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Mediating Antiquity in Mehmed ʿAli's Egypt: Rationalism and Its Limits in Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi's Ancient History Textbook

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The major project of Arab Nahda studies since the mid-2000s has been to develop an understanding of the Nahda that goes beyond the movement's own self-understanding; that is, beyond its rhetoric of "awakening" (the literal sense of *nahḍa*), national renewal, and rupture with the recent past. Scholars have approached this task in a variety of ways, notably by retracing continuities between 19th-century Arabic cultural production and that of earlier centuries; by analyzing the economic underpinnings of the culture of the Nahda and the salience of local class interests in its formation; by studying the relevance of transnational circulations of ideas; by investigating popular culture; and through detailed studies of individual figures and of subjective experience in the period.[1] A central challenge in this reconceptualizing of the Nahda has been that of accurately identifying and explaining the shifts within the era; that is, in a way that neither simply reproduces the movement's conception of itself, nor fails to appreciate properly the social transformations of which the Nahda was a part. This challenge has been tackled with impressive results in certain domains of cultural production, notably the intersection between print culture and Islamic thought.[2]

One domain of cultural production in which more work of this sort remains to be done is that of historical thought. Producing a nuanced account of the key shifts in this area is especially urgent, and also especially challenging, because of the foundational importance of historical thought to the discourse of the Nahda.[3] Recent work by Peter Hill, Marwa Elshakry, and others has begun to remedy this deficiency, highlighting points of contrast between certain major Arabic historical texts of the period and the European sources on which they drew, and hence demonstrating the distinctiveness of Arabic historical writing in its

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[1] The following studies encompass the trends mentioned here, though not in the same order: Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, eds., *Arabic Thought beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Elizabeth M. Holt, *Fictitious Capital: Silk, Cotton, and the Rise of the Arabic Novel* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Samah Selim, *Popular Fiction, Translation, and the Nahda in Egypt* (New Brunswick, NJ: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Peter Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation in the Arab Nahda* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Marilyn Booth, *The Career and Communities of Zaynab Fawwaz: Feminist Thinking in Fin-de-Siècle Egypt* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021); Marilyn Booth and Claire Savina, eds., *Ottoman Translation: Circulating Texts from Bombay to Paris* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023). Many others could be named.

[2] Kathryn Schwartz, "Meaningful Mediums: A Material and Intellectual History of Manuscript and Print Production in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Cairo" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015); Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[3] Selim, *Popular Fiction*, 2.

concerns and concepts at different points in the 19th century.[4] The present article seeks to build on this work with a study of an ancient history textbook from the early phase of the Nahda in Egypt, namely, *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ wa-Hidayat al-Hukamaʾ* (The Beginning of the Ancients and the Guidance of the Sages, 1838).

Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ was the first work of history in Arabic to be printed at the Bulaq press—making it probably the first work of history in Arabic printed anywhere in the Middle East. It was a collaborative effort, undertaken by Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi (1801–73) with the assistance of three students at the School of Languages in Cairo, of which he was the principal. The text was read widely in the 19th century both in Egypt and beyond.[5] It has received some scholarly attention.[6] However, its contents—which comprise an unusual combination of elements—have been described only vaguely or mischaracterized, and no detailed study of the text has been undertaken.

The neglect of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* in scholarship until recently is probably due above all to its absence from the collected works of al-Tahtawi, in which only the preface appears. This meant that the text was relatively difficult to access prior to the digitization of the 19th-century editions.[7] The omission from the collected works may itself be ascribed to the fact that *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* is mostly a work of translation and furthermore one in which al-Tahtawi had several collaborators. Indeed, this fact may be an independent reason for the limited scholarly attention that it has received.

But in its capacity as a work of translation, *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* both substantially repurposed and, in significant ways, modified its main source. By examining these processes in detail, this article discovers a tension at the heart of the text. Overtly, *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* seeks to foster an attitude of rationalism and anti-irrationality in its readers. In this, it reflects the high-Enlightenment ethos of its French source, which it reorients in service of the particular demands of Mehmed ʿAli Pasha's (r. 1805–48) state-building agenda. Yet, in important respects, *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* also mitigates the ultra-rationalistic ethos of the French text. It does this by incorporating excerpts of premodern Arabic poetry into the translation. Against the grain of the text's overt ethical program, these insertions cultivate an appreciation of non-rational affective bonds as fundamental to human life, and an awareness of the absolute limits of human powers of control and human autonomy. They achieve this by channeling into the text certain ethical attitudes with deep roots in the Arabic literary tradition: attitudes associated with the classical notion of the *waṭan* as "homeland," as distinct from the modern concept of the *waṭan* as "nation"; and with a conception of traces of ancient pasts not primarily as objects of rational knowledge, but rather as symbols

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[4] Peter Hill, "Ottoman Despotism and Islamic Constitutionalism in Mehmed Ali's Egypt," *Past and Present* 237, no. 1 (2017): 135–66; Marwa Elshakry, "The Invention of the Muslim Golden Age: Universal History, the Arabs, Science, and Islam," in *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History*, ed. Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 80–102. See also Nicole Khayat, "Historiography and Translation during the Arabic Nahda: European History in Arabic" (PhD diss., University of Haifa, 2016); Renaud Soler, "Une Autre Histoire de la Civilisation: Comment Rifāʿa al-Ṭahṭāwī Repensa l'Histoire de l'Égypte dans les Années 1860," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 74, no. 2 (2019): 265–96; and the special edition of *Philological Encounters* 6, nos. 3–4 (2021).

[5] It is referenced or quoted, for example, in Butrus al-Bustani, *Khutba fi Adab al-ʿArab* (Beirut: n.p., 1859), 28; in Yusuf Shalfun's 1869 lecture at the Syrian Scientific Society in Beirut, printed in Yusuf Q. Khuri, *Aʿmal al-Jamʿiyya al-ʿIlmiyya al-Suriyya, 1868–1869* (Beirut: Dar al-Hamraʾ, 1990), 197–202; in the Moroccan historian Ahmad al-Nasiri's *Kitab al-Istiqsa li-Akhbar Duwal al-Maghrib al-Aqsa* (Casablanca: Manshurat Wizarat al-Thaqafa wa-l-Ittisal, 2001 [1894]), 26, noted by Youssef Choueiri, *Modern Arab Historiography: Historical Discourse and the Nation-State* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 35 n5; in al-Sayyid ʿAzmi, *Kitab al-Masalik al-Ibtidaʾiyya fi Tarikh al-Umam al-Mashriqiyya* (Cairo: al-Matbaʿa al-Amiriyya, 1893), 6–15; and see my concluding section below.

[6] Choueiri, *Modern Arab Historiography*, 20–21; Elshakry, "Muslim Golden Age," 85; Wael Abu ʿUksa, "The Premodern History of 'Civilisation' in Arabic: Rifāʿa al-Ṭahṭāwī and his Medieval Sources," *Die Welt des Islams* 62 (2022): 412–16.

