

The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition

Elias Muhanna

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Elias Muhanna's *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition* is an erudite, scrupulously researched, and eminently readable book that marks a significant contribution to studies in Arabic literature, Mamluk history, and the production and circulation of knowledge in the medieval Islamicate world. Muhanna successfully analyzes—over the course of 232 pages with almost a dozen images and as many tables—the monumental, 31-volume encyclopedic compendium that consists of over two million words, titled *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab* (*The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition*), composed by Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī, an Egyptian bureaucrat and scholar, during the early fourteenth century.

Muhanna's goals are to consider why al-Nuwayrī composed his ambitious work; to analyze the disciplines al-Nuwayrī's work encompassed and the models, sources, and methods that guided its composition; and to trace its reception among al-Nuwayrī's contemporaries as well as its later reception in Europe and the Islamicate world. Centering these questions on *The Ultimate Ambition*, Muhanna analyzes Arabic encyclopedism, a phenomenon that reached its zenith in Egypt and Syria during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.

Muhanna challenges the argument that the rise in encyclopedism reflected anxiety about the Mongol invasions and fears about the obliteration of civilization's knowledge and heritage. He instead argues that encyclopedists such as al-Nuwayrī were motivated by various factors, "chief among them the feeling of an overcrowding of authoritative knowledge in Cairo and Damascus, the great school cities of the empire" (3) which, coupled with the expansion of higher education and the migration patterns of scholars in West and Central Asia, meant that there were "new texts available for study and prompting the formation of new genres and knowledge practices" (3). The story of al-Nuwayrī is, thus, a story about the production, reception, and transmission of knowledge. Muhanna's primary raconteurs are scholars of Mamluk history and historiography, Islamicate literature, and studies in the transmission of knowledge, including T. Bauer, J. Berkey, A. Blair, M. Chamberlain, L. Guo, K. Hirschler, H. Kilpatrick, D. Little, L. Northrup, C. Petry, J. Schmidt, M. van Berkel, and G. van Gelder.

The World in a Book is both sweeping and specific, and it considers al-Nuwayrī's compendium directly—not merely as a source to reconstruct Mamluk history—and assesses why encyclopedism surged during the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. Amongst the genres of medieval Arabic Islamicate literature to which scholars have directed their attention during the past several decades—such as *adab*, poetry, mirrors for princes, histories, chronicles, hadith collections, and pilgrimage manuals—relatively few have studied Arabic encyclopedism.

Chapter 1, "Encyclopedism in the Mamluk Empire," explores why al-Nuwayrī compiled his work. Muhanna offers a useful distinction between "encyclopedism and encyclopedia" (pp. 11-13) and grounds his approach in encyclopedism, which is the idea that there is a "spectrum... upon which we might situate a variety of works belonging to different premodern genres and possessing different principles of order, structure, focus, agenda, audience, and modes of reading" (12). The merit of this approach is that it casts a wider, less restrictive net, since "reading these texts as tokens of a

similar knowledge practice rather than members of a common genre permits us to see the continuities between strategies of knowledge-ordering that cut across different bibliographical categories” (12). Given the fluctuating and complex notions of genre—the genre of medieval Arabic and Persian *tārīkh*, for example, encompasses a heterogeneous variety of texts, from local histories, chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and often some combination of all of the above—encyclopedism is a compelling conceptual approach to this body of literatures. Muhanna argues that while al-Nuwayrī himself situated his work within the tradition of *adab*, his inspirations and sources belonged to other genres, which lead to the rise of this hybrid genre of encyclopedism. Al-Nuwayrī was an esteemed copyist who directly addressed the scribal arts in *The Ultimate Ambition*, which “both described the expectations of the scribe and provided the content of his education: it styled itself as an encyclopedic guide for an encyclopedic education” (21).

Chapter 2, “Structures of Knowledge,” offers a 30,000ft view of al-Nuwayrī’s work, including its arrangement, structure, and overall composition, and compares it to other Mamluk encyclopedic texts and to earlier *adab* works. This chapter is particularly useful to scholars who want an introduction into *The Ultimate Ambition* and Arabic encyclopedism, which Muhanna argues was itself a *mélange* of other extant genres: the work is “not recognizably a literary anthology, a cosmographical compendium, a chronicle, a pharmacopia, or a scribal manual, but an amalgam of all of these genres” (49).

