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Finding Meaning in the City: al-Maqrīzī's Use of Poetry in the *Khiṭaṭ*

A notable feature of the *Khiṭaṭ*[1] by al-Maqrīzī is the incorporation of poetry in many sections devoted to the structures or landscape features of Cairo.[2] This poetry is especially evident in the Bulaq edition, where the dense blocks of Arabic text are occasionally interrupted by columns of verses. The *Khiṭaṭ* has been mined by scholars as a source of information about elements of the historic city of Cairo; historical works on the cityscape of Cairo are indebted to the book for the who and when and how of its structures.[3] From the standpoint of documenting the history of Cairo, this emphasis has been useful, but has led to the poetry in the *Khiṭaṭ* being passed over, as these poems rarely contain anything in the way of objective historical facts. Li Guo, at the conclusion of an essay on the poet Ibn Dāniyāl, writes "…human emotions, collective sentiments, and public opinions all count; and the *adab* material, especially poetry, represents an ideal vehicle for such 'soft data.'"[4] The present article looks closely at what is added to the *Khiṭaṭ* and our understanding of Cairo by the inclusion of this poetry.

[1] *Al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-al-Iʿtibār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Bulaq, 1854). In the translations for this article I make use of the edition of Ayman Fuʾād Sayyid, published by the Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation (London, 2002–4). Page numbers refer to the standard Bulaq edition.

[2] This use of poetry in the *Khiṭaṭ* comes as no surprise since it was a common feature of Mamluk histories, both chronicles and biographical dictionaries. Al-Maqrīzī should be understood as participating in what has been called the "literarization" of history writing in the Mamluk period, a notion developed by Ulrich W. Haarmann in *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit* (Freiburg, 1969), and something of its growing importance among Mamluk historians is portrayed by Robert Irwin in "Mamluk History and Historians," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period,* ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge, 2006), 159–70. The redistribution of the poetic material into sections of the *Khiṭaṭ* relating to topographic features casts this material in a new light, allowing us to see relations between the poetry and features of the landscape that could be obscured by chronological or biographical methods of organization.

[3] The building by building approach to Cairo taken by Doris Behrens-Abouseif in *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: An Introduction* (Cairo, 1989) and more recently in *Cairo of the Mamluks: A History of the Architecture and Its Culture* (New York, 2007) is an example of an approach made possible by the wealth of information on each building collected by al-Maqrīzī.

[4] "Reading *Adab* in Historical Light: Factuality and Ambiguity in Ibn Dāniyāl's 'Occasional Verses' on Mamluk Society and Politics" in *History and Historiography of Post-Mongol Central Asia and the Mongol East,* ed. Judith Pfeiffer and Sholeh A. Quinn (Wiesbaden, 2006), 400.

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The poetry in the *Khiṭaṭ* falls broadly into two categories. The first is poetry that occurs incidentally within a larger passage cited on a specific topic. An example of this would be a passage from the *Risālah* of Abū al-Ṣalt al-Andalusī (d. 528/1134), containing a record of poetry composed on the occasion of Abū al-Ṣalt's visit to the pyramids.[5] The second type of poetry in the *Khiṭaṭ* is that collected by al-Maqrīzī himself, presumably in much the same way that he excerpted other bits and pieces of geographical, religious, or historical information related to Egypt. The holograph notebook of al-Maqrīzī represents a sample of the method by which he collected the poetry.[6] The conclusion of the section in the *Khiṭaṭ* on the pyramids offers an example of al-Maqrīzī's editorial handling of poetry as it concludes with eight poems, in different meters and ranging from two to thirteen verses in length. The poems follow each other with no commentary or explanation.[7] Clearly al-Maqrīzī found poetry an important addition to the *Khiṭaṭ,* as it is not only incidentally included, but purposefully collected and organized.

The *Khiṭaṭ* as Social Text

We continue to learn much through the "Maqriziana" studies of Frédéric Bauden about al-Maqrīzī's editorial/authorial process for compiling the *Khiṭaṭ*. His compositional work included the use of notebooks and note cards to select passages drawn from a wide number of books that touched in some way on Egypt and Cairo. These studies have left us with a view of al-Maqrīzī as a lively curator of information, and as an editor able to deftly summarize and hone in on crucial passages.[8] In a serious charge as to the intellectual honesty of al-Maqrīzī, we learned how he incorporated into his own working manuscript large sections of a previous manuscript by his near contemporary al-Awḥadī, who died in 811/1408.[9] The natural emphasis in these inquiries has been on al-Maqrīzī as author, but we should perhaps not ignore a second result: a view of the *Khiṭaṭ* as a social text.

[5] *Khiṭaṭ,* 1:118 = *Risālah al-Miṣrīyah,* in *Nawādir al-Makhṭūṭāt,* vol. 1, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Hārūn (Cairo, 1951), 26–27.

[6] Frédéric Bauden, "Maqriziana I: Discovery of an Autograph Manuscript of al-Maqrīzī: Towards a Better Understanding of His Working Method: Section 1," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2003): 21–68. For an example of the collection of poetry see section XXXIII in "Maqriziana I: Discovery of an Autograph Manuscript of al-Maqrīzī: Towards a Better Understanding of His Working Method: Section 2," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (2006): 81–139.

[7] *Khiṭaṭ,* 1:121–22.

[8] In addition to Maqriziana I/1 and I/2, see "Maqriziana II: Discovery of an Autograph Manuscript of al-Maqrīzī: Towards a Better Understanding of His Working Method Analysis," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2008): 51–118.

[9] Frédéric Bauden, "Maqriziana IX: Should al-Maqrīzī Be Thrown Out with the Bath Water? The Question of His Plagiarism of al-Awḥadī's *Khiṭaṭ* and the Documentary Evidence," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 14 (2010): 159–232.

