

Collectors' Knowledge:  
What Is Kept, What Is Discarded  
Aufbewahren oder wegwerfen  
– Wie Sammler entscheiden

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NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS / NICHTWESTLICHE KONTEXTE



COINING THE ESSENTIALS: ARABIC ENCYCLOPAEDIAS  
AND ANTHOLOGIES OF THE PRE-MODERN PERIOD

Ulrich Marzolph

Dabshelim, king of India, had so numerous a library that a hundred brachmans were scarcely sufficient to keep it in order, and it required a thousand dromedaries to transport it from one place to another. As he was not able to read all these books, he proposed to the brachmans to make extracts from them of the best and most useful of their contents. These learned personages set themselves so heartily to work, that in less than twenty years they had compiled of all of these extracts a little Encyclopedia of 12,000 volumes, which thirty camels could carry with ease. They had the honour to present it to the king. But how great was their amazement, on his giving them for answer, that it was impossible for him to read thirty camel-loads of books! They therefore reduced their extracts to fifteen, and afterwards to ten, to four, then to two dromedaries, and at last there remained only so much as to load a mule of ordinary stature.

Unfortunately, Dabshelim, during this process of melting down his library, was grown old, and saw no possibility of living to exhaust its quintessence to the last volume. 'Illustrious sultan,' said the vizier, the sage Pilpay, 'though I have but a very imperfect knowledge of your royal library, yet I will undertake to deliver you a very brief and satisfactory abstract of it. You shall read it through in one minute, and yet you will find matter in it for reflecting upon throughout the rest of your life.' Having said this, Pilpay took a palm leaf, and wrote upon it with a golden style the following four sentences. . . . (Hone 1827, 124)

The above anecdote is quoted from William Hone's *Table-Book of Daily Recreation*, a volume that was published at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The anecdote's earliest known version is given at the beginning of the fifth chapter in the mirror for princes *al-Tibr al-masbûk* (Smelted Ore), compiled by the Arabic author al-Ghazzâlî, who died in 1111 (Ghazzâlî 1987). Communicated to the European public by way of Antoine Galland's edifying booklet *Les Paroles remarquables, les bons mots, et les maximes des Orientaux* (Galland 1694, 129–130) and Denis Dominique Cardonne's *Mélanges de littérature orientale* (Cardonne 1770, 259–261), versions of the anecdote are included in various collections of 'Oriental' tales (Chauvin 1904, 139–140, no. 138), a genre that enjoyed considerable popularity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe (Marzolph 2009) as part of the way Europeans imagined the 'Orient' (Polaschegg 2005). Since the

anecdote was quoted in a large variety of publications in the major European languages, both its imagery and the content of the four pieces of wisdom could potentially reach a wide readership. It would be fascinating to retrace the anecdote's history and diffusion. It would be even more tempting to discuss the contents of the four sentences that serve as a kind of intellectual *lapis philosophorum*. Yet in the present context the anecdote is quoted for a different purpose. Introducing a brief survey of Arabic encyclopaedias and anthologies of the pre-modern period, it serves to highlight two points that are essential for the following considerations.

On a theoretical level, the anecdote reveals an interesting dichotomy between the intellectual longing for comprehensiveness and the practical necessity of manageable brevity. On the one hand, the king of India's library exemplifies the desire for an all-encompassing encyclopaedic compendium assessing the totality of human knowledge. On the other hand, the gradual reduction of this comprehensive collection to a few short sentences, however skilful the process of reduction might be, underlines the relative value of knowledge: the vast majority of the collected knowledge is assumed to be dispensable, as it is submitted to a gradual boiling down of quantitative arrangements aimed at a condensed result that coins the essentials.

In Arabic literature, these opposing tendencies have given rise to two literary genres that I propose to discuss in the following. Encyclopaedic compilation has been a constant companion to other forms of writing since the early days of Arabic literature in the Muslim period (Biesterfeldt 2002; Kilpatrick 1982; Van Gelder 1997). Meanwhile, ever since the classical period of Arabic literature, authors have endeavoured to condense the available knowledge into much shorter compilations, whether by way of selection or abridgement. For want of more suitable terminology, the two genres concerned will be treated here under the labels of 'encyclopaedia' and 'anthology'. Handy as these terms are, though, it should be kept in mind that their drawback lies in the fact that they suggest the feasibility of applying European literary concepts to non-European, in this case Arabic, literature—an assumption that is most often not only wrong but whose implications have produced outrageously biased assessments of the works in question by European scholars.

