

Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition: A Compendium of Knowledge from the Classical Islamic World* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2016). Pp. 318.

Reviewed by Robert Irwin, London

Al-Nuwayrī (667–732/1279–1332) was born in Upper Egypt and studied in Cairo under some distinguished teachers before pursuing a career in financial administration in Egypt and Syria. Late in life he turned to writing and produced the *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*. The *Nihāyat* ranks with al-ʿUmārī’s *Masālik al-abṣār* and al-Qalqashandī’s *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā* as one of the great encyclopedias of the Mamluk era. It is divided into five books: (1) The heavens and the earth, (2) The human and what relates to him, (3) Animals, birds, and fish, (4) Plants, perfumes, and various concoctions, (5) History. The published Arabic edition of the *Nihāyat* (1923–97) runs to over 9,000 pages in thirty-three volumes.

In his introduction to the selection under review, the translator and editor, Elias Muhanna, captures the flavor of the book perfectly: “The world that appears in *The Ultimate Ambition*’s pages is not a plain reflection of al-Nuwayrī’s quotidian reality but rather a medieval imaginary of warped dimensions, a dreamworld inhabited by real and fantastical creatures, living and long-dead monarchs, the sights and sounds of fourteenth-century Cairo alongside scenes from once glorious Baghdad during its golden age.”

Muhanna has chosen to draw most of his material from the first four books and there is plenty to amuse the reader in this selection. In the first book al-Nuwayrī presents a vision of the cosmos that is based on contradictory and often crackpot speculations. The cosmology on offer is an uncritical kind of lucky dip which draws on pre-Islamic poets, Muslim theologians, and Greek philosophers: “It is said that the earth lies upon the water, and the water upon a rock, the rock upon a hump of a bull, the bull upon a sand dune on the back of a fish, the fish on the water, the water on the wind, the wind on a veil of darkness, and the darkness upon moist earth. Here ends the knowledge of created beings.” This sort of cosmology will remind some readers of Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels. Angels are behind the weather, thunderbolts, the movements of the stars, and much else. Their activities are a substitute for causation as it is normally understood. In this part of the *Nihāyat* al-Nuwayrī was writing to entertain rather than to instruct.

His topographical survey naturally gives precedence to Egypt. Among its many excellences (*faḍāʾil*) is that Socrates and Alexander came from Egypt. Yet perhaps Tibet has more to offer: “Tibet, which is in the land of the Turks, has a unique quality: whoever lives in it is overcome with inexplicable happiness and cannot stop smiling and laughing.” In al-Nuwayrī’s display of barmy erudition



©2017 by Robert Irwin.

DOI: [10.6082/M100006H](https://doi.org/10.6082/M100006H). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M100006H>)

DOI of Vol. XX: [10.6082/M1J10184](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1J10184). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/P36S-EH02> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

mirabilia take precedence over common sense and observation. This is evident in his survey of flora and fauna, which is a rich source of misinformation. The cowardly lion is frightened of many things “including the sight of a black rope, a white rooster, a cat, and a mouse.” (The cowardly lion is something of a trope in world culture, its most famous manifestation being the one in *The Wizard of Oz*.) The hyena, like the rabbit, changes its sex. When it is female it likes to dig up graves and have sex with human corpses. In his introduction to the fourth book, on plants, he explicitly disclaims any scientific purpose: “My intention in presenting it has been to relate literary descriptions by poets and literary epistles by eloquent litterateurs, because that is what the attendant of literary gatherings is in need of and depends upon.”

Literary culture of this sort features largely in the second book. Here what is striking is the pastness of the *adab* that al-Nuwayrī celebrates. The quotations and anecdotes almost all hark back to Umayyad Damascus and Abbasid Baghdad and Samarra. He has almost nothing to say about the high culture of his own time. Instead what seems to be going on is a literary version of rescue archaeology in which the aim was to revive the wit and wisdom of old Baghdad in the Mamluk Sultanate. It is difficult to assess how successful this mission was. Did al-Nuwayrī actually attend literary causeries in Cairo, Damascus, and Tripoli in which the aim was to rekindle the wit, style, and erudition of the Abbasid cultural elite? He is reticent on the matter.

But the fifth book is twice as long as the first four books put together and al-Nuwayrī’s introduction to this book is a panegyric to history: “The study of history is required for the king and the minister, the general and the prince, the scribe and the counsellor, the rich man and the poor man, the desert dweller and the city dweller, the sedentary and nomadic. The king gains experience by contemplating former states and peoples...” History was a serious subject and the fancifulness that was such a feature of his cosmology, zoology, and botany is largely absent in the chronicle section of the *Nihāyat*. It is the tail which wags the encyclopedic dog. Al-Nuwayrī was unusual among Mamluk chroniclers in that he did not adopt a strictly annalistic form and he preferred to structure his narrative around dynasties and to present events as they developed over more than a single year. Only as he comes to record events in his own lifetime does it begin to deteriorate into a dry annals. The trouble is that the chronicle part of his encyclopedia will strike most readers as rather dull—apart from, that is, the dedicated Mamlukists who will be reading this review and those Mamlukists may be frustrated by the few selections from book five.

The Ultimate Ambition has an extremely useful appendix which gives a detailed breakdown of the entire contents of the Arabic *Nihāyat* and this is followed by a listing of the volume and page references to what has been translated in this en-



tertaining paperback. Al-Nuwayrī wrote fluently and clearly and this is reflected in Muhanna's prose.



©2017 by Robert Irwin.

DOI: [10.6082/M100006H](https://doi.org/10.6082/M100006H). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M100006H>)

DOI of Vol. XX: [10.6082/M1J10184](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1J10184). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/P36S-EH02> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.