Writing the Maghrib: Mobility, Patronage, and Scholarship in Seventeenth-Century Damascus

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In the introduction to his history of al-Andalus, Naḥḥ al-ṭīḥ (The Aroma of the Sweet Breeze), the North African scholar al-Maqṣarī (d. 1632) vividly describes a soirée in Damascus, commenting that al-Andalus was the conversational centerpiece of the evening.¹ Those attending the gathering, including scholars, statesmen, and other notables from Damascus and surrounding areas, spoke of its agricultural bounty and sheer physical beauty, likening al-Andalus to Damascus. In the course of the evening, al-Maqṣarī, a respected scholar with comprehensive knowledge of the Islamic sciences and in particular matters related to the history, culture, and intellectual heritage of North Africa and al-Andalus, showcased his talents through a recitation of Andalusī poetry and prose, including some works attributed to the fourteenth-century Andalusian polymath Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1374). After hearing the recitation, one notable present at the gathering, Ahmad b. Shāhīn (d. 1643), requested that al-Maqṣarī compose a written work describing Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s family origin, education, character, and major life events, along with some of Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s poetry and prose.²

The picture painted by al-Maqṣarī about this gathering and others is often overlooked in discussions about Naḥḥ al-ṭīḥ and its author, who eventually composed the work at the urging of Ahmad b. Shāhīn.³ In fact, al-Maqṣarī has been remembered as the mere compiler of a “vast rag-bag of miscellaneous snippets” on Muslim Iberia.⁴ Yet the description of the gathering in the introduction to Naḥḥ al-ṭīḥ is more than simply a colorful anecdote; it provides great insight into the circumstances of the work’s production, including both the immediate context as well as the broader sociocultural and intellectual backdrop of the work and its author.

Based on an analysis of excerpts from Naḥḥ al-ṭīḥ and other writings, this paper will suggest that al-Maqṣarī and scholars like him traveled to and within the Ottoman Arab provinces to cities such as Damascus in the early seventeenth century to work and develop their scholarly reputation, and also to seek out local patrons to further their scholarly pursuits. In particular, seventeenth-century Damascus, as depicted by al-Maqṣarī through the excerpt above and countless others, was a vibrant space in which intellectual ideas within the Ottoman Arab provinces were produced, circulated, and flourished, attracting scholars from the farthest reaches of the Islamic world.

Al-Maqṣarī was born and educated in the city of Tlemcen in present-day Algeria in 1577, and he hailed from a family of scholarly and economic repute throughout North Africa and beyond.⁵ Moving to Morocco to further his studies, al-Maqṣarī gained renown at the court of the powerful Moroccan ruler Aḥmad al-Maḥṣūr, eventually landing a position as jurisconsult or muftī at the Qarawiyyīn University in Fez.⁶ Due to the fratricidal chaos following the death of Aḥmad al-Maḥṣūr (d. 1603), al-Maqṣarī left Morocco. He would never return to this part of North Africa.

Journeying to the east, al-Maqṣarī completed the pilgrimage in Mecca, like many of his predecessors from North Africa, and settled in Cairo, but instead of returning to his birthplace of Tlemcen or adopted home of Morocco, he continued to travel widely in the eastern Mediterranean. Warmly welcomed by scholars and statesmen alike in Damascus and other cities of the Ottoman Arab provinces, al-Maqṣarī decided to leave Cairo to spend the rest of his days in Damascus. Before embarking on this journey, however, al-Maqṣarī fell ill and died in Cairo in
After al-Maqqārī died in Cairo, he was buried in the so-called City of the Dead, the graveyard at the foot of Muqtaṭtam Mountain.

Al-Maqqārī authored several works in his life while living in Morocco and in the Ottoman Arab provinces. He composed *Nafḥ al-tīb*, his most celebrated work, while residing in Cairo. In addition to the autobiographical introduction, the work consists of two additional parts. The first part outlines the history of al-Andalus, and the second part narrates the biography of Ibn al-Khaṭīb, who was a fourteenth-century polymath from a family of scholars and politicians prominent in Andalusian history.

*Nafḥ al-tīb* is a remarkable compilation of historical information taken from sources that have not yet been uncovered or are considered lost. Indeed, numerous studies about al-Andalus cite *Nafḥ al-tīb* as a primary source of information. Given the value of *Nafḥ al-tīb* as a repository of information from sources otherwise lost, it is reasonable that many scholars rely on the work for their studies. Despite the significance of the work, however, few scholars have written about its author. While most scholars regard al-Maqqārī as the preserver and compiler of important historical and literary works pertaining to al-Andalus, they disregard al-Maqqārī as the author of the work, depreciating his participation in and contributions to the thriving cultural and intellectual early modern Mediterranean landscape. In terms of al-Maqqārī’s literary production and career, *Nafḥ al-tīb* represents “the summation of his life.”

Al-Maqqārī gives a lengthy overview of his own life and the circumstances that led him to compose the work in *Nafḥ al-tīb* in the introduction to the work itself. The first-person narrative begins at the point when he left North Africa for the eastern Mediterranean, and he mentions that he left it in order to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca. The beginning of the introduction, which focuses on al-Maqqārī the itinerant traveler and scholar, sheds light on the professional trajectory of an individual who left his home out of necessity. He took the sea route to Cairo and eventually went to Mecca and Medina. Instead of returning home, al-Maqqārī stayed in the eastern Mediterranean world, traveling, lecturing, and learning throughout cities in the Arab Ottoman provinces. He tells us several times that he lectured in cities like Jerusalem and Damascus, possessing knowledge that was highly regarded and sought after in the eastern Mediterranean region including coveted chains of Prophetic narration (*ḥadīth*).