[7] Donald Reid noted that he was unable to access a copy in *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 329 n39.

of the limits of human understanding and hence of the power of God. The expression of these attitudes within the text complicates its general emphasis on the authority of reason. In this complexity, as the article finally reveals, *Bidayat al-Qudama* contrasts with the more rigorously rationalistic mode of Arabic historical writing that became dominant later in the 19th century in connection with the rise of the modern concept of the nation.

Ancient History as an Instrument of Moral Education

The bulk of *Bidayat al-Qudama* consists of a complete translation of a single work that is not mentioned in the Arabic text, but which I have identified as an 18th-century French school-book, the *Abrégé de l'histoire ancienne* (1777), by the clergyman and prolific historian Claude-François-Xavier Millot.[8] This is an abridgment of part of the same author's multivolume universal history, supplemented with a glossary of ancient place names and a dictionary of Greek mythology.[9] The overwhelming majority of Millot's *Abrégé* concerns ancient Greece: sections on the ancient Egyptians, the Phoenicians, Assyrians and Babylonians, Medes and Persians, and ancient India make up less than one-eighth of the whole; the rest is devoted to Greece. But the translation of this French text is interwoven in *Bidayat al-Qudama* with relatively extensive chapters on the lives of the prophets and the pre-Islamic Arabs taken verbatim from Abu al-Fida's (1273–1331) *al-Mukhtasar fi Tarikh al-Bashar* (Abridged History of Humanity). The Arabic text also includes numerous excerpts of Arabic poetry in the section on ancient Egypt, and two passages of original writing: an elaborate preface in rhyming prose and a brief essay identifying Dhu al-Qarnayn with Hercules. Most of the translation work was undertaken by al-Tahtawi's students, but the design of the whole text, the original passages, and the selections of Arabic poetry are all clearly due to al-Tahtawi himself.

The text was produced within the framework of a translation program that was set up by Mehmed ʿAli as part of his state-building agenda, following his elimination in 1811 of the Mamluks, his main rivals to power.[10] The overarching aim of the agenda was to develop the strength and capacities of the new regime, and hence also to consolidate the pasha's own position as quasi-independent ruler of Egypt within the Ottoman Empire. Its main elements were expansion of the army by conscription; centralization of control over commerce and trade; assumption of state ownership of land; radical reform of agriculture; and development of manufacturing in textiles, munitions, and agricultural products.[11] To meet the needs of this agenda, Mehmed ʿAli initiated the translation of a wide array of texts, typically for use in new educational institutions, which were established in tandem with the translation program. In total, between 1819 and 1853—when translation activity stalled under ʿAbbas I (r. 1848–54)—around 200 works were translated. The largest category was treatises on warfare—which were mostly rendered from French into Turkish, the language of the ruling elite. Medicine and veterinary medicine were the next largest; these were typically French–Arabic translations. The remainder, also largely French–Arabic, encompassed a wide range of technical disciplines.[12] But the single largest category of texts after veterinary

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[8] On the issue of translation and originality in Arabic literature in this period, see Nicole Khayat, "What's in a Name? Perceptions of Authorship and Copyright during the Arabic *Nahda*," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 41, no. 4 (2019): 423–40.

[9] The last of these was originally a separate work, Joseph de Jouvancy's *Appendix de diis et heroibus poeticis* (1704), translated from Latin for the purpose. Millot's universal history was titled *Elémens d'histoire générale* (Paris: Chez Prault, 1772–73).

[10] Jamal al-Din al-Shayyal, *Tarikh al-Tarjama wa-l-Haraka al-Thaqafiyya fi ʿAsr Muhammad ʿAli* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-ʿArabi, 1951), 5–10.

[11] Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), 64–76; Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 76–111.

[12] Al-Shayyal, *Tarikh al-Tarjama*, appendix, 38.

medicine was history, comprising two Arabic–Turkish translations in 1819 and 1833; one Italian–Turkish and three French–Turkish translations between 1829 and 1834; and eight French–Arabic translations between 1838 and 1850, including *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*.[13]

The production of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* was closely related to developments in education in late 1830s Egypt, specifically the broadening of the state's educational mission. The first new educational institutions to be founded under Mehmed ʿAli—in the 1820s—were military academies for Turkish-speaking officers. These were followed in the 1830s by schools of agriculture, medicine, engineering, accounting, chemistry, languages, and other fields, largely for Arabic-speaking Egyptian students, as well as primary schools and a "preparatory school" (*madrasa tajhīziyya*) to feed the specialist institutions.[14] Through the mid-1830s, all of these schools were under the authority of the War Ministry (Diwan al-Jihadiyya), an indication of the initial impetus behind the formation of education policy. This changed with a major set of education reforms in 1836–37, which established a Ministry of Education, and provided for the founding of a new "preparatory school" and fifty primary schools across Egypt.[15] These reforms reflected the ever-increasing importance of Egyptians within the state over the course of the 1820s and even more so in the 1830s.[16] They also marked the broadening of the state's educational mission. While meeting the practical needs of the state clearly remained the central aim of education policy, documents relating to the reforms indicate the development of a more expansive ambition for the school system. The first item, for example, of the 1837 statute that provided for the foundation of the new primary schools specified their purpose not merely as "providing and preparing students for the preparatory school" but also more broadly as "spreading the principles of the sciences among the communities" (*nashr mabādiʾ al-ʿulūm li-l-ahālī*).[17] In similarly expansive language, in a letter to one of his officials in 1839, Mehmed ʿAli himself described the aim of the education reforms as the "instruction and edification of the sons of the people" (*taʿlīm wa-tathqīf abnāʾ al-ʿibād*).[18]

That the expansion of the state's educational mission was the immediate occasion for the production of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* is apparent not just from its publication date of 1838 but also from al-Tahtawi's preface. This concludes with a tribute to the inaugural education minister, Mustafa Mukhtar Bey (1802–39), and the claim that the work is "fit for use in the schools."[19] Mukhtar Bey had presided over the reforms committee—of which al-Tahtawi himself had been a member.[20] But while it is apparent that *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* was intended for use in the reformed school system, a more difficult question is what purpose it was expected to serve in this context. Whereas the other categories of translation literature produced in Egypt in this period can be understood as serving Mehmed ʿAli's state-building agenda directly, the anticipated function of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, as a work of history, is less obvious. The fact that the earliest translations of history works had been into Turkish would indicate an operative notion of history within the government at that point—prior to the education reforms—as a form of elite knowledge, of special value to the highest ranks of the ruling class. The production of history works in Arabic, beginning with *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, suggests a notion of history as being of broader value.

Al-Tahtawi's preface confirms this, in the course of an elaborate account of the value of history, but with a certain important qualification. Occupying the first two pages of the

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[13] Ibid., 6–23.

[14] Ahmad ʿIzzat ʿAbd al-Karim, *Tarikh al-Taʿlim fi ʿAsr Muhammad ʿAli* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyya, 1938), 251–385.

[15] Ibid., 173.

[16] Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979), 115.

[17] ʿAbd al-Karim, *Tarikh al-Taʿlim*, 172. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

[18] Ibid., 35.

