

Elias Muhanna. *The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. 232 pages. ISBN: 9781400887859.

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In the age of Wikipedia, encyclopedias seem to offer an openly editable content. Yet there was a time when ambitious individuals sought to write compendiums of universal knowledge on their own. Some of them failed because they did not live long enough to complete such enormous projects; however, one of those who succeeded was the late medieval scholar al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333). Elias Muhanna's book recounts how this scholar managed to create such an enormous compendium.

Composed in the early fourteenth century by al-Nuwayrī, an Egyptian bureaucrat and scholar with a career in the financial administration of the Mamluk Empire, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition* offers a wide range of topics from natural history to commercial enterprises. A synthesis of many different genres and diverse authorities that were often contradictory, it was not an accumulation of all of the knowledge available to al-Nuwayrī, but rather a product of various encyclopedic forms in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries – a product of enormous scope.

Muhanna's motivation was triggered by simple yet engaging questions: Why did al-Nuwayrī compose this work? What disciplines did he cover, and which working methods informed its composition? How was the book received over the centuries both in the Islamic world and Europe? *The Ultimate Ambition* was composed at a time when there was a great explosion of compilatory texts – not only of encyclopedias, but also of dictionaries and manuals. In *The World in a Book*, Muhanna reveals the process that these scholars followed to compose Arabic encyclopedias. Acknowledging this specific compendium as one of the most ambitious exemplars of this specific genre, he sheds light not only on how

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textual sources were chosen and combined in the *Ultimate Ambition*, but also on the scholarly practices of the Mamluk civilian elite.

The author indicates that classical Arabic literature contains no equivalent for “encyclopedia,” as this term was understood in the medieval European context. Hence, rather than the genre of encyclopedia, he analyzes his sources from the concept of encyclopedism. Muhanna comments on the modern association of this term with the objectivity, multidisciplinary, comprehensiveness, and systematic organization took place only in the eighteenth century. He argues that al-Nuwayrī situated the *Ultimate Ambition* within the tradition of *adab*, but at the same time made it idiosyncratic in certain ways. Starting with the problem of which genre can be associated with the *Ultimate Ambition*, Muhanna explains the relevant terminology for a broader understanding of al-Nuwayrī’s work.

The World in a Book begins with a chapter entitled “Encyclopedism in the Mamluk Empire,” which explores why al-Nuwayrī produced the *Ultimate Ambition*. The first chapter is motivated by the following questions: Did al-Nuwayrī produce the book because he feared that the Mongol armies could destroy the intellectual heritage of Islam, or did he merely want to offer a manual for fellow scribes? According to the author, al-Nuwayrī was not really motivated by either preoccupation because he composed this work primarily for himself, a claim derived from the lack of any dedication to a patron and any impression suggesting that his intended audience was fellow scribes. The *Ultimate Ambition* was a study of *adab*, which functioned as a tool for self-edification. Muhanna contends that al-Nuwayrī recognized that he could not acquire a literary education only by attending salons and thus chose writing, as opposed to oral mediums, as his method for self-edification. And yet it is not very clear why self-edification might be important to al-Nuwayrī in this historical context.

Muhanna’s most important historical intervention appears in the first chapter. He begins with the well-known episode when Renaissance humanists compiled works to prevent ancient learning from getting lost again, as had happened during the Middle Ages. He criticizes the adaptation of this view for the Islamic context and asserts that there is little evidence that Mamluk encyclopedists had similar preoccupations. His argument suggests a further revision to studies on premodern Islamic encyclopedias, in which, for example, apocalyptic accounts are strictly – and often only – associated with the Mongol invasion.

Since this was the time when encyclopedic projects flourished in Egypt and Syria, Chapter 2 situates the *Ultimate Ambition* within this broader context and compares it to contemporaneous Mamluk encyclopedic texts. This chapter stresses

what Muhanna calls the “hybridity” characteristic of al-Nuwayrī’s text and how its structure is imbued with cross-references (50). This intertextuality facilitates the reader’s navigation among its volumes. Despite the uneven distribution of its contents, the author underlines that history was central to al-Nuwayrī’s project because the *Ultimate Ambition* begins with the creation of the heavens and ends with the history of Islamic Egypt.

Although this is an important aspect of his work, Muhanna does not elaborate upon it on the grounds that it is beyond the scope of his book. A further study of it would reveal much about the patterns of change and persistent practices within the evolution of Islamic historical writing. This sort of inquiry would enhance our understanding of al-Nuwayrī’s book in the Islamic intellectual tradition and how it differs than other early encyclopedic writings.

Chapter 3, “Sources of Knowledge,” focuses on the relationship between centers of learning and encyclopedic compilation. Muhanna argues that what he calls “the scholarly ecosystem of Cairo and Damascus” was the two main contexts for understanding the characteristics of encyclopedic literature in the fourteenth century (86). For example, when al-Nuwayrī moved into the Nāsiriyya he was in charge of the neighboring Bīmāristān al-Mansūrī hospital, whose affairs he observed for four years. This experience nourished his interest in the natural world, which can be seen in the relevant sections of the *Ultimate Ambition*. His work was also influenced by other institutions that he oversaw during his career.

In addition, Muhanna claims that the creation of the *Ultimate Ambition*, which is based on authoritative texts from the Abbasid era, amounts to an act of self-edification. The place of *adab* in scholarly culture significantly changed during the early twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when scholars mostly turned to nonliterary pursuits. But this was not the case during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, which saw the emergence of a new interest in classical models. In this regard, Muhanna argues that al-Nuwayrī’s book can be called “antiquarian” (72), by which he means that it demonstrates “the complexity of navigating the hegemonic intellectual patrimony” (82).

