

MEDIEVAL KNOWLEDGE IN MODERN READING:
A FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ARABIC ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF
OMNI RE SCIBILI

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In 1981, when the Lebanese capital of Beirut still remained in the firm grip of civil war, one of the most inspiring intellectual events in the city was the weekly meeting in the house of Iḥsān ʿAbbās, a renowned Palestinian specialist in Arabic history and classical Arabic literature. When on one of these occasions, I asked him about the fifteenth-century Arabic encyclopaedia called *al-Mustaṭraf*, I was astonished to see him frown and actually advise me not to mention the subject to him again. It was only several weeks later that he informed me about the reason for his harsh reaction: Iḥsān ʿAbbās told me that when he was growing up, the major reading matter available to satisfy his curiosity, in fact the only book in the home of his family besides the Qoran, the holy book of Islam, had been the *Mustaṭraf*—so he knew it almost by heart and was reluctant to confront his memory. Unfortunately, we never managed to discuss the *Mustaṭraf* in depth, but since this experience I think of the *Mustaṭraf* as a kind of *Hausbuch* of the average intellectual family in the Arab world.

Any effort to evaluate the *Mustaṭraf*'s position at the turn of the twentieth century not only leads to a discussion of its individual qualities but also necessitates a number of preliminary remarks sketching the historical and literary background of its genesis.

As for the *historical dimension*, Arabic literature is conventionally divided by analogy to political events into three major periods designated classical, intermediary (post-classical, pre-modern), and modern. The classical period began with the oral literature of pre-Islamic times, had its first major authors in the ninth century C.E. and lasted until the Mongol invasion and the resulting abolishment of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258. The intermediary period, lasting until the end of the eighteenth century, is seen by most Western as well as Islamic scholars predominantly as a period of cultural decline and decadence with few literary products deserving serious

attention; accordingly, only a minute percentage of the literary production of this period has been researched. In terms of literature, this decadence is usually seen in the small number of original, individual, inspiring, or simply new contributions: authors tended to produce highly repetitive compilations of the achievements of the classical period. It is to this period that the *Mustaṭraf* belongs. The modern period was initiated by Napoleon's Egyptian expedition and the ensuing developments, confronting the Arab world with the achievements of the West. In literature, this confrontation on the one hand resulted in a definite break with tradition and the formation of modern literature as influenced by Western models and ideas; on the other hand it led to a conscious appreciation of the heritage of classical Arabic literature, most of whose major works have become available in critical editions.

As for the *literary dimension*, the *Mustaṭraf* belongs to the genre of *adab*-literature, a genre which aims at combining instruction and entertainment, conveying knowledge in a diverting manner and employing entertaining topics in order to present and discuss serious moral and ethical matters. Moreover, the *Mustaṭraf* belongs to the category of encyclopaedia, or more specifically, the *adab*-encyclopaedia, a category which had already been established by a number of basic works in the ninth and tenth centuries, and to which the *Mustaṭraf* represents the last major contribution. So the *Mustaṭraf*'s genesis is to be seen against the specific background of a literary product summing up previous knowledge in a period of cultural decline.

In comparison with many other authors of the medieval period, the known facts about the *Mustaṭraf*'s author form a relatively clear picture.¹ His name was Bahā'addīn Abū 'l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ibšīhī. He was born around the year 790/1388 in the village of Abšūya in the Fayyūm (Upper Egypt),

¹ The most comprehensive presentation of Ibšīhī's biography is given by T. Paaanen, *Scribal Treatment of the Literary and Vernacular Proverbs of al-Mustaṭraf in 15th-17th Century Manuscripts. With special reference to diglossic variation* (Helsinki 1995) 15-21 (*Studia Orientalia* 77). Paaanen's book is a detailed study of the *Mustaṭraf*'s chapter on proverbial sayings (6), making this the only chapter so far covered by extensive research. On the position of the proverbial chapter in Arabic tradition see also R. Sellheim, "Eine fünfte Miszelle zur arabischen Sprichwörterkunde," *Oriens* 32 (1990) 463-475, at 469.

