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Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Khaldūn, Historians of the Unseen

According to Sir Lewis Namier, the great historian of Hanoverian England, "historians imagine the past and remember the future."¹ It is evident that Namier intended his paradoxical-seeming dictum to apply to all historians, but there are few, if any, of whom it is more true than of Ibn Khaldūn and his one-time student, al-Maqrīzī. In modern times Ibn Khaldūn has mostly been studied by historians, philosophers, and sociologists. None of those who have picked their way through his *Muqaddimah* seem to have engaged fully with the width and intensity of his interest in divination and the future. A remarkable amount of space in Ibn Khaldūn's philosophical prolegomena to the study of history is devoted to consideration of divination and the occult sciences more broadly. In general, he took a hard-headed, even hostile view of the occult sciences. Alchemy and astrology were, like philosophy (*falsafah*), part of the *'ulūm al-awā'il* and, as such, inimical to true Islam.

Ibn Khaldūn judged alchemy to be a pernicious kind of sorcery, when it was not simply actual fraud.² *Maṭālib*, the occult science of treasure-hunting, was, like alchemy, not a natural way of making a living and the treasure-hunters were, like most of the alchemists, confidence-tricksters who used forged documents and other trumped-up pieces of evidence to prey upon the weak-minded. The section on *maṭālib* is entitled "Trying to make money from buried and other treasures is not a natural way of making a living."³ A great deal of mumbo-jumbo was associated with treasure-hunting and, according to Ibn Khaldūn, this sort of thing was bound to appeal to the Egyptians, as they had a centuries-long attachment to anything to do with sorcery. One only had to look at the confrontation of Moses with the Egyptian sorcerers, as it was related in the Quran, to see that this was so.⁴ Again the invocation of the Divine Names for magical purposes was wicked and blasphemous. Ibn Khaldūn was here denouncing the sort of magic set out in

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¹Lewis Namier, *Conflicts: Studies in Contemporary History* (London, 1942), 70.

²Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddimah*, published by E. Quatremère as *Prolégomènes d'Ebn-Khaldoun*, Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque impériale et autres bibliothèques, vols. 16–18 (Paris, 1858), 18:191–219; idem, *The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd ed. (New York and London, 1967), 3:227–46.

³Ibn Khaldūn, *Prolégomènes*, 17:280–87; idem, *Muqaddimah*, 2:319–26.

⁴*Prolégomènes*, 17:283; *Muqaddimah*, 2:322.



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treatises like the thirteenth-century *Shams al-Ma'ārif*, attributed to al-Būnī (and popular among adherents of the Shadhilī Sufi *ṭarīqah* in Egypt).⁵

But Ibn Khaldūn's main interest was in those occult techniques that seemed to promise knowledge of the future. Here again his approach was hostile and suspicious. What he wanted to affirm was that knowledge of the future was reserved to God alone. However, his hostility to divination was tinged by ambivalence and he was not consistent in his approach to this subject. At times he seems to be saying that knowledge of the future is reserved to divinely guided prophets; at other times he seems to be saying that those who are not divinely guided prophets should not seek to enquire into the future—which is a rather different thing. Moreover, Ibn Khaldūn clearly viewed the subject as of remarkable importance, for he devoted one of the key prefatory discussions of the *Muqaddimah* (the sixth prologue) to an exploration of different ways of knowing the future, including such diverse topics as Prophetic revelation, Sufi meditation, numerology, astrology, and the *zā'irajah*.⁶ As a Muslim, Ibn Khaldūn had to accept the authenticity of prophecy and, having done so, he found that the distinction between prophecy and divination was a subtle one. He was particularly interested in the political and historical uses to which divination might be put. Hence his discussion in the sixth prologue of *ḥisāb al-nīm*.⁷ *Ḥisāb al-nīm* (it is not known why it was so called) was a kind of *jafr*, or a numerological divination based on the letters in the names of dynasties or rulers, that was used for making political and historical predictions. In medieval times it was widely thought that *ḥisāb al-nīm* had been vouched for by Aristotle in his famous treatise, the *Politics*. However, those who thought this were confusing the *Politics* with the *Sirr al-Asrār*, or *Secreta Secretorum*, an anonymous and immensely popular ragbag of wise maxims, stories, and spells. Ibn Khaldūn, after careful consideration, seems to have rejected the efficacy of *ḥisāb al-nīm*, though his rejection was tinged with ambiguity. The subject had after all attracted the attention of distinguished men. (He also doubted whether it was correct to attribute the *Sirr al-Asrār* to Aristotle.)⁸

When he came to consider such divinatory techniques as catoptromancy,

⁵*Prolégomènes*, 18:145–46; *Muqaddimah*, 3:180–82.

