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## Introduction



It was the late summer of my second year in graduate school, and my train was speeding away from the urban moloch of Cairo toward Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast, cutting through the Nile delta, whose lush greenery was sprinkled with the white of the first cotton buds of the season. I was taking some time off from the neatly printed books of Harvard's Widener Library to explore Arabic manuscripts at the Egyptian National Library in Cairo. After it had closed for the day, I had spent a few hours book shopping around the Azhar mosque, one of the oldest still functioning institutions of learning in the world, and was now on my way back to my temporary home.

I was exhausted and had clearly gotten too much sun, but I was making an effort to review the notes I had taken that day. My haphazard stabs at the National Library's large manuscript collection, at the time housed in a dingy concrete block in Cairo's Bulaq district, had yielded a surprising find: a work on Islamic law, written 1,200 years earlier by an Egyptian named Abū Ya'qūb al-Buwayṭī, which recent academic publications had declared extinct. Sitting at the microfilm reader that morning (the library did not allow access to the manuscript itself) and realizing what I was looking at, I had scrolled frantically through the text, scribbling notes as I went. The work appeared to be a complete treatment of the principal areas of Islamic law, and it included a methodological discussion on how to read and interpret scripture—one of the oldest such discussions to be found. I had immediately requested a copy of the manuscript, but this would not be ready until the following week, so for now all I had were my hastily jotted notes. The last thing I had written in my notebook was the name of the copyist—a certain 'Abd al-Ra'ūf from Kazan, the Tartar Muslim city on the Volga River—and the year in which the manuscript had been copied: 1325. That year fell in the Mamluk period, when Egypt and Syria were the intellectual centers of the Muslim world. But revisiting my notes, I frowned: why had I written only 1325, without its Hijri counterpart? The Islamic Hijri calendar is more than six centuries behind the Gregorian calendar, though the gap shrinks by about eleven days each year, as the Hijri calendar tracks lunar rather than solar years.<sup>1</sup> When I wrote down the date, I reasoned, I must have automatically converted it into its Gregorian

<sup>1</sup> In this book, I generally use only Common Era dates, but I provide both Hijri and CE death dates for Muslims who died before 1700 CE.

equivalent, but why had I not made a note of the original Hijri date also? I was too worn out to ruminate on the matter further that day, but when I awoke the following day with my headache gone, the answer struck me: 1325 was not the Common Era date; it was the Hijri date. This meant that the manuscript of al-Buwayṭī's book had been copied as recently as in 1907 CE. No wonder I had, in my groggy exhaustion after a long day of work, misread my own notes. Why would a hugely important work have been copied by hand in the twentieth century, even as it remained unknown in the published literature?

Puzzling though the manuscript's provenance was, I had to push it to the back of my mind. My dissertation research focused on the early period of Islam, and it was the content of al-Buwayṭī's book, not the textual history of this particular manuscript, that was immediately relevant to my investigation of the genesis of Islamic law. But the twentieth century reasserted itself a year later, when I found a second manuscript copy of the same book in Istanbul's magnificent Süleymaniye Library. This copy had been written in 1228 CE (AH 625), but a short note had later been added to the otherwise empty last page: "I, the poor servant of God 'Abd al-Ra'ūf from Kazan, have made a copy of this work on the seventh day of [the month of] Jumādā al-Ākhira, 1325 [July 18, 1907]."<sup>2</sup> The Cairo manuscript thus turned out to be a copy of the Istanbul one. Why had a work originally composed in Egypt ended up in Istanbul, and how had its copy found its way back to Cairo? Examining the two manuscripts for further clues, I noticed an ownership seal on the margin of the Cairo copy, carrying the name Aḥmad Bey al-Ḥusaynī. Some digging revealed that al-Ḥusaynī was an Egyptian lawyer who died in 1914; he possessed quite a collection of manuscripts and had evidently traveled to Istanbul in order to procure the text I had stumbled on in Cairo.

I was intrigued by this individual I had never heard of whose hunt for written treasure had yielded such a find in my own quest. Once I returned to Egypt for further archival work connected to my dissertation project, I looked for more information about al-Ḥusaynī and unexpectedly came across his name in the card catalog of the Egyptian National Library as the author of a twenty-four-volume manuscript book with the cryptic title *Murshid al-anām li-birr umm al-imām*, "The people's guide to respecting the imam's mother." Curious, I asked to see the work's first volume. I spent the rest of the day reading al-Ḥusaynī's extensive introduction, and by the evening I knew that I would one day write the book that you are holding now.