The fourth chapter focuses on imperial institutions, chanceries, and financial “bureaus.” Muhanna presents a convincing argument that a career in the bureaucracy helped encyclopedists acquire the necessary skills to compose a compilation, such as archiving and itemization. To achieve scholarly excellence, a writer had to master specific canonical texts whereas a bureaucrat had to negotiate among the social, political, communal, and economic networks that formed the empire. Citing studies especially on the Roman Empire, Muhanna demonstrates

that there is a strict relationship between encyclopedic and imperial order in recent scholarship covering many diverse geographic areas.

However, he rejects the idea that encyclopedism and empire go hand-in-hand. Instead, he asks: “What impact did the imperial administration have upon the production, outlook, motivations, readership, and interests of encyclopedists in the Mamluk realms?” (88). High-ranking bureaucrats like al-Nuwayrī gained access to various sources of knowledge that constitute the linchpin of large-scale compilations. Because of their competence in different sources, members of the bureaucratic class had a unique impact on the politics of their time.

According to Muhanna, even though methods employed to acquire and accumulate vast scales information were similar for both scholars and bureaucrats, the kinds of knowledge they pursued were distinct. Thus, the author differentiates the domain of administration from the academic world based on the types of knowledge that each one valued. Moreover, intellectual enterprises detached from bureaucratic life were common in the Islamic intellectual world. In a similar manner shared by many bureaucrat-scholars throughout early modernity, al-Nuwayrī also retired from a state position and devoted himself to a life of study in Cairo.

Muhanna’s emphasis on the role of a bureaucratic career in composing voluminous works is a promising starting point. However, other questions awaiting further study could be pursued: Did the methods used by bureaucrat-scholars set a standard in composing scholarly works? Were they adopted by other kinds of scholars as well? If such a distinction based on “contemporary, mutable information” (104) existed between the administrative and scholarly domains, how did these bureaucrat-scholars perceive practical and theoretical knowledge? And, what was the role of these scholarly and literary works in creating new forms of political language or practice?

Chapter 5 scrutinizes the working methods adopted by copyists in assembling manuscripts. It focuses on techniques of collection, editing, and source management used to produce compilations. Al-Nuwayrī was renowned for making fine copies, a subject he mentions in the *Ultimate Ambition*. His biographers even left copious documentation about his working methods. Muhanna discusses what copying meant at that time, since al-Nuwayrī considered the copying of scholarly manuscripts to be a specialized craft that required the competency of a discipline’s principles and authorities. This chapter demonstrates the potential of al-Nuwayrī’s enormous work for future manuscript studies, as Muhanna addresses many thoughtful questions.

The last chapter moves beyond the fourteenth century by discussing the circulation of *Ultimate Ambition* in both the Islamic and European contexts from the time of its compilation to the modern era. Given the breadth of this subject, Muhanna presents a preliminary survey. Starting with the Islamic reception, he explains that this work's nonhistorical sections did not circulate widely until later centuries. For both Mamluk and Ottoman historians, including the famous Kâtib Chalabî (d. 1067/1657), the *Ultimate Ambition* received a profound interest mostly because of its historical sections. A further study on the entanglements between these historians' works will be important for understanding the Muslim scholars' approach to writing history.

In a similar vein, the European interest stemmed from a need for a reference work about Islamic history. As Muhanna underscores, Orientalist scholars such as Barthélemy d'Herbelot (d. 1695) knew of al-Nuwayrî's work. For the preparation of his *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697), d'Herbelot was most drawn to Islamic compilations and reference works. His most important source was Kâtib Chalabî's *Kashf al-zunûn*, large parts of which are included in the *Bibliothèque*, as recently discussed by Alexander Bevilacqua in his *The Republic of Arabic Letters*.¹ It would be interesting to explore the evolution of Islamic compilations, including their continuities and ruptures across these centuries, as well as their role in the development of European Orientalist scholarship.

Muhanna's well-researched *The World in a Book* presents an exciting exploration of the conditions of creating a compendium in the fourteenth century. He scrutinizes the close affinities between encyclopedism and state administration in the Mamluk Empire, as exemplified through al-Nuwayrî's colossal work. From this perspective, the *Ultimate Ambition* is a representative work of the entanglements between scholarly projects and bureaucratic practices. The author focuses more on the historical context that gave way to the Islamic encyclopedic tradition and the structural characteristics of al-Nuwayrî's text.

Muhanna's work is largely persuasive in its conclusions. Yet, rather than a final word – if there is such a thing – it leaves us with many interesting questions to ponder. Seemingly, the *Ultimate Ambition* is an embarrassment of riches for scholars. For example, I am struck by how bureaucrat-scholars such as al-Nuwayrî – and there are many similar examples from the Ottoman Empire – decided to differentiate their administrative career from a scholarly one simply by retiring

1 Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

and devoting themselves to erudition. This seems to be a common behavior before undertaking colossal intellectual projects, and yet I am not sure if this was only because of time management. In addition, I am curious about the underlying political, social, religious, and economic reasons for this move. Such questions are certainly evoked by Muhanna's eloquent and learned style, and his study will be a reference work for further studies on the Islamic encyclopedic tradition.

To conclude, *The World in a Book* is a fascinating read for all lovers of knowledge, and for those who yearn for more, Muhanna has also published an English translation of some parts of the *Ultimate Ambition*.²

2 Shihab al-Din al-Nuwayri, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition: A Compendium of Knowledge from the Classical Islamic World*, introduction, translation and notes by Elias Muhanna (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).