⁶*Prolégomènes*, 16:165–220; *Muqaddimah*, 1:184–247; cf. Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn, an Essay in Reinterpretation* (London, 1982), 65–68.

⁷*Prolégomènes*, 16:209–13; *Muqaddimah*, 1:234–38.

⁸On the misattribution to Aristotle and Ibn Khaldūn's doubts, see *Muqaddimah*, 1:81–82, note; cf. Dorothee Metlitzki *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England* (New Haven, 1977), 107. On Ibn Khaldūn's ambivalence with regard to the supernatural and miraculous in general, see Armand Abel, "La place des sciences occultes dans la décadence," in *Classicisme et déclin culturel dans l'histoire de l'Islam*, ed. Robert Brunschvig and G. E. von Grunebaum (Paris, 1957), 304–5; Toufic Fahd, *La divination arabe* (Paris, 1987), 45–50.



geomancy, and divination from entrails, he denied that there was any sound, logical basis for making predictions from these techniques. Nevertheless, he did suggest that such practices might permit their practitioners to allow their minds to drift and, if they were spiritually gifted, their souls might ascend into the realm of the spiritual.⁹

In a later section devoted to astrology, Ibn Khaldūn argued that the boasts of the astrologers were not justified by their results.¹⁰ Another reason for disapproving of astrologers was that their predictions often focused on coming crises and in so doing were liable to provoke civil strife.¹¹ Yet, when he encountered Tīmūr in Damascus in 1401, he told the would-be world-conqueror that Maghribi soothsayers and saints had predicted his coming. More specifically in 766/1365, astrologers in the western Islamic lands, basing themselves on the impending astrological conjunction of the two highest planets, Saturn and Jupiter—an event that occurred only once every 960 years—had deduced the coming of Tīmūr in 784/1382. Prophecies about the political consequences of this planetary conjunction seem to have originated in Isma‘ili circles in North Africa and were originally held to foretell the coming of a Fatimid Mahdi (a possibility that Ibn Khaldūn did not rule out). Only subsequently were the prophecies reapplied to fit the coming of Tīmūr.¹²

Moreover, to stick with Ibn Khaldūn’s belief that the coming of Tīmūr had been foretold, in a lengthy chapter in the *Muqaddimah*, entitled “Forecasting the future of dynasties and nations, including a discussion of predictions (*malāḥim*) and exposition of the subject called divination (*jafr*),” he reproduced a lengthy, though fragmentary poem attributed to a Qalandar Sufi, al-Bājarbaqī (d. 724/1324).¹³ Al-Bājarbaqī’s poem (which will remind many Western readers of Nostradamus’s *Centuries*) makes obscure prophecies about the future, the obscurity being enhanced by the frequent use of initials or gibberish assemblages of consonants to identify,

⁹*Prolégomènes*, 16:209; *Muqaddimah*, 1:234.

¹⁰*Prolégomènes*, 18:220–28; *Muqaddimah*, 3:258–67.

¹¹*Prolégomènes*, 18:225; *Muqaddimah*, 3:262–63.

¹²Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Ta’rīf bi-Ibn Khaldūn wa-Riḥlatihi Gharban wa-Sharqan*, ed. Muḥammad ibn Tāwīt al-Ṭanjī (Cairo, 1951), 412–13; idem, *Le voyage d’Occident et d’Orient: autobiographie*, trans. Abdesselam Cheddadi (Paris, 1980), 232–34; cf. Walter J. Fischel, ed. and tr., *Ibn Khaldūn and Tamerlane, Their Historic Meeting in Damascus, 1401 A.D. (803 A.H.): A Study Based on Arabic Manuscripts of Ibn Khaldūn’s “Autobiography,” with a Translation into English, and a Commentary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1952), 35–36, 79–81; idem, *Ibn Khaldūn in Egypt: His Public Functions and His Historical Research* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), 55–57; Yves Marquet, “Ibn Ḥaldūn et les conjonctions de Saturne et de Jupiter,” *Studia Islamica* 65 (1987): 91–96; cf. Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn*, 26.

¹³*Muqaddimah*, 2:225–27, 229–31; *Prolégomènes*, 17:197–198, 200–1.



or perhaps rather to conceal the identity of people and things. One of the fragments runs as follows:

This is the lamed Kalbite. Be concerned with him!
In his time there will be disturbances, and what disturbances!
From the East, the Turkish army will come . . .

And then the warning tails off into more obscure *jafr*. Presumably, the author of this verse was intending to refer to the limping Turk, Tīmūr, and that was how Ibn Khaldūn read it (though why Tīmūr should be associated with the South Arabian tribal grouping of Kalb is a bit of a mystery). Another of the fragments quoted by Ibn Khaldūn is also of interest:

His father will come to him after an emigration
And a long absence and a hard and filthy life.