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That is to say, the *Khiṭaṭ* can now more than ever be understood as the product of a community rather than of a single author, somewhat more Wikipedia than *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The *Khiṭaṭ* speaks with many voices, and was not so much the expression of one man as the result of a shared interest in Cairo and its history.[10]

If we approach the *Khiṭaṭ* as a social text, then the poetry gains a unique interest for us: it provides evidence for the contemporary experience of sites. The passages of poetry embedded in the *Khiṭaṭ* are other voices that ascribe value (beauty, piety, power) to sites independently of the author's insistence. As we will see when examining the poetry more closely, there is good evidence that much of this poetry was exchanged and circulated among its contemporary audience, and so the poetry gives us a glimpse of widespread views of sites. If we were able to read poetry from this era only in the context of a traditional *dīwān,* we would be forced to make many guesses as to its reception. In the *Khiṭaṭ* much of the poetry is embedded in historical contexts and lines of argument that allow us to see how it interacted with the social spaces of Cairo. If historical enquiry is broadened to include details about the experience of a city, then these poems, found throughout the *Khiṭaṭ,* can be invaluable. The lived experience evident here will of course be limited to the males who read and circulated this formal poetry.[11]

We learn something more about the audience for the *Khiṭaṭ* by sampling the placement of the poetry. If we step back and examine the sections in the *Khiṭaṭ* to which poetry is attached, we find in Cairo a select number of nodes of attention. These nodes are by no means limited to buildings, but include natural features such as the Nile and the ponds *(birak)* in the vicinity of Cairo. Poetic attention was not determined by the sheer splendor of a mosque. The mosque of the Citadel, built by Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in 718/1318, was richly decorated in marble and unique in several aspects of its construction; al-Maqrīzī speaks highly of its

[10] Particularly suggestive in this direction is the way al-Maqrīzī can be understood as taking up a project begun by his two colleagues Ibn Duqmāq and al-Awḥadī, both of whom had the misfortune of dying before bringing their work to completion. See "Maqriziana IX," 205.

[11] The poetry cited in the *Khiṭaṭ* reflects the elevated register of the formal *qaṣīdah*. Although the *Khiṭaṭ* was written in the midst of what has been described as the "heyday of popular Arabic literature," the poetry here gives no glimpses of the rich popular tradition that was blossoming among the *ʿāmmah*. Nevertheless we should not confine the readership of even this formal poetry to a group of elites, but rather assume a wide circulation for many of these poems. See Margaret Larkin, "Popular Poetry in the Post-Classical Period" in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period,* 191–242. Thomas Bauer underlines this point about the mixed audience for formal poetry in "In Search of 'Post-Classical Literature': A Review Article," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 153–55.

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beauty.[12] But no poems are present in this section that would point us to discussions or arguments that revolved around this structure.

More broadly, the Citadel, while extensively described in the *Khiṭaṭ,* has little poetry attached to the sections that cover its structures, with the exception of two short poems on the great *īwān,* described as having been written at the point of its construction under Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.[13] These poems on the *īwān* are clever lines of propaganda for the rule of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, making use of the very visible *īwān* as a symbol of his power. It makes sense that the *īwān,* clearly visible from lower Cairo as we know from nineteenth-century representations, would be taken up in propagandistic praise poetry. But the Citadel as a whole appears to have been resistant to poetic use, likely reflecting the "exclusion" and "segregation" from the general populace of Cairo that was an important part of the Mamluk ruling ethos.[14] The absence of poetry tells us something about the nature of that space, indicating a lack of personal experience and knowledge of the individual sites on the part of civilians. Specific elements of this military complex were simply not available for poetic composition and popular discussion.

The concluding section of the *Khiṭaṭ* reviews places of worship for Jews and Christians. In contrast to the mosques and madrasahs, which can fairly bristle with passages of poetry, these final sections are devoid of poetry. The exception is again insightful: poetry is used on a several occasions as monasteries are being described. This is a result of the public nature of some monasteries. On some occasions a monastery served as an open park where individuals could take relaxation. Al-Maqrīzī notes that the Monastery al-Quṣayr was much beloved because of its overlook, and then cites a poet who wrote of the amusements here:

> How often at the al-Quṣayr Monastery I had revelry
> with every possessor of youthful passion and charm.
> I amused myself there with a flirtatious fawn,
> marvels of description falling far short of this place.[15]

[12] Al-Maqrīzī writes of the mosque of the Citadel: "He made it an excellent structure and had much on the interior crafted from splendidly colored marble…The mosque took its place as one of the most sublime and greatest mosques in Egypt,." *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:325.

[13] Ibid., 2:209.

[14] Nasser Rabbat uses these terms to describe the unique place of the Citadel in Cairo. As is well known, the Mamluk system provided few positions for native Egyptians in the upper levels of the state. Under Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad a somewhat more open version of the Citadel emerged with "semi-public" access being allowed for the mosque and the *īwān*. Presumably this would represent the point of maximum openness for the Citadel, and in times of stress it would revert to being characterized by "exclusion" and "segregation." See *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture* (Leiden, 1995), 283–87.

[15] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:502.

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It would seem that to attract poetic composition a site had to be on the map of the elite who composed this formal poetry. Undoubtedly there were Christians and Jews who wrote and circulated poetry about their repasts, but the poetry in the *Khiṭaṭ* represents that which the Muslim elite would have consumed.[16]

We will now examine some sections of the *Khiṭaṭ* that were rich in poetry.