[19] Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi, ʿAbd Allah Abu al-Suʿud, Mustafa al-Zarabi, and Muhammad ʿAbd al-Raziq, *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ wa-Hidayat al-Hukamaʾ* (Bulaq [Cairo]: Dar al-Tibaʿa al-ʿAmira, 1838), 7.

[20] J. Heyworth-Dunne, *An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt* (London: Luzac and Co., 1939), 192.

six-page preface, this general affirmation of history provides a good idea as to how, at least from al-Tahtawi's own perspective, *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* fitted in with the state-building agenda. The culminating sentence explicitly avows the utility of history both to the elite and to society at large: "so, its benefit is general, for the elite and the general public" (*fa-manfaʿatuhu ʿāmma li-l-khāṣṣa wa-l-ʿāmma*). There is a subtle ambiguity to this claim. It could be that the benefit of history to the general public is direct; that is, the result of direct engagement with history and the attainment of historical knowledge on the part of the general public. Alternatively, it could be that history is beneficial to the general public only as a secondary effect, by way of its immediately beneficial influence on the elite. Altogether, the section articulates a conception of history that lies somewhere between these alternatives, but closer to the latter. Al-Tahtawi frames history as a form of knowledge to be wielded by the elite; but since the work was being produced in Arabic for use in the schools, it follows that this was to be an expanded elite, encompassing new sections of society. The importance of this point is that a conception of history along these lines informs the work as a whole.

The emphasis in al-Tahtawi's affirmation of history is certainly on its immediate usefulness to elite actors. Following the line quoted above, al-Tahtawi continues: "it is the advisor of every commander, the commander of every advisor; the counsel of every minister, the aid of every counsel; if asked, it answers and discloses the most amazing things; virtuous spirits find pleasure in it, perfect minds thirst for it, among sages and notables, kings and sultans."[21] Moreover, the passage that leads up to and supports the above claim has made history's direct value to the elite quite clear: it is a means of enhancing the wisdom of those in power by expanding their experiential knowledge of human affairs through accounts of past events. Thus, after declaring that good governance requires knowledge of how society works, al-Tahtawi contends that "none perceives this" except one who

> has gained experience of reports, and probed the depths of biographies and histories, until he is versed in the events of east and west and has imbibed from their breadth all manner of savors and drafts, and has turned away from the path of confusion towards the people of memory [*ahl al-dhikr*], and raced to the ways of history with conviction and thought.[22]

The central idea here is that quasi-practical experience can be gained through immersion in accounts of past events. The opening two verbs in particular—"gained experience of" (*ikhtabara*) and "probed" (*sabara*)—imply the attainment of empirical knowledge. The implicit notion of history as a means of developing practical wisdom is akin to the early modern European idea of "history as the school of life," or *historia magistra vitae*, a phrase derived from Cicero (first century B.C.E.). But this notion has deep roots in Arabo-Islamic tradition, certainly independent of the Roman orator, traceable at least to the Abbasid era.[23]

Of course, such a notion of history need not imply exclusive application to the instruction of the elite, and indeed some authors, such as al-Masʿudi (10th century), explicitly highlighted the general validity of history as a means of refining ethics.[24] A similar view was expressed in the early 19th century by ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753–1825).[25] However, emphasis on the special relevance of historical education to those in power was common in Arabo-Islamic tradition, and al-Tahtawi drew on this convention, particularly emphasizing the importance of history in the formation of a competent elite.[26] It would be simplistic to

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[21] al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 3.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 48–49.

[24] The relevant passage appears in Shams al-Din al-Sakhawi, *al-Iʿlan bi-l-Tawbikh li-Man Dhamma Ahl al-Tawrikh*, ed. Salim al-Zufayri (Riyadh: Dar al-Sumayʿi, 2017), 118–19.

[25] As noted by Gran, *Islamic Roots*, 72, with reference to ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, *ʿAjaʾib al-Athar wa-Gharaʾib al-Akhbar*, ed. Shmuel Moreh, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: al-Jamiʿa al-ʿIbriyya, 2013), 1–4.

[26] Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, 48–49.

suppose that a concern with elite formation must therefore have narrowly determined the production of the work, but it would equally be wrong to dismiss this emphasis as mere convention. Al-Tahtawi positions the reader as a potential member of the elite, suggesting that while the work was surely not exclusively intended to mold future state officials, it was at least concerned with fostering a sympathetic perspective on the elite.

   This interpretation is consistent with the immediately preceding part of the preface. Leading up to the above passage, al-Tahtawi sets out a naturalistic account of human society along the lines of Ibn Khaldun's (d. 1406) Aristotelian explanation of human social organization in the *Muqaddima*.[27] This provides the theoretical foundation for the educational function of history, but it also amounts to an argument as to the necessity of elite rule for the sake of human welfare. Following the preliminary praise of God and the Prophet, al-Tahtawi opens his discussion of history by asserting as known facts (*min al-maʿlūm*) that

> the human being is social by its nature [*bi-ṭabʿihi*], inclined to sociability [*al-taʾannus*] and civilization [*al-ʿumrān*] in root and branch; in need of politics and leadership; a good society and prudence; and the means of pursuing perfection; and knowledge of the causes behind its preservation, or its change and transformation; and of the basis of the ruler's condition in himself and vis-à-vis his subjects; and of the cultivation of the cities of his domain.[28]

This provides the theoretical foundation for the educational function of history in the sense that it establishes the human being as a stable category, with a set of essential inclinations and needs that remain constant across time and space. The avowed stability of the category of the human ("by its nature") implies that accounts of human affairs from any time and place may serve to expand a given individual's effective experiential knowledge of human affairs in their own time and place. The passage thus prepares the ground for al-Tahtawi's insistence on the importance of a historical education for competence in administration and governance; and indeed al-Tahtawi proceeds directly from these theoretical points to affirming the practical utility of historical knowledge for those in power.

   In articulating this affirmation, al-Tahtawi indicates that the ultimate aim of administration and governance, and hence the ultimate benefit of history, is the common good or public welfare. Thus, al-Tahtawi writes: "Since the administration of welfare [*tanẓīm al-maṣāliḥ*] and the management of activities in a proper, successful way require this"—where "this" refers to the ingredients of social order that humans have been said to be "in need of" in the above passage. The implicit reference here to a concept of public welfare (*maṣāliḥ*) is one way in which al-Tahtawi supports his ensuing claim that the benefit of history is "general," though only as a secondary effect of its positive influence on the elite. But the above passage, in which al-Tahtawi grounds the utility of history in a universal theory of social order, suggests a direct way in which history may be of wider educational value: not as a means of developing practical expertise, as for the ruling elite; but rather as a source of theoretical understanding about society, and hence as a basis for accepting social hierarchy as a natural phenomenon.

