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Vehicles of Cultural Identity: Some Thoughts on Maghribi Scripts and Manuscripts in the Mashriq

Abū al-Ḥajjāj Yūsuf Ibn al-Shaykh al-Balawī (527–604 H/1132–1208 CE) was one of the most respected scholars from Almohad Málaga: a prolific author of prose and poetry, a renowned teacher of Arabic literature, grammar, and Islamic jurisprudence, and *imām* at the congregational mosque of the city. He was also a wealthy and vigorous man: he is recorded to have paid for, and physically contributed to, the erection of 25 mosques and the digging of more than 50 wells in Málaga, in service to the urban community. Before becoming established as a notable in his hometown, however, Ibn al-Shaykh was one of the many Andalusī intellectuals who had travelled to the Mashriq to perform the *ḥajj* and study under the most prominent scholars of Egypt, Iraq, and Greater Syria. Being a man of action as well as intellect, he fought as a *ghāzī* against the Castilians under the Almohad caliph al-Manṣūr, and against the Crusaders under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (Saladin), thus playing an active role on the two major *jihād* fronts of the 12th-century Mediterranean.¹

During most of the year 562 H/1166–7 CE, Ibn al-Shaykh resided in Alexandria and became a close disciple of the local traditionist Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (d. 576 H/1180 CE). In his partly autobiographical treatise *Kitāb Alif bā’ li-l-alibbā’* (“The Book of *Alif* and *Bā’* for the Discerning”), a pedagogical work completed shortly before his death and dedicated to his son, the Malagan scholar recounts the following anecdote:

I was in Alexandria, reading to the *ḥāfiẓ* al-Silafī (may God have mercy upon him and protect the city) a passage of his own work, when I got to a *ḥadīth* transmitted by his masters on the authority of al-Shāfi‘ī (may God be pleased with them). The *ḥadīth* read: “Broad beans [*fūl*] strengthen the brain, and a bigger brain increases the intelligence”. However, the people of those lands mark the letter *fā’* with one dot above it, and *qāf* with two dots also above it, and because of a distraction, I mistook the *fā’* for a *qāf* and read instead: “Speech [*qawl*] strengthens the brain”. The *ḥāfiẓ* burst into laughter (he was an amiable and witty man, may God have mercy upon him) and declared: “Speech exhausts the brain!” or something to that effect. I replied that the word ‘speech’ was in my book, but he corrected

¹ For a complete biography of Ibn al-Shaykh and a discussion of his works, see Peña Martín 2007.

me: “It’s broad beans!”, enlightening me about their way of dotting letters. Then I asked him: “How can beans strengthen the brain? In my country we say the exact contrary!”. He laughed and replied: “I posed the very same question to my master so-and-so (I forgot his name). I asked him: ‘How can Tabaristan be the greatest producer of broad beans in the whole world, while its inhabitants are the most empty-headed?’”. He replied: ‘Were it not for their beans, they would all be flying!’”.²

In this humorous passage, Ibn al-Shaykh refers to the well-known Maghribi practice of dotting the letter *fāʾ* with one dot below it, and *qāf* with one dot above it, attested in virtually all the manuscripts copied in the Islamic West from the 3rd/9th century onwards. This apparently insignificant difference in writing conventions is what caused the author’s misunderstanding and al-Silafi’s amused reaction. As one of the distinctive features of Maghribi scripts, the idiosyncratic way of dotting *fāʾ* and *qāf* was a trait that travelling Andalusī intellectuals such as Ibn al-Shaykh carried with them as part of their cultural background, and confusions of this kind must have been a natural consequence of the encounter between scholars born and trained at the two extremes of the Arabic-speaking Mediterranean. Because of the many differences between Maghribi and Mashriqī scribal practices, similar misunderstandings were arguably commonplace, and must have given rise to a variety of responses spanning from harmless jokes to diplomatic incidents, evidence of which is yet to emerge from the scrutiny of medieval Arabic sources. Among the possible triggers, one should imagine not only the differences in letter shapes (e.g. the final *dāl* and *dhāl* of Maghribi scripts resembling the final *rāʾ* and *zāy* of eastern scripts), but also the disparity between the eastern and western alphanumerical systems (e.g. the letter *ṣād* expressing the number 60 in the Maghrib, but the number 90 in the Mashriq), the distinctive *mise-en-page* of Maghribi diplomatic correspondence, the discrepancies between the formulae and terminology employed in both manuscripts and notarial documents, and so forth.³