Muslim Arabic culture is dominated by the supremacy of the spoken word or, to be more exact, the supremacy of oral communication (Kishtainy 1985, 11–15). The holy scripture of Islam, the Koran, was revealed to the prophet Muhammad in a process initiated by the word 'Recite!'



and large parts of pre-modern Arabic literature betray their origin in oral communication by being attributed to acknowledged authorities, in the case of 'serious' argumentation often together with a detailed chain of transmitters (Arabic *isnâd*). Considering the high esteem in which oral tradition is held, it comes as an apparent contradiction that, at the same time, the Arabic culture of the Muslim period has been characterised as a culture of the book. The contradiction is resolved when we consider the obvious violability, the potential variety and the inherent unreliability of oral tradition. Both the Arabic script as developed in the seventh century CE and the Arabic literature of the Muslim period essentially owe their development to the unfathomable experience of divine revelation and the ensuing need for permanent and reliable textual documentation. The rapid expansion of the Arabic Islamic Empire in the seventh and eighth centuries CE and the intellectual perspective widened by the integration of Greek and Persian knowledge (Gutas 1998) soon led to the need for authoritative summaries to guide the reader through the vast array of available knowledge.

Early surveys of encyclopaedic works in Arabic, such as the one by Charles Pellat, add an additional element of intellectual competition. Pellat points to the fact that in the ninth century the "religious policy of the caliphate brought to the forefront Muslims disturbed by the turn taken by the rather anarchic quest for knowledge and by the danger to the integrity of Islam that they perceived to be posed by a curiosity which appeared reprehensible" (Pellat 1991, 904). In the context of this development, Pellat discusses the production of Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), an author who served as *qâdî* in the Iranian city of Dinawar for twenty years and who is usually credited with compiling the first encyclopaedic surveys of knowledge in Arabic in a series of three handbooks. Pellat sees these works as characterised by an explicit "conservative attitude" (*ibid.*) towards previous intellectual developments in the world of Islam, since Ibn Qutayba's collections of authoritative knowledge were intended to serve as guidelines for members of the cultured public who might have been bewildered by the sheer amount of speculative theory available in their day. Meanwhile, Pellat's main point is not only the encyclopaedic nature of Ibn Qutayba's works, but also the fact that these works are set off against the "liberalism and eclecticism" (*ibid.*) of authors like al-Jâhiz (d. 868), whose writings Pellat regards as superior because of their independent reasoning. In a similar vein, much of Pellat's further discussion, rather than aiming to convey a balanced idea of Arabic encyclopaedias against the backdrop

of their indigenous cultural context, is tainted by a strong bias towards European concepts such as ‘originality’, ‘intellectual curiosity’ and conceivable order.

In his recent theoretical reflections on the concept of encyclopaedia in Islam, Josef van Ess has pondered the “inflationary manner in which the term is used” (Van Ess 2006, 6) in the discipline of Arabic and Islamic studies. Wondering whether a ‘comprehensive’ biographical dictionary, a *summa theologica*, a manual for secretaries or a cosmographical work may rightfully be regarded as an encyclopaedia, Van Ess advocates a descriptive definition of the phenomenon in Arabic literature. Similarly, Dimitri Gutas speaks of “early Arabic encyclopaedism” (rather than ‘encyclopaedias’), which he sees as expressing itself in at least three distinct genres of writing—inventories of varying brevity of the sciences containing descriptions of the subjects covered; mirrors for princes, i.e., “writings offering advice of mostly a political and ethical nature”; and “collections of entertaining and instructive information on various subjects each of which is treated individually in a dedicated chapter” (Gutas 2006, 91–92).

It is this last category of collections of useful knowledge that is probably most characteristic for the encyclopaedic works of the period that might be termed the golden age of encyclopaedias, i.e., the Mamluk period spanning the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. A frequently quoted example is al-Damîrî’s fourteenth-century zoographical encyclopaedia *Hayât al-hayawân* (The Life of Animals). In its alphabetical arrangement of entries, this work comes fairly close to the modern European notion of an encyclopaedia, yet in terms of its structure and contents it is stoutly traditional. Described as a “heroic attempt to impose a rational grouping to a vast store-house of animal lore” (Russell 2002), the book essentially offers an alphabetical treatment of the animal world, each entry containing a maximum of seven sections. These sections range from philological considerations regarding the animal’s name to a description of its physical characteristics and habits to its reflection in theological and juridical terms, in proverbs, medicine and the interpretation of dreams. While some researchers have characterised the work as an “uncritical compilation, indiscriminately lumping together the important and the trivial, the real and the imaginary, the factual and the fictional” (ibid.), others have praised Damîrî’s encyclopaedia for the vast array of sources to which it refers—adding up to more than eight hundred different authors and works (De Somogyi 1928).