The Ethical Program of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*

As I have noted, al-Tahtawi's framing of history as a form of quasi-experiential knowledge draws on Arabo-Islamic tradition. But the element of elitism had a special significance in

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[27] On the (possibly indirect) influence of Ibn Khaldun on al-Tahtawi, especially his later works, see Atoor Lawandow, "Situating Rifāʿah al-Ṭahṭāwī within an Islamicate Context," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 51, nos. 1–2 (2020): 130–46.

[28] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 3. Cf. Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddima*, ed. ʿAbd Allah Muhammad al-Darwish, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 2004), 137–39.

the context of Mehmed ʿAli's state-building project, and it informs the thematic content of the body of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*. One of the major recurring themes of the work is the tendency of humans at large to fall prey to irrationality; or, to use the text's own idiom, to *awhām* (superstitions, false beliefs). The flip side of this theme—which, with a crucial exception, is not made explicit, but rather left to be inferred—is the need for corrective action by an elite that is committed to reason and rationality. This thematic constellation coheres in obvious ways with the impetus of Mehmed ʿAli's state-building project, in that it was top-down and often coercive, and had an immensely disruptive impact on Egyptian society, particularly on the peasantry. The persistence of the theme of *awhām* suggests that among the aims of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* was to cultivate a type of moral subject who could countenance the kind of intense upheaval that the state-building initiatives inflicted on Egyptian society, even in the face of resistance.[29] An acceptance of such upheaval as a moral necessity was, in concrete terms, the kind of practical attitude that the work was seeking to impart to its readers, by way of the exemplary authority of the past.

The theme first emerges in the preface, as part of a tribute to Mehmed ʿAli that immediately follows the general affirmation of history. It is here that the necessity of corrective action is made explicit. Al-Tahtawi begins the tribute by suggesting that the production of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* was due to Mehmed ʿAli's personal appreciation of the value of history. Before expanding on this point, al-Tahtawi enumerates Mehmed ʿAli's merits, describing him finally as "the destroyer of the power of *awhām*" (*mubīd tamakkun al-awhām*). This sets up a panegyric poem, in which al-Tahtawi implies a link between Mehmed ʿAli's "reason" (ʿaql) and the vanquishing of *awhām* in Egypt:

وما السعد الا عقله وعقاله · يقول اناس طالع السعد حظه
اما تبصر العرفان يسمو هلاله · محا غيهب الاوهام قسرا بمصره
ببحر خضم قد روتنا سجاله · على الدهر نذر قد وفى فيه وعده

People say the rise of good fortune is his lot;
     and the good fortune is simply his ʿaql (reason) and his ʿiqāl (headband).
He has forcibly dispelled the darkness of delusions in his Egypt;
     don't you see the crescent of knowledge ascending?
Against Time, [he made] a vow; and in this he has kept his promise;
     his bounties have watered us with an abundant sea.

The first two lines here present Mehmed ʿAli as an agent of the powers of reason and knowledge against superstition. The third line blends this picture with a classic feature of Arabic panegyric, namely, the representation of the ruler as the custodian of life and provider of life-giving forces against the ravages of Time—where Time symbolizes the constant threat of chaos and disorder.[30]

The theme of *awhām* reappears frequently in the body of the work, mostly in relation to ancient religious practices and beliefs. There are instances of it in the chapters on the Greeks, the Indians, and the Tyrians, and with special emphasis in the chapter on the Egyptians.[31] The particular emphasis on the *awhām* of the ancient Egyptians can be judged from a line in the chapter on the Tyrians, where it is written that "despite the abundance of their knowledge and commercial activities, they had *awhām*, but these were fewer than the *awhām* of the Egyptians."[32] I will return to the emphasis on the superstitions of the ancient Egyptians.

[29] Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men*, 99–103, 124–25; Kenneth M. Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants: Land, Society, and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 121–46.
[30] Stefan Sperl, "Islamic Kingship and Arabic Panegyric Poetry in the Early 9th Century," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 8 (1977): 25–31.
[31] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 48, 55, 61, 63, 105, 156.
[32] Ibid., 55.

In order to form an accurate understanding of this theme in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, it is, of course, necessary to consider the matter in relation to the source text. The Arabic *awhām* has no single equivalent in Millot's French, which uses, for example, "folies superstitieuses" (superstitious follies), "les préjugés de la barbarie" (the prejudices of barbarism), and "préjugés superstitieux" (superstitious prejudices).[33] Even so, it is clear that al-Tahtawi and his collaborators were not introducing the theme of *awhām* into the translation as a departure from their source or even markedly intensifying it. On the contrary, the suscept-ibility of humans to "superstitious follies" was an integral component of the rationalistic ethos of Millot's work. The intensity of this aspect in the latter is reflected in the fact that his complete universal history was promoted for use in the French education system at the height of the revolutionary rationalism of the First Republic in the mid-1790s.[34]

Yet, given the emphatic way in which al-Tahtawi introduces the theme of *awhām* in the pref-ace, it is also clear that this theme in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* should not be understood as a by-product of the translation of an Enlightenment-era French text. Rather, the theme assumes distinctive significance in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* as part of a new symbolic framework. Indeed, in this respect, it would be a mistake to suppose that the theme has all the same nuances and resonances in the Arabic as in the French. In the latter case, for example, the discourse of ratio-nality versus superstition was imbued with the issue of clerical power, on the one hand, and with colonialism and the conquest of non-European peoples, on the other.[35] In the Arabic case, notwithstanding the tense relationship between Mehmed ʿAli and the religious authorities at al-Azhar, and indeed the regime's colonial-expansionist activities vis-à-vis Sudan, Arabia, and Syria-Palestine, the theme of *awhām* primarily keyed into the issue of relations between the state and the rest of Egyptian society, especially the peasantry.[36]

This distinctive valence of the theme is expressed in the text's treatment of the ancient Egyptians. Given al-Tahtawi's status as a pioneer of the idea of the Egyptian nation, it might be expected that *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* would emphasize the magnificence of Egypt's ancient past.[37] In fact, it does almost nothing of the sort and, on balance, actually presents a negative impression of the ancient Egyptians. This is apparent in the following passage, which closely follows the French in its critical assessment of the Egyptians:

> Many historians have lavished praise on this nation [*umma*]. The final word on them is that they had immense knowledge, along with peaceable qualities, and reverence for their parents, such that their ancestors' judgments remained in force over them, and they did not like criticizing established customs. But their ambitions were slack. They were masters of faint-heartedness and heresies, and they disdained everything that custom had not tested.[38]

The term *awhām* does not itself appear in the passage, but the criticisms of the Egyptians—for excessive adherence to custom and susceptibility to "heresies"—evoke broadly the same

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[33] Claude-François-Xavier Millot and Joseph de Jouvancy, *Abrégé de l'histoire ancienne*, 10th ed. (Paris: Chez Genets, 1813), 25, 28, 89 = al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 61, 63, 105.

[34] Matthias Meirlaen, "'Reaping the Harvest of the Experiment?': The Government's Attempt to Train Enlightened Citizens through History Education in Revolutionary France (1789–1802)," in *Free Access to the Past: Romanticism, Cultural Heritage and the Nation*, ed. Lotte Jensen, Joseph Leerssen, and Marita Mathijsen (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 247–79.