Chapter 3, “Sources of Knowledge,” contextualizes al-Nuwayrī’s compendium by situating it within the scholarly milieu of centers of learning within the Mamluk Empire, particularly Cairo and Damascus, during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. By situating al-Nuwayrī within the Nāsiriyya madrasa in Cairo and the intellectual, familial, and professional connections he cultivated and from which he benefitted, the author brings a granular depth to al-Nuwayrī and his work. This chapter is of particular interest to scholars of the production and circulation of knowledge.

In Chapter 4, “Encyclopedism and Empire,” Muhanna turns to the imperial and administrative scaffolding of the Mamluk Empire. The author argues that since compilers like al-Nuwayrī were part of the Mamluk bureaucracy, they “were particularly attuned to the processes of centralization and consolidation that transformed the politics of their time (4),” and wrote for an audience that reflected the nexus between literary encyclopedism and the imperial Mamluk state. Muhanna considers administrative knowledge and scholarly knowledge as separate but related spheres, arguing that

“gathering vast quantities of information, collating sources, and synthesizing diverse types of knowledge represented the core activities of both the administrator and the large-scale compiler... a career in bureaucracy helped develop the skills of archiving and itemization that any compiler would have possessed... What set the two domains apart, however, was a difference in the types of knowledge that were valued. The world of administration was one of contemporary, mutable information” (104).

Muhanna’s more important argument in this chapter, however, is his claim about the unique position of Mamluk bureaucrats to be curators of knowledge and practices in the Mamluk Empire. He argues, “The common thread uniting the diverse professionals that comprised the administration... was the importance attached to gathering data in the service of the state... By virtue of their access to demographic, financial, historical, and legal materials about the empire’s subjects, institutions, and communities, the bureaucratic class was in a unique position to shape the politics of their day in a manner that no other professional group could achieve” (104). As a bureaucrat-turned-scholar and an expert copyist, al-Nuwayrī embodied the related spheres of knowledge gathering, organization, and transmission in Mamluk Cairo.

Chapter 5, “Working Methods,” delves into the manuscript tradition and reconstructs the composition history of al-Nuwayrī’s work. Muhanna addresses the strategies of collation, edition, and the management of sources involved in the production of large compilations during the Mamluk period.

The Chapter 6, “The Reception of the *Ultimate Ambition*,” addresses the literary afterlife of al-Nuwayrī’s work by discussing its reception in the Islamicate world and in Europe, with particular attention to the Dutch reception. By considering reception history of al-Nuwayrī’s work, Muhanna’s brief but engaging final chapter considers the impact of Mamluk encyclopedism in shaping the way Islamicate thought was perceived both within Europe and the Islamicate world.

Muhanna’s appendices will prove valuable to scholars. “Appendix A: The Contents of the *Ultimate Ambition*” is extremely useful for those who do not share Muhanna’s patience to delve into the 31-volume work itself. In Appendix B, Muhanna compares the tables of contents of the two editions of *The Ultimate Ambition*: that of the standard Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya edition, which was begun in 1923 but only completed in 1997, which is difficult to access; and the more recent Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya edition, published in Beirut in 2004, which is more widely available. The 11 figures that

Muhanna intersperses throughout his book are attractive additions to his work, but it is the 13 tables that showcase Muhanna's service to organize, divide, and categorize the sources, focusing primarily on al-Nuwayrī's *Ultimate Ambition* itself. Some of these tables include: identifying *The Ultimate Ambition*'s chapter word counts for the Cairo and Beirut editions; outlining the arrangement of seven classical *adab* encyclopedias; and identifying and listing the sources of *The Ultimate Ambition* in its books 1, 3, and 4. These are valuable sources that the author has produced to help scholars and students make better sense and use of al-Nuwayrī's massive tome.

The World in a Book is a valuable contribution to studies in Arabic literature, Mamluk history, and the production and circulation of knowledge in the medieval Islamic world. Specialists will benefit most from this work, but its excellent readability makes it a valuable volume for graduate and undergraduate students as well as those interested in the production of knowledge in the Middle East more broadly.

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