Although never really considered in this light by modern cultural historians, it is becoming increasingly evident that the use of Maghribi scripts represented a key factor in the creation and promulgation of the Andalusī identity throughout the Islamic world, at least from the 6th/12th century. The distinctive round bookhands originated in al-Andalus during the Umayyad period were introduced in Northwest Africa under the Almoravids and Almohads – Berber dynasties from

² Ibn al-Shaykh, *Alif bāʾ* (1870), 1: 159–160. The passage is also mentioned in Ibn Sharifa 1994, 75–76.

³ Gacek 2012, 11–12 (“Arabic alpha-numerical notation”), 147–150 (“Maghribī script”), 82–89 (“Dates and dating”).

the Sahara and the Atlas Mountains who unified the two sides of the Strait of Gibraltar and employed Andalusí secretaries and calligraphers as instruments of legitimization and propaganda.⁴ This political and cultural coalescence was accompanied by an increased socio-economic interconnection between the two shores of the Alboran Sea, which led to a surge in the circulation and re-settling of Andalusí intellectuals and merchant-scholars in present-day Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Further to the East, the presence of Andalusí and Maghribi expatriates is attested well before this period, and it is a known fact that cities like Alexandria, Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad were all home to significant Maghribi communities whose members, although occasionally marginalised, made important contributions to the local intellectual debates and the transmission of knowledge.⁵ This constant presence is certainly attested in the written sources (travelogues, historiography, biographical dictionaries, etc.), but, from the 6th/12th century, it becomes all the more visible thanks to a different and more concrete type of evidence, namely manuscripts copied in the Mashriq by Maghribi scholars who proudly clung to the writing practices of their homeland. In the next pages, I shall present a brief overview of some of these important vehicles of cultural identity, which deserve to be studied and understood as part of a much larger and still unidentified corpus of Maghribi manuscripts produced, read, annotated, and deposited in the mosques and *madrasas* of the eastern Islamic Mediterranean.

1 Alexandria: the frontier at sea

It was in the fortified port city of Alexandria that the vast majority of Maghribi pilgrims, merchants, and scholars journeying by sea had their first encounter with the Mashriq. This typically happened under the towering height of the famous lighthouse, a monument so vividly described by Ibn al-Shaykh and several other Andalusí travellers.⁶ By the time of Ibn al-Shaykh's sojourn in 562 H/1166-7 CE, the political decline of the Fāṭimids, once rivals of the Almoravids and largely opposed to the Maghribi presence in Egypt, had allowed the establishment in Alexandria of Sūfī circles animated by disciples of the Andalusí mystic Abū Madyan

⁴ Al-'Allaoui/Buresi 2005; Lagardère 1993–94; al-Manūni 1991, 21–42.

⁵ On Greater Syria, see Aḥmad 1989; on Damascus in particular, see Pouzet 1975; on Baghdad, see Fierro 2009, 75–90; on Alexandria, see Geoffroy 2002; on Egypt in general, see Ḥanafī 2006.

⁶ Asín Palacios 1933. For the description of the *Pharos* given by Abū Ḥāmid al-Gharnāṭī, who visited Alexandria in the year 512 H/1118 CE, see Bejarano Escanilla 1995.