\* \* \*

When we think of the classics of Islamic thought today, we think in the first instance of works written by the founders of the various schools of theology,

<sup>2</sup> Al-Buwayṭī, *Mukhtaṣar* (Süleymaniye MS), fol. 196b.

law, philosophy, linguistics, Sufism, and historiography and by subsequent scholars who shaped these fields through their seminal contributions. The aisles of the bookshops around al-Azhar that I browsed for hours during my visits to Cairo could be relied on to contain, for example, Sibawayh's eighth-century grammar, al-Ash'ari's tenth-century survey of Islamic theology, al-Tabari's voluminous ninth-century exegesis of the *Quran*, al-Makkī's tenth-century Sufi manual, al-Shāfi'ī's ninth-century legal treatise, and Ibn Khaldūn's fourteenth-century sociology of history, usually in multiple editions and copies. These same classics formed the basis of the foundational works of Orientalist scholarship that I pored over in preparation for my qualifying exams at Harvard, and they are the same works I now teach in my classes as the "great books" of the Muslim world.

But this landscape of relatively established classics was not what al-Ḥusaynī faced at the turn of the twentieth century. Far from ubiquitous, these works were scarce and difficult if not impossible to find; not only had most not yet been edited and printed, but there were few manuscript copies of them, and the whereabouts of those few that existed were often unknown. Instead, the literature that *was* available and abundant consisted of a very different pool of writings: dense, technical commentaries on earlier works, typically written centuries after the original works' composition. It was this state of affairs that drove al-Ḥusaynī to embark on the grand quest that he describes in the introduction to his massive book. Deeply dissatisfied with what he saw as the narrow horizons of Islamic scholarship in his time, he had set out to gather the largely forgotten foundational early works of the Shāfi'ī school of law, to which he adhered, laboriously hunting down manuscript fragments across the Middle East, and then sought to reintroduce them to his contemporaries in the form of an exhaustive synthetic commentary on al-Shāfi'ī's magnum opus, *al-Umm* (The mother[book]).<sup>3</sup> In addition to producing this commentary, which brought together and summarized countless key works of earlier Shāfi'ī scholarship, al-Ḥusaynī arranged and financed the publication of the *Umm* itself; the seven-volume book appeared in print between 1903 and 1908, much earlier, thanks to al-Ḥusaynī, than the foundational legal works of most other schools.<sup>4</sup> Given its rich information on contemporary juristic trends and debates, the *Umm* subsequently became the lens through which Western scholars of Islamic law, such as Joseph Schacht, perceived the early history of their subject.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A more accurate rendition of the title of the commentary is thus "The people's guide to respecting Imam al-Shāfi'ī's *Umm*."

<sup>4</sup> The *Muwatta'* of Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), the founder of the Mālikī legal school, had been printed in 1864, but Mālik's treatment provided little information on the historical development of the law. For a detailed discussion of al-Ḥusaynī and his work, see chapter 4.

<sup>5</sup> See Schacht, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*.

Al-Ḥusaynī's account changed the way in which I viewed the "classics" on which my work—like that of other scholars of premodern Islam—was largely based. I realized that I had been wrong to assume that the printed classical literature, whose many known gaps were gradually being filled as new editions were completed and published, naturally reflected the essence of the Islamic intellectual tradition. To me as to Schacht, familiarity with al-Shāfi'ī's *Umm* had seemed indispensable to any serious study of Islamic law; but al-Ḥusaynī's description of scholarship in his time made it clear that just a century or two ago, even Shāfi'ī jurists saw absolutely no need to have read al-Shāfi'ī's own words in order to be considered leading experts in their field. The fact that books that had been so thoroughly marginalized and ignored had, in such a short time, attained the status of classics clearly owed much to their availability in printed form, but as al-Ḥusaynī's travails demonstrated, their printing was by no means inevitable: in the case of many of these long-forgotten works, the publication of a reasonably complete and accurate text constituted a major achievement that had required the marshaling of an array of philological, organizational, and financial resources, all underpinned by considerable time and commitment. But commitment by whom, and for what purpose?