This Ibn Khaldūn took to refer to the Sultan Barqūq and his summoning his father from Circassia to join him in Egypt.

One can, if one wishes, credit al-Bājarbaqī with remarkable powers of prescience, but, of course, it is more likely that the relevant verses were composed after the rise to power of both Tīmūr and Barqūq and falsely dated earlier, in order to confer more prestige on the prophetic verses as a whole. Ibn Khaldūn surmised that this was the case with the Bājarbaqī oeuvre—yet he remained fascinated by the subject and devoted an inordinate amount of space to it. Now Ibn Khaldūn only encountered al-Bājarbaqī's prophecies after he had arrived in the Mamluk lands in 1382. The bulk of the *Muqaddimah* was written in the late 1370s in Qal'at Ibn Salāmah in the Oranaise. However, it is important to bear in mind that he continued to expand and revise his work after his arrival in Mamluk Egypt and, as late as 1404, he was still revising his masterwork.¹⁴ This raises the possibility that some of the historians who studied with Ibn Khaldūn in Egypt, such as al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Ḥajar, may conceivably had some influence on the final shape of the *Muqaddimah*. However, intriguing though this notion may be, it will not be pursued further here.

Also while in Egypt, Ibn Khaldūn had heard from learned people of the book of predictions attributed to Ibn al-'Arabī al-Ḥātimī (not the famous Andalusian Sufi Ibn al-'Arabī), in which the author "speaks about the horoscope of the foundation of Cairo." If one followed Ibn al-'Arabī's somewhat complex calculations, then it

¹⁴Franz Rosenthal, "Introduction," in *Muqaddimah*, civ–cvii.



could be deduced that Cairo would be destroyed in 832/1428–29.¹⁵ Ibn Khaldūn relayed the prophecy without comment. However, the fact that this prophecy, like the Bājarbaqī prophecies, as well as another prophecy of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s concerning an eschatological redeemer of Fatimid descent, were circulating in Cairo in the 1390s suggests the doom-laden atmosphere in which Ibn Khaldūn and al-Maqrīzī thought and wrote. *Malḥamāt*, prophecies concerning the last days and final slaughterings, preoccupied Ibn Khaldūn, just as they had an earlier scholar, Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī. (Ṣafadī wrote a treatise on the subject).

In the latter part of the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn included a section on *ta’bīr*, or dream interpretation.¹⁶ Dream interpretation was not part of the dodgy corpus of the *‘ulūm al-awā’il*; rather it “belongs to the sciences of the religious law.”¹⁷ It was clearly possible to divine the future in dreams, for Joseph in the Quran did so. Moreover, the Prophet had declared “A good dream is the forty-sixth part of prophecy.” The problem for Ibn Khaldūn was how to distinguish a good dream from a false one, but at the end of his discussion, he concluded that “dream interpretation is a science resplendent with the light of prophecy.”

The divination technique that above all others fascinated Ibn Khaldūn involved the use of a device called the *zā’irajah*. He discussed this thing at length in two places in the *Muqaddimah*. In the first place he discussed whether it could validly be used for telling the future. In the second place he went into enormous detail on the mechanics of the *zā’irajah*’s operation, including an operational manual cast in cryptic verse and attributed to al-Sabtī. The *zā’irajah* was a kind of calculating machine, relying on rotating, concentrating circles, marked with devices that combined *ḥurūf* and *jafr*. It bears a curious similarity to Ramon Lull’s engine for demonstrating the existence of God and answering all questions, the *Ars Magna*. Ibn Khaldūn described the *zā’irajah* as “a remarkable technical procedure” and remarked that “Many distinguished people have shown interest in using it for supernatural information. . . .”¹⁸ Despite his fascination with it, he suggested that the machine was incapable of determining the future by supernatural means. Rather the answers it produced were predetermined by the phrasing of the questions that were posed to it. Still Ibn Khaldūn remained fascinated by the device and went into extraordinary detail about its workings. He remonstrated with critics of

¹⁵ *Prolégomènes*, 17:196; *Muqaddimah*, 2:224.

¹⁶ *Prolégomènes*, 18:80–86; *Muqaddimah*, 3:103–10.

¹⁷ *Prolégomènes*, 18:80; *Muqaddimah*, 3:103.