(d. 594 H/1198 CE), as well as of scholars of Mālikī jurisprudence.⁷ In fact, the first Sunnī *madrasa* established in Fāṭimid Egypt – the Ḥāfiẓiyya – was directed by the Mālikī *imām* Ibn ‘Awf al-Zuhri, and opened in Alexandria in 532 H/1137–8.⁸ Among the most ancient manuscripts once in the Municipal Library of the city and now incorporated in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, are four volumes of a parchment copy of Saḥnūn’s *Mudawwana*, one of the founding texts of the Mālikī *madhhab*, penned in an elegant Maghribi script in Calatrava la Vieja (in present-day Castile-La Mancha), between 506 H/1112 CE and 510 H/1116 CE.⁹ Although there is no conclusive evidence to prove it, one is tempted to imagine that these precious codices were brought to Egypt by Andalusī scholars fleeing from the Castilian conquest of Calatrava in 1147.¹⁰

In the same way as Calatrava and the other towns of the northern Andalusī marches, 12th-century Alexandria was also organized and perceived as a frontier city. It attracted militant intellectuals and saintly warriors from all over the Muslim world, desirous to defend the Nile delta from the raids of the Crusader armies and armadas.¹¹ It is likely that Ibn al-Shaykh gained his own experience of *jihād* here, since in the very year 562 H/1167 CE Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn valiantly held the city during a four-month siege laid by King Amalric of Jerusalem and the Fāṭimid vizier Shāwar b. Mujir.¹² A certain fascination with the figure of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and his image of heroic champion of Sunnism was a quality shared by many Maghribi scholars, including the Valencian traveller Ibn Jubayr, who visited Alexandria in 578 H/1183 CE.¹³ As recently pointed out by Maribel Fierro, the Andalusī historian al-Yasa‘ al-Ghāfiqī (d. 575 H/1179 CE), after re-settling in Egypt and becoming an esteemed member of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s entourage, wrote one of the first accounts of

7 Geoffroy 2002, 171. For the persecution of Maghribi pilgrims in Egypt under the Fāṭimid vizier Badr al-Jamalī (r. 466–487 H/1073–1094 CE), mentioned by the historian Ibn al-Athīr, see Vajda 1968, 4.

8 Sayyid 1992, 117–118. In his unpublished doctoral thesis, Gary Leiser argues that before the foundation of the Ḥāfiẓiyya by the Fāṭimid vizier Riḍwān b. Walkhashī, there were already three ‘*madrasas*’ in Alexandria: one in the house of the Andalusī Mālikī jurist Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 520 H/1126 CE), one erected by the Mālikī judge of the city Aḥmad b. ‘Abd al-Majid b. Ḥadid and named Makiniyya, and one established by the Shāfi‘ī judge Abū al-Ḥusayn Yaḥyā al-Maqdisi. See Leiser 1976, 115–131.

9 MS 532/B; see Ziedan 2003, 8–11. Part of the same manuscript is in Dublin, Chester Beatty Library MSS Ar. 3006 and Ar. 4835; see Arberry 1955–66, 6: 113.

10 This manuscript was already in Alexandria in the 16th century, as it bears a number of annotations by the Egyptian scholar and mystic ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī (d. 973 H/1565 CE).

11 Geoffroy 2002, 169–170.

12 Omran 1985.

13 Phillips 2013.

the Maghrib specifically intended for a Mashriqi audience, aiming to elicit his patron's military intervention in the western Mediterranean as well.¹⁴

Three decades before Ibn al-Shaykh's journey, the famous jurist of Dénia Ibn Ghulām al-Faras (d. 547 H/1152 CE) also visited Alexandria on his way to Mecca, and attended the lectures of Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī.¹⁵ While in the city, in 528 H/1133 CE, he transcribed a work on the variant readings of the Qur'ān by Ibn Jinnī al-Mawṣilī (320–392 H/932–1002 CE), in a manuscript now held in the National Library of Cairo.¹⁶