These are the questions that this book seeks to answer.<sup>6</sup> My aim is to sketch the transformation of the Arabo-Islamic intellectual tradition that accompanied the adoption of printing in the Middle East, and to bring to light the stories of the hitherto mostly invisible individuals who effected this transformation. They collected books, resurrecting forgotten works, ideas, and aesthetics that they felt could contribute to the revival of Islamic and Arabic culture; they inaugurated institutions dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of their discoveries; and they developed practices and systems of editing and publication that led to a wave of printed editions of classical works from the late nineteenth century onward. Their motivations, goals, and approaches were diverse. Some sought to reinvigorate the established scholarly tradition, others to undermine it. Some emphasized the socially relevant messages conveyed in rediscovered older works, while others focused on their aesthetically superior form. Some consciously adapted the Orientalist tradition of editing and scholarship, whereas others sought to excavate an indigenous Arabic philology to counterbalance Orientalism and its claims to privileged expertise. All had to contend with the formidable challenges posed by centuries of cultural neglect of the classical literature: locating and obtaining manuscripts in the absence of catalogs, piecing together complete works out of scattered fragments, deciphering texts in spite of errors and damage, and understanding their meaning without recourse to adequate

<sup>6</sup>Similar questions were posed by Muhsin Mahdi in his programmatic 1995 article "From the Manuscript Age to the Age of Printed Books."

reference material. Their painstaking, frequently solitary, and often innovative efforts opened up the narrow postclassical manuscript tradition into a broad literature of printed, primarily classical works—the literature that we today consider the essential canon of Islamic texts.

This renaissance of classical literature by means of print was part of a broader constellation of sociocultural changes that has often been referred to as the *nahḍa*, “awakening.” Although there is no agreed-on definition of this phenomenon, developments that are typically placed under its umbrella include the large-scale translation of European works into Arabic, the adoption of European genres of literature, and engagement with the modern natural and social sciences.<sup>7</sup> An interest in the classical past appears less often among the features of the *nahḍa*,<sup>8</sup> although Western observers contemporaneous to it pointed out the connection.<sup>9</sup> But as this book shows, the resurrection of the classical heritage, particularly in the form of published editions of classical texts, was an integral facet of the activities of many key *nahḍa* figures.<sup>10</sup> They were not, as is often assumed, rejecting the Arabo-Islamic intellectual tradition wholesale in favor of an imported modernity. Instead, they drew on the classical tradition in order to undermine the postclassical one, which they decried as restrictive and ossified, and in order to reconstruct a classical literature that could serve as the foundation of an indigenous modernity.

My focus on the individual agents of this cultural transformation reflects my conviction that the technology of print was not a *cause* of the transformation as much as it was a *site* and a *means* of it. Influential studies of the history of print in the West, published between the 1960s and the 1980s, portrayed an inherent logic that connected the adoption of printing to subsequent sociocultural changes.<sup>11</sup> It is undeniably true that a manuscript culture differs in many respects from a written culture perpetuated through mechanical reproduction. But I reject the deterministic hypothesis that grants technology the power to override individual agency and to move societies along a fixed, inevitable trajectory—especially when the hypothesis rests on the blanket generalization of a particular (in this case Western) historical experience. Instead, this book tells the stories of the people who harnessed the multidirectional potential of print to further their diverse agendas, and it describes how the printing of rediscovered classical works,

<sup>7</sup>For definitions and descriptions of the *nahḍa*, see, for example, Patel, *Arab Nahḍah*; Di-Capua, “Arab Project of Enlightenment”; Sing, “Decline of Islam.”

<sup>8</sup>Contrast Tomiche’s flat denial of a connection between *nahḍa* and renaissance in “Nahḍa” with the title of El-Ariss’s anthology *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahḍa*.

<sup>9</sup>See Pedersen’s insightful observation in *Arabic Book*, 138 (originally published in 1946).

<sup>10</sup>Important *nahḍa* intellectuals discussed in this book include ‘Alī Mubārak, Rifā‘a al-Taḥṭāwī, Aḥmad Fāris al-Shidyāq, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā.