¹⁸ *Prolégomènes*, 16:213; *Muqaddimah*, 1:239; for the *zā’irajah* generally, see *Prolégomènes*, 16:213–20, 3:146–79; *Muqaddimah*, 1:238–45, 3:182–214; cf. D. M. Dunlop, *Arab Civilization to A.D. 1500* (London, 1971), 243–46; Fahd, *La divination*, 243–45.



the *zā'irajah* who denounced it as merely hocus-pocus.¹⁹ It also seems, though he expresses himself somewhat obscurely on the topic, he believed that people with mystical training could use the device as a kind of springboard for veridical divination.²⁰ Through this strange science secrets could indeed be uncovered, though he believed that it would be impious to seek to divine the future through this technique. It also seems that Ibn Khaldūn may have been even more obsessed with the device than he let on in the *Muqaddimah*. Ibn Ḥajar, in his obituary of Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn al-Khaṭīb al-Marrākushī (d. 735), described how this man was obsessed with the *zā'irajah* and how he left his *zā'irajah* to Ibn Khaldūn, who continued to research the topic intensively, though he kept his findings to himself.²¹ A North African treatise on the *zā'irajah* quoted an eyewitness to Ibn Khaldūn in 1371 testing the device by asking it how old this particular technique of divination was. The *zā'irajah*'s response was that it was invented by Idrīs (i.e., Hermes) and since then its mystery had ascended to the highest rank. When Ibn Khaldūn got this answer, he was so pleased and excited that he spun and danced on the terrace of his house.²³ It is easy to exaggerate the modernity of Ibn Khaldūn by discounting his flirtations with the supernatural, as well as his intense, though rather conventional piety.

Neither Ibn Khaldūn's knowledge of the past history of the Maghrib and al-Andalus, nor his study of what was to come inspired him with optimism. Referring to the ravages of the Black Death, he wrote that it "was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it."²³ Ancient ruins testified that a large area of North Africa had once been settled and prosperous, though this was no longer so. Civilization in the region had shrunk: "This fact is attested by relics of civilization there, such as monuments, architectural sculpture, and the visible remains of villages and hamlets."²⁴ The ruins and abandoned cities of Yemen, Iraq, and Syria similarly testified to the decay of the world. One of the main aims of the *Muqaddimah*—arguably its chief aim—was to explain why there

¹⁹*Prolégomènes*, 16:217–18; *Muqaddimah*, 1:243–44.

²⁰*Prolégomènes*, 16:217; *Muqaddimah*, 1:243.

²¹Aḥmad ibn 'Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, 4 vols. (Hyderabad, 1929–32), 3:376–77. (Note that the man in question is not the famous Andalusian statesman and polygraph, Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb.)

²²M. Reinaud, "Divination et Histoire Nord-Africaine au temps d'Ibn Khaldun," *Hesperis* 30 (1943): 215.

²³*Prolégomènes*, 16:52; *Muqaddimah*, 1:64.

²⁴*Prolégomènes*, 16:272–73; *Muqaddimah*, 1:304–5.



were more ruins in North Africa and the Islamic world generally than there were settled habitations.

The Arab race had long ago exhausted itself, and with the exhaustion of the Berbers would come the extinction of Maghribi civilization.²⁵ Ibn Khaldūn believed that power was moving from the Andalusian clime to the north. As Aziz Al-Azmeh has noted, "Ibn Khaldūn seems . . . to have had a strong sense that momentous developments were taking place in the North [i.e., in Christian Europe], and surmised that the centre of gravity of human habitation was moving northwards—for which there were (according to him) ample stellar causes, as well as mundane ones he could not quite grasp. The passage is difficult to interpret, as the allusion in it might equally have been to the growing power of the Ottomans, to which there are other vague references in the *Muqaddimah*."²⁶

All of the above serves as a rather lengthy introduction to certain aspects of the historical thinking of al-Maqrīzī. Al-Maqrīzī knew Ibn Khaldūn and he appears to have read at least some of the *Muqaddimah*, but how much did al-Maqrīzī learn from this? Although the only subject that we know al-Maqrīzī formally studied with Ibn Khaldūn was *mīqāt*, the science of time measurement (which was used both for religious and for astrological purposes), it is perfectly clear that al-Maqrīzī was familiar with Ibn Khaldūn's ideas about history. He gave Ibn Khaldūn a fairly lengthy entry in his biographical dictionary, the *Durar al-'Uqūd*, in which he was unstinting in his praise of Ibn Khaldūn's mastery of historiography and most specifically enthusiastic about the *Muqaddimah*.²⁷ Among other praiseworthy features, "it reveals the truth of things, events, and news; it explains all the state of the universe and reveals the origin of all beings in an admirable plain style." Moreover, at several points in the *Durar*, al-Maqrīzī borrowed from Ibn Khaldūn.²⁸ Ibn Ḥajar and al-Sakhāwī later quoted al-Maqrīzī on the incomparability of the *Muqaddimah*, though they both had doubts whether the

²⁵On this aspect of Ibn Khaldūn's pessimism, see Abdallah Laroui, *L'histoire du Maghreb: un essai de synthèse* (Paris, 1976), 1:202–3.