Misfires of Panegyric

The amir Sarghitmish constructed his madrasah right next to the venerable mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn, then nearing 500 years old. The madrasah of Amir Sarghitmish, completed in 757/1356, is remarkable for several elements of its design, and al-Maqrīzī is complimentary: "The madrasah became one of the most marvelous and beautiful structures, and one of the most delightful also on the interior."[17] Amir Sarghitmish appointed as teacher of Islamic law at the madrasah a man known as Qiwām al-Dīn, whose full name was Amīr Kātib ibn Amīr ʿUmar al-ʿAmīd ibn al-ʿAmīd Amīr Ghāzī al-Atqāʿī. At the grand opening, which in good Mamluk style took the form of a great repast in the new madrasah, Qiwām al-Dīn stood up and delivered a poetic panegyric for the founder¾and his appointer¾Amir Sarghitmish. As recorded in the *Khiṭaṭ* this eulogy is made up of 21 verses. The poem is introduced by al-Maqrīzī as being "in the height of odiousness" *(fī ghāyat al-samājah).* We immediately recognize the reason for this characterization as we read the poem, which truly is remarkable for its exaggerated praise:

> Have you seen the one who has strength
> and arrives near to God and expels suspicion?
> He appears as a banner, lofty with nobility.
> He advances having achieved victory!
> He races ahead with piety and bestows right guidance;
> he gives generously and loves liberality.
> He exemplifies custom; he makes vivid the sunnah.
> He sweetens our time with his excellent judgment.
> This one Sarghitmish, the days
> of his princehood have sent forth nourishing rain clouds.
> He takes away barrenness to bring abundance,
> and distress to bring a carefree heart.[18]

[16] The record for Jewish composition of poetry is strong thanks to the Geniza documents, through which we see an active community involved in poetry that has parallels to broader Islamic culture. See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgement in One Volume,* ed. Jacob Lassner (Berkeley, 1999), 165, 215.

[17] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:403.

[18] Ibid., 2:404.

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This is only the first third of the poem, and the remaining lines go on like this or even advance a notch in exaggeration. Amir Sarghitmish handsomely rewarded Qiwām al-Dīn 10,000 dirhams for these lines of praise.

A first point to make about this poem is simply that it has been cited at such length. It was such a standout example of exaggerated praise that a full 21 verses made it into the *Khiṭaṭ*¾quite a block of text for lines that add nothing factual, either about the mosque or the biography of Amir Sarghitmish. It is hard to resist the conclusion that this is an example of lines being included for the sole reason that it was a striking example of bad poetry¾and possibly thus entertaining for the reader.

This panegyric raises questions about composition. How did these lines, delivered orally in 757/1356, get placed with such accuracy into this particular historical event? As it happens, due to the amount of manuscript materials relating to the composition of the *Khiṭaṭ* we are able to trace with surprising precision how this poem came to be placed here.[19] Al-Maqrīzī found the poem in the biographical sketch of the poet Qiwām al-Dīn contained in *Aʿyān al-ʿAṣr* by the historian al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363).[20] We know that al-Maqrīzī came across this poem some time after he had composed a draft of this section on the mosque of Amir Sarghitmish since we find in the margins of his rough draft the note *yudhkar madḥ Qiwām al-Dīn fīhā* ("panegyric of Qiwām al-Dīn should be cited here"). This note functioned as a reminder that the panegyric poem should be inserted in this section when a final copy was made, and in the manuscripts of the finished works we indeed find it here. Since the poem is not found in the biography of Amir Sarghitmish composed by the same al-Ṣafadī in another historical work, *Kitāb al-Wāfī bi-al-Wafayāt,*[21] we can attribute to al-Maqrīzī the positioning of this poem in a place that was bound to get more readers than within the biographical sketch of a poet who was not well known. In this instance he is in no way following an earlier account of the mosque, but inserting a lengthy poem he had come across in his reading. The motivation for bringing this poem to the attention of readers was its inherent interest as an example of an odious praise poem.

Our knowledge of the social context in which this poem was delivered enhances our sense of the use and abuse of poetry in the Mamluk era. We can imagine coming across a eulogy like this in a *dīwān,* and wondering who could

[19] The following discussion is indebted to personal communication from Frédéric Bauden.

[20] Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿAṣr wa-Aʿwān al-Naṣr,* ed. ʿAlī Abū Zayd (Beirut, 1997–98), 1:622–27.

[21] Al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-Wāfī bi-al-Wafayāt,* ed. Sven Dedering (Wiesbaden, 1981). The extent to which al-Maqrīzī made use of this work by al-Ṣafadī, though without explicit citation, is demonstrated in Bauden, "Maqriziana XI: al-Maqrīzī et al-Ṣafadī: Analyse de la (Re)Construction d'un Récit Biographique," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 4 (2009): 99–136.

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possibly have been impressed with all this exaggerated praise, but the introduction by al-Maqrīzī marking the poem as "the height of odiousness" allows us to understand that the poem was by no means free from criticism among its audience. We might think of poems such as this in the *Khiṭaṭ* as embodied miniatures, giving us both a glimpse of actual context and reception.

In an introduction to the Arabic poetry of the "post-classical age" Salma Khadra Jayyusi remarks on the difficulty that later Arabic poets had in continuing the tradition of panegyric in an age of rulers who held sway over smaller regions: "The poet's enthusiasm was blunted; one can easily imagine his psychological difficulties and the artificiality that pervaded the writing of his panegyrics…The only innovation they could introduce was the pursuit of exaggeration, which diminished poetic appeal still further."[22] One way to approach this particular poem, then, is as a vivid example of this problem. The amir Sarghitmish¾powerful, but not sultan¾is praised with a couplet such as the final one above: "He takes away barrenness to bring abundance/and distress to bring a carefree heart." This was still a variety of poetry that was in demand from powerful men who wished to have words of praise directed at themselves, but it is now characterized by a social misfire, as it is received cynically by other elites. In fact, in this case it is held up to almost unbearable ridicule by being cited at length.