whence his epithet al-Abšihī, more commonly al-Ibšihī. He was educated in the traditional fields of knowledge such as theology, jurisprudence, and grammar, is known to have received lessons in Cairo from Jalāladdīn al-Bulqīni, probably was close to Šūfī-circles and appears to have made a living following his father's profession as a preacher. He is said to have died after the year 850/1446. The entry devoted to him in the biographical dictionary of eminent men of the ninth/fifteenth century compiled by his contemporary as-Saḥāwī (d. 902/1497)² describes him as a productive writer and author of several other works besides the *Mustaṭraf*, but also criticises a certain laxity and inexactitude in grammatical correctness, a verdict amounting to an implicit warning against the reliability of the way he presents his material.

The *Mustaṭraf*'s full rhyming title is *al-Mustaṭraf fi kulli fannin mustaṭraf*, roughly to be translated "The most appreciated precious topics from every art regarded as elegant." The French translation by Gustav Rat renders the title as "Recueil de morceaux choisis ça et là dans toutes les branches de connaissances réputées et attrayantes",³ and Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall imitates the Arabic rhyme in his German equivalent "Das Entzückende aus allen Kenntnissen Pflückende."⁴ The *Mustaṭraf* has been characterised by Western scholars as "a vast encyclopaedia of *omni re scibili*,"⁵ intending to inform the reader *de rebus omnibus et quibusdam aliis*,⁶ a veritable "*Dictionnaire de conversation*"⁷ treating just

² Šamsaddīn Muḥammad ibn 'Abdarrahmān as-Saḥāwī: *aḍ-Ḍau' al-lāmi' li-ahl al-qarn at-tāsi'* (repr. Beirut s.a.) 7.109.

³ *Al-Mostaṭraf*, tr. G. Rat, 2 vols. (Paris/Toulon 1899-1902). For reviews and related commentaries up to about 1905, see V. Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes ou relatifs aux arabes publiés dans l'Europe chrétienne de 1810 à 1885* (Liège/Leipzig 1892-1922) 9.64-65, no.86.

⁴ J. von Hammer-Purgstall, "Bericht über die in den letzten vier Jahren 1845, 46, 47 und 48 zu Constantinopel gedruckten und lithographirten Werke," *Sitzungsberichte der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* 3,2 (1849) 126-137, 174-182, 251-261, 266-275, 310-315; concerning the *Mustaṭraf* see 255-261, 266-273, at 255.

⁵ J.-C. Vâdet, "al-Ibšihī," in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden/London 1979) 3.1005-1006, at 1005, rendering the statement as supplied in Rat, *Mostaṭraf* (as in n.3) author's preface, 1.vii.

⁶ *Orientalistische Litteratur-Zeitung* 6 (1903) 289 (H. Reckendorf).

⁷ *Journal asiatique* 19,15/1 (1900) 388 (J. Houdas).

about every topic a fourteenth-century Muslim ought to be informed about,⁸ a “populäre Moralenzyklopädie,”⁹ in general a “fully-fledged representative of Arabic encyclopaedic literature.”¹⁰ Ibšihī himself outlined the aim of his compilation in his introductory remarks by first referring to previous authors who had collected “literary subjects, pious exhortations and moral instructions” besides presenting “voluminous books on history, anecdotes, tales, stories, witticisms and delicate poetry.”¹¹ Though he agrees with the merits of those previous compilations, he judges his own work as more comprehensive and more systematically arranged—“so that its reader can find in it everything he looks for and wishes,” and so that anyone studying its list of contents can immediately identify the topic he is looking for.

The *Mustaṭraf* is almost exclusively a compilation of material available in previous sources. Ibšihī explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to two previous *adab*-encyclopaedias: *Kitāb al-‘Iqd* by Ibn ‘Abdrabbih (d. 327/949) and *Rabī‘ āl-ābrār* by az-Zamaḥšarī (d. 538/1144). In addition to these he has exploited a large number of other works of theological, historical, and *adab*-literature,¹² some of which are mentioned at various places in his book. The author’s personal contribution to his work is minimal, restricting itself—according to the recent analysis by Timo Paa-janen¹³—to four categories:

1. Brief comments and requests addressed to the reader concerning the subject at hand
2. Summaries at the beginning or the end of chapters and [...] short remarks serving as transitional material
3. Descriptions of events based on al-Ibšihī’s personal experience

⁸ C. Pellat, “Les encyclopédies dans le monde arabe,” in: id., *Études sur l’histoire socio-culturelle de l’Islam* (London 1976) 631638, at 642 (“tout ce qu’un Musulman moyen doit savoir”).