<sup>11</sup>McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy*; Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Eisenstein, *Printing Press*.

together with a host of related phenomena, such as the reassertion of classical Arabic and the foundation of modern libraries, permanently transformed the landscape of Islamic thought in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

\* \* \*

The narrative of this book opens in the early nineteenth century, when Arabo-Islamic book culture was still carried overwhelmingly in manuscript form, its practices of teaching, copying, and transmission perpetuating a continuous written discourse that was, by then, well more than a millennium old. But the literature that was taught, transmitted, and circulated at this time represented only a fraction of the extant Arabic literary corpus: early and classical works had been marginalized and often forgotten, and many clung to existence in rare, dispersed copies or fragments. In chapter 1, I outline the key factors that constrained the availability of such books—namely, the dramatic decline of traditional libraries and the voracious appetites and deep pockets of European collectors of Arabic books. Meanwhile, chapter 2 examines the reasons for the dearth of indigenous interest in these works: the dominant scholasticism of postclassical academic discourse preferred late commentary works over their classical predecessors, and the growing influence of Sufi esotericism undermined the authority of book-based learning altogether.

The adoption of printing to reproduce Arabic and Islamic literature changed the literary landscape. Not only could copies of books now be made available in much larger quantities than when each had to be copied by hand; more importantly, access to the presses was open to anyone who wished to publish a particular text and could come up with the money to have it printed. Chapter 3 describes the birth of the Arabic printing industry and the new opportunities that it created for the propagation of established as well as novel ideas and works, and chapter 4 uncovers the emerging constituency of elite bibliophiles such as ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Nāfi’ and Aḥmad Taymūr whose enthusiasm for classical literature, supported by social capital and access to financial resources, drove the rediscovery of long-lost classical works. As the movement to publish classical texts gained momentum, the challenges of reconstituting fragmentary and corrupted texts gave rise to the new cultural function of the editor, inaugurated by Aḥmad Zakī and described in chapter 5.

The technology of printing appealed to reformers of various stripes, who recognized its potential for promoting social and religious change. Chapter 6 discusses the editing and publishing activities of Ṭāhir al-Jazā’irī and Muḥammad ‘Abduh, both of whom believed in the power of eloquent language and the importance of ethical literature in the project of public edification. In chapter 7, I introduce other, less well-known reformist scholars, such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī and Maḥmūd Shukrī al-Ālūsī, who formed a



transnational network of like-minded individuals dedicated to rescuing classical texts from oblivion. Their choice of works to publish reflected their goal of challenging the postclassical scholarly orthodoxy on both methodological and substantive grounds. Their emphasis on the objective representation and evaluation of positions on their own merits found an echo in the developing discourse of textual criticism, discussed in chapter 8, within which philologists such as Muḥammad Shākir and Aḥmad Shākir grappled with issues of truth and authenticity and confronted the complex legacy of Orientalist scholarship in the shadow of European political and economic dominance.

Finally, a word on terminology and the limitations of the book's scope. I have striven to minimize the use of labels, and the few labels that I do use should be considered descriptive rather than evaluative. Accordingly, a "reformer" is simply someone who seeks to reform something, not necessarily along progressive lines; "scholasticism" is not intended (as it is sometimes used) as a term of abuse but simply as a descriptor of a specific mode of scholarship; and "postclassical" thought is so called because its central feature was its sidelining of the classical textual corpus. Geographically, my investigation of the Arabo-Islamic scholarly tradition and the printing movement has dictated a focus on the heartlands of this tradition where, for many decades, the movement was concentrated—especially Egypt, the Levant, and Iraq—with only marginal attention to regions less influential in the early stages of this movement and almost total disregard for editions and writings in languages other than Arabic. I do not discuss lithography, a technique of reproducing manuscripts mechanically that dominated the Indian, Iranian, and North African printing industries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because it represented a continuation of the preprint scribal tradition and lacked the features of moveable-type printing—such as clear script, distinct editors, and substantial print runs—that made the latter so pregnant with possibility.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, the aim of this book is to trace the evolution of the discourses of Islamic scholarship, and I therefore consider non-scholarly religious practices and ideas only insofar they are reflected in the arena of scholarship.

<sup>12</sup>See Messick, "On the Question of Lithography." Lithographs were produced in limited print runs, and they generally carry next to no information on the scribe or the other circumstances of publication.

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