We should be cautious, however, in attributing this tension in praise poetry to the Mamluk era alone. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych has shown in an essay on panegyric in the Abbasid era that such tensions were inherent in the genre. Indeed, al-Mutanabbī's poetry dedicated to Kāfūr, Ikhshidid ruler of Egypt in the fourth/tenth century raises some of the same questions. Stetkevych treats panegyric through the lens of ritualized exchange, in which praise and monetary reward mutually support each other. In a perfect world the excellence of the poetry and the patron are matched, but in fact this was rarely the case, and tension arose: "If the panegyrist is a bad poet, no amount of virtue and heroism on the part of the patron will enable him to produce a good poem, and as the poor or mediocre poem is consigned to oblivion, so, too, is the renown of the patron."[23]

Al-Maqrīzī provides us with a dramatic miniature that allows us to complicate this view of praise. By any reasonable account the praise poetry delivered by Qiwām al-Dīn should be judged successful. The poet delivered the bombastic lines and those lines were ratified by the generous reward from his patron, the amir Sarghitmish. This is exactly the ideal spelled out by Stetkevych. Despite that suc-

[22] Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Arabic Poetry in the Post-Classical Age," in *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period,* 33–34.

[23] Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, "Abbasid Panegyric and Political Allegiance: Two Poems of al-Mutanabbī on Kāfūr," in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa,* ed. Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (Leiden, 1997), 1:40.

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cess the poem was not well-received. Al-Maqrīzī counted the poem as a misfire. Reading the verses it is hard not to agree with al-Maqrīzī's characterization of them as "the height of odiousness." Even if the externals of this gift-giving situation were strictly followed by poet and patron, it is clear that for the audience something was lacking. This third party of the audience and their participation is not taken up by Stetkevych, but it is a necessary element for this ritual exchange.

We owe to the *Khiṭaṭ* a number of miniatures such as this in which we learn to read poetry within a fleshed-out context. Another panegyric misfire takes place in the madrasah of Sultan Qalāwūn, which as a grand building in the center of Cairo gets a lengthy section devoted to it in the *Khiṭaṭ*. Al-Ashraf Salāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl was the first successor to Sultan Qalāwūn, and his reign was a short three years (689–93/1290–93). Upon completion of a successful jihad against the Franks, he returned to Cairo and after a grand entrance to the city, came to the madrasah-mausoleum of Qalāwūn. Al-Maqrīzī sketches the mausoleum as "packed with judges, elites, readers, shaykhs, and legal scholars." In the midst of the ceremony in honor of the sultan's return, a poet[24] climbed the pulpit and began to declaim a poem written in honor of the sultan. The poem began with this verse:

> Visit your parents and stop by their tombs,
> It is as if you were transferred to them.[25]

This turned out to be a spectacularly ill-chosen line to begin his panegyric. Al-Maqrīzī notes that Sultan Khalīl understood the meaning of the line (which could not be taken for granted for a Turkish Mamluk) and rose immediately in outrage at the bad omen of these words (the mention of movement to tombs). Sultan Khalīl was calmed, but returned immediately to the Citadel. Al-Maqrīzī informs us that the poet did not get a reward.

We see again the misfire of panegyric, though this time on the more straightforward basis of unhappiness on the part of the patron. Words whose glory was to be found in ornamented elusiveness are brought crashing to the ground on account of a sultan who took the words literally and found them to be an ill omen. The story brings a dash of humor with it, as we read the expression of outrage from the sultan: "This guy couldn't find anything to say except that line?"[26]

Reading the *Khiṭaṭ* we enter a society in which event, place, and words were closely linked. Events were celebrated at monumental constructions whose very names specified the person they were meant to memorialize. Poetry was a vital part of an event, and in turn those poems came to be associated in social memory

[24] Al-Maqrīzī gives the poet's full name as Najm al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Fatḥ al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allah ibn Muhalhal ibn Ghayyāth ibn Naṣr, known as Ibn al-ʿAnbarī the exhorter.

[25] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:381.

[26] The Arabic text is "*mā wajada hadhā shay'an yaqūluhu sawa hadhā al-bayt!*"

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with those sites. The *Khiṭaṭ* as developed by al-Maqrīzī builds upon these interconnections and mimics the connections that were already present in society.

Falling Minarets

One delicate point in the architecture of medieval Cairo was the minaret, whose spindly form and vulnerability to earthquakes made it liable to collapse. The tragedy of a minaret failure was a major event in medieval Cairo, and in the case of the tumble of the minaret under construction at the mosque of Sultan Ḥasan, it could be quite a deadly event. Through the editorial addition of poetry into his *Khiṭaṭ,* al-Maqrīzī allows us to catch a glimpse of the social use of poetry in making sense of such an incident.

Th *Khiṭaṭ* provides a superb example of a running dialogue conducted through poetry. This exchange surrounded the failure of a minaret during the construction of the madrasah-*khānqāh* of Sultan al-Muʾayyad in 821/1418. Since this construction took place within the lifetime of al-Maqrīzī and well after the point where he is known to have begun compiling the material for the *Khiṭaṭ,*[27] there should be no surprise that the stages in the construction of this large mosque are noted in detail. For example, we learn that on the 27th day of Shawwāl in 819/1416 the magnificent door originally installed in the madrasah of Sultan Ḥasan was transferred to the new construction. Then on the 17th day of Rabīʿ II there occurred an accident in which ten workers fell from the mosque, four of whom died. These are just two examples of the detailed nature of al-Maqrīzī's reporting on the construction of this mosque.