Not only was al-Maqqārī considered an authority on collections of *ḥadīth*, particularly the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī, the subsequent portions of the introduction suggest that al-Maqqārī, given that he was rooted in the cultural and intellectual heritage of Morocco and the Islamic West more broadly, was seen as an authority to write about the history of that region in Damascus and the Ottoman Arab provinces more broadly, even if he was not particularly renowned for his erudition in the subject while in the Islamic West. His scholarly arsenal thus came to include expertise in history after his move to Damascus, a highly coveted subject for scholars residing in this part of the Islamic world.

Al-Maqqārī discusses the work’s patronage at length in the introduction to *Nafḥ al-tīb*. Here, we learn that the patron, a scholar and notable from Damascus, asked al-Maqqārī to compose a work about the life of the Andalusian polymath Ibn al-Khaṭīb. Indeed, many of his biographers, including the famous late seventeenth-century Damascene scholar al-Muḥībī and author of a centennial biographical dictionary, affirm that al-Maqqārī composed the work at the request of this patron in Damascus.

In the introduction to *Nafḥ al-tīb*, al-Maqqārī discusses the trip to Damascus, including that fateful evening gathering described above in which his recitation of poetry and prose were heard
by many, and led to Ahmād b. Shāhīn’s patronage of the work. This Damascene notable came from a family of Ottoman government officials affiliated with Gaza. The known eponymous founder of the family was Muṣṭafā Shāhīn Pasha, an Ottoman official, who had served Suleyman the Magnificent as a governor of Ottoman Arab provincial areas. Ahmād b. Shāhīn and his ancestors were also known as patrons of poets and scholars residing in the Ottoman Arab provinces, particularly Damascus, and Ahmād b. Shāhīn himself was a scholar and poet in his own right.11

Al-Maqrārī eventually took on the project to write Naḥ al-ṭīb. He notes in this introduction the difficulty of the task at hand, which led him to hesitate in accepting the commission. Initially, he declined the task, and enumerates the reasons for his refusal. The subject required exhaustive knowledge of numerous branches of literature, which he claimed he did not possess. He also suggested that did not have the necessary books to successfully complete this task, having left his entire library in Morocco. Finally, he notes that his mind was too filled with melancholy due to his departure from his homeland.12 Despite the noted difficulties in composing such a work, al-Maqrārī felt pressure to agree to compose the work, and he eventually promised to undertake the task as soon as he returned to Cairo, where he completed the work, after spending some time in Damascus teaching and frequenting various gatherings such as the one described above.

By giving the reader specific details about himself and his patron, readers can locate the production of the work and its author in specific circumstances, including al-Maqrārī’s professional necessity, departure from Morocco, his travels to Damascus, and a particularly generous benefactor to compose the work. From the introduction of Naḥ al-ṭīb along, the author gives us the impression that he produced the text for the patron out of the former’s indebtedness to the latter. Upon reading this introduction, one may surmise that al-Maqrārī was asked to compose a work for a wealthy patron and he did so out of respect for the notable’s request and furthermore personal need to sustain a living in his adopted home.

Yet, other sources demonstrate that patronage in the Ottoman Arab provinces was complex and more than simply a matter of producing a single text at the request of a well-to-do patron. In fact, al-Maqrārī also gave permissions to transmit texts (pl. jāzāt) to many of the esteemed figures he encountered in Damascus and the eastern Mediterranean region. In fact, al-Maqrārī gave Ahmād b. Shāhīn one such jāza, through which the former gave the latter permission to narrate and transmit many of his own works.13 Thus not only did al-Maqrārī provide the author with a written work upon his request, he also bestowed upon the patron a kind of intellectual legitimacy, giving him permission to narrate and transmit his own textual corpus as well as others’, which al-Maqrārī had spent much of life earning. Receiving such permissions to transmit brought Ahmād b. Shāhīn into the intellectual heritage of Islamic scholarship from centuries past. In turn, al-Maqrārī enjoyed the patronage of a highly respected member of Damascus’ elite population.

The introductory portion of Naḥ al-ṭīb thus describes aspects of the process of patronage in the Arab Ottoman lands, and not only that of intellectuals from Damascus itself. Rather, the anecdote provides evidence for the rich intellectual circles that continued to flourish in the Arab Ottoman provinces. Despite the centrality of Istanbul as the Ottoman capital, there were continued opportunities for patronage and scholarly activities in the provincial regions. Naḥ al-ṭīb is then as much about al-Maqrārī and the circumstances in which he found himself as a scholar and intellectual in Damascus as it is about al-Andalus and Ibn al-Khaṭīb, an insight which ultimately throws the work, its author, and his wider sociocultural circumstances into much sharper relief.

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2 Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s came from a family of scholars and statesmen prominent in Andalusian history, and his writings are an important source for furthering one’s understanding of Andalusian history and culture of the end of the thirteenth into the fourteenth centuries. For more on Ibn al-Khaṭīb, see Alexander Knysh, “Ibn al-Khaṭīb.” In The Literature of Al-Andalus, edited by María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, and Michael Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 358–372.


10 Al-Maqqārī, Naḥf al-ṭīb, 1:33.