Another well-known encyclopaedic work from the Mamluk period is al-Ibshîhî’s fifteenth-century encyclopaedia, which until fairly recently

managed to defend its position as an indispensable basic constituent of the standard household library in the Muslim world. The title of Ibshîhî's encyclopaedia is *al-Mustatraffi kulli fann mustazraf*, which can be roughly translated as "The Most Appreciated Precious Topics from Every Art Regarded as Elegant" (Marzolph 1997). In its eighty chapters, this popular work treats every topic a good Muslim ought to know, from the introductory chapters dealing with the five pillars of Islam and reflections on reason, the Koran and knowledge to the final chapters on destiny, repentance, illness, death and the hereafter. As one of the few encyclopaedic compilations available to the European reader in (French) translation, the *Mustatraf* has elicited a considerable number of judgemental assessments from European scholars (ibid., 413–415). Most of these assessments bespeak a strong bias since they range from according the author "little personality" to regarding his work as "rather clumsy". And yet, Ibshîhî's "Mamluk distillation of Arab cultural wisdom" (Larkin 2006, 218) is a worthy companion to the European encyclopaedic compilations of the late Middle Ages, since in drawing on material culled from the works of a vast array of previous authorities, he subjects the compiled data to a comparatively clear and logical arrangement, even though the organisational scheme is not easy to discern for the modern reader (Tuttle 2009).

Though the two works discussed in some detail here—al-Damîrî's *Hayât al-hayawân* and al-Ibshîhî's *Mustatraf*—usually qualify as encyclopaedias, they can also be studied as anthologies. As a matter of fact, in addition to constituting the golden age of encyclopaedias, the Mamluk period was the "golden age of anthologies" (Bauer 2003, 71). To a certain extent, the concept of the anthology in pre-modern Arabic literature is governed by considerations similar to the concept of the encyclopaedia in that both genres present a synopsis of knowledge in a comprehensive manner and in an often anecdotal style. Yet encyclopaedias aim to present the totality of available knowledge in a manner that enables the informed reader to retrieve the needed information somewhat systematically. By contrast, anthologies aim to present representative highlights of an outstanding quality. Numerous Arabic books called *mukhtâr* or *intikhâb* (both meaning 'selection'), *lubâb* (quintessence), and *mukhtasar* (abridgment) have been preserved (Hamori 1991; Arazi and Ben Shammai 1991; Bauer 2007). Due to the biased 'colonial attitude' largely prevalent in Western research since the mid-nineteenth century, these works have rarely been studied in their own right. The "notion of decadence and stagnation" (Bauer 2005, 106) that this attitude imputed to the history of the Muslim world resulted in the view that the anthologies of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods were

repetitive and inferior and thus did not deserve a similarly serious study as that awarded to the original excerpts from which anthologies quote. Rather than appreciating anthologies as “the result of the dynamic literary culture of the period” (ibid., 122), scholars saw their chief value in the preservation of older texts that have been lost today. While the anthologists of the Abbasid period were credited with seeking to “distil a canon from raw materials” (Lowry and Stewart 2009, 7), only fairly recent approaches acknowledge the value of late pre-modern and early modern anthologies as reinterpreting the canon “in ways that appealed to contemporary developments in literary taste and sensibilities” (ibid.).

An early exception to this situation is a short study of three abridgements of Abû Faraj al-Isfahânî’s tenth-century *Kitâb al-Aghânî* (Book of Songs), itself an “encyclopaedic portrayal of culture” through song (Kilpatrick 1997). It runs to a little under ten thousand pages in the modern printed editions. In her diligent comparison of the original work and its abridgements, Hilary Kilpatrick identifies the techniques applied by the later compilers. One author only includes “poets of a generally recognised standing” (ibid., 434), prunes back the chains of transmitting authorities and drops the musical indications; another—besides stripping the original text of its musical information, excluding the chains of transmitters and eliminating repetitions—includes the biographies of musicians “so long as they cover subjects of general interest” (ibid., 435); and a third appears to accord “a determining part in whether to include an article” from the previous work to the “presence or absence of entertaining anecdotes” (ibid., 437). Kilpatrick suggests that some of the phenomena she studies, such as “the decline in tolerance” and “the ‘aestheticising’ approach to anecdotes as a result of the loss of understanding of the historical realities out of which they rose . . . may point to a profound change in literary sensibility having taken place between the 4th/10th and the 7th/13th centuries in the Arab world” (ibid.).