Shortly after the completion of the madrasah-*khānqāh* in 821/1418, a lean was discovered in a minaret that stood over Bāb Zuwaylah. This minaret was one of two built over the older gate in association with the new madrasah-*khānqāh*. In what turns out to be a fascinating account of the procedure in such an event, the engineers made a report to the sultan and then the sultan authorized the tearing down of the minaret. The engineers commenced a controlled destruction of the minaret, but two days later a portion of it fell, destroying some buildings and killing a man. At that point Bāb Zuwaylah was closed for a month, and al-Maqrīzī writes: "No collapse like this had been known since Cairo was founded."[28]

The response of the elite to this event was to chatter. Al-Maqrīzī writes: "The literary men of the age wrote lots of poetry about the collapse of this minaret." He goes on to give six samples of the poetic chatter that came about as a result of the collapse. In lining up these poems one after another al-Maqrīzī makes clear their

[27] With respect to the date for the composition of the *Khiṭaṭ,* Frédéric Bauden has argued that the rough drafts can be dated between 811 and 816/1408 and 1413 ("Maqriziana IX," 204–5).

[28] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:329.

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interrelationship. Introducing the second poem he notes that the person wrote "countering him" *(yuʿāriḍuhu).* Following another poem he writes: "the people circulated this poem" *(wa-tadāwala hadhā al-nās).* These poems were not isolated examples that came to light years later in poetic collections, but opinions exchanged in the immediacy of the event.

The first poem is by Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, best known for his hadith scholarship and biographical compendia.[29] Here is Ibn Ḥajar's response to the failure of the minaret:

> The mosque of our master al-Muʾayyad is splendid;
> its minaret is radiant with beauty and adornment.
> It says, having leaned over them, "Go slowly,
> for there's nothing against my body more harmful than the eye."[30]

At the conclusion of these lines al-Maqrīzī points out a double entendre *(tawriyah)* that might otherwise elude us. On the one hand there is the obvious meaning that the "eye" *(al-ʿayn)* makes reference to "the eye that strikes things and thus ruins them"¾that is, the evil eye. The second meaning is that "the eye" is a reference to Shaykh Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-ʿAyntābī, the scholar better known by the shortened form of his name, al-ʿAynī. The people among whom this poem circulated had no trouble seeing in these lines the cut-down aimed at a man who had some connection to the new construction. That warranted a response on the part of al-ʿAynī:

> A minaret when revealed is like a handsome bridegroom;
> its destruction comes through the judgment of God and fate.
> They say: "It was struck by 'the eye.'" I say: "That's wrong!
> Nothing deserves destruction except worthless stone *(ḥajar).*"[31]

This poem is similar to the first. A gnomic comment on the handsomeness of the minaret is followed by a verse that points a finger of blame. The lines can be interpreted literally as turning back the notion that the evil eye could cause a minaret to collapse, but with an insider's reading we see that it is a statement of the author's own innocence (as "the eye") and then a shift of the rhetorical blame onto his accuser, whose name included the word "*ḥajar*" or stone. We should understand that Ibn Ḥajar is being equated with "worthless stone."

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[29] For an analysis of his poetic output see Thomas Bauer, "Ibn Ḥajar and the Arabic Ghazal of the Mamluk Age," in *Ghazal as World Literature I: Transformations of a Literary Genre,* ed. Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth (Beirut, 2005), 36–55.

[30] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:329.

[31] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:329.

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This kind of word play is often mentioned as one of the characteristics of Mamluk-era poetry. In his review of contemporary criticism of Mamluk-era poetry, Th. Emil Homerin cites Bakrī Amīn Shaykh's opinion that Arabic poems of the age were marked by intricate word-play, and that this tendency is most visible in the area of invective, where tribes or society were no longer criticized, but only individuals.[32] The exchange captured by al-Maqrīzī so far conforms to this view. We see quibbling word play tied to invective aimed at individuals. These are not lines that would be anthologized and appreciated by a modern audience, as they are simply too local and personal in their concerns.

As it happens, al-Maqrīzī was in agreement with the above critique in his explicit judgment of the lines. This kind of comment from al-Maqrīzī is rare, and it gives us some clues as to the grounds of reception for poetry like this. Al-Maqrīzī writes: "Neither of these poets achieved his aim, for neither al-ʿAynī Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd, overseer of pious donations, or Shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī ibn Ḥajar had any real relation to the minaret so that he might serve as a useful double entendre."[33] In other words, these are examples of failed poems, whatever their popular currency, on account of their disconnect from the event at hand. This was an example of personal animosity being transferred to discussion of a current event with which neither man was appreciably involved. Thus the double entendre is labeled by al-Maqrīzī a failure. He then cites a third poem:

> Upon the tower *(burj)* of Bāb Zuwaylah was founded
> a minaret for the house of God and place of safety.
> That damn tower *(burj)* abandoned it, causing it to lean.
> So, people, shout: "Damnation to the tower *(al-burj)*!"[34]

These lines would again strike us as somewhat innocuous, except for the extra information supplied by al-Maqrīzī: the manager and overseer of the construction of the madrasah-*khānqāh* was a man by the name of Bahāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn al-Burjī. Re-reading the short poem we can note that the three references to "the tower" *(al-burj)* can be understood as criticism of the man to whom construction was assigned. The final invective "damnation to the tower!" now has a more personal point to it. Because of the real connection between actual builder and poetic effect, al-Maqrīzī judges this to be effective in a way the previous two were not. This double entendre must have been striking since the next three poems cited by al-Maqrīzī employ variations of it. This is the poem that al-Maqrīzī specifies as being circulated by the people.

[32] Th. Emil Homerin, "Reflections on Arabic Poetry in the Mamluk Age," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 70.

[33] *Khiṭaṭ*, 2:329.

[34] Ibid.