²⁶Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Mortal Enemies, Invisible Neighbours: Northerners in Andalusian Eyes," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden, 1992), 269. Azmeh is discussing a passage that does not appear in the standard edited text of the *Muqaddimah*. For this text see M'barek Redjala, "Un texte inédit de la *Muqaddima*," *Arabica* 22 (1975): 321–22; see also *Prolégomènes*, 2:245–46; *Muqaddimah*, 2:281–82 on the greater wealth of Christian merchants and Eastern merchants and how this is attested to by astrology.

²⁷Maḥmūd al-Jalīlī, "Durar al-'Uqūd al-Farīdah fī Tarājīm al-A'yān al-Mufīdah lil-Maqrīzī," *Majallat al-Majma' al-'Ilmī al-'Irāqī* 13 (1966): 235.

²⁸Nasser O. Rabbat, "Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ*, an Egyptian *Lieu de Mémoire*," in *The Cairo Heritage: Essays in Honor of Laila Ali Ibrahim*, ed. Doris Behrens-Abouseif (Cairo, 2000), 24.



book really was as good as al-Maqrīzī cracked it up to be.²⁹ (Incidentally, composition of *Durar al-ʿUqūd* seems to have had a melancholy inspiration, for as al-Maqrīzī noted in the introduction, “By the time I was fifty most of my friends and acquaintances had perished. . . .”) Ibn Ḥajar sardonically observed that al-Maqrīzī was only so enthusiastic about Ibn Khaldūn because he had not understood him properly. Although al-Maqrīzī was unstinting in his praise of Ibn Khaldūn, the casually arrogant immigrant genius from the Maghrib never troubled to mention the latter at all—neither in the *Muqaddimah*, nor in the *Taʾrīf*.

It is perfectly plausible that al-Maqrīzī learned important lessons from the older historian, but, of course, what modern thinkers, like Arnold Toynbee, Ernest Gellner, and others, have admired in Ibn Khaldūn and taken away from a reading of the *Muqaddimah* may not be the same as what al-Maqrīzī may have learned from his acquaintanceship with the man and the work. Indeed, al-Maqrīzī in the fifteenth century seems to have read a rather different book from the one we read today. But first I would like to draw attention to some obvious contrasts between the two historians. Although the *Muqaddimah* concentrated on broad historical developments and their underlying social and economic causes, when Ibn Khaldūn actually came to write history in the *Ibar* and, more briefly and scrappily, in the *Taʾrīf*, the results, as many have noted, are disappointing. Ibn Khaldūn mostly wrote a thoroughly conventional narrative history. By contrast, al-Maqrīzī was actually the more theoretical when it came to writing history as opposed to theorizing about it. He did give weight to broad social and economic causes. It is only disappointing that his economic information was so often erroneous and his social analyses skewed by a religious and moralistic perspective.

Secondly, if, as we have seen, Ibn Khaldūn was a rather gloomy historian, al-Maqrīzī was even gloomier. Though Ibn Khaldūn was gloomy about the Maghrib and about the End of the World in general, he actually took a thoroughly upbeat view of life in Cairo, on the peaceful nature of existence in Mamluk Egypt and Syria, and of the dynamic and Islamic virtues of the Mamluks themselves. Ibn Khaldūn presented an essentially false picture of life in Egypt as prosperous and peaceful and free from tribal disputes.³⁰ In Ibn Khaldūn’s eyes, the Mamluks were benign patrons of scholarship and architecture and, above all, they were the saviours of Islam. For al-Maqrīzī, on the other hand, they were “more lustful than monkeys,

²⁹Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, 1968), 498; cf. M. A. Enan, *Ibn Khaldūn, His Life and Work* (New Delhi, 1979), 98–99.

³⁰On Ibn Khaldūn’s (unduly rosy) picture of the Mamluk sultanate, see Robert Irwin, “Rural Feuding and Mamluk Faction Fighting in Medieval Egypt and Syria,” to be published in *Texts, Documents and Artifacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D. S. Richards*, ed. Chase F. Robinson (forthcoming 2002). See also Fischel, *Ibn Khaldūn in Egypt*, 78–79, on Ibn Khaldūn’s neglect of the great famine in Egypt.



more ravenous than rats, more harmful than wolves.”³¹

Al-Maqrīzī, by contrast preferred to harp on all the disasters that had recently befallen Egypt—most of which, according to the *Ighāthah*, had been caused by the ruling regime’s mismanagement and corruption.³² Notoriously, al-Maqrīzī was nostalgic about the glory days of the Fatimids. He also painted for himself an unduly positive assessment of the condition of Egypt and Syria under the early Bahri Mamluk sultans. Historical nostalgia mingled with personal nostalgia—nostalgia for the time before he lost his only daughter, for the time when he enjoyed the favor of the sultan Barqūq to such an extent that one of his contemporaries described him as the sultan’s *nadīm*, for the time when most of his friends were still alive, for the time when one could still buy the sweets he particularly liked in the Cairo market. The flipside of al-Maqrīzī’s pervasive nostalgia was, as we shall see, his apprehension about the future.