⁹ *Literarisches Centralblatt* 54, 29 (1903) 982 (C. F. Seybold).

¹⁰ Paa-janen, *Proverbs* (as in n.1) 20.

¹¹ A concise listing of traditional narrative material in the *Mustaṭraf* is supplied by U. Marzolph, “Ibšihī,” in: *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (Berlin/New York 1993) 7.610.

¹² Summarised following Rat, *Mostaṭraf* (as in n.3) by Paa-janen, *Proverbs* (as in n.1) 20, n.2.

¹³ Paa-janen, *Proverbs* (as in n.1) 21, with references in n.36.

4. Insertions of his own verses and poems in the text

Furthermore, a recent Arabic editor of the *Mustaṭraf*¹⁴ has pointed out that Ibšihī probably owes more to the *Kitāb al-ʿIqd* than a body of borrowed material, but probably even modelled the title of his own book on a remark in the introductory passage in which Ibn ʿAbdrabbih explicitly mentions a tale (*ḥabar*) “regarded as elegant,” using the same word *mustaṭraf* later employed by Ibšihī in coining the title of his encyclopaedia.

The *Mustaṭraf* contains a total of 84 chapters. Jean-Claude Vadet, the author of the entry on Ibšihī in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*,¹⁵ has made the only attempt at analysing the *Mustaṭraf*'s larger groups of chapters treating similar topics:

- chapters 1-16: human mind and the natural lights of reason: religion, wisdom, good customs, various talents
- chapters 17-22: a sort of treatise on society and its most characteristic categories
- chapters 23-51: “pure” morality
- chapters 52-76: various thoughts on the marvels of nature and the profane arts of poetry and music

Vadet's grouping is admittedly rough. It constitutes a first attempt at deciphering a system which obviously does not disclose itself easily. On the other hand, there is no absolute necessity to presuppose a systematic arrangement of the material in the *Mustaṭraf*. Arabic *adab*-encyclopaedias usually work with a fair amount of associative criteria often resulting in a kind of “holistic” creative chaos, and the *Mustaṭraf*'s author is right in underlining the comparatively strict organisation of his own work. And yet, though this may be predominantly the obsession of a Western analytic mind, it is unsatisfying not to be able to discover a master-plan in the *Mustaṭraf*'s inner structure.

In this respect, it seems worthwhile to consider again the role of the *Kitāb al-ʿIqd* as model, pointed out by ʿAbdallāh Anīs aṭ-Ṭabbāʿ. In addition to moulding the title of his encyclopaedia on the quotation from the *Kitāb al-ʿIqd*, Ibšihī might have drawn some inspiration for the arrangement of his material from Ibn ʿAbdrabbih, the chapters of whose book are arranged as a necklace

¹⁴ Ed. ʿAbdallāh Anīs aṭ-Ṭabbāʿ (Beirut 1981) 20.

¹⁵ Vadet, “al-Ibšihī” (as in n.5).

(*'iqd*) of precious stones, lined up in symmetrical sequence of twelve jewels on each side around a centrepiece, thus amounting to 25 chapters altogether. Though it is not possible to decipher a strict arrangement of chapters in the *Mustaṭraf* comparable to the parallel naming of chapters in the *'Iqd*, there are some striking similarities in structure. A closer examination of the *Mustaṭraf* at first reveals a frame of predominantly religious topics: the opening chapters deal with the basic tenets of the Islamic creed (1) and the Qoran (3), besides discussing (as equally basic, yet subordinate elements) reason, intelligence and stupidity (2);¹⁶ the concluding chapters (77-83), on the other hand, while abruptly following the merry chapters on women, wine, jokes and anecdotes (73-76), close the frame with an intense *memento mori* elaborating prayer, destiny, repentance, illness, death, patience, and the uselessness of attaching oneself to this world. A final chapter (84) praises the prophet Mohammed. This predominantly religious frame is filled by two halves of unequal length, the first of which (chapters 5-45) focuses on moral and ethical qualities while the second deals with distracting (46-62) and entertaining (63-76) matters. Within this general description, several groups of between two to seven chapters with a common theme can be identified, following one another like rough jewels on a string:

- 5-9: language
- 10-13: virtues and vices
- 14-20: government
- 21-25: social life
- 30-31: saints
- 40-41: courage
- 46-48: the body
- 63-67: wonders of creation
- 68-73: entertainment
- 75-76: jocular narratives

Some of the chapters are arranged according to the principle of contrasts, such as 19-20: justice and injustice, 26-27: modesty and pride, 33-34: generosity and stinginess, 51-52: richness and poverty; others follow with a loose or even without any apparent con-

¹⁶ F. Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant. The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden 1970) 274-275.

nection to the previously treated topics, such as 35: table-manners following 34: stinginess; 50: travel following 49: names; 59: the ancient Arabs following 58: slavery.

The *Mustaṭraf* has been known to Western scholars at least since the early eighteenth century, when it was the subject of a short entry in Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* (originally published in 1697), the first encyclopaedia of Islam ever conceived.¹⁷ The fact that its "overall plan is less easy to discern"¹⁸ has prompted a number of highly critical evaluations, most of them published in contemporary reviews by leading Arabists of the time of Gustav Rat's French translation,¹⁹ which appeared in two volumes in 1899 and 1902—making the *Mustaṭraf* the only Arabic encyclopaedia to be translated in full into a European language. René Basset regards the lack of originality as a characteristic trait of this kind of literary work, and of that of Ibšihī in particular, to whom he concedes "peu de personnalité";²⁰ Maurice Gaudefroyes-Demombynes sees the *Mustaṭraf* as an important source of second hand information, extracted in the course of the extensive and varied readings of a good scholar, who—without aiming to think himself [!] ("sans chercher à penser par lui-même")—wanted to leave the fruits of his efforts as a heritage for his fellow-citizens.²¹ While Hermann Reckendorf laments a lack of (intellectual) depth,²² Baron Bernard Carra de Vaux senses a "multitude of treasures" in the *Mustaṭraf*, but advises us first to work the ore so the pure metal can

¹⁷ *Bibliothèque orientale, ou Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connoissance des Peuples de l'Orient. [...] par Monsieur d'Herbelot* (Maestricht 1776) 634 qualifies the *Mustaṭraf* as "un Florilège d'élégances Arabiques." On d'Herbelot see H. Laurens, *Aux Sources de l'Orientalisme. La Bibliothèque Orientale de Barthélemy D'Herbelot* (Paris 1978) and the criticism most pointedly voiced in E.W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York 1978) *passim*.

¹⁸ H. Kilpatrick, "A Genre in Classical Arabic Literature: The *Adab* Encyclopedia," in: R. Hillenbrand, *Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants. 10th Congress. Proceedings* (Edinburgh 1982) 34-42, at 35.

¹⁹ Rat, *Mostaṭraf* (as in n.3).

²⁰ *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 41 (1990) 401-417, at 401.

²¹ *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* 37,2 (1903) 124-125, at 125.

²² *Orientalistische Literatur-Zeitung* 6 (1903) 290: "In die Tiefe freilich geht das Werk nirgends."

show.²³ Michael Jan de Goeje at least concedes an "honourable position"²⁴ for the *Mustaṭraf*.