[35] On Millot's critical views of the church, despite being a clergyman himself, see Martin Starm, "Human, Not Secular Sciences: Ideology in the Central Schools," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 12, no. 1 (1985): 71–72.

[36] On relations between Mehmed ʿAli and the ʿulamaʾ, see Patrick Scharfe, "Muslim Scholars and the Public Sphere in Mehmed Ali Pasha's Egypt, 1801–1841" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2015). On the expansionist activi-ties of the regime, see Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 38–54.

[37] On al-Tahtawi as a founder of Egyptian nationalism, see Yasir Suleiman, "Egypt: From Egyptian to Pan-Arab Nationalism," in *Language and National Identity in Africa*, ed. Andrew Simpson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 31.

[38] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 51.

type of defect, namely, behaviors and beliefs not grounded in reason. In light of the portrayal of Mehmed ʿAli as "destroyer of *awhām*" in the preface, and the wider development of the theme of *awhām* within the body of the work, this framing of the ancient Egyptians takes on a specific significance, suggesting that Egypt may have a particularly urgent and acute need for an elite guided by reason to impose order on society from above.

The representation of the ancient Egyptians in this way cannot entirely be ascribed to the source text. Al-Tahtawi in fact adds a passage to the text that compounds the negative impression of the ancient Egyptians, and one that alludes to the necessity of the disciplining force of the elite. Moreover, it does this by explicitly entertaining the idea that pharaonic-era traits may be characteristic of Egyptians in general. Shortly after the above passage, at the conclusion of the translated portion of the Egypt section, the text continues without a break: "and someone said that the Egyptians have skill in trickery and deception" (*al-kayd wa-l-makar*).[39] The authority is not named, but it is the Mamluk-era Egyptian historian Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi (d. 1442).[40] Still drawing on al-Maqrizi, the text goes on to feature a poem by Abu Nuwas (d. 814) to illustrate the proverbial status of this purported characteristic of the Egyptians, as a vestige of "Pharaoh's falsehood." It begins, "People of Egypt, my counsel concerns you!" and concludes, "If Pharaoh's falsehood remains among you, well, Moses' staff is in the hand of a Khasib"—where "Khasib" is a reference to the finance director of Egypt in Abu Nuwas's time.[41] The "people of Egypt" are thus threatened with the corrective force of a powerful but—given the reference to Moses—implicitly righteous ruler. The object of correction in this case is "falsehood," in the sense of duplicity and deception. This is distinct from *awhām*, or "false beliefs," but both imply a departure from the truth that requires corrective action on the part of a righteous elite.

The salience of the theme of *awhām* and its precise significance are substantiated by its coordination with another persistent theme, namely, the importance of "taking account of consequences" (*al-naẓar fī al-ʿawāqib* or *ʿawāqib al-umūr*), with reference to elite decision-making. The phrase appears in earlier Arabo-Islamic thought as the essence of rational activity.[42] In *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* it features exclusively in the section on the Greeks—though not because the Greeks are supposed to have been masters of this practice. In all but two of the eight instances of the phrase, it denotes something that the relevant leaders failed to do, with disaster ensuing.[43] The fact that the importance of "taking account of consequences" is thus mostly affirmed by counterexamples does not, of course, diminish the instructional force of the theme. The text was not seeking to convey that elites are inherently beneficent or effective. Rather, the aim was to impress upon the reader the necessity and value of a particular kind of elite mentality, and the lesson that would-be leaders should aspire to this, namely, a calculating, future-oriented attitude; in other words, precisely the kind of elite rationality that the text establishes as the scourge of *awhām*.

There are two noteworthy points about the theme of "taking account of consequences" that confirm that it reflects the particular aspirations of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*. The first is that this theme is more clearly articulated as an ethical principle in the Arabic than any corresponding idea is in the French.[44] The second is that, in another work from the same period, al-Tahtawi establishes a connection between Mehmed ʿAli's whole project, on the one hand,

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Taqi al-Din al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-Khitat al-Maqriziyya* (Bulaq [Cairo]: Dar al-Tibaʿa al-Misriyya, 1853), 49.

[41] Paul Balog, *Umayyad, ʿAbbāsid, and Ṭūlūnid Glass Weights and Vessel Stamps* (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1976), 224–25.

[42] Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1201), for example, has a section titled "taking account of consequences is the business of the rational" (*al-naẓar fī al-ʿawāqib shaʾn al-ʿuqalāʾ*) in *Sayd al-Khatir*, ed. Hasan al-Samahi Suwaydan (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 2004), 438.

[43] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 88, 101, 120, 128, 132, 139, 140, 147.

[44] In five cases the Arabic phrase corresponds to *prudence* or, with negation, to *imprudence*, but in the other cases it translates three different phrases (Millot, *Abrégé*, 82, 120, 147). Thus, while the reader of Millot might well pick up on the importance of *prudence*, the reader of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* could not miss the insistence on *al-naẓar fī al-ʿawāqib*.

and "taking account of consequences," on the other. In the introduction to his famous travel work, *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz* (Extracting Pure Gold in Summing Up Paris, 1834), al-Tahtawi writes:

> There is a famous saying: "the most rational [*aʿqal*] kings are those who look most to the consequences of things [*abṣaruhum fī ʿawāqib al-umūr*]." This is why the Benefactor [Mehmed ʿAli] ... has set his mind to restoring [Egypt's] former youth and reviving its faded splendor.[45]

The passage features a variant formula for "taking account of consequences," but the idea is clearly the same. Moreover, the practice is explicitly identified here with "rational" governance, thus supplying from within al-Tahtawi's corpus the conceptual link that I have suggested between the theme of "taking account of consequences" and that of *awhām*. Al-Tahtawi's appeal to a "famous saying" to make this point suggests that he was keen to frame the reformist zeal of Mehmed ʿAli's state-building project simply as the renewal of established modes of good leadership.[46] The passage confirms that the thematization of "taking account of consequences" in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* is no accident, just as the preface itself does with respect to *awhām*. Whether understood as points of moral instruction for potential members of the elite, or as a means of fostering sympathy for the character of the regime more widely, the two themes evidently represent a repurposing of the rationalistic ethos of the French source to serve the aims of Mehmed ʿAli's state-building project.

The Limits of Rationalism in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*

Yet, this rationalistic ethos is balanced in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* by elements of the text that draw attention to the limits of human powers of autonomy and control, and thereby of reason. This aspect of the work has no counterpart in its French source, emerging in passages that have no basis in Millot's work. These passages fall into two categories: poems concerning the landscape of Egypt; and poems about the material remains of ancient Egypt, particularly the pyramids. The effect of these passages is not to contradict the rationalistic ethos of the text: there is no affirmation of irrationalism. Rather, in different ways—by thematizing the dependence of human beings on their environment, on the model of the classical concept of the *waṭan*; and by adverting to the vast unknownness and inaccessibility of past times—these passages cultivate an appreciation of the absolute limits of human self-sufficiency and of the human capacity to bring the phenomenal world under human control, and hence of the power of reason.