Thirdly, if al-Maqrīzī was gloomier than Ibn Khaldūn, he was also much loonier—and he was totally uncritical in his embrace of the occult and the prophetic. Al-‘Aynī in his brief obituary of al-Maqrīzī accused him of being obsessed with history, yes, but also of being obsessed with *darb al-ramal*, or geomancy.³³ According to al-Sakhāwī, al-Maqrīzī cast Ibn Khaldūn’s horoscope and, on the basis of this, predicted that the latter would hold high office. Al-Sakhāwī described al-Maqrīzī as an expert on *zā’irajah*, the astrolabe, geomancy, and *mīqāt* (time-keeping).³⁴ Al-Maqrīzī was also convinced of the predictive power of dreams. Towards the end of the reign of al-Ashraf Sha‘bān an acquaintance of al-Maqrīzī’s dreamt of Barqūq as an ape preaching from a *minbar* and unsuccessfully trying to lead the people in prayer. From this he deduced that the dream had predicted the rise of Barqūq, as the Circassian sultan had the qualities of an ape—niggardliness and corruption. Ibn Taghrībirdī thought al-Maqrīzī’s interpretation of this quite ridiculous.³⁵ Incidentally, Ibn Taghrībirdī, al-Maqrīzī’s student, fan, and historiographical rival, had no time for astrology at all and in the *Nujūm* he repeatedly went out of his way to highlight the failed predictions of the *munajjim*.

³¹Nasser O. Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture* (Leiden, 1995), 293–94 and note.

³²Adel Allouche, *Mamluk Economics: A Study and Translation of al-Maqrīzī’s Ighāthah* (Salt Lake City, 1994).

³³Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī, *‘Iqd al-Jumān fī Tārīkh Ahl al-Zamān*, ed. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṭanṭāwī al-Qarmūṭ (Cairo, 1985), 2:574.

³⁴Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-Lāmi’*, 12 vols. (Cairo, 1934–36), 2:24.

³⁵Abū al-Maḥāsīn Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, 12 vols. (Cairo, 1929–56), 5:423–24.



He believed that astrology, like the other *'ulūm al-awā'il*, was doomed to disappear.³⁶ Moreover, to return to dreams, the narrative of al-Maqrīzī's chronicle, the *Sulūk*, is peppered with accounts of political dreams that came true.³⁷

In the *Khiṭaṭ*, al-Maqrīzī wrote that, since the Egyptian people were governed by Gemini, they were especially gifted in predicting the future. He instanced the time when in 791 Barqūq escaped from prison in Kerak in Transjordan and people in the Bayn al-Qasrayn in Cairo knew that very day.³⁸ It is natural that the *Khiṭaṭ* should have been read primarily as a source on the topography of Cairo and on the history of the Fatimids and Mamluks. However, to do this runs the risk of neglecting entire sections of the *Khiṭaṭ* that offer the modern reader no useful historical information (at least not useful in terms of mainstream historiography). But it is noteworthy that, after some preliminary pious throat-clearing, the *Khiṭaṭ* actually opens with a substantial disquisition on astrology. According to al-Maqrīzī, a grasp of this subject is necessary if the reader is to follow what he is to going to write about later. The familiar great names in Islamic astrology, Abū Ma'shar, al-Bīrūnī, and so on are cited, but al-Maqrīzī's interest was not merely theoretical and, for example, in order to predict the annual rise of the Nile flood, al-Maqrīzī followed a technique set forth by al-Bīrūnī, a method which involved a board and lots of seeds.³⁹ Most important, al-Maqrīzī believed that the fate of Egypt was foretold in the doom-saying of astrologers—as we shall see.

Al-Maqrīzī's gloomy ponderings on the future of Egypt arose naturally from his imagining of what Egypt's past had been. He knew—or thought he knew—that Egypt had once been a land of fabulous wealth, or rather it had several times been a land of fabulous wealth.⁴⁰ First, there had been the wealth of the Pharaohs, both before and after the Flood. Then there was the wealth of Egypt under its Rumi (Greek and Roman) rulers. Then, there was the well-attested wealth of the Fatimid caliphs. It even seemed to al-Maqrīzī that in the early Mamluk period Egypt had been more prosperous than it now was. So the question naturally arose, if, in former times, Egypt had been so very wealthy, where had all that treasure gone? Barqūq's Cairo was after all a dump in al-Maqrīzī's eyes. Ibn Khaldūn, in his

³⁶See for examples *ibid.*, 7:220, and note; 7:789–90.

