Nasser Rabbat: *Writing Egypt. Al-Maqrizi and His Historical Project*

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Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442) is undoubtedly one of the most widely quoted historians of premodern Egypt. His chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and the topographical history of Egypt and Cairo known as the *Khiṭaṭ* are indispensable reading for anyone interested in Fatimid, Ayyubid, or Mamluk history. While European researchers were aware of the outstanding importance of al-Maqrīzī's writings already in the eighteenth century, readers interested in this outstanding intellectual figure have had to wait for centuries for a book-long intellectual biography in a European language. The long wait is now over, thanks to Nasser Rabbat, who over the past decades has become one of the internationally leading specialists on al-Maqrīzī and his topographical writings.

Rabbat's *Writing Egypt: Al-Maqrizi and His Historical Project* is divided into an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and two indices. Its basic argument, as outlined in the introduction (pp. 1–7), is that al-Maqrīzī was "a historian with a clear ethical imperative [...], a devout scholar who quit his public career [...] to devote himself completely to writing the history of his beloved country Egypt" (p. 3). The most outstanding outcome of this devotion was, according to Rabbat, the *Khiṭaṭ*: "Even today, the book still comes across as a moving and challenging discursive oeuvre laced with political innuendos, sociocultural commentaries, nostalgic reminiscences, and grim proclamations" (p. 4).

Chapter 1 ("The formative years", pp. 11–59) explores the available sources on al-Maqrīzī's life, his family background and lineage, and his education. Special attention is paid to the claim that al-Maqrīzī was a scion of the Fatimid caliphs, which Rabbat is inclined to accept, and to al-Maqrīzī's treatment of this dynasty. Chapter 2 ("Career, moral crisis, and withdrawal", pp. 60–114) deals with the question of al-Maqrīzī's *madhhab* identity (highlighting his Ẓāhirī tendencies), his administrative career, patrons, and rivals, his fall from the grace of the political elite, and his subsequent long, and in terms of his written output highly productive, period of withdrawal. This written output is the topic of chapter 3 ("Harvest of a lifetime", pp. 117–53) that surveys al-Maqrīzī's "exhaustive, structured, and principled historical project with clear ethical messages pursued [...] in a personal, sentimental, and moralizing fashion" (p. 117). Among other things, the chapter provides a tentative inventory of his works, examines his use of sources and development as an author, and discusses his key concept of *kharāb* (ruination). Chapter 4 ("The *Khitat*: history and belonging", pp. 154–201) offers a detailed introduction to al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ*, focusing on its connection to his other works, its writing process, title, and structure, the notion of history and the "patriotic impulse" (p. 175) expressed in it, and the role of urban space in al-Maqrīzī's ethical understanding of history. The history of the reception and research on al-Maqrīzī's works – again with a clear focus on the *Khiṭaṭ* – is the subject of chapter 5 ("Al-Maqrizi and the Orientalists", pp. 205–33), which investigates the reception of the *Khiṭaṭ* in Ottoman times, the work by early, primarily francophone Orientalists on al-Maqrīzī's oeuvre, and later editions, translations, and other relevant publications. The last chapter ("Reading al-Maqrizi in modern Egypt", pp. 234–83) offers an

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introduction to the reception and creative reimaging of al-Maqrīzī and his writings in Egyptian scholarship and belletristic literature from the *nahḍa* to the Mubarak era, tracing, inter alia, changing patterns of publication and readership, but also al-Maqrīzī's appearances as a character in Egyptian historical fiction. Finally, Rabbat uses the conclusion ("In the guise of a conclusion: becoming the greatest historian of Egypt", pp. 284–7) to present personal reflections on his own process of writing al-Maqrīzī's biography.

Writing Egypt fills a much-felt gap in the literature on Mamluk historiography and will serve as a very useful beginner's introduction to al-Maqrīzī's life and important aspects of his oeuvre, while specialists will benefit from Rabbat's many important observations that are the fruit of decades of dedicated research. The image of al-Maqrīzī that Rabbat traces in his book is multifaceted, coherent, convincing, and genuinely sympathetic. Rabbat also deserves special praise for giving credit to the work of other experts on al-Maqrīzī, most notably to Frédéric Bauden's groundbreaking and exemplary series of Maqriziana articles and the scholars involved in the *Bibliotheca Maqriziana* project. The high level of attention paid to the reception of al-Maqrīzī and his *Khiṭaṭ* from the eighteenth century onwards is another strength of the book, which thus skilfully connects the study of Mamluk and modern Egypt.

