the form of multi-volume, alphabetically-arranged onomastica. Many of these texts were devoted to the notable jurists of different legal schools, but others mapped the intellectual boundaries of other scholarly communities as well, from grammarians to Qur’anic exegetes to hadith transmitters. As Wadad al-Qadi has suggested, the production of these texts marked an important development in the self-consciousness of the learned elite. Not merely lists of names, these works rather presented an ‘alternative history’ of the Muslim community, written by scholars for scholars, as opposed to the historical chronicle, which was primarily written by scholars for rulers.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Nuwayrī, the author of the encyclopaedic *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, is a prime example of an individual whose professional and intellectual trajectory was defined by his experience within this world of institutions. Born in Upper Egypt, he went to Cairo when he was 19 to work in the office of the sultan’s private funds, studying and residing at a local college. Showing talent in his administrative duties, he was given greater responsibility, overseeing various institutions in the course of his career, from the imperial fisc itself to the Bīmāristān al-Manṣūrī, a famous hospital containing ‘wards for various diseases, a lecture room, laboratories, a dispensary, baths, kitchens and store-rooms’ and a school mosque with a library of medical, theological, and legal texts.<sup>20</sup> In 1310, al-Nuwayrī was put in charge of the Nāṣiriyya, the college where he had resided as a young man. He was an astute observer of its workings, even supplying the text of its endowment deed in his encyclopaedia. When he eventually retired to devote the rest of his life to composing his encyclopaedia, he availed himself of the Nāṣiriyya’s library, drawing upon its considerable holdings in multiple fields to compile his enormous work.

Al-Nuwayrī’s encyclopaedia was, like its author, something of an institutional product: a work that came to fruition in the context of colleges,

patronage of powerful *amīrs*: see Chamberlain (1994). Jonathan Berkey, while recognising the important role that institutions played, argues that we should not overstate the institutional character of the transmission of knowledge in Islam, suggesting that most learning took place outside the *madrasa* even during its heyday, and that education remained a largely personal and flexible affair; see Berkey (1992).

<sup>18</sup> Gilbert (1980) 134. <sup>19</sup> al-Qadi (2006). <sup>20</sup> Rabie (1978).

imperial chanceries, and libraries. This environment did not only facilitate the work of a compiler, but also engendered it, insofar as the growing numbers of books and learned people circulating within the network of scholarly institutions could not but convey a sense of the expanding boundaries of knowledge. On the other hand, however, these conditions also made it possible to envision a solution to the problem of too much information, which took the form of the capacious compilatory texts that began to appear in such profusion. The historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) observed in the late fourteenth century that ‘among the things that are harmful to the human quest for knowledge and to the attainment of a thorough scholarship are the great number of works available . . . and the numerous (different) methods (used in those works)’.<sup>21</sup> The solution to this dilemma (which Ibn Khaldūn regarded as quite unsatisfactory) seemed to be the production of even more books – abridgements, epitomes, commentaries, and compendia – to help the novice wend his way through the great forest of specialised treatises. The production of such works was not aimed at preventing the loss of knowledge (as has been previously supposed), but was more likely a response to the feeling of an overcrowding of authoritative sources, a feeling made especially palpable in the scholarly centers of the Mamluk empire.<sup>22</sup>

To reiterate, the boom of encyclopaedic and otherwise compilatory literature during the fourteenth century took place against a cultural backdrop characterised by the consolidation of political power and centralisation of intellectual exchange. In this regard, there are certain congruities in the relationship of encyclopaedism to empire, which may repay investigation, between the Mamluk period and other imperial settings. As Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh have argued, the essential functions of the archive (‘itemisation, analysis, ordering, hierarchisation, synthesis, synopsis’) belong to a discursive form that is ‘characteristically imperial’.<sup>23</sup> Such processes undergird the work of the encyclopaedist no less than that of the chancery official. As we will discuss in the next section, it is little wonder that, during the Mamluk period, these two figures were often one and the same.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Khaldūn (1958) vol. 3, 288–91. The anxiety about an overabundance of books is common to many intellectual traditions and historical epochs, and, as recent research has shown, was often mitigated in similar ways. For an excellent discussion of this trope as it appears throughout classical Arabic literature and historiography, see Rosenthal 1995. For approaches to dealing with textual overabundance in the European context, see Blair (2003).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. chapter 2 in this volume for a similar discussion of literary ‘overcrowding’ in the Roman Empire.

<sup>23</sup> König and Whitmarsh (2007b) 38.

