

# Introduction

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This volume is a collection of several of the papers presented during the first themed day of the First Conference of the School of Mamlūk Studies (held at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, from June 23 to June 25, 2014), devoted to Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). The organizers of this First Conference—Marlis Saleh, Frédéric Bauden, and myself—thought it appropriate to devote the themed day of the conference to this Egyptian polymath who is probably the best representative of encyclopaedism, a genre that was practiced extensively in his time. The wide gamut of disciplines he dealt with was the ideal nucleus around which to gather specialists in different fields who could contribute to a better knowledge of his intellectual profile and, more generally, to a deeper understanding of the cultural and academic life of the last period of the Mamlūk empire.

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, the most productive author of the pre-modern Islamic world and no doubt “the most controversial figure of his time,”<sup>1</sup> had a complex personality: arrogant, presumptuous, and polemic, he was involved in controversies of various kinds with his colleagues and with the political authorities of his time as well. His enemies were numerous, and a large number of his contemporaries displayed a remarkable and overt hostility against him. The most caustic among them, al-Sakhāwī, did not refrain from contesting his eminence as a scholar and from denigrating him and accusing him of plagiarism. Yet these tense relations with his colleagues, his overt criticism of the political authorities and, generally speaking, his unpleasant character conflicted not only with the affection showed by his pupils but also with “the aura of godliness”<sup>2</sup> that he enjoyed during his life; this makes his personality still more intriguing. The most visible feature of his scholarly profile is perhaps his eclecticism; indeed, he was a multifaceted intellectual and, though he declared *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, and grammar to be his preferred sciences, the titles of his bibliography range from law to theology, from linguistics to history, including medicine and geography. His wide-ranging scholarly output is no doubt a result of his belief that the level of scholarship had declined, even decayed. He felt that it was his mission to preserve the rich cultural heritage of the past, and knowledge in general, from widespread ignorance and from the decline in the learning

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1 Sartain, *Biography* 72.

2 Geoffroy, al-Suyūṭī 914.

standards of his time. But this belief did not cause him to retreat into the works of earlier scholars. He was first and foremost a man of the times. As such, he responded to his opponents—many of his works were written as a response to them, thus testifying to his deep involvement in debates and disputes of a political or scientific character. He was also able to recognize public demand, both that of his colleagues, the *‘ulamā*’, and that of readers at large, and was ready to respond to it by producing rigorous but handy commentaries, treatises, or reference works.

Considered for a long time an author devoid of any originality and a “simple” compiler (an accusation which the bitter remarks of al-Sakhāwī played a part in), he was in fact an excellent teacher and a rigorous scholar. He had a meticulous and accurate working method, which manifested itself in the methodical and faithful citation of his sources and also resulted, as some essays in this volume demonstrate, in a careful and well thought out process of self-editing.

Six decades ago E.M. Sartain called for a reassessment of al-Suyūṭī’s production by specialists in the disciplines he dealt with, and for a more nuanced position on the issue of his lack of originality.<sup>3</sup> In recent times and in a certain sense in response to her invitation, scholars have progressively changed their attitudes and started to appreciate al-Suyūṭī’s scrupulousness, honesty, and also originality. E.M. Sartain’s book, along with more recent contributions by Éric Geoffroy, Marlis Saleh, and Aaron Spevack are more than sufficient to introduce al-Suyūṭī’s life and bibliography;<sup>4</sup> the themed day of the conference devoted to al-Suyūṭī was thus specially conceived to throw new light on specific aspects of his scholarly output, to stimulate a careful reassessment of his polymorphic, intriguing (perhaps provoking) intellectual profile, and to formulate a fresh appraisal of his scholarly achievements and his contribution to the intellectual life of the Mamlūk period. Readers will find in the present volume fresh insights into aspects already investigated, like his stance towards power, as well as original remarks and new insights into issues until now poorly investigated or overlooked in scholarly literature, like al-Suyūṭī’s contribution to the genre of *ḥadīth* commentary or erotica. Commonly held opinions on al-Suyūṭī’s intellectual profile and working method are also questioned; some studies in this volume call for a more nuanced evaluation of al-Suyūṭī’s scholarly production, including his methods of quoting previous works (or even his own works) and his original and personal approach to linguistic questions. Last but not least, al-Suyūṭī’s impact on modern religious discourse is also

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3 Sartain, *Biography* 114–5.

4 See the bibliography at the end of this introduction.