chapter 14

Scholars in Networks: ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī and His Travels

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ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī visited Baalbek in Lebanon during a short trip in 1112/1700. He toured the famous Roman ruins and met with friends and officials. His description of this visit in one of his travel accounts provides a helpful view of how networks of scholars in the Islamic world of the eighteenth century actually operated. Scholarly networks throughout the history of the Muslim world are recognized as having significance.1 Sometimes scholars like al-Nābulusī provide narratives of their travels within the networks and these travel accounts are important historical sources. However, in studies utilizing this literature of travelers, most attention is given to analysis of literary formats, descriptive information provided, or conceptual content, while less consideration is given to what the scholars in these networks actually did while they were “networking.” An examination of this more personal dimension gives a sense of the nature and importance of the networks themselves.

Al-Nābulusī was one of the leading teachers and intellectuals in the Ottoman-Arab world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.2 He has been

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1 See, for example, the important volumes of studies of networks: Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip Hop (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), and Roman Loimeier, ed., Die islamische Welt als Netzwerk: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen des Netzwerkaansatzes im islamischen Kontext (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2000).

described as “[t]he outstanding figure in the Arabic literature of the Ottoman period.” The author of the great biographical dictionary of his age, Muḥammad Khalīl al-Murādī, states that al-Nābulusī “is the greatest among those for whom I have written biographies in terms of knowledge (ʿilm) and in being close to God (walāya),” and this is confirmed by the fact that his name dominates the lists of teachers of the major scholars whose biographies appear in Murādī’s dictionary.4

He undertook four trips for which he wrote travel narratives. These travel narratives are in a long tradition of Muslim travel accounts or riḥlas, a genre extending back to the writings of great medieval travelers like Ibn Jubayr in the twelfth/thirteenth centuries and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in the fourteenth century. Al-Nābulusī’s travel accounts are part of the development of “a new kind of mystical travel literature” with al-Nābulusī being “the best-known exponent of Arabic travel writing in which Sufi interests feature prominently.”5 He recounts his meetings with living Sufis and his visits to the graves of past Sufi masters. At the same time, his narratives provide interesting insights into his activities as a scholar as he is “networking” among his peers in the world of Muslim intellectuals and teachers.

1 Al-Nābulusī’s Travels: Some Networking

A few specific descriptions of al-Nābulusī’s activities help to provide a concrete awareness of what scholars like al-Nābulusī did as they traveled. The broad purposes of travel are often framed in discussions of the instruction in a Prophetic hadīth to seek knowledge, even unto China, and travel to fulfill the obligation of undertaking the pilgrimage (ḥajj). Many of the riḥla accounts are basically narratives of the pilgrimage to Mecca. Within this broad framework, it is useful to know some of the specifics of what the traveling scholars actually did as they moved within the networks of their peers. A few specific examples drawn from al-Nābulusī’s travel accounts can be helpful.

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Theology: ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī and His Network of Scholarship,” at the University of Tübingen, 4–6 September 2014, reflect the recognition of the importance of his work. A conference volume is planned.


5 Sirriyeh, Sufi Visionary, 108.