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A second section in the *Khiṭaṭ* deals with the fall of another minaret. In this case it is a fall that resulted in a real tragedy: 300 lives were lost in the year 762/1361 when one of the minarets under construction for the madrasah of Sultan Ḥasan toppled. Most of the dead were orphans busy learning the Quran at the nearby *maktab al-sabīl,* though a few non-orphans were in that number. This was a momentous tragedy¾as it would be considered today. Al-Maqrīzī provides a snapshot of the public reaction: "When the minaret fell the general populace *(ʿāmmah)* of Fustat and Cairo talked continually *(lahijat)* about how it was a warning about the downfall of the state."[35]

As we have already noted in the much less tragic case of the failure of a minaret connected to the madrasah-*khānqāh* of Sultan al-Muʾayyad, one central use of poetry in this era was as a way to identify and set public meaning for an event. Al-Maqrīzī tells us that the people of Cairo "talked continually" about the event, leading to a popular interpretation of impending trouble for the current state. Poetry, as should be clear now, was another way for this society to talk about an occurrence, and al-Maqrīzī provides an example of how a poet tried to step in and even re-direct opinion concerning this one. The following is the full poem, consisting of 9 verses, cited by al-Maqrīzī:

Rejoice! For, O sultan of Egypt, a messenger
of your fortune brought a saying that circulated like a proverb.
The minaret did not fall because of any fault,
but because of a hidden secret that has been revealed to me.
Underneath were readers of the Quran, so the minaret listened
and its passion in this state led it to lean!
If God were to reveal the Quran upon a mountain
its peak would lift rom the power of its emotion.
The stones of the minaret did not cease moving, and finally fell
from fear of God, not because of any weakness or fault.
Its sultan was absent, so it became despondent and threw
itself down from passion with heart ablaze.
So praise God, a fortune liable to envy vanished because of what
the Merciful One decreed in eternity.
No harm struck the madrasah after that day;
You built the edifice with knowledge and craft
You continued until you saw this world by the madrasah
filled with knowledge, for there's no one in Egypt without work.[36]

[35] Ibid., 2:316.

[36] Ibid. The full name of the author of these lines was Shaykh Bahāʾ al-Dīn Abū Ḥāmid Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Subkī.

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The point of the lines is to exculpate the sultan from any possible wrongdoing in the death of the orphans. Building on the notion that Quran recitation was going on directly underneath the minaret, the poet gives us a vivid image of the minaret out of piety leaning to hear the Quran, and thus falling onto the school. This line of reasoning is bolstered with an allusion to the episode in the Quran in which Mt. Sinai is seen by Moses to crumble in the process of revelation.[37] Stones, apparently, are supposed to crumble when confronted with the Quran. A second, less fully developed reason for the fall is also given in the dejection of the minaret at the absence of its sultan. The last two verses praise the sultan for his construction and for filling the world with knowledge¾and, incidentally, providing work for everyone in Egypt.

This poem was clearly meant to defend the sultan and deflect the tongue-waggers that saw in this event a bad omen. But as it happened, those who saw in it a portent were proven correct when the sultan was killed a mere 33 days after this incident, according to al-Maqrīzī. That is a remarkable fact since it allows us to date this poem quite precisely to the immediate aftermath of the minaret's fall. This was not a poem written in repose and calmly meditating on a past event, but one written in the heat of public discussion of an event. The goal of the poem was to shift public discourse away from blaming the sultan and toward understanding the incident as actually in support of his piety, or, at least, as an act of God.

The poetry that came to surround these two minaret failures can be seen as contributing toward the social memory of these events. James Fentress and Chris Wickham write about the formation of social memory: "How does one make individual memory 'social,' then? Essentially by talking about it."[38] Poetry in medieval Cairo was one way for society to talk about the events that mattered to it and that demanded explanation. In both the above examples we see that major events were closely followed by the chatter of poetry assigning blame or excuses.

The Boat on the Shrine

The mausoleum of Imam al-Shāfiʿī is located in the southern cemetery of Cairo, known as al-Qarāfah. The official embrace of Sunni Islam by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and his Ayyubid successors paved the way for the monumental mausoleum built over the grave of Imam al-Shāfiʿī, who had died in Fustat several centuries before in 204/820. The massive domed structure that now marks the tomb was erected by a successor to Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil, in 607/1211.

[37] The well-known story is at 7:142–44.

[38] James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory: New Perspectives on the Past* (Oxford, 1992), ix–x.

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Al-Maqrīzī treats the mausoleum under the heading of "tomb" *(qabr).*[39] The focus of the section is on the remains of Imam al-Shāfiʿī, beginning with a note about his death and burial in the cemetery outside Fustat, and then moving on to a story about the attempted relocation of his body to Baghdad during the Fatimid era. This planned relocation was foiled by the combination of popular unrest and a miraculous sign. Only after this earlier history does al-Maqrīzī mention the later Ayyubid construction of the mausoleum *(qubbah)* that now marks the tomb.

Although the section on the mausoleum is only of medium length (slightly over one page in the Bulaq edition), it is marked by an abundance of poetry. Seven short poems are included: three near the opening that lavish general praise on Imam al-Shāfiʿī, then four at the conclusion. These last four were explicitly written about the mausoleum itself, and in particular one feature that stirred interest: the copper boat that sits upon the dome.

Al-Maqrīzī introduces the four concluding poems with a short introductory gloss: "A number of poems have been written about this mausoleum." Multiple inclusions of a site in poetry is a positive sign of its cultural importance, demonstrating that social chatter centered on it, but what further makes these poems worthwhile to study is their engagement with a deeper cultural question about the confines of knowledge in this era. The mausoleum and its boat evidently afforded people of Cairo an opportunity to reflect on the development of Islam, from its early pure days to their own time.