I showed above that, on balance, *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* represents the ancient Egyptians in a somewhat negative light, and I linked this to the text's participation in a project of elite moral subject formation. The representation of the ancient Egyptians in this way stands in sharp contrast to the text's emphatically positive treatment of the land and landscape of Egypt. This contrast reveals the precise concept of the *waṭan* that is operative in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*: the *waṭan* as beloved homeland rather than as "nation" in the modern sense. Crucially for my argument, the treatment of the land and landscape of Egypt, whereby this concept of the *waṭan* is expressed, also has the effect of affirming the limits of human autonomy, control, and self-sufficiency, in a way that qualifies the text's rationalistic ethos. This aspect of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* is noteworthy, because unlike the features of the text that I have been discussing up to this point, it cuts against the grain of the French source.

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[45] Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi, *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz* (Bulaq [Cairo]: Dar al-Tibaʿa al-Khidiwiyya, 1834), 8. My translation lightly adapts Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric, 1826–1831*, trans. Daniel L. Newman (London: Saqi, 2004), 113.

[46] The saying appears in al-Thaʿalibi's (d. 1038) book of maxims, *al-Iʿjaz wa-l-Ijaz*, ed. Muhammad Ibrahim Salim (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qurʾan, 1999), 52, in the chapter on famous sayings of Jahili kings.

The earliest example of this dimension of the text is also the first instance of any excerpt of poetry being incorporated into the body of the work. On the first page of the Egypt section, following a description of Egypt in the different phases of the Nile's cycle—flooded in summer, teeming with vegetation in winter—al-Tahtawi interrupts the translation with two lines of poetry by the Abbasid-era poet Ibn al-Muʿtazz (d. 909). These lines present "the land" as a beneficent agent graciously providing plant life, and "the sky" and cultivated terrain (*al-riyāḍ*) as personified subjects with emotional depth:

<div dir="rtl">

مخضرة واكتسى بالنور عاريها   اما ترى الارض قد اعطتك زهرتها

وللرياض ابتسام في نواحيها   وللسماء بكاء في حدائقها

</div>

> Surely, you see how the land has given you its green
> > flowers, and its naked form has burst into blossom;
> The sky weeps in its gardens,
> > and the meadows smile in its vistas.[47]

These lines foreground the role of nonhuman forces in the making of a hospitable earthly environment for humans. By personifying these forces, the verses implicitly place their contribution on the same level of importance as the human. In order to appreciate the difference they make to the passage as a whole, it is necessary to compare the sentence that comes next in the French and the Arabic. First, a rendering of the French:

> But for a people to settle there about the waters, to find the means of benefiting from the rising of the Nile and to avoid its troubles, humans have had to be sufficiently skillful to conquer the obstacles of nature [*pour vaincre les obstacles de la nature*].[48]

In contrast to the verses of Ibn al-Muʿtazz, these lines declare the necessity of humans "conquering" nature in order to benefit from the river. A rendering of these lines appears in the Arabic text too, but its effect is preemptively diminished by the lines of poetry. The translation also tones down the conflict between human and nature:

> But for a people that wants to settle about these waters, in order to take advantage of the Nile's benefits and to defend against losses, it's necessary for them to have much skill and energy to stave off its natural dangers [*ḥattā tadfaʿ maḍarrātihi al-ṭabīʿiyya*].[49]

Two elements serve to soften the effect of the corresponding French. "Stave off" (*dafaʿa*) is less intense and confrontational than "conquer" (*vaincre*). The translation also eliminates "nature" as an abstract noun and hence as one side of a binary conflict with humans, rendering "the obstacles of nature" as "its [viz. the river's] natural dangers." The poem and these translation choices together serve to emphasize the dependence of humans on nonhuman factors and forces. They do not amount to a precise assertion that there are limits to the powers of human reason, but they undermine any conceit of human autonomy and self-sufficiency, and this in itself implies limits to the powers of human reason. I have shown above that, to a large extent, the Arabic text repurposes this rationalistic ethos for its own moral-pedagogical agenda. It is now apparent that the translation also rejects aspects of this ethos in favor of a more integrated conception of the human and the natural environment.

   The modifications in this part of the text cohere in their effect with excerpts of poetry that appear later in the chapter on the Egyptians, concerning the landscape of Egypt and

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[47] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamāʾ*, 44.

[48] Millot, *Abrégé*, 2.

[49] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamāʾ*, 44.

the pyramids. Before discussing these, it should be noted that, besides being the first piece of poetry within the body of the work, the excerpt of Ibn al-Muʿtazz is the only one that is not specific to Egypt in its content and that does not derive from another text about Egypt. Thus, whereas in the other cases al-Tahtawi was probably selectively copying the excerpts from other sources, it seems likely that in this case the lines simply occurred to al-Tahtawi as a spontaneous reaction against the French text's emphasis on human agency in defiance of nature as the basis of human life. This indicates that, insofar as they cohere with the effect of these modifications, the subsequent insertions of poetry should not be regarded as random additions, but rather as reflecting the response of al-Tahtawi to the French text and hence also the distinctive character of the Arabic text.

The poetry about the landscape of Egypt appears at the end of the Egypt section. Al-Tahtawi includes eight pieces, all of which are drawn from the Maghribi scholar Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Maqqari's (1577–1632) *Nafḥ al-Tib min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib* (Breath of Scent from the Fresh Branch of al-Andalus, 1629).[50] Al-Maqqari composed this work while living in Cairo, and the poems—which are not his own work—appear in a section in which the author describes his relief on reaching Egypt, after having had to leave his own land at the behest of the local ruler.[51] The preceding section focuses on al-Maqqari's yearning for his homeland, which he articulates with an abundance of excerpts of poetry about it. Al-Maqqari presents the poems about Egypt as attempts to represent the great delights (*maḥāsin*) of the country. However, these poems are very much in the same idiom as those about al-Maqqari's own land, and their effect in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* is to introduce the underlying form of attachment to the *waṭan* into the translation.

Yaseen Noorani has analyzed what distinguishes this form of attachment to the *waṭan* from modern patriotism. The latter, Noorani explains, "is to be understood as a moral sentiment, inherently oriented towards the uplifting or perfection of human community." By contrast, "classical yearning for the homeland" is associated with "primordial desire," by way of a connection between the *waṭan* and the emotional intensities of childhood and youth.[52] But the retrospective yearning for the homeland is not a straightforward manifestation of the persistence of primordial desire into adulthood. Rather, it is intrinsic to this yearning that the homeland has become an object of nostalgia: of a type of longing that is predicated on irrecoverable loss. The moral significance of the classical notion of the *waṭan* follows from this: the *waṭan* signifies the power of primordial desire as a vital force both at the foundations of life and persisting into adulthood; however, in the latter case, it is transformed into an object of nostalgia, so that the *waṭan* also symbolizes the necessity of leaving the attachments of childhood behind in order to assume the demands of adulthood. Thus, as Noorani puts it, "the *waṭan* unites primordial desire and rationality, childhood and maturity, permanence and the degenerative time of fate."[53] As this description indicates, the classical notion of the *waṭan* eschews any sense of the human being as essentially or ideally rational, recognizing instead a combination of the nonrational with the rational as the basic fabric of human life.