While several specific essays on Egyptian encyclopaedic literature towards the end of the Middle Ages treat their subject without even so much as mentioning the *Mustaṭraf*²⁵—which in itself appears to be a judgmental measure—few evaluations are predominantly positive. Thus, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall while introducing the *Mustaṭraf*'s Turkish translation speaks of one of the most famous Arabic anthologies and one of the most important, instructive and entertaining encyclopaedias;²⁶ Max Weisweiler regards the book as a brilliant supplement to Ibn 'Abdrabbih's compilation;²⁷ Sergej Shuiskii in a short encyclopaedic survey qualifies the *Mustaṭraf* as one of the "practical handbooks that are real treasure troves of cultural data."²⁸ Yet in most of the more recent statements, a highly critical attitude prevails. For Jean-Claude Vadet the *Mustaṭraf* is a "rather clumsy work" with a "rather haphazard arrangement" which however he admits not to be "entirely illogical."²⁹ Hartmut Fähndrich sees in the *Mustaṭraf* an inner, material continuity of this kind of *adab*-literature through the centuries, but clearly discerns a limited intellectual capacity ("begrenzte geistige Fähigkeiten") in its author.³⁰ And Franz Rosenthal in his discussion of the presentation of knowledge in what he labels "*adab* anthologies" is wise enough not to qualify the *Mustaṭraf* at all, but

²³ *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* 34,2 (1900) 370-373, at 369.

²⁴ *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 24 (1903) 466-467, at 466.

²⁵ G. Wiet, "Les classiques du scribe égyptien au XV^e siècle," *Studia islamica* 18 (1963) 41-80 (exclusively on Qalqašandi); R. Blachère, "Quelques réflexions sur les formes de l'encyclopédisme en Égypte et en Syrie du VIII^e/XIV^e siècle à la fin du XI^e/XV^e siècle," *Bulletin des études orientales* 23 (1970) 719 (on Nuwairi, 'Umari, and Qalqašandi); M. Chapoutot-Remadi, "Les encyclopédies arabes de la fin du Moyen Age," in: A. Becq (ed.), *L'Encyclopédisme. Actes du Colloque de Caen 12-16 janvier 1987* (Paris 1991) 267-279 (on Waṭwāṭ, Nuwairi, 'Umari, Qalqašandi).

²⁶ Hammer-Purgstall, "Bericht" (as in n.4) 255, 256.

²⁷ M. Weisweiler, *Arabische Märchen* (Düsseldorf/Köln 1966) 2.287.

²⁸ S. Shuiskii, "Encyclopedias and Dictionaries, Arabic and Persian," in: *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York 1984) 4.442-446, at 445.

²⁹ Vadet, "al-Ibshihī" (as in n.5).

³⁰ H. Fähndrich, "Der Begriff »adab« und sein literarischer Niederschlag," in: W. Heinrichs (ed.), *Neues Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*, vol. 5: *Orientalisches Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden 1990) 319-345, at 335.

makes it clear that he finds it difficult when characterising Ibšihī's achievement to "speak of a development."³¹

The critical and even devastating evaluation by Western scholars is in sharp contrast to the *Mustaṭraf*'s unquestioned appreciation in its original environment. Most major libraries in East and West contain one or more manuscripts of the *Mustaṭraf*, some of them compiled comparatively close to the author's lifetime;³² Ibšihī's actual autograph, however, has not yet been identified. A number of imitations and extracts prepared by later Arabic authors³³ demonstrate the *Mustaṭraf*'s popularity, as does the (enlarged) Turkish translation prepared by Es'ad Efendi at the beginning of the nineteenth century.³⁴ As a matter of fact, the rich manuscript tradition of the *Mustaṭraf* appears to have given way to an equally rich tradition in print since about the middle of the nineteenth century. Between 1850 and 1950 the *Mustaṭraf* was printed (in Būlāq or Cairo) probably up to twenty times, and since then the Cairo editions have been republished numerous times in photostatic reprints (in Beirut); the book was finally published in modern type (and in an allegedly first critical edition relying on several, though undisclosed, manuscripts) in the early 1980s.³⁵ In the 1990s, Beirut publishers even produce small excerpts almost of a chapbook character with titles such as *al-Mustaṭraf min al-Mustaṭraf* ("The most elegant pieces from *al-Mustaṭraf*") clearly aiming at a reading public with limited financial means such as those buying from the numerous sidewalk peddlers and newspaper stands in the big cities of the Arab world. Both recent Arabic editors of the *Mustaṭraf* stand to its defence, not so much against the Orientalist criticism, but rather against critical evaluations such as the one stated in as-Saḥāwī's biographical dictionary.³⁶ Muḥid Qumaiḥa stresses the author's intention to support

³¹ Rosenthal, *Knowledge* (as in n.16) 274.