In the field of literary anthologies I would like to briefly mention two abridgements, so far unstudied, that add further details to the understanding of the mechanisms at work during compilation. The literary anthology *Rabî‘ al-abrâr* (The Springtime of the Pious), compiled by the prolific author al-Zamakhsharî (d. 1144), was abridged in the sixteenth century by a certain Muhammad b. al-Qâsim al-Amâsî in a work titled *Raud al-akhyâr* (The Garden of Exquisite [or Chosen] Pieces). As a rare exception, Amâsî’s introduction to his abridgement contains some information that in addition to analysing the work’s contents helps us to understand

the author's agenda (Amâsî 1863, 2–3). In the first place, the author chose a total of fifty chapters from the approximately one hundred chapters of the original work, thus reducing the work's range by about half. Within the specific chapters, he then selected those anecdotes that appeared to be the most suitable to him, at times also condensing the original text so as to express its intention more clearly. What is interesting here, however, is the fact that the author freely confesses to having supplemented his selection from the original work with additional anecdotes quoted from both literary and oral tradition available to him, thus augmenting the original work in addition to abridging it.

An anonymous author of the fifteenth century ventured to prepare a concise abridgement of *Nathr al-durr* (Scattered Pearls) by al-Âbî (d. 1030), itself a truly comprehensive encyclopaedia of jokes and anecdotes comprising many thousand individual items (Marzolph 1992, vol. 1, 38–43). While the author of the *Kitâb Lubâb Nathr al-durr* (The Quintessence of *Nathr al-durr*) does not inform us about his agenda, the fact that he starts his abridgement by supplying a complete list of the chapters of the original work appears to indicate that he simply intended to select specific items from each chapter while following the original sequence of chapters. In comparing the index to the actual text of the abridgement, one notices the absence of three chapters. Their omission is, in fact, not a total deletion, since the author condenses into one chapter two original chapters with closely connected contents and a fairly similar heading. In comparing the content of the abridgement to the original text, one once again notes with interest that the author has added several texts that are not contained in the original, or at least not in the original's edited version. This feature once again underlines the importance of studying each and every abridgement in its own right, since the obvious factor of selection is often joined by less discernible factors such as supplements to the purportedly excerpted original, as well as textual variation and conscious modification.

Brief as my theoretical reflections on the role of encyclopaedias and anthologies in the Arabic literature of the pre-modern period are, they suggest a constant and vital interaction between the processes of compilation and selection. Each and every one of the numerous works that need to be considered in their own right documents the changing cultural contexts and the constant development of varying literary tastes. In view of the limited number of detailed studies, particularly in the field of anthologies and abridgements, it is as yet impossible to analyse specific trends beyond the general assessment that the Mamluk period was an

“age of commentaries and compendia”—taking the inherent derogatory tone of the original quotation as an unbiased and value-free statement (see Lowry and Stewart 2009, 1).

In conclusion, let me return briefly to the initially quoted anecdote about the library of the king of India. The earliest known Arabic version of the anecdote in al-Ghazzâlî’s mirror for princes presents the following four maxims as the quintessential essence of human knowledge: the ruler should reign in justice; his subjects should practice obedience; people should eat only when hungry; and they should not meddle in matters that are not of their concern. These same maxims are included in the French versions by Galland and Cardonne, though with a more elaborate wording. In François Blanchet’s *Apologues et contes orientaux*, published in 1784, the maxims have changed (Blanchet 1784, 1–3). Surprisingly, Blanchet freely admits that the original words appeared him to be ‘too vulgar and little suitable for the subject’. The very first of these ‘new’ maxims clearly demonstrates the relativistic attitude of Blanchet’s day in that he has the sage Pilpay write ‘upon a palm-leaf . . . with a golden style’: ‘The greater part of the sciences comprise but one single word—*perhaps*; and the whole history of mankind contains no more than three—they are born, suffer, [and] die.’ Whether we feel inclined to follow Blanchet’s opinion or not, his version is another telling example of selective editing. While retaining the anecdote’s original structure, Blanchet discards parts of the previous wording and replaces it with a new wording. In this manner, the different versions of the anecdote also bespeak an agenda of selecting and discarding that not only illustrates the mechanisms of textual adaptation but also demonstrates the constant reinterpretation of any given material against the backdrop of different cultural contexts and changing intellectual discourses.

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