This precious codex – possibly the oldest and most accurate copy of Ibn Jinnī's treatise to have survived – confirms and adds to the little we know of Ibn Ghulām from the biographical dictionaries: he was clearly a keen scholar of the Qur'ān and its recitation, gifted with a fine handwriting and skilled at compiling and binding books (“*kāna [...] ḥasan al-khaṭṭ, anīq al-wirāqa*”).¹⁷ He signed the manuscript's final colophon with the title of *muqri* (“Qur'ānic reader”) and the *nisba* al-Andalusī, arguably the two personal qualities he was most proud of, adding that he completed the book's copying “in the frontier town of Alexandria (*bi-thaḡhr al-Iskandariyya*)”, which is indicative of how the city was perceived by newly-arrived travellers. Ibn Ghulām must have been particularly excited about the variety of books available within the learned circles of Alexandria, as he included after the colophon of his manuscript a detailed description of the exemplar he transcribed, a book copied by the *muqri* Abū al-Husayn Naṣr al-Shirāzī, read to a certain 'Alī b. Zayd al-Qasānī (i.e. from Kāshān) in 411 H/1021 CE, and carefully checked against the autograph of Ibn Jinnī. Had he never embarked on his journey eastwards, it would have been very difficult for Ibn Ghulām to come across a manuscript with such a remarkable and ‘exotic’ line of transmission in his hometown of Dénia.

14 PUA, id. 2583; Fierro 2018, 356.

15 PUA, id. 8633; Ibn al-Abbār, *al-Takmila* (1887–89), 1: 193–195, no. 669.

16 MS 78 *qirā'āt*; see Ibn Jinnī, *al-Muḥtasab* (1998), 1: 72, 97–99; Moritz 1905, pl. 177a.

17 Ibn al-Abbār, *al-Takmila* (1887–89), 1: 194.

Fig. 1: Cairo, Egyptian National Library MS 78 *qir'āt*, fol. 169r. Final colophon of a copy of Ibn Jinnī's treatise on the variant readings of the Qur'ān, titled *al-Muhtasib fī tabyīn wujūh shawādhdh al-qir'āt*. The manuscript was copied by Ibn Ghulām al-Faras in Alexandria, in 582 H/1133 CE (image from Moritz 1905)

It was also customary for travelling scholars such as Ibn Ghulām to carry with them manuscripts written in the Maghrib, with a view to collating them with eastern copies of the same works, or reading them in the presence of Mashriqi specialists. A perfect witness to this practice is a codex now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, containing the second volume of a 12th-century copy of Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī's *Kitāb al-Sunan*, one of the most important *ḥadīth* collections ever compiled (the original work dates from the 3rd/9th century).¹⁸ The manuscript is in Maghribi script, undated, and it was left unsigned by its copyist. The date 12 Ramaḍān 585 (24 October 1189), found in a collation note at the end of the work (fol. 207r), is written in a different hand from the main text, and can only provide a *terminus ante quem* for the production of this copy. As for the origin of the manuscript, the presence of zigzag marks along the central fold of numerous bifolia leaves no doubt that it was originally transcribed in al-Andalus, on locally produced paper.¹⁹

However, three notes added after the final colophon indicate that, by the beginning of the following century, the book had been brought to Alexandria: the first note, dated 604 H/1207-8 CE, is a reading certificate written in Mashriqi script by a certain Ibn Yāqūt al-Iskandarī al-Muqri' al-Mālikī, clearly a local exponent of the Mālikī school of jurisprudence; the second annotation, this time in Maghribi script, is a hearing certificate penned by a scholar from Málaga – Ibn Ḥarīra al-Mālaqī – who attended a joint reading of this work given by a *shaykh* from Ceuta – Ibn Abī Zayd al-Sabtī – and a second *shaykh* from Béjaïa – Ibn Abī Naṣr al-Bijā'ī – in the hall of one their homes (“*fī dihliz dār al-shaykh*”), at the end of a series of sessions (“*majālis*”) on 5 Ramaḍān 605 (13 March 1209); on the next page (fol. 207v), another hearing certificate in Maghribi script was added by a student from Valencia – Ibn al-Walī al-Balansī – who attended the reading sessions of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Sabtī's son Muḥammad, and of a second *shaykh* from Algeciras – Ibn Jābir al-Jazīrī al-Khaḍrā'ī – on 10 Rabī' I 607 (1 September 1210), always “in the frontier town of Alexandria (*bi-thaghr al-Iskandariyya*)”. It is difficult to overstate the historical importance of annotations such as these, documenting the breadth and vitality of the Maghribi scholarly circles of Alexandria, whose members copied, read, and gathered around manuscripts that, in both their aspect and content, reflected the intellectual pursuits and identity of an entire community.

