Nostalgia for the Future: A Comparison between the Introductions to Ibn ʿAsākir’s Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s Taʾrīkh Baghdād

Zayde Antrim

In an earlier article, I wrote that one of the main differences between the introductory representation of Baghdad in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s Taʾrīkh Baghdād (TB) and the introductory representation of Damascus in Ibn ʿAsākir’s Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq (TMD) is that the former is marked by a distinct nostalgia while the latter is not.1 While this argument remains sustainable based on several important differences between the two introductions (such as the triumphal dedication of the latter to the reigning prince in Damascus Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zangī (r. 541/1141–569/1174), an explicit evocation of Baghdad’s past glory under the early ʿAbbasid caliphs in the former, and a larger proportion of up-to-date topographical information in the TMD than in the TB), here I consider the possibility that both works in fact convey a certain nostalgia, or a vision of a more ideal past or future.2 Nostalgia is sometimes characterized as a static mood of reverie rather than an activist or political position. In this analysis, by contrast, longing for a temporally distant ideal—whether past or future—may be a vehicle for mounting a critique of the present and/or for inciting an audience to strive to attain that ideal. When this longing is expressed in the form of a representation of a city and its surrounding region, as it is in the introductions to the TB and the TMD, it can be seen as participating in what I have called a “discourse of place,” or an Arabic literary tradition in which texts from a variety

1 See Antrim, Ibn ʿAsākir’s representations 109–29. The editions of the two works that I will be referring to as TMD and TB below are: Ibn ʿAsākir, TMD, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (hereafter Ibn ʿAsākir, TMD 1/2); al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, Taʾrīkh Baghdād, ed. Maktabat al-Khānjī, vol. 1 (hereafter al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, TB 1). For partial translations and studies of each, see Elisséeff, La description de Damas d’Ibn ʿAsākir; Lassner, The topography of Baghdad.

2 This idea was inspired by Boym, The future of nostalgia, as well as by Rosenthal’s characterization of apocalyptic in Islam as a “history of the future” in Muslim historiography 23. While Boym does not identify a “nostalgia for the future” in her book, she does discuss the utopian elements of nostalgia and the way in which nostalgic yearnings are always born of temporal distance.
of genres focus on particular physical spaces as a means of asserting values, loyalties, or agendas.  

The two authors, separated by a century, were nonetheless closely connected intellectually, both in terms of general scholarly orientation and in terms of the landmark works in each author’s oeuvre, voluminous local biographical dictionaries focusing on the ʿulamāʾ and other figures of political and religious authority associated with their cities or the surrounding region. Many scholars have noted that Ibn ʿAsākir’s biographical dictionary was modeled in form and content on al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s and that Ibn ʿAsākir invokes al-Khaṭīb frequently as a source for his biographical entries. However, Ibn ʿAsākir quotes from the introduction to the TB in only two short sections of the much longer introduction to the TMD, and to my knowledge the city of Baghdad is not once mentioned in the 800 pages of the al-Munajjīd edition (though the region of Iraq and the cities of Kufa and Basra appear frequently). Moreover, although the introduction to the TMD loosely follows the format of the introduction to the TB, combining etymological, geographical, and historical information with a collection of traditions extolling the “virtues” (faḍāʾil) of the city and/or region and a series of topographical observations, this was in fact a very common format for the representation of cities and regions in works across the genres since the third/ninth century. Thus, the extent to which the introduction to the TMD was modeled specifically on that of the TB should not be overstated. Nevertheless, a number of conspicuous similarities between the two introductions, including both authors’ inclusion of apologies for their regions, suggest that Ibn ʿAsākir intended the introduction to the TMD to do for Damascus what had already been done for Baghdad in the TB. In what follows, I adopt Fred Donner’s methodology, identifying strategies of selection, repetition, and placement as clues to an author’s goals for and preoccupations in compiling material that might at first glance seem random or formulaic. This methodology works well in a comparative framework, as juxtaposing Ibn ʿAsākir’s and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s introductions and situating them in the broader

3 For more on the discourse of place, see Antrim, Routes and realms.
4 For an excellent, but brief, comparison between al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s and Ibn ʿAsākir’s approaches to and emphases in the compilation of biographical entries, see Lindsay, Ibn ʿAsākir, his Taʾrīkh 11–7.
5 See, for examples, Ibn ʿAsākir, TMD 1, 181, 575–90.
6 For three early works from different genres that nonetheless represent cities and regions with similar combinations of etymological, geographical, historical, scriptural, and topographical material, see al-Azraqī, Akhbār Makka; Ibn al-Faqīh, Mukhtaṣar kitāb al-buldān; Abū l-Maʿālī, Faḍāʾil Bayt al-Maqdis wa-l-Khalīl wa-faḍāʾil al-Shām.
7 Donner, ʿUthmān 44–61.