³⁷On the literary uses of dreams in chronicles of the Mamluk era written by al-Maqrīzī and others, see Barbara Langer, *Untersuchungen zur historischen Volkskunde Ägyptens nach mamlukischen Quellen* (Berlin, 1983), 70–85.

³⁸Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār (al-Khiṭaṭ)*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1853–54), 1:86–87.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 1:8–14.

⁴⁰Though the theme is pervasive throughout the *Khiṭaṭ*, al-Maqrīzī devoted a short section specifically to the destruction of the wealth of Egypt (*Khiṭaṭ*, 1:73–74), which contains some characteristically eccentric speculations about fossilized watermelons, cucumbers, and other fruits.



discussion of treasure-hunting, had asked himself precisely the same question. What had happened to the great wealth of past cultures? The sensible answer, as far as Ibn Khaldūn was concerned, was that those riches had been transferred elsewhere to other more successful cultures. Ancient Egypt's wealth had been plundered, first by the Persians and then by the Greeks.⁴¹ Al-Maqrīzī, who was never so fond of sensible answers, took a somewhat different view.

In his chapter on the *maṭālib* in the *Khīṭaṭ*, al-Maqrīzī wrote about *The Book of Treasures*, or *ʿIlm al-Kunūz*: "It is said that the Greeks [i.e., Byzantines] in leaving Egypt and Syria hid most of their treasures, but they wrote down in books where they had hidden those treasures and these books were deposited in a church in Constantinople."⁴² Alternatively, according to al-Maqrīzī, the Greeks took older treasure books (presumably dating from Pharaonic times) to the church in Constantinople. Each servant of the church who guarded those valuable texts received one page of where to find treasure as his reward. Ibn Khaldūn took the more sensible view that no one who was hiding treasure would then set about writing out instructions that others could use to find that treasure.⁴³ However, it was obvious to al-Maqrīzī at least that most of the treasures of antiquity had been hidden here and there all over Egypt. It is worth remembering that he lived in an age of thesaurisation, when viziers and other state functionaries routinely salted away the proceeds of office-holding in hollow columns, hidden cupboards, and holes beneath their courtyards.⁴⁴ Al-Maqrīzī actually devoted a whole treatise to hidden treasures, the *Kitāb al-Dhakhāʾir*, which has not survived. However, he also discussed the subject in the *Khīṭaṭ* and he relayed stories that are found in Ibn Waṣīf Shāh, al-Masʿūdī and al-Murtaḍā, about the treasure-hunting *muṭālibūn*, who ventured into the pyramids and other places.

The pyramids were not merely storehouses of material treasure—of gold, silver, and jewels, but they were also repositories of intellectual treasures. Al-Maqrīzī shared the widely held view that the pyramids were a sort of collection of educational time-capsules that had been built to preserve ancient Egypt's intellectual heritage from a predicted catastrophe (the theme of ecpyrosis). Egypt had once been home to Hermes, or Idrīs, and he taught all the sciences to the inhabitants of the land before the Flood.

According to Ibn Waṣīf Shāh (fl. ca. 1000), the author of a widely credited but quite fantastic history of ancient Egypt, King Surīd had a dream which his counsellors

⁴¹ *Prolégomènes*, 17:285–86; *Muqaddimah*, 2:324–25.

⁴² Al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 1:71. The section on *maṭālib*: 70–73.

⁴³ *Prolégomènes*, 17:285; *Muqaddimah*, 2:324.

⁴⁴ A *makhbaʾ* was a place in the house designed for the hiding of treasure. See E. W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 3rd ed. (London, 1896), 16.



interpreted as a warning of coming catastrophe. Unable to determine whether it would be by fire or by water, they built the pyramids to preserve within them their wisdom in a picture language that people in future centuries would be able to decode and they also drew diagrams on the walls of their temples. Al-Maqrīzī related a series of tales, also found in al-Mas'ūdī, al-Idrīsī, and others, about those who ventured into the pyramids looking for treasure or excitement. Most of these tales had a moralizing burden.⁴⁵ One story must have been particularly dear to the author of *Shudhūr al-'Uqūd*. It was related that treasure hunters excavating in the area of the pyramids presented Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn with a jar of ancient pure gold dinars in one of the pyramids and the inscription on the dinars declared in the ancient *barbatī* script "He who has been able to issue pure currency will be pure in this life and the next."⁴⁶

The Sphinx was the talismanic guardian that saved Giza from being engulfed by sands. Another factor behind al-Maqrīzī's engagement with the occult was his fierce patriotism. He wanted to boast about his land and, in order to do so, he invoked it's '*ajā'ib*, its marvellous temples, talismans, wonder-working pillars, and buried treasures.