Although the boat has undoubted links to ancient Egyptian religious practices,[40] J. M. F. Van Reeth points out how the boat took on a particular meaning as a result of the political/religious context of this mausoleum, arguing that in the context of the religious transformation of Egypt under the Ayyubids the boat becomes an allusion to the story of Noah. Just as in the story of Noah a small group remained faithful and were brought through the flood, so in the case of Imam al-Shāfiʿī we find an example of faithfulness and resistance to heresy. Van Reeth writes: "L'imām fournissait ainsi l'exemple, le modèle *par excellence* de la conversion. Comme lui, l'Egypte avait besoin de se disculper: elle¾ou du moins ses dirigeants¾avait été chiite; il fallait maintenant retourner à l'orthodoxie sous l'étendard de la théologie šāfiʿite."[41]

There can be no doubt that the story of Noah, in this circumstance, could easily serve as a metaphor for the changes in Egypt; the theme of fidelity to orthodoxy

[39] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:462–63. A mosque built beside the earlier tomb during the reign of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn is briefly treated at 2:296.

[40] Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: An Introduction* (Cairo, 1989), 85.

[41] "La Barque de l'Imām Aš-Šāfiʿī," in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras, II: Proceedings of the 4th and 5th International Colloquium Organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 1995 and 1996,* ed. U. Vermeulen and D. De Smet (Leuven, 1998), 258–59.

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is strong in both. The specific connection of the boat on the mausoleum to the story of Noah is confirmed by many elements of later popular devotion, and this combined with the general note of restoration evident in the inscriptions from the mausoleum make for a plausible case that this is workable interpretation of the mausoleum at the time of its construction. Van Reeth pushes this too far, though, when he assumes that all references to the boat and the story of Noah reference the Ayyubid transformation. The poems compiled by al-Maqrīzī in the section on the mausoleum must be interpreted on their own, without the assumption that later poets could not have applied the same system of metaphors in a novel way.

The first of the four poems with which al-Maqrīzī concludes his section on the mausoleum is a description of a small group approaching the mausoleum:

> I passed near the dome of al-Shāfiʿī
> and my eye spotted upon it a river boat.
> So I said to my companions: "Now don't be amazed
> if there are boats above the water!"[42]

This is an effective way to begin this group of poems as it points out, from the vantage of a group of friends, the physical detail that will be central throughout this small group of poems: that odd boat upon the mausoleum. There is no attempt in these lines to set meaning, rather we find just a clever reference to a curious point of Cairo's topography. The lines serve as a reminder that the boat was a well-known feature, and as such open to creative re-use.

The second poem in the series is by ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Abū ʿAlī ʿUthmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nāblusī, and constructs a view of the importance of Imam al-Shāfiʿī in Egypt:

> Al-Shāfiʿī has become master *(imām);*
> among us his school of law is gold.
> He was truly a sea of knowledge when he departed,
> for atop his grave is a ship.

The first verse is a statement of fact: the legal school of Imam al-Shāfiʿī was indeed preeminent in Egypt, and had been since the rejuvenation of Sunni Islam under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn.[43] His school of law could plausibly be called "gold" *(mudhhab)* since it received wealthy endowments from Cairo's rulers. In this case the boat atop the mausoleum is used as a clue to Imam al-Shāfiʿī's importance: the fact that a boat is there is fitting, because it is over a man who can be considered a

[42] *Khiṭaṭ,* 2:462 = Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, *Al-Rawḍah al-Bahīyah al-Zāhirah fī Khiṭaṭ al-Muʿizzīyah al-Qāhirah* (Beirut, 1996), 80.

[43] André Raymond provides a brief description of the changeover of Egypt to Sunni Islam, and the raising of the Shafiʿi school of law to a place of pre-eminence in Egypt, in *Cairo,* trans. Willard Wood (Cambridge, 2000), 102–4.

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"sea of knowledge." Although the actual reasons for the boat's placement should be sought among the continuities between medieval popular religion and more ancient Egyptian practices, the poet in this case used the boat as an indicator for the nature of the person buried there.

The next poem is by a poet who is not named, but simply referred to as "someone else" *(akhar).*

> I came to the tomb of al-Shāfiʿī to make visitation
> but an ark stood opposite us even when there was no sea.
> So I said, "God be exalted, this is a sign
> indicating that his grave has drawn together the sea."

The context in this case is a "visitation," the technical word for a pious visit to a grave or other site viewed as having *barakah*. Except for the explicitly pious intention of the writer, these lines are similar to the first poem of the group. The word *fulk* ("ark") is used also in the Quran for Noah's ark,[44] which sets us unavoidably in the context of that story. The poet claims to discover in this sight a sign: the grave marked by the boat "embraces" or "draws together" *(ḍamma)* the sea. What "sea" means in this case is not wholly clear, but given the allusion to the story of Noah, we can begin by identifying it with the uncontrolled waters of the flood. Given the context of the poems immediately before and after this one, we might assume that again the "sea of knowledge" is in mind. In this case the boat is accorded tremendous power; it is a powerful organizer or even master of the chaotic sea. The sea of knowledge is envisioned as an unruly entity, but the religious thought of Imam al-Shāfiʿī, as represented by the boat on his tomb, is nevertheless able to master it.

The final poem of the series is by the famous Mamluk poet Sharaf al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Saʿīd ibn Ḥammād al-Būṣīrī, author of the *Burdah*.

> On the dome of the grave of al-Shāfiʿī is a ship
> that came to anchor on the sturdy construction above the rocks.
> Ever since the deluge of knowledge receded to his grave
> this ark sits firmly at the mausoleum as upon Mount Judi.

The first verse begins in the same place as the previous ones, pondering the significance of the boat. As earlier noted, the mausoleum of Imam al-Shāfiʿī lies toward the Muqaṭṭam Hills, and the poet makes use of this placement to communicate the idea of bedrock: the boat has anchored "above the rocks" *(fawq jalmūd).* Th se foundation rocks are immediately contrasted with the "deluge of knowledge"

[44] This word can be found in Quran 7:64.

