

*Selections from Ṣubḥ al-Asḥā’ by al-Qalqashandi, Clerk of the Mamluk Court: Egypt: “Seats of Government” and “Regulations of the Kingdom”, from Early Islam to the Mamluks*, edited by Heba al-Toudy and Tarek Galal Abdelhamid. Routledge Medieval Translations (London: Routledge, 2017). Pp. viii+ 470.

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The name of al-Qalqashandī is certainly familiar to anyone interested in the history of the Mamluk Sultanate, its organisation, and its functioning. This fifteenth-century secretary has indeed gone down in history because of his most famous work *Ṣubḥ al-aṣḥā’ fī ṣinā’at al-inshā’*, an encyclopedic work on the *inshā’* production (chancery production) of the Islamic states from the time of the Prophet up to the early fifteenth century. This encyclopedia, edited in 14 volumes, addresses most every aspect of the art of writing, from calligraphy, style issues, and writing material to required skills for secretaries, presenting not only detailed theoretical explanations, but also concrete examples through the many copies of original samples it provides. Beyond its focus on the art of writing, however, the *Ṣubḥ al-aṣḥā’* in fact covers all aspects related to the chancery as well, such as the evolution of the administration and administrative practices, but also geographical and organizational concerns for governance, etc., making the work a true history of Islamic governance and administration over time. Because of the encyclopedic character of the work, al-Qalqashandī based his work on an incredible amount of sources, many of which are now lost.

Scholars have long recognized the value of this work, and many parts of it have been studied in detail and sometimes even translated. But since Gaudetroy-Desmombrynes’ famous 1923 translation in *La Syrie à l’époque des Mamelouks d’après les auteurs arabes*, no attempt was made to present a coherent and “full” translation of the work (or at least of part of the work). This is now finally initiated, thanks to Heba El-Toudy and Tarek Galal Abdelhamid, the two translators of the present volume. The translation of this essential author comes at the right time as the field of Mamluk Studies has recently witnessed an increased activity in the domain of translation. The *Bibliotheca Maqriziana* is one remarkable example of that trend (critical editions and translations of al-Maqrīzī’s works), but many other initiatives are being taken in that direction for other Mamluk authors.

Due to the extent of al-Qalqashandī’s *Ṣubḥ al-aṣḥā’*, however, the translators have only been able to concentrate on a short portion of the work concerning Egypt from the second Treatise on Human Geography (*al-maqālah al-thānīyah, fī al-masālik wa-al-mamālik*): “The Established Seat of Government,” including Fustat, Cairo, and the citadel (Part I of the book) and “The Regulation of the Kingdom” from early Islam up to the Ikhshidids; under the Fatimids; and during



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the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods (Part II). Part I is mostly concerned with the topographical description of Fustat, Fatimid Cairo, and the citadel, recounting their urban development, and their evolution over time, based on the model of the *khīṭat* (neighborhood by neighborhood, including a list of all mosques, madrasahs, *khānqāhs* and *ribāṭs*, and hospitals). Part II addresses mainly the basis of government, its organization and staff, as well as its attributes during the Fatimid caliphate and the Ayyubid and Mamluk sultanates. The translation of the work is preceded by a short introduction, and followed by a detailed glossary. If the translation of the text is sometimes quite literal, the translators have nevertheless extensively commented and explained the text—and technical words and concepts—in the footnotes, the extent of which demonstrates the amount of work delivered.

Such an ambitious work, however, does not come without some shortcomings that should be mentioned. First and foremost, in this era of the “translation wave,” it is rather surprising that the editors based their translation on the edition of the work that was made in the early 1900s, and did not even consult *Šubḥ al-āshā*’s manuscripts. As many similar projects of translation have shown, the consultation of the manuscripts, as well as the comparison of the different versions of the works, and the consideration—if not integration—of the para-textual features is now considered the rule in the field of critical edition and translation. In this respect, it is therefore difficult to consider the translation as truly critical. Furthermore, the critical apparatus in the footnotes is nowhere made explicit (for example, the distinction between the footnotes merely translated from the Arabic edition of the text and those added by the translators of the present volume; the reference to problematic translation is not coherent through the text). Finally, the text should have been reviewed more carefully as it still contains many misspelled words, and the transliteration is not uniform or always correct.

A second shortcoming is the lack of a proper introduction to the selection of the work translated. While the editors focused their introduction on the author, his work, and the *inshā'* genre to which it belongs, they, on the one hand, neglected to consult some very relevant—and updated—literature on these topics (for example, they still refer to al-Khalidi’s *Al-maqṣid al-rafi‘ al-munsha’ al-hādī li-dīwān al-inshā'*, which has been identified since 2009 as being *Al-thaghr al-bāsim fī ḥināt al-kātib wa-al-kātim*, authored by al-Sāḥmāwī). But even more importantly, on the other hand, the editors entirely neglected to address the importance of the work within the encyclopedic trend of the time (compared to other contemporary chancery manuals, or to an author such as al-‘Umārī), and to discuss the particularity of the selection they translated on Egypt (as part of the *masālik wa-al-mamālik* trends). This particular selection of the work has been already extensively used by scholars for many different studies, and therefore could have been better contextualized (many of those—classical—studies are in fact ignored



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throughout the text, such as Ayalon's studies on the Mamluk army, and William Popper's *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans*.

Nonetheless, because of the importance of the contents of al-Qalqashandī's work, with the explanatory footnotes and glossary, this volume is indisputably a nice addition to the scholar's library, as well as to a broader (non-specialist) audience.



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