¹⁸ Bodleian Library MS Marsh 292; see Uri 1787, 75, no. CCVII.

¹⁹ On the zigzag marks found in Andalusi paper and their possible function, see Estève 2001.

Fig. 2: Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Marsh 292, fol. 207r. Final page of an Andalusī copy of Abū Dāwūd's collection of ḥadīth, titled *al-Sunan wa-l-āthār 'an rasūl Allāh*. Besides the original colophon, the image also shows a collation note dated 585 H/1189 CE, as well as a reading certificate and a hearing certificate, both written in Alexandria (photo by the author)

2 Mecca and Jerusalem: scholarship and piety

As the ultimate destination of virtually all Maghribi pilgrims and travellers, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina were bustling centres of learning, where scholars from all over the Islamic world met and exchanged ideas, and where the activities of trading, studying, and copying books were fuelled by the relentless coming and going of people. An acephalous manuscript of al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* completed in Mecca, in Maghribi script, and dated Ramaḍān 578 (29 December 1182–27 January 1183), auctioned in 2001 and currently in an unknown collection, attests to the presence of Maghribi scholars who resided in the Hejaz and transcribed important religious works not just as an erudite endeavour, but probably also as an act of devotion during the holy month of Ramaḍān.²⁰ The copyist of this particular manuscript was a certain Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Aghmātī, namely from the town of Aghmat, an important mercantile centre of Almohad Morocco, 30 km southeast of Marrakesh. Two centuries after its production, the manuscript came into the possession of the Rasūlid sultan of Yemen, al-Ashraf Ismā'il b. al-'Abbās (r. 778–803 H/1377–1400 CE), as suggested by a hearing certificate written in his name that was added to the right of the original colophon.

An important Meccan manuscript revealing the presence of Andalusī scholars in the city during the 6th/12th century is a copy of al-Tirmidhī's *ḥadīth* collection, *al-Jāmi' al-kabīr*, today in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.²¹ The book was transcribed by the Afghan traditionist 'Abd al-Mālik b. Abī al-Qāsim al-Qazzāz al-Harawī al-Kurūkhī in 547 H/1153 CE, one year before his death. It was then given by him to Abū Ja'far Aḥmad Ibn Kawthar al-Muḥāribī, a pilgrim from Granada who resided and studied in Mecca for six years with his son 'Alī.²² After his father's death in 550 H/1155 CE, 'Alī returned to al-Andalus with al-Kurūkhī's gift, and rose to become the most authoritative transmitter of al-Tirmidhī's work in the whole Maghrib.²³ The circulation of this manuscript within the Andalusī community in Mecca first, and then within the scholarly circles of Almohad Iberia, is demonstrated by a series of hearing and reading certificates written in Maghribi scripts on its first and last folios, published by Georges Vajda in 1957.²⁴

²⁰ *Islamic Art and Manuscripts* 16/10/2001, lot 28. See also <https://www.christies.com/lot-finder/Lot/muhammad-ibn-ismail-al-bukhari-d-ah-256870-3052204-details.aspx> (accessed Mar. 2020).

²¹ MS arabe 709. See <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b110003844> (accessed Mar. 2020).

²² PUA, id. 1640.

²³ PUA, id. 6366.

²⁴ Vajda 1957, 13–15.