## The cleric and the clerk

The earliest manifestations of Arabic encyclopaedism have typically been traced to a period predating the rise of the Mamluk empire by several centuries: that of the Abbasid caliphate and its glorious literary and intellectual apogee during the ninth and tenth centuries. This was a period that witnessed a florescence of *adab*, a term that has come to refer generically to ‘literature’ in modern Arabic, but which encompassed a broader set of acceptations in the medieval period, including, correct, polite behaviour (i.e., what one scholar has referred to as the Arabic equivalent of the Latin *urbanitas*); a genre of quotable aphorisms and *bons mots* to be cited in polite society; and a collection of philological disciplines which included grammar, knowledge of poetry, and other subjects.<sup>24</sup>

The main practitioners and originators of *adab* were the *kuttāb* (singular *kātib*), the class of secretaries who served in the Abbasid administration, whose urbane outlook was modeled upon that of their predecessors, the *dibhērān*, Persian scribes in the employ of the Sassanid empire. For this class of officials, a well-rounded education was essential. In addition to being an accomplished litterateur, a secretary was steeped in ‘theology and law . . . philosophy, music, medicine and the natural and mathematical sciences like astronomy, alchemy, arithmetic, geometry and mensuration, mechanics and hydraulics’.<sup>25</sup> Testifying to the importance of this encyclopaedic ideal is a wide range of multi-topic compendia from the period in question – works by such figures as al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868/9), Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), and al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956) – that comprise what might be called a ‘first wave’ of medieval Arabic encyclopaedism.<sup>26</sup>

While several parallels between the worlds of Abbasid and Mamluk officialdom might be noted, it is the differences that are most salient to an understanding of what characterised the encyclopaedism of the fourteenth century. In the Mamluk empire, the principal nexus of intellectual and literary exchanges shifted away from the court, where it had been centred in previous centuries, and came to occupy other milieus such as the educational and administrative institutions.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the increased involvement by religious scholars (the ‘*ulamā*’) in the production of poetry and belles-lettres (*adab*) betokens a blending of the religious and secular ethics, or what Thomas Bauer has called ‘the adabization of the ‘*ulamā*’.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to

<sup>24</sup> See Bonebakker (1960); Bonebakker (1984); Heinrichs (1995).

<sup>25</sup> Bosworth (1963) 98–9. <sup>26</sup> Pellat (1966); Pellat (1991); Chapoutot-Remadi (1991).

<sup>27</sup> See al-Musawi (2006). <sup>28</sup> See Bauer (2007b).

earlier periods, when litterateurs (particularly within the highly specialised professional class of clerks) stood apart from the religious establishment, it is difficult to draw a clear division between secretaries and scholars during the Mamluk period.<sup>29</sup> Many scholars worked in administration during their careers, and one could rarely rise very high as a bureaucrat without some kind of traditional training in Islamic law. Administration, therefore – and particularly the chancery – served as a key meeting point for individuals with a wide range of specialties, interests, and abilities.<sup>30</sup>

The copious administrative literature of the period provides a window onto the encyclopaedic culture of the Mamluk secretarial–scholarly classes. In one of the longest chapters of his work – occupying approximately 850 pages – al-Nuwayrī lays out a kind of professional manual, a *vade mecum* comprising a multitude of subjects relevant to the day-to-day dealings of a clerk: samples of praiseworthy epistles, styles of greeting and salutation, guidelines for the practices of good bookkeeping and proper penmanship, and boiler-plate language for every manner of legal transaction, from royal letters of investiture to common divorces.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the mass of administrative minutiae, however, al-Nuwayrī also speaks more generally about the education of the secretary and his cultivation of eloquence, a process which required the study of various materials – a kind of scribal curriculum.<sup>32</sup> At the head of this curriculum, naturally, is the Qur'an, which the secretary must memorise and make a part of his consciousness, such that the appropriate quotation will leap to his mind spontaneously in the course of penning an epistle. Following the Qur'an the secretary should develop a mastery of hadith, Arabic grammar, rhetoric, classical Arabic poetry, belletristic prose, proverbs, constitutional and administrative law, and political history.<sup>33</sup> Just when one thinks the curriculum is complete, al-Nuwayrī casually reminds his reader that, in addition to these basics, the scribe must also be familiar with different kinds

<sup>29</sup> See Carter (1971) 46–7.

<sup>30</sup> This is apparent from a study of the vocational patterns of Mamluk clerks. As Joseph Escovitz has shown, unlike their Abbasid forebears, most officials in the Mamluk administration had a religious education, and over one third held posts as 'vocational *ulamā*' (e.g. *madrasa* instructors, judges, etc.) or *hadith* transmitters. In other words, the secretaries were not 'a homogeneous caste of "men of the pen" drawn from a small number of scribal families, and devoted only to the smooth running of the Mamluk administration, but rather a heterogeneous group from diverse backgrounds, with strong and active ties to the religious institution': see Escovitz (1976) 55.

<sup>31</sup> See al-Nuwayrī (1923–97) 7, 8, 9: 1–223.

<sup>32</sup> This discussion takes the form of an extended quotation from a treatise by another Mamluk scribe: see Ibn Fahd al-Ḥalabī (1897).

