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Intention or Pure Happenstance?

While I was completing my chapter on the works written for the officials of the Egyptian royal chanceries, the judges, and their scribes (which I prepared for the *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*),¹ I came upon a volume of documents and letters entitled *Qahwat al-Inshā'*² in Brockelmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* that have never been surveyed or published. This work originated from the workshop of Abū Bakr ibn 'Alī, better known as Ibn Ḥijjah, a man respected by his contemporaries as a talented poet and a skilled and renowned literary critic, who was often called upon for his opinion of new literary works. In addition to his own literary activities, Ibn Ḥijjah applied his expertise and skill in the use of refined language to his daily occupation as a scribe (*kātib*, *munshi'*) in the correspondence chancery (*dīwān al-rasā'il*) of the Mamluk sultans for twelve years from 1412 till 1424.³ As he was always esteemed above all as a poet and an expert in artistic style, his *Qahwat al-Inshā'* passed unnoticed by orientalist and historians, hidden under the name of its author in the chapter concerning the Egyptian and Syrian poets and prose-writers between 1250 and 1517.⁴

Brockelmann characterizes *Qahwat al-Inshā'* as a collection of letters and documents written on the sultans' order, and this work appears to be just that at first sight.⁵ A more careful perusal, however, shows that it includes both official documents, correspondence, and other prosaic texts written by Ibn Ḥijjah. The textual diversity of this book prevented me from determining its explicit nature

¹ Rudolf Veselý, "Die arabische inšā'-Literatur," in *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie* III, ed. Wolf Dietrich Fischer (Wiesbaden, 1992), 188–208.

² *Das Rauschgetränk der Stilkunst oder Qahwat al-inšā' von Taqīuddīn Abū Bakr b. 'Alī Ibn Ḥijjah al-Ḥamawī al-Azrārī*, ed. Rudolf Veselý, Bibliotheca Islamica 36 (Beirut, 2005).

³ He exercised the office of *munshi'* in his native town of Ḥamāh in the chancery of the local lieutenant between the years 810 and 813 (comp. nos. 117–21: *Das Rauschgetränk*, 428–45).

⁴ Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* (Weimar, 1898–1902), 2:8 ff; idem, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur: Supplementbänden* (Leiden, 1943–49), 2:1 ff. For Ibn Ḥijjah, see Brockelmann, *GAL*, 2:15–17, S2:8–9.

⁵ I gave a presentation about *Qahwat al-Inshā'* as a new historical source at the German Oriental Society's (DMG) 25th Deutsche Orientalistentag held in Munich on 8–13 April 1991; see Veselý, "Eine neue Quelle zur Geschichte Ägyptens," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplement 10 (1994): 136–43.



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when I started its critical edition.⁶ At most I was able to state that it was not only a collection of official documents and letters, but a collection where the prevailing official papers (representing 79% of the whole work) were mixed with texts of another kind. My conclusion that the author intended to present this work to his colleagues in the chancery and their disciples as a collection of material for study is supported by the author's foreword.⁷

At a glance Ibn Ḥijjah's work seems to be confused, even chaotic. It is not visibly structured and the texts are neither differentiated in accordance with their contents, form, or literary type, nor divided into chapters. Only a more familiar acquaintance with the work reveals that its order is in fact well thought-out by the author.

The basis of the work is represented by the most numerous texts, i.e., the official documents edited by the sultan's correspondence chancery—letters of appointment, domestic and foreign correspondence, replies or letters attending to messages from abroad—and some documents released by the judges. This ample material, which includes 121 letters, is not coherent but rather divided into groups mingled with texts of quite different contents and form. These are the so-called *taqārīd* (sg. *taqrīd*, i.e., “praise”),⁸ which are a form of reviews written by different persons evaluating new or remarkable literary works. In addition to these two types of text, Ibn Ḥijjah included in his book a third type distinct from the previous two both in its content and form, as it is composed of shorter or longer prosaic treatises divided into two groups. The first group includes Ibn Ḥijjah's commentary (*ta'liq*) on Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī's *Ta'liq al-Tamā'im al-Ḥamā'im*⁹ and *Majrā al-Sawābiq*,¹⁰ rhetorical descriptions of horses of different colors and species written by his three predecessors in the chancery—Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd ibn Fahd (d. 1325), Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Nubātah (d. 1366), and Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-'Umārī (d. 1348)—which he enlarged by his own descriptions.¹¹ The second group of these