Framing al-Kurūkhī's swift Mashriqi handwriting on all sides, these marginalia illustrate vividly the reception process of a classical eastern work of *ḥadīth* within the Maghribi tradition: perhaps the most important note was added in Ramaḍān 640 (22 February–23 March 1243) in Granada, during a session attended by the city's *qāḍī*. Interestingly, this manuscript was brought back to the Mashriq in the following century, as shown by one final hearing certificate on its last page, written in the Great Mosque of Damascus in 788 H/1386 CE.²⁵ It is probably in Syria that the book was rebound in a beautiful leather cover decorated with blind and gold tooling, a fitting new look for a manuscript with such an important history.²⁶

The scribal activities of the Maghribi population of Mecca, however, were not limited to copying books. Thanks to Dominique and Janine Sourdél's edition of 147 original pilgrimage scrolls dating from the Ayyūbid period, originally stored in the Great Mosque of Damascus and now in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul, evidence has emerged of *ḥajj* and *'umra* certificates written in Maghribi scripts, possibly catering to a Maghribi clientele, the earliest of which dates from the year 596 H/1200 CE.²⁷ The symbolic weight of employing Maghribi scripts in a Mashriqi context is hinted at in the biographical dictionary of Meccan personages authored by Taqī al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Fāsī al-Mālikī (775–832 H/1373–1429 CE), historian and Mālikī judge of the city, himself a descendant of Maghribi immigrants. In his biography of Ibn Masdī al-Gharnāṭī (d. 663 H/1265 CE), an Andalusī preacher and *imām* who had settled in Mecca two centuries earlier, al-Fāsī praises him by saying that he could write beautifully in both Maghribi and Mashriqi scripts (*"wa-kāna yaktub bi-l-khaṭṭ al-Maghribī wa-l-Mashriqī khaṭṭan ḥasanan"*).²⁸ One is left wondering why the Meccan historian deemed it important to include such a minor detail of Ibn Masdī's curriculum in his account, if not to highlight his mastery of – and integration into – both the Maghribi and Mashriqi scholarly traditions, and possibly also his ability to copy books for his native community as well as for other Meccan circles and institutions.

²⁵ Vajda 1954, 371–375.

²⁶ Guesdon/Vernay-Nouri 2001, 148, n. 108.

²⁷ Sourdél/Sourdél-Thomine 2006, 22, n. 16, pls. V–VI.

²⁸ PUA, id. 10808; al-Fāsī, *al-'Iqd* (1959–69), 2: 403–410, no. 493, mentioned in Juvin 2013, 155.

Fig. 3: Dublin, Chester Beatty Library MS Ar. 3016, fols. 86v–87r. Last page spread and final colophon of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ma‘āfirī’s autograph work on famous women, written in Damascus in 581 H/1185-6 CE (photo by the author)

In Jerusalem, the third holiest city of Islam recaptured from the Crusaders in 583 H/1187 CE, an Andalusī expatriate had risen to unprecedented fame by the end of the 6th/12th century. The man was Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ma‘āfirī al-Mālaqī (d. 605 H/1208-9 CE), renowned for his wisdom and asceticism, whom the victorious Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn appointed *imām* and preacher of the prestigious Aqṣā Mosque, after restoring the site to Muslim worship. A spiritual leader to the local Maghribī community, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ma‘āfirī was revered as a saint by the time of his death, and his funeral was an event that stirred the entire city deeply, with Christians also paying their last respects to his coffin.²⁹ The Chester Beatty Library in Dublin houses a unique autograph by al-Ma‘āfirī, which he wrote in Damascus in 581 H/

²⁹ PUA id. 6675. For a complete biography of ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Ma‘āfirī and a discussion of his works, see Navarro i Ortiz 2012b.

1185-6 CE, two years before taking up his new position in Jerusalem.³⁰ The manuscript comprises a series of biographies and anecdotes relating to famous Muslim women who lived in the early Islamic period, as well as Qur'ānic figures such as Eve, Job's wife, and the Queen of Sheba.³¹

Interestingly, these accounts are grouped in what appears to be the draft of a work that al-Ma'āfirī never completed. Six of the eleven chapters begin with a list of transmitters from whom al-Ma'āfirī received the text and to whom he read it