The poems about Egypt in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* evoke this notion of the *waṭan* in a variety of ways. In most cases they do so by presenting Egypt in idealizing terms, conjuring an impression of the *waṭan* as a product of the experiences and perceptions of youthful desire. For example, the first of the poems runs:

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[50] Ahmad al-Maqqari, *Nafḥ al-Tib min Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib*, ed. Ihsan ʿAbbas, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1967), 35–39.

[51] Ibid., 13.

[52] Yaseen Noorani, "Estrangement and Selfhood in the Classical Concept of *Waṭan*," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47, nos. 1–2 (2016): 29.

[53] Ibid., 40.

<div dir="rtl">

ما مثلها في بلد   شاطئ مصر جنة

بنيلها المطرد   لا سيما مذ زخرفت

سوابغ من زرد   وللرياح فوقه

داودها بمبرد   مسرودة ما مسها

يرعد عارى الجسد   سائلة وهويها

ـن حادر ومصعد   والفلك كالأفلاك بيـ

</div>

> Egypt's shore is a garden without comparison in any land,
>   not least in the adornment of its ever-flowing Nile.
> And the breezes above it have chain-mail coats
>   interwoven, untouched by David's file,
> flowing; and their blowing makes the naked body quiver;
>   and the boats like the stars fall and rise.

Despite the specificity of the focus on the Nile—which is a feature of all the poems—Egypt is obviously represented here as an ideal locale. The description of its shore as a "garden" (*janna*) implies a sense of the land as a kind of Eden. The reference to "the naked body" subtly coheres with this, as does the comparison of Egypt's breezes to "chain-mail coats." The latter is an allusion to a passage in the Qurʾan (21:80) in which God is said to have taught David how to make armor. The point is that the "chain-mail coats" of Egypt's breezes are not man-made, nor are they for martial purposes. There is no explicit indication that Egypt here is to be understood as an object of nostalgic yearning, but the framing of the land as a primordial paradise implies as much.[54]

Two other poems are worth mentioning for the particular ways in which they evoke the classical notion of the *waṭan* and their distinctive bearing on the question of rationalism and its limits. One of them frames the relationship between the individual and the *waṭan* in the conventional terms of Arabic love lyric, as between lover and beloved:

<div dir="rtl">

لم أشف من ماء الفرات غليلا   بالله قل للنيل عنى إننى

ان كان طرفى بالبكاء بخيلا   وسل الفؤاد فانه لى شاهد

واظن صبرك ان يكون جميلا   يا قلب كم خلفت ثم بثينة

</div>

> By God, say to the Nile from me that I've
>   not quenched my thirst at the waters of the Euphrates,
> and ask my heart—it's my witness—
>   if my eyes were poor in tears.
> Heart, how many a Buthayna did you leave behind there?
>   I consider your steadfastness beautiful.[55]

The representation of the Nile as the poet's beloved here figures the relation between individual and homeland as an elemental, affective, and fundamentally nonrational bond. The effect of this is to qualify the rationalism of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, by affirming the existence and importance of forces beyond the rational in human life.

The other poem of particular note qualifies the rationalism of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* from the opposite direction: not by insisting on the essential importance of the nonrational for human life, but by dissociating rationality from any exclusive association with the human. It does this by expressing a sense of the Nile as having powers of comprehension and moral agency:

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[54] See ibid., 33.

[55] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 52. Buthayna is one of the famous beloveds of Arabic love lyric.

ولب لما يبدو لخير الناس منه   كان النيل ذو فهم
ويمضى حين يستغنون عنه   فيأتى حين حاجتهم اليه

It's as if the Nile has understanding and sense
        in how it appears to the best of people:
it comes when they need it
        and passes on when they can do without it.[56]

The purport of this poem is akin to that of the Ibn al-Muʿtazz poem discussed above. By attributing "understanding and sense" to the river in its contribution to human life, these lines suggest that nonhuman forces play a crucial, indispensable, and independent role in supporting human life. One implication of this is that human ingenuity—or the power of human reason—alone is not enough.

The poems that al-Tahtawi introduces into the section on the pyramids in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* are derived not from al-Maqqari, but rather from al-Maqrizi, mentioned above as the source for the Abu Nuwas poem. Al-Tahtawi includes four excerpts, and in various ways they draw attention to the limits of human knowledge and understanding. In this respect, they insist on certain absolute limitations of the powers of human reason, while also highlighting other potentialities of the human, notably wonder and awe. The first and longest of the poems combines these traits. It is attributed to "the judge ʿAbd al-Wahhab al-Misri" (active ca. 1354), and begins as follows:

صدع القلوب ولم يفه بلسانه   أمبانى الاهرام كم من واعظ
اين الذى الهرمان من بنيانه   اذكرتنى قولا تقادم عهده

Pyramids, how many a warner
        has transfixed hearts without speaking with their tongue?
They reminded me of something spoken long ago:
        "where is he that built the two pyramids?"[57]

The opening question alludes to an idea of ancient monuments as offering a warning to humans as to their transience and mortality; "without speaking with their tongue" refers to the uncanny way in which such monuments communicate without actually speaking. The second line features a quotation from a poem by al-Mutanabbi (915–65), which sets up the remainder of the poem. This consists of an evocation of the immense proportions, majesty, and longevity of the pyramids, followed by a list of alternative theories as to their original function, and finally a line concerning the effect of the pyramids on the viewer: "In the heart of one who sees them is a thought to know himself / that he clings to by the tips of his fingers." The poem's emphasis on uncertainty about the pyramids, culminating in this enigmatic reflection on the precarity of human self-knowledge, makes for a startling rupture in the prose discourse of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, modifying the emphasis on human mastery by rational means that the text cultivates as its dominant ethos.

Conclusion

In the summer of 1881, the first issue of a new journal featured an article titled "Recap: Abridged from *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*" (*Tadhkar: Mulakhkhas min Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*). The journal was *al-Tankit wa-l-Tabkit* (Jokes and Reproaches), edited by ʿAbd Allah al-Nadim (1842–96).

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[56] Ibid., 52–53.
[57] Ibid., 49. All the excerpts from al-Maqrizi appear on pp. 49–50.