Some of the messages that the ancients had transmitted across the centuries were warnings for al-Maqrīzī and his contemporaries. According to al-Maqrīzī, there was once a temple in Ikhmīm, now lost, with pictures and images that recorded the past and future of the world. He was steeped in the writings of the eighth-century Sufī Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī—or at least the writings ascribed to him, for much or all of the occult material is presumably pseudepigrapha. According to al-Maqrīzī, Dhū al-Nūn had succeeded in deciphering a Pharaonic inscription in a temple, presumably in Ikhmīm. The inscription warned its readers, "Beware of freed slaves, young men, military men become slaves, and Nabataeans who claim that they are Arabs."⁴⁷ (So it would seem that ancient sages had foretold the coming of the Mamluks.)

More conclusively for the pious Muslim, Egypt's sad fate had been foretold in Prophetic hadiths. Egypt was safe only as long as Iraq was unscathed, according to several hadiths, but according to another hadith, there would come a time when Egypt would be ruined by the overflowing of the Nile and military revolts would break out. According to yet another hadith, Egypt and Basra would become the most desolate of places. Red fighting and dry hunger would ruin Egypt and the

⁴⁵For al-Maqrīzī on pyramids, see *Khiṭaṭ*, 1:199–216 and cf. 1:53. See also Erich Graefe, ed. and tr., *Das Pyramidenkapitel in al-Makrizī's "Hitat" nach zwei Berliner und zwei Münchener Handschriften* (Leipzig, 1911).

⁴⁶Al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1:73.

⁴⁷*Ibid*, 1:69.



Nile would dry up. More puzzlingly it had also been foretold that "when men with yellow flags shall enter Egypt the Syrians shall dig roads under the ground." The "men with yellow flags" might well be the armies of the Ayyubids or Mamluks (for yellow was the color of their standards), but what is supposed to be going to happen in Syria? Again Egypt should beware when it should be the target of the fourfold blows of the Andalusians, Abyssinians, Turks, and Rumis.⁴⁸ And so on... and al-Maqrīzī proceeded from these and numerous other doom-laden prophecies to a description of the ruined situation of al-Fuṣṭāṭ in his own time.⁴⁹

In the opening pages of the *Khiṭaṭ*, al-Maqrīzī declared that the purpose of the study of history was to warn people and prepare them for departure from mortal life. Also that history was the most important of the sciences "for it contains warnings and exhortations reminding man that he must quit this world for the next." Also, "through such study, a person whose blindness of heart and vision was removed by God, will learn about the destruction and final disgrace which fell to the lot of his fellow-men after the handling of wealth and power." And in a version of the text of the *Khiṭaṭ*, quoted in al-Sakhāwī's *I'lān*, al-Maqrīzī continued "and he will come to abstain from this world and to wish for the other world."⁵⁰ His gloomy animadversions on the decline of Egypt under al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn and his descendants and the slide to worse yet under the early Circassian sultans should be seen within the broader framework of his historical vision, which encompassed the pre-Adamite sultans, the antediluvian Pharaohs, the Deluge, and the rule of Rome. The *Khiṭaṭ* considers how many centuries have passed since the world was created and how few years yet it and Islam have to endure, before the coming of the Mahdi.⁵¹ Ever since Silvestre de Sacy and his student, Quatremère, historians have stressed al-Maqrīzī's importance as a historian and it is certainly true that history was his chief interest. However, this stress has been at the expense of al-Maqrīzī's wider literary and intellectual interests. For, after all, he wrote poetry, as well as treatises on bees, on precious stones, on music, on dogmatics, on the domestic objects in the household of the Prophet, a life of Tamīm al-Dārī, a polemical attack on the followers of Ibn al-'Arabī in Damascus, a biographical dictionary of artists (*The Light of the Lamp and the Answer of Company in Respect of the Annals of Artists*), as well as a treatise on secret letters and talismans.⁵² All in all, he claimed to have written more than 200

⁴⁸Ibid, 2:124–26.

⁴⁹Ibid, 2:126–34.

⁵⁰Ibid, 1:3–4; Rosenthal, *History*, 315–16.

⁵¹Al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 1:440–53.

⁵²Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur* (Leiden, 1949), 1:654. On the treatise on artists, see Thomas Arnold, *Painting in Islam* (Oxford, 1928) 22, 138.



works. History was at the core of his oeuvre, but occult and eschatological concerns were at the core of his history. It is difficult to be sure what Ibn Khaldūn and al-Maqrīzī talked about when they met, but it is probable that they talked more about knowledge of the future than the past. If Ibn Khaldūn in Egypt succeeded in anything, it was in passing on his pessimism and his speculative interest in the future to al-Maqrīzī.



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