⁶ Rudolf Veselý, “Eine Stilkunstschrift oder eine Morgenländischen Urkundensammlung? Das Qahwat al-inšā' des Abū Bakr Ibn Ḥiḡḡa al-Ḥamawī,” in *Threefold Wisdom: Islam, the Arab World, and Africa*, ed. Otakar Hulee and Milos Mendel (Praha, 1993), 237–47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 245–46.

⁸ There are two forms of this word: *taqrīd* and *taqrīz*. The first is “praise,” the second (in colloquial pronunciation) “blame”; see Rudolf Veselý, “Das Taqrīz in der arabischen Literatur,” in *Die Mamluken: Studien zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur: zum Gedenken an Ulrich Haarmann*, ed. S. Conermann and A. Pistor-Hatam (Hamburg, 2003), 379–85, esp. 380. Ibn Ḥijjah used the form “*taqrīz*” only.

⁹ Brockelmann does not mention any work bearing this title written by al-Ṣafadī or any other author. Probably we are dealing with a lost work.

¹⁰ Brockelmann, *GAL*, 2:16.

¹¹ Note that the title Ibn Ḥijjah used for this collection of descriptions of horses is a pun based on the different meaning of the consonant groups *J-R-Y* and *S-B-Q*. Accordingly we can explain



prosaic texts is represented by extracts written exclusively by Ibn Ḥijjah. The first of them is Ibn Ḥijjah's eyewitness description of the conflagration of Damascus in the year 1389. Known under the title *Yāqūt al-Kalām fī Nār al-Shām*, it was put by the author into a letter addressed to his friend Fakhr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Makānis.¹² Several letters, which Ibn Ḥijjah sent to other friends, are followed by some of his *taqārīd* relating to the works of his contemporaries. The whole book is closed with prefaces introducing four of Ibn Ḥijjah's works of poetry: *Tahrīr al-Qīrāṭī*,¹³ *Sharḥ al-Badī'iyah*,¹⁴ *Buyūt al-Asharah*,¹⁵ and *Dīwān Janā' al-Jannatayn*.¹⁶

The "axis" of the whole work, however, is the set of official documents and letters, thus creating the impression that *Qahwat al-Inshā'* is nothing more than a collection of official papers. But in his preface to this work Ibn Ḥijjah mentions that his reason for writing it was to give "those who have elegant taste and wish to enjoy sipping this dazing drink (i.e., *qahwah*) the real relish of the *qahwah* from Cairo and the fruits from Ḥamāh . . . and to offer it with open hand to the gentle scribes from this store."¹⁷ To achieve this goal, he did not content himself with the lexis of official correspondence, but he enriched his work, focused above all on language skills, with many of his own prosaic texts of different form and content as well as heterogeneous, yet always skillful lingual expression. It means that Ibn Ḥijjah's aim was not to publish a handbook of various formulary documents but rather to provide a rich resource of stylistic and lexical skills demonstrated by texts written by himself or by skilled scribes from the court chanceries of local rulers, and bejeweled with literary subtleties.

The author divided this collection of texts into three parts (*juz'*). The first part consists of twenty-six official documents concluded by the two literary texts—*Ta'liq Tamā'im al-Ḥamā'im* and *Majrā al-Sawābiq*. The second part includes thirty-one official documents and diplomatic letters (nos. 27–34 and 35–57) divided in two groups by several *taqārīd*. In the third and last part of the work, three groups of documents with *taqārīd* rotate regularly. The first series of documents opening

"*majrā al-sawābiq*" as "racing course for the racing horses" as well as "competition of the predecessors." Also the word "*ta'liq*" in "*ta'liq tamā'im al-ḥamā'im*" is used not only in the meaning of "commentary," but also as "hanging the turtles with talismans."