Renamed *al-Taʾif* (The Wanderer), this journal would soon become a key organ of the ʿUrabi revolt (1881–82).[58] In keeping with the tenor of this revolt—which was directed both against European interests in Egypt, and also against the existing dispensation of Khedivial rule, especially insofar as this was perceived to favor European interests— al-Nadim's journal presented itself from the outset as "a service to the *waṭan*" (*khidma waṭaniyya*).[59] The "recap" of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* reflects this framing, as well as being inflected by it: spread across two issues, the article consists exclusively of the Egypt section of the work, with some minor edits to the text, the insertion of a couple of paragraphs of commentary, and the removal of the poetry.[60] As I have shown above, in its original form, the Egypt section of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* provides, at best, an ambivalent account of the ancient Egyptians—though it concludes with selections of poetry that express a profoundly intimate personal relationship with Egypt. In the version that appears in *al-Tankit wa-l-Tabkit*, the ancient Egyptians explicitly symbolize the potential of Egypt to flourish as a strong independent polity in the modern era. Ambivalence about ancient Egypt is gone; the unfathomability of Egypt's remote past is no longer felt; and intimate personal experience has lost its primacy in the construction of Egypt. Egypt is now a kind of primordial force that has run right through the long history of the land, inhering both in the place and also emphatically in all Egyptians of all times, at least latently, if not always as a fully realized potentiality. In other words, the ancient Egyptians and *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* itself have been incorporated into a new conception of the *waṭan* as a "nation" in the modern sense.

My analysis of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* brings to light key points of continuity and rupture in this process of transformation, at the nexus of historical writing, elite ideology, and changing conceptions of the *waṭan* in 19th-century Egypt and indeed across the wider Middle East. As for continuity, common to both *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* and this later text is the use of history as an instrument of major social change. But there was a shift in how history was supposed to function as such an instrument: principally by the moral education of an elite in the case of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*; and by providing an inspirational, galvanizing narrative of the nation aimed, at least in principle, at the whole populace in the case of the later text.

This points to another contrast. What I have referred to as the elitist rationalism of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* did not disappear; rather, it developed into the promotion of rationalism as a general good, with the education of the whole populace—from superstition into the domain of reason—becoming a central aim of elite ideology. Implicit in this was a conception of rationalism as a universal norm, and not as the exclusive prerogative of an elite segment of society. This did not necessarily mean that in reality society became any less hierarchical or indeed less elitist. On the contrary, this development may best be understood as an extension of elitist rationalism, only with some occlusion of the element of elitism, as in practice it entailed the attempted imposition of a particular elite conception of rationalism onto the population at large.

Finally, along similar lines, there was an intensification of the component of rationalism within the same ideological structure, such that the kind of appreciation of the limits of the powers of reason that I have highlighted as a feature of *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* was displaced from historical writing. This development was closely related to the formation of the new sense of *waṭan* as nation. Indeed, in a certain respect, the two developments are indistinguishable, as one of the ways in which al-Tahtawi qualified the overriding rationalistic ethos of *Bidayat*

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[58] Juan Ricardo Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's Urabi Movement* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 123–24.

[59] ʿAbd Allah al-Nadim, *al-Tankit wa-l-Tabkit* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Misriyya al-ʿAmma li-l-Kitab, 1994), 37. On the ʿUrabi revolt, see Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution*, 14–22.

[60] Al-Nadim, *al-Tankit wa-l-Tabkit*, 39–40.

al-Qudamaʾ was precisely by incorporating the classical concept of the *waṭan* as homeland into the work. At the same time, the formation of the modern concept of the nation presupposed the suppression of the other way in which al-Tahtawi accomplished this, which consisted in highlighting the dimensions of the past that are beyond the comprehension of human beings. The modern concept of the nation depends on the notion that the past is effectively comprehensible in its entirety, as a basis for the claims of nations to historical integrity; it requires total control over the past, and therefore cannot easily accommodate the kind of relationship with past worlds that al-Tahtawi cultivates in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* by way of the poetry about the pyramids. This is not merely a symptom of the modern concept of the nation but a fundamental and inextricable component of it.

The displacement of the mode of engagement with the past that had animated *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* is well illustrated by al-Tahtawi's own later work of history, *Anwar Tawfiq al-Jalil fi Akhbar Misr wa-Tawthiq Bani Ismaʿil* (Lights of the Glorious Tawfiq: On the History of Egypt and Validating the Sons of Ismaʿil, 1868). This takes the form of a continuous history of Egypt from the earliest times down to the Arab conquest in 641 C.E.; further volumes were supposed to continue the narrative down to the present.[61] While the overall design of the work thus bespeaks the new conception of *waṭan*, a contrast with *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* in the use of poetry reflects the associated shift in the operative relationship with the past. On the whole, the later work features poetry to a much greater extent: by contrast with *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, excerpts of poetry appear frequently throughout *Anwar Tawfiq al-Jalil*. The only exception to this is the first hundred pages, which deal with the geography of Egypt, including its "ancient remains" (*al-āthār al-qadīma*), and its first twenty ruling dynasties. The only part of the work that does not feature poetry is thus the part that contains the only two topics that al-Tahtawi supplied with poetry in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, namely, the landscape of Egypt and the pyramids. The absence of poetry in the account of the pyramids is particularly striking, as the section contains a brief description in prose of one of the images of the pyramids that appears among the excerpts in the earlier work: regarding the two main pyramids of Giza, al-Tahtawi notes that "the poets have compared them to two breasts in the heart of the Egyptian lands."[62]

As described above, the first and longest poem about the pyramids in *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ* had dwelt on the unknownness of the basic facts about the pyramids. Al-Tahtawi followed this with a quotation of the two lines of al-Mutanabbi on which the longer poem had drawn: "Where is he that built the pyramids? What was his tribe? What his day? What the place of death? / Traces remain after their makers for an eternity; then time fells them, so they're felled."[63] In *Anwar Tawfiq al-Jalil*, al-Tahtawi provides a description of the dimensions of the pyramids and the precision of their construction. He then explains that, owing to the decipherment of hieroglyphics, the kings responsible for building each of the pyramids at Giza are now known to have been Cheops, Chephren, and Mycerinus. He adds that from "recent investigations" it has become apparent that they are of the fourth dynasty and from the 29th century B.C., whereas previously these kings had been placed in the 19th century before the hijra.[64] In the face of such impressive new facts, the kind of relationship with the past that al-Tahtawi had expressed by way of the above lines of al-Mutanabbi was suppressed—which is not to say altogether eradicated—in favor of one that could support the new concept of the nation.

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[61] Al-Tahtawi did not live to complete the project. His account of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, titled *Nihayat al-Ijaz fi Sirat Sakin al-Hijaz*, was published posthumously as the second volume in the series in 1874. This was intended by al-Tahtawi as a bridge to the history of Egypt in the Islamic era, as noted in the introduction to Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi, *Nihayat al-Ijaz fi Sirat Sakin al-Hijaz*, ed. ʿAbd al-Rahman Hasan Masʿud and Faruq Hamid Badr (Cairo: Maktabat al-Adab wa-Matbaʿatiha bi-l-Jamamiz, 1982), xiv.

[62] Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi, *Anwar Tawfiq al-Jalil fi Akhbar Misr wa-Tawthiq Bani Ismaʿil* (Cairo: Matbaʿat Bulaq, 1868), 46.

[63] Al-Tahtawi et al., *Bidayat al-Qudamaʾ*, 49.

[64] Al-Tahtawi, *Anwar Tawfiq al-Jalil*, 46–47.

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