CHAPTER 19

“Extremely Beautiful and Extremely Long”
Al-Qīrāṭī’s Exuberant Letter from the Year 761/1360

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Introduction

It is said that the generation of so-called “digital natives” is able to process information more quickly than older generations and that they are more talented at multitasking. It is also said, however, that they find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on a single, complex text for a long while. This is not the place to discuss this theory, but if it proves to be true, the prospects for the text presented here are rather meager. This text is a letter of exuberant length and complexity, not only by the standards of the twitter generation, but in the eyes of the writer’s contemporaries as well. In print, the letter would amount to about forty pages, a length that was already considered extraordinary at the time the letter was written.

Obviously, a text of this format is not an ideal subject for a contribution to a Festschrift, but the dedicatee of this volume was paying attention to literary prose texts from the Mamluk period back when these texts were only being used as sources by historiographers and being tapped for their quotations of older texts that had been lost in their original form.\(^1\) Literary texts such as post-Ḥarīrian \textit{maqāmāt} or, worse still, letters in ornate prose were disregarded almost completely. Gradually, the situation is improving,\(^2\) but major works such as all of Ibn Nubāta’s letters not included in al-Qalqashandī’s \textit{Ṣubh al-a’shā} are still in manuscript, and there is hardly any study analyzing such texts from an aesthetic point of view.\(^3\) This is grounds enough for presenting a text that is interesting for additional reasons:

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1 See Rowson, Homoerotic narratives, Alexandrian age, and his reviews in MSR 8 (2004), 315; MSR 10 (2006), 222; and MSR 14 (2010), 233.
2 To mention only the recent editions of aṣ-Ṣafādi, \textit{Alḥān} and Ibn Ḥijja, \textit{Qahwat al-inshā’}.
3 See Bauer, Toward an aesthetics of Mamluk literature, 14–20.
1. It is completely unknown. Though preserved in a comparatively large number of manuscripts and highly acclaimed by the author’s contemporaries, the text is still unedited, and no modern scholar has ever taken account of it.

2. It was considered an important text when it was created, and we can therefore assume that studying this text will shed light on the nature of literature and society at the time it was written.

3. Stylistically complex texts—even texts that are much more harmless than the text in question here—have often provoked negative reactions in the last two centuries from both Arab and Western readers. Being confronted with a text like this therefore promises to tell us a lot not only about its time, but about ours as well.

4. Curiosity is the starting point of scholarship, and this is a text that should make every reader curious. A number of mysteries have to be resolved, and a number of questions have yet to be answered. Why was a text like this written? Why did it find acclaim? What, after all, is its message? Even these obvious questions are not always easy to answer.

5. And, finally, for these and other reasons, the text as such is fascinating, which should be reason enough to present it to one of the leading connoisseurs of classical Arabic prose.

This study will neither answer all of the questions nor give an in-depth analysis, but it may demonstrate that al-Qīrāṭī’s text is interesting and deserves further study.

**Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī and his Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn**

The author of the text treated here is Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī. The name al-Qīrāṭī has nothing to do with the unit of weight al-qīrāṭ, but refers to a village in the administrative district of Bilbays (today Zaqāzīq) in the Sharqiyya province of the Nile delta. His father was born in this village and would later become a lawyer, judge and mufti, and, as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī remarks, a “mediocre poet.” His son Burhān ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm was born in Cairo in Ṣafar 726/January 1326 and specialized in precisely the field in which his father was only a mediocre talent and became an adīb, i.e. a poet, prose writer and scholar.

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