At times, readers might wonder whether the author goes a bit far in heroizing al-Maqrīzī and attacking his adversaries. This is especially apparent in Rabbat's treatment of the claims of plagiarism raised against al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ*, which Rabbat calls "a particularly hypocritical accusation" (p. 3) and "a nasty accusation" that can be linked to "the palpable antagonism heaped upon him [i.e. al-Maqrīzī] in recent Western scholarship" (p. 6). Here, Bauden's historical and philological approach that aims at understanding the accusation of plagiarism within the conceptual frameworks of al-Maqrīzī's time and scholarly community appears more nuanced and fruitful. Similarly, Rabbat's characterization of al-Maqrīzī as a "patriotic" Egyptian (p. 175) might speak more to modern sensibilities than to those of the society in which al-Maqrīzī lived and worked.

One of the least enjoyable features of the book is its way of reproducing Arabic terms and phrases. Instead of following the *IJMES* system as indicated in the "Notes on transcription and dates" (p. xiii), the book uses a simplified and unfortunately at times inconsistent or simply incorrect system of transliteration together with occasional quotations in Arabic characters. The result is sometimes confusing to non-experts, while speakers of Arabic will stumble over occasional oversights. A more conservative approach following an established system of transliteration could have helped to avoid these unnecessary blemishes. Other steps that could have made the book even more useful include the addition of a complete overview of al-Maqrīzī's works and a more systematic chapter structure that could have prevented some unnecessary repetitions. The lack of illustrations is also noteworthy, given that the book refers repeatedly to physical objects such as buildings, manuscripts, and early prints that readers might have wished to see depicted.

While the book is far-reaching and rests on a broad basis of primary sources and secondary literature, it is almost unavoidable in an undertaking of this kind that some blind spots and insufficiently investigated topics will remain. The significant German-language secondary literature on Mamluk Studies in general and al-Maqrīzī in particular is not considered, and the discussion of al-Maqrīzī's reception in Ottoman times (pp. 210–15) remains superficial. Perhaps most importantly, the book has a very clear focus on al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ* and a few related short treatises, while al-Maqrīzī's biographical dictionaries and chronicles receive only limited attention. Moreover, his primarily religious writings, such as his multi-volume works on the Prophet Muḥammad and his family, which constitute a significant part of his oeuvre, are hardly engaged with. *Writing Egypt* is thus a very good book about al-Maqrīzī and his *Khiṭaṭ*, but not a comprehensive study of his thought and scholarly output overall. In his preface, Rabbat states that a

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"major aim of the book [...] became to bring al-Maqrizi closer to us" (p. vii). In this, Rabbat has succeeded on an admirable level, but he has also shown how much remains to be explored about the man whom he calls "the Greatest Historian of Egypt" (p. 284).

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Marcus Milwright: *A Story of Islamic Art*

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This book is provided with a glossary, a timeline, an appendix of notes, a section on further reading, and also some fine drawings by the author, but is rather different from other accounts of Islamic art. As Milwright himself declares, the word "Story" in the title is pertinent. Milwright selects 50 items from the field and elucidates each within a bubble of narrative. As explained in the introduction, he has adopted two characters from the *Maqāmāt* (Assemblies) of al-Hariri (d. 1122): al-Harith, a merchant, and Abu Zayd, a picaresque figure, who here proves to be remarkably well informed about technical aspects of the manufacture of Islamic objects. To these he adds Salim, a servant well-versed in Islamic teaching, and Aisha, daughter to al-Harith, who is an eager questioner. Aisha's is the principal, but not exclusive, narrative voice. These figures are encountered in differing locations in pursuit of merchandise, but more importantly they are time travellers. First encountered in the seventh century, they are still active in the twenty-first, having developed skills of the relevant periods.

Using this format, Milwright is able to focus attention on 50 disparate items. They are presented in an approximately chronological order – of which more later. They are not grouped by region or technique, and are not related to each other except insofar as Islamic belief and practice is their background. First comes a Quran leaf in Hijazi script, datable to the second half of the seventh century, marking the fundamental importance of the sacred text and of writing as a vehicle for it; and last, in 2020, come two cloth facemasks of the sort made familiar during the pandemic, with apotropaic inscriptions. Between these two items, many are already well-known and celebrated, but others indicate Milwright's intention, signalled in his introduction, to include a wider geographical scope than has often been the case, hence a fountain at Nafplio, Greece, the Great mosque of Djenné, Mali, and chromogenic prints produced in New York. It can perhaps be said that Milwright's selection of media favours the applied arts: ceramics, metalwork, stone carving, textiles, carpets, and woodwork – if we include the Palermo ceiling. Architecture is sometimes treated in terms of an element of its decoration: we learn of the sort of European botanical work that must have influenced the carvings on the dadoes of the Taj Mahal, but nothing of the building's structure and lineage. Painting also gets rather short shrift. Aside from the cover there is no product of the Timurid period, and there is nothing from Sultanate India.