¹² A poet and court dignitary, and an older contemporary of Ibn Ḥijjah; see *GAL*, 2:15.

¹³ A work not mentioned by Brockelmann; see *GAL*, 2:16. For al-Qīrāṭī, Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm ibn 'Abd Allāh (1326–79), see *GAL*, 2:14.

¹⁴ Ibn Ḥijjah's name for his adaptation of the "Burdah." (Is it the *Taqdīm Abī Bakr* mentioned in *GAL*, 2:16 as Ibn Ḥijjah's commentary on his *Badī'iyah*?)

¹⁵ A collection of *qaṣīdahs*, five of them composed by Ibn Nubāṭah (1287–1366) and five by Ibn Ḥijjah; see Brockelmann, *GAL*, 2:10.

¹⁶ The last two works are not mentioned by Brockelmann in his *GAL*.

¹⁷ Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwat al-Inshā'*, 4.



this part are followed by *taqārīd* and then another small group of *taqārīd* is inserted between the next two series of documents. The last series of documents (nos. 113–16) is followed by official papers drawn up by Ibn Ḥijjah when he worked in the provincial chancery in Ḥamāh and also the above-mentioned letters to his friends, *taqārīd*, and prefaces to his literary works.

These three parts (*juzʿ*) vary not only in their contents but also in their extent. The shortest of them is the first part, while the second one is a little bit longer, and the third part is the longest, with its length exceeding both preceding parts.¹⁸

For understanding Ibn Ḥijjah's preparation and elaboration of *Qahwat al-Inshāʿ* its first part is important. As mentioned above, a first look at this work can—with regard also to the different length of its parts—create an impression that the texts are arranged fortuitously without any premeditated plan. Nevertheless, it seems that Ibn Ḥijjah decided very early to create a special work of the art of epistolography and stylistics that would correspond to contemporary language skills and taste. Perhaps he started with preparations when he worked in the correspondence chancery in Cairo or even during his service in the provincial chancery in Ḥamāh. Such a conjecture is supported by both public and private letters found at the end of the third part, which Ibn Ḥijjah brought in 1413 from Ḥamāh to Cairo, as well as by the mention of the *ḥalāwah* of Cairo and the fruits of Ḥamāh. The fact that “the fruits of Ḥamāh” are mentioned in the preface to the first part, brought to an end in Ramaḍān 817/November 1414,¹⁹ reveals Ibn Ḥijjah's early idea to compose a collection of his properly chosen epistolographic texts, and—as is evident from his supplying other texts of a more literary nature—to provide their users with as rich linguistic material as possible. All official documents in this first part are arranged chronologically from 13 Shawwāl 815/16 January 1412 to 1 Ramaḍān 817/14 November 1414. In the same way—i.e., in chronological succession—all of the following official letters are arranged being formalized mostly by Ibn Ḥijjah until the beginning of Rajab 827/beginning of July 1424.

That means that *Qahwat al-Inshāʿ* came into existence gradually and in accordance with publishing the documents worded by its author. The fact that he complemented the documents issued by the sultan's chancery with letters from the times when he worked in Ḥamāh shows that he could not have completed the collection before terminating his service in the correspondence chancery—which he likely did before his return to his native Ḥamāh, i.e., between the years 827/1424 and 830/1427.

¹⁸ For instance, in the manuscript preserved in Tübingen (sign. Ma 170) the first part occupies twenty-six leaves, the second part is thirty-one leaves and the third is seventy-four leaves.

¹⁹ The copy (Leiden MS Or. 452) was finished in the first ten days of Dhū al-Ḥijjah 817/12–21 January 1415. The copyist was a pupil (*tilmīdh*) of Ibn Ḥijjah, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Kharrāt (appointed by the *tawqīʿ* no. 28 as *kātib as-sirr* in Ṭarābulus; see Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwat al-Inshāʿ*, 113 ff.).



It is possible to illustrate the regular rotation of the types of texts as well as their dissimilarity in the different parts (*juz'*) of *Qahwat al-Inshā'* by marking every type of text by a symbol. The letter A marks the official documents, B the *taqārīd*, and C the literary texts. The position of these texts in the three parts of *Qahwat al-Inshā'* appears as follows:

In the first part (*juz'*): A . C

In the second part (*juz'*): A . B . A

In the third part (*juz'*): A . B . A . B . A . B . C

From this scheme it is evident that:

- (1) All three parts are opened by official documents (A).
- (2) The first part as well as the third one are concluded by literary texts (C).
- (3) The individual parts always consist of a certain number of elements; the first one is composed of two elements, the second one of three elements and the third one of seven elements. In the second and the third parts texts A and B rotate regularly and form the nucleus of the whole work.
- (4) The nucleus of the work consists of parts two and three bookended by the literary texts (C).

It is hardly credible that this structure came into existence by chance. On the contrary, no doubt can be cast upon the author's intention. The coincidence is disproved by its premeditation and artificiality corresponding after all with the taste of the times when *Qahwat al-Inshā'* came into existence. The author took advantage of the chronological sequence of the official documents (A), which he interrupted—probably also in dependence on chronology²⁰—by the *taqārīd* (B). Such an unusual form²¹ results not only from Ibn Ḥijjah's efforts to be original, but also to raise interest in his professionally challenging work among its contemporary and future users. The unusually high number of its copies preserved up until now is proof of the author's success.²²

²⁰ In such a case it could be possible to guess the time of the "edition" of the "reviewed" literary works, for instance Ibn Nāhid's *Sīrah Shaykhīyah*—likely in the second half of the year 818, between no. 34 (10 Rajab) and no. 35 (second half of Dhū al-Ḥijjah?); see Ibn Ḥijjah, *Qahwat al-Inshā'*, 135–49.

²¹ It was a *namaṭ gharīb*, a "strange form," some "original way," a term Ibn Ḥijjah used in his *taqrīz* for Ibn Nāhid's form of *Sīrah Shaykhīyah*; see *Qahwat al-Inshā'*, 137; Rudolf Veselý, "Eine verkannte Sultansbiographie, Die Sīra shaykhiya des Ibn Nāhid," in *Zafar Nāme: Memorial Volume of Felix Tauer*, ed. R. V. and Eduard Gombár (Praha, 1996), 271–80.

²² Brockelmann records seventeen copies of *Qahwat al-Inshā'*; see *GAL*, 2:15–17, S2:8–9. This number may be enlarged by additional copies too, for instance Nuri Osmaniye MS 4308 and Hamburg MS 162.



Conclusion

Ibn Ḥijjah's *Qahwat al-Inshā'*, a work located on the boundaries between epistolography, diplomatics, artificial prose, and stylistics (*badī'*), is an example to help us pose the question as to whether and how the works of Arab artistic prose created in the so-called late medieval period—often described as the epoch of Arabic literary decay—could be studied. It is known that a work's originality typically did not consist of new themes and ideas, but more often of an unusual elaboration of more or less well-known traditional elements. Ibn Ḥijjah's *Qahwat al-Inshā'* suggests that creating a work by means of the composition of different kinds of texts and styles arranged according to a fixed scheme could be one of the ways leading to originality—*namaṭ gharīb*—as conceived by the society at that time. It is possible that we might find something analogous to Ibn Ḥijjah's composition of *Qahwat al-Inshā'* in other works of contemporary authors. In some works, for instance an anthology,²³ certain themes, forms, and milieus may rotate again and again in accordance with a given kind of literature. Or was this a path that Arabic prose did not pursue further due to the Ottoman conquest of the Arab East? And was Ibn Ḥijjah an author who had no continuator and was his *Qahwat al-Inshā'* only a solitary attempt at a new structure of a literary work? Or was his feat merely a response to a similar work of his era?

²³ Compare the remarkable study of Thomas Bauer, "Literarische Anthologien der Mamlukenzeit," in *Die Mamluken*, ed. S. Conermann and A. P. Hatam (Schenefeld, 2003), 71–122.