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(ṭūfān al-ʿulūm).[45] That is a surprisingly vivid metaphor for knowledge, or more precisely, the religious sciences.[46] These sciences are made to appear chaotic and uncontrollable as they are likened to the deluge. In the midst of that deluge is a boat, again connecting us to the story of Noah with the use of the Quranic word *fulk*. In this case the "ark" that provides safety for the righteous comes to rest not on a mountain but at the bedrock of the tomb of Imam al-Shāfiʿī. Mount Judi is the mountain in present-day Turkey upon which the ark was thought to have come to rest after the flood.[47] At this point we can recognize how the series of metaphors again underlines the scholarly mastery of Imam al-Shāfiʿī.

What al-Maqrīzī thought about these poems is difficult to know, beyond the obvious fact that he was so struck by their similarity that he lined them up one after another. By citing them in his section on the mausoleum of Imam al-Shāfiʿī he constructs what I have called a social text. These short poems break out of any fixed meaning that al-Maqrīzī brought to his presentation of the mausoleum and give us a glimpse of how the site was experienced by the elite more broadly. In this case we find a broad agreement on the cultural importance of Imam al-Shāfiʿī given metaphoric resonance through the incorporation of the well-known boat atop the mausoleum. This is perhaps what Th. Emil Homerin had in mind at the conclusion of his essay on Mamluk poetry when he wrote: "…reading poetry by Muslims in the Mamluk Age can heighten our perceptions of their lives by helping us to feel more sharply and with more understanding some of what they may have felt and believed in their own day…"[48] The meaning of this site can be seen to arise through the intertwining of a general understanding of the past with the physical presence of the mausoleum itself.

Concluding Thoughts

None of the poems considered in this essay are likely to make it into the next edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*. In the creation of such an anthology the literatures of past and present cultures are sifted for texts that are deemed approachable by students in our own time. David Damrosch elucidated a three-point definition of world literature. His second point is of interest to us: "World

[45] The word here for deluge *(ṭūfān)* is used in Quran 7:133 and 29:14, the former in a list of plagues brought on Egypt in the time of Moses, the latter for the Deluge proper.

[46] How this image of a "deluge of the religious sciences" could be taken as a reference to Fatimid rule is not explained by Van Reeth ("La Barque de l'Imām Aš-Ŝāfiʿī"). Reference to the same story does not mean its application has remained stable, and in this case the details of the poem break down if the Ayyubid situation is applied with any rigor.

[47] Mount Judi is named as the resting place for Noah's boat in Quran 11:44. See also Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-Buldān* (Beirut, 1957), 2:179–80.

[48] Th. Emil Homerin, "Reflections on Arabic Poetry in the Mamluk Age," 85.

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literature is writing that gains in translation." Discussing why some literature translates and other literature does not, he writes: "It is important to recognize that the question of translatability is distinct from questions of value. A work can hold a prominent place within its own culture but read poorly elsewhere, either because its language doesn't translate well or because its cultural assumptions don't travel. Snorri Sturluson's dynastic saga *Heimskringla* is a major document in medieval Nordic culture, but it only makes compelling reading if you are fairly knowledgeable about the political history of Norway and Iceland."[49]

This provides us with a frame for understanding what we encounter in the poetry that al-Maqrīzī has framed for us in the *Khiṭaṭ*. It is poetry that translates only with difficulty because it is so closely tied to its social and physical context. In other words, it is not poetry that abstracts easily into discussions of the universal human spirit, as its interest is in negotiating meaning for concrete events and places.

It is often exactly on the score of "universality" that Mamluk poetry is criticized. This can be seen in a recent essay on "Arabic Poetry in the Classical Age" in the last volume of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature:* "The poet seems incapable of capturing the particular, of exploring inner experience and so arriving at the essence of life. He does not see beyond the expected, the recurrent, beyond the conventional routine and formality of externalized living."[50] If we look closely at the terms we see that the author is reaching for some standard of universality in the poetry. The poet is supposed to look *through* the world to the underlying elements of the human condition. But if we have discovered anything in the poems analyzed here, it has been their unwillingness to forget about where they are. The framing of these poems by al-Maqrīzī attaches them to a time and place, and these dramatic miniatures in turn allow the poetry to stand out as lively and even artful texts that interact with their setting in an effort to create meaning.

One result of thinking of these poems so sharply within a particular context is to make us re-think the notion of universality. Here we can get some help from anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who addressed the notion of universal and particular in the study of human beings. He argued that the study of human beings does not consist in discovering universally shared traits (religion, marriage), but studying the particulars of different cultures. That particularity opens up the danger of losing touch with any hope for broader relevance or for connecting discrete facts about human beings back to some larger picture. Here Geertz points

[49] David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, 2003), 289.

[50] Salma Khadra Jayyusi, "Arabic Poetry in the Post-Classical Period," 29. I take this only as representative of a large body of negative opinions on Mamluk poetry. For an overview of the standard critical evaluation of this poetry see Th. Emil Homerin, "Reflections on Arabic Poetry in the Mamluk Age," 63–64.

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us to another kind of universal: "…the mechanisms by whose agency the breadth and indeterminateness of his inherent capacities are reduced to the narrowness and specificity of his actual accomplishments."[51] That is to say, what should hold our attention are the universal mechanisms (cultural, psychological) by which human beings create their social worlds.

Thinking of the Mamluk poetry examined here in this light, we can acknowledge that it is not the sort of poetry that most readily translates into modern concerns; nevertheless, we find in it lively examples of human beings attaching meaning to their experience. This has been evident in each of the poems cited in this article, whether it be the panegyric and its interpretation, the attribution of blame for the failure of a minaret, or meditation on that boat sitting on top of the mausoleum. Each time, we see traces of lively public discussions seeking to find some frame for understanding events and the world. Each of these poets is busy at what Geertz describes (with use of a phrase from John Dewey) as a human being putting "a construction upon the events through which he lives, to orient himself within 'the ongoing course of experienced things…'"[52]

[51]Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man," in idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 45.

[52]Ibid., 45.

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