JOURNEYING TOWARDS MODERNITY. THE “SAFRAT AL-BATRAK MAKÂRIYÛS” OF BÛLUS IBN AL-ZA‘ÎM AL-HALABÎ*

BY

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On 9 July of the year 1652 A.D., or 7160 reckoning from the creation of the world, Makâriyûs, Patriarch of Antioch, set out from Aleppo to appeal to the prince of Moldavia, Vasile Lupu, for help in paying the patriarchate’s debts. He travelled with a small suite which included his son, the archdeacon Bûlus.

The time was inauspicious. During the Syrians’ stay in Moldavia Vasile Lupu was overthrown. The ruler to whom they turned next, the old and ill Matei Basarab of Wallachia, died while they were his guests; the Patriarch officiated at the accession of his successor, Constantin Şerban. Going north again, the Syrians crossed the Ukraine, which was savouring its independence from Poland and repairing the ravages of the recent wars, to seek help from Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich. They arrived in Moscow in January 1655 and spent nearly a year and a half in Russia, where Patriarch Makâriyûs was invited to give his opinion in the disputes between Patriarch Nikon and his religious opponents. On their way home, the travellers again passed through Moldavia and Wallachia, where they witnessed Constantin Şerban’s overthrow and the accession of Mihnea Radu. They reached Aleppo on 21 April 1659, with enough money to lighten the burden of taxes to which the Christians of the province of Damascus were subjected and cover other church expenses.¹ The entire journey had taken nearly seven years.²

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* A shorter version of this study was presented at the EMTAR conference on “Autobiography in modern Arabic literature” held in Oxford on 5–9 April 1995. I am grateful to the participants for their comments.


By far the largest part of the Safra is devoted to relating the journey itself, the important events the travellers witnessed and their historical background, meetings with rulers and ecclesiastical dignitaries, descriptions of noteworthy buildings and church services, and the manners and religious customs of the people whose countries they passed through. Because the 1650s are important, for different reasons, in the history of Moldavia, Wallachia, the Ukraine and Russia, and because Bûlus is a precise and sober reporter, the Safra has frequently been drawn on in studies of Rumanian, Ukrainian and Russian 17th century history and culture. It has also attracted scholarly attention for its unusual linguistic traits, to which I will come back. And its importance within the corpus of Christian Arabic writing has been recognised.

It is less appreciated, however, from the artistic point of view.

Orientalis, XXII, fasc. 1, 1930 (repr. 1976); XXIV, fasc. 4, 1933 (repr. 1976); XXVI, fasc. 5, 1949. I use the continuous pagination, given in square brackets: 3–199 in XXII (1), 203–362 in XXIV (4), 367–484 in XXVI (5). This summary is based on the editor’s introduction, 4–11.

Both safra and riha are found in the title of the text, the former, for instance, in the three MSS, in the library of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch in Damascus, the latter in Joseph Nasrallah, Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l’eglise melchite du Ve au XXe siècle, vol. IV, Période ottomane 1516–1900, tome 1, 1516–1724 Louvain 1979, 219. (It is curious that the text’s author appears nowhere on the title page of Radu’s edition.)


5 Nasrallah, Histoire du mouvement littéraire, 219–220, 224. Brockelmann, who excludes the writings of Christian and Jewish authors intended only for members of their own confessions, (Geschichte der arabischen Literatur, Bd. 1, 3), does not mention it. But the Safra may have been read outside Christian circles too, if Radu’s reading of the signature on the first folio of the Paris MS. (Voyage, 14) is correct.