<sup>33</sup> al-Nuwayrī (1923–97) 7: 27–35.

of animals, birds, plants, trees, geographic locales, etc., as he will be called upon to test this multifaceted knowledge in the service of his craft:

As for letters that include descriptions of weapons and implements of war, horses, birds of prey, types of sport, and things of that nature, the scribe is given free rein to do what he can with his own eloquence . . . With regard to horses and birds of prey, and everything related to them from cheetahs and [other] hunting animals, the knowledge of their qualities and the tokens of their skill is essential to the scribe . . . And as for letters meant to exercise the mind and test one's talents – such as boasting jousts between fruits and blossoms, and descriptions of aromatic plants, rivers, streams, canals, creeks, seas, ships, and things of that nature . . . we will present some of them [in a later volume]<sup>34</sup>

The chapter on the scribal arts, therefore, serves two functions. On the one hand, it presents a wealth of technical and administrative information pertaining specifically to chancery affairs. On the other hand, the chapter also gestures towards the rest of the encyclopaedia – the parts containing cosmological, political, literary, zoological, botanical, and historical information – and insists that these materials are not just relevant, but essential to the formation of the model clerk. This treatment of clerkly erudition prompts several questions. Firstly, we would be justified in wondering just how idealised a picture it was. In other words, was it actually crucial for a scribe to know who the Caliph al-Ma'mūn's favourite singing slave-girl was? Did he truly need to be well-versed in the nesting habits of flamingoes, or the rituals of moon-worshipping cults? Was he really expected to know which aromatic blossoms were capable of being distilled (roses, white willows, and water lilies), and which ones were not (violets, jasmine, myrtle, saffron, and mint)? Did one, in other words, have to be a walking encyclopaedia, just to wield the *kātib's* pen?

As tempting as it is to accept al-Nuwayrī's description at face value, one must assume a certain amount of exaggeration, for, as Maaïke van Berkel has shown, the testimony of the administrative literature regarding the profile of the ideal clerk can be unreliable. Just because famous scribes such as 'Abd al-Ḥamīd ibn Yaḥyā (d. 750), Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1239) and al-Qalqashandī were 'well-versed *adībs* (men of letters) and set great store to erudition', this does not mean that all scribes conformed to this model.<sup>35</sup> On the other

<sup>34</sup> al-Nuwayrī (1923–97) 8: 212–13.

<sup>35</sup> Van Berkel (2001) 89. Al-Qalqashandī himself evinces a prejudice towards the financial clerks who served in the imperial fisc, claiming that they were intellectually inferior to the clerks of the chancery. One wonders if he knew that al-Nuwayrī – whose text contains far more literature than al-Qalqashandī's – had once been the head clerk in charge of the imperial fisc: the height of philistinism, indeed!

hand, even if al-Nuwayrī and his contemporaries exaggerated somewhat about their job descriptions, the profile does not seem to stray that far afield from what we know of the wide-ranging interests of many Mamluk intellectuals. The blending of the cultures of *‘ilm* (knowledge) and *adab* meant, for one thing, that circulating in learned society required fluency in multiple domains, and it is here that one begins to perceive how a text like al-Nuwayrī’s fits into the processes of cultivating, deploying, and constantly renewing and expanding one’s eloquence and erudition.

The Mamluk encyclopaedias were textual products of this ethos. A resurgence of the cosmopolitan, ‘humanistic’ culture of Abbasid literary circles was in evidence, but it had a far broader reach, including religious scholars in its midst, which also changed its character substantially. At the same time, increasing literacy among the ‘middle strata’ of Mamluk society (merchants, craftsmen, etc.) resulted in a vibrant book market, which provided alternatives to patronage for those who wanted to make a living from their scholarly and literary activities.<sup>36</sup> By all accounts, this was a good time to be in the book business, good enough for al-Nuwayrī to leave a rewarding job in the imperial administration to work as a copyist of popular manuscripts while he labored away on his encyclopaedia.

## Conclusion

In seeking to explain the rise of encyclopaedism in the Mamluk empire, I have focused upon social and political factors, mainly because our knowledge of the social and political history of the period far outstrips our understanding of its intellectual history. Until fairly recently, the scholarly view of the post-Mongol period had regarded it as an age of decadence and decline, a period when Arabic-Islamic culture ‘had exhausted itself since the already distant age of its great prosperity and . . . was scarcely able to make any more obvious progress.’<sup>37</sup> The downfall of this approach lies in its ahistoricity, a failure to situate literary texts against the backdrop of their cultural environments, instead examining them through a critical lens shaped by the values and standards of earlier centuries.

In recent years, the study of Mamluk intellectual culture has begun to experience a reorientation, with several scholars challenging the old commonplaces, and advancing our knowledge of important figures from this

<sup>36</sup> See Bauer (2007a) 154–5. On the growth of the Mamluk book market, see also Larkin (2006) 220.

<sup>37</sup> See Pellat (1991) 906.

period. The suggestiveness of these studies notwithstanding, a more theoretical framework for the analysis of Mamluk literature has yet to be elaborated which is sensitive to (rather than dismissive of) the complexities of navigating a hegemonic literary–intellectual patrimony, and attuned to the various forces at work: conservatism, systematisation, revival and renewal, irony and intertextuality, modernism and meta-discourses. Encyclopaedic texts provide an ideal laboratory within which to develop such an approach, because they embody, to an overwhelming degree, many of the qualities and discursive modes of this period’s literature.