³² Paaianen, *Proverbs* (as in n.1) 22-30, 257-258.

³³ C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, 2nd ed. (Leiden 1943) 2.68; *Supplement* (Leiden 1938) 2.55-56.

³⁴ See Hammer-Purgstall, "Bericht" (as in n.4).

³⁵ Ed. 'Abdallāh Anīs aṭ-Ṭabbā' (as in n.14); ed. Muḥid Qumaiḥa (Beirut 1983), 2 vols. I would like to thank Hilary Kilpatrick for pointing out to me the new edition by Darwiš al-Guwaidī (Beirut 1996) as advertised in *Sulaiman's Bookshop List* no. 92 (January-March 1996).

³⁶ as-Saḥāwī, *Dau'* (as in n.2).

and strengthen human qualities and underlines his effort to employ simple yet illustrative passages from the Qoran and the prophet Mohammed's sayings, "which enter the heart and the mind without any obstacle"; furthermore, he stands up against those who regard Ibšihī as an uninspired compiler, a *Materialhuber* (Arabic *ḡammā'*), by underlining the *Mustaṭraf*'s character as the product of an intentional educational process.³⁷ 'Abdallāh Anis aṭ-Ṭabbā' points out the *Iqd*'s role as model, defends Ibšihī against the reproach of grammatical laxity, and advertises the *Mustaṭraf* as a direct successor to the model compilations of the classical period, labelling it as "book of the books, treasure of traditional literature, and ultimate goal to be attained."³⁸

Both views, the nationalist praise as well as the Orientalist criticism, miss an essential point, probably *the* essential point constituting the *Mustaṭraf*'s timeless importance and responsible for its privileged position over a period of more than five centuries. True, the *Mustaṭraf*'s author may not claim to be an original thinker, which in the eyes of Western criticism would alone deserve recognition and praise. Yet, as I have elaborated in a different context,³⁹ and as is similarly the case in the field of European compilations of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in contemporary opinion a work did not necessarily have to have an individual approach in order to deserve high esteem. As for Arabic compilations, the individual contribution of an author often did not consist in *what* was presented, but rather in *how* he presented it. The raw material would be regarded as a kind of common stock which everyone was entitled to exploit, and the achievement of an author would be judged according to the quality of the authorities he quoted from and the individual way in which he organised his material.

In this respect the *Mustaṭraf* has achieved incomparably more than any of its successors. First, the material is presented in a comparatively structured way in chapters which are easy to locate; second, the presentation of material within the respective chapters

³⁷ Qumaiḥa (ed.), *Mustaṭraf* (as in n.35) 58.

³⁸ aṭ-Ṭabbā' (ed.), *Mustaṭraf* (as in n.14) 23.

³⁹ U. Marzolph, *Arabia ridens. Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen adab-Literatur im internationalen Traditionsgeflecht*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main 1992) 1.60-66.

follows a pattern which is both traditionally accepted and convincing: introductory passages from the Qoran are followed by sayings of the prophet Mohammed; next come those of his companions, until the level of presentation gradually descends from the sacred to the profane, to anecdotes and poetic verses;⁴⁰ third, and most important, the complete work does not comprise more than a single volume. This makes the *Mustaṭraf* the first major representative of the genre of encyclopaedic *vademecum*, a book which not only offers its rich treasury of traditional knowledge in the dignified and secluded atmosphere of public or private libraries, but which is available as a constant mobile companion, supplying ready reference for questions on all vital subjects of everyday life.

Given its unique position of addressing a large audience, it is important to recall the nature of the *Mustaṭraf*'s material. On the one hand, it is of a definitely traditional nature. Ibšihī has picked the "most appreciated precious topics from every art (traditionally) regarded as elegant." Yet he has arranged the material in a specific order, and his distinct imprint implicitly reveals itself in the choice of topics as well as their arrangement. Charles Pellat, for instance, has pointed out the significant position of the *Mustaṭraf*'s last chapter (84) on the praise of the prophet Mohammed. According to Pellat, Ibšihī's contemporaries in the fifteenth century were well aware of the fact that the cultural and political decadence they faced did not leave much choice but to ask God's blessing for the prophet Mohammed and his community, hoping that the situation could be improved and the glory of Islam would be restored.⁴¹ Franz Rosenthal has emphasised the position of the chapter on knowledge (2), ranking only second after the introductory chapter on the pillars of Islam. In his opinion, this position is indicative of the author's evaluation of all secular learning as secondary to religious identity: "the intellect ranks in importance below the duties of the religious law."⁴² And Pellat goes so far as to suggest a twofold moral function of the *Mustaṭraf*, inasmuch as it not only supplied basic information on useful topics but also in a period of stagnation helped to strengthen confidence by recalling the achievements of the classical

⁴⁰ Cf. *Journal asiatique* 19,15/1 (1900) 389 (J. Houdas).

⁴¹ Pellat, "Encyclopédies" (as in n.8) 643.

⁴² Rosenthal, *Knowledge* (as in n.16) 274.

period.⁴³ Thus, one might even regard the *Mustaṭraf* as an essential factor in shaping the identity of its readers.

Pellat, Rosenthal and others⁴⁴ understand Ibšīhī's "concern with impressing upon his readers the religious and moral virtues of knowledge" as an inevitable result of the "intellectual climate of his time."⁴⁵ From the present perspective, at the turn of the twentieth century, it is evident that Ibšīhī's work over the centuries since its compilation has lost little of its original appeal. So if the *Mustaṭraf* at the time of its compilation constituted an essential factor in shaping the identity of its readers, its permanent appeal is bound to signal a lasting continuity of this very meaning. Obviously, modern readers still delight in and profit from the *Mustaṭraf*'s presentation. On the other hand, the new vigour the Muslim world has gained since about the middle of the twentieth century has resulted in the strengthening of its traditional identity, and religious as well as traditional cultural values of the classical period are held in higher esteem than ever. For those concerned, this is not indicative of a new period of decadence or a feeling of inferiority, but rather expresses a new consciousness of dignity and pride referring to the cultural achievements of the classical period. Time will show whether under these conditions a work like the *Mustaṭraf*, preserving cultural values of the classical period, moulded in the specific understanding of its fifteenth-century Egyptian author, and presented in its almost unaltered medieval form to a modern audience, will retain the privileged position it has held for so many centuries.

⁴³ Pellat, "Encyclopédies" (as in n.8) 643-644.

⁴⁴ See Fährdrich, *Begriff* (as in n.30) 335: "trotz der dem Geist seiner Zeit entsprechenden stärkeren Betonung des Religiösen bei al-Ibšīhī"; cf. G.E. von Grunbaum, *Der Islam im Mittelalter* (Zürich/Stuttgart 1963), especially chapter 1, where the *Mustaṭraf* is cited in several places (see index).

⁴⁵ Quotations from Rosenthal, *Knowledge* (as in n.16) 275.

APPENDIX: LIST OF CHAPTERS IN THE *MUSTAṬRAF*

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|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. basic tenets of Islam | people | earth |
| 2. reason and intelligence | 33. generosity | 67. mines and precious stones |
| 3. the Qoran | 34. stinginess | 68. music and singing |
| 4. knowledge | 35. table-manners | 69. singers and musicians |
| 5. sayings | 36. forgiveness and magnanimity | 70. female singers |
| 6. proverbs | 37. keeping of promises | 71. love |
| 7. rhetoric | 38. discretion | 72. poems |
| 8. prompt answers | 39. perfidy | 73. women |
| 9. speeches, poetry | 40. courage | 74. wine |
| 10. trust in God | 41. heroes | 75. jokes |
| 11. counsel and experience | 42. praise | 76. anecdotes |
| 12. moral advice | 43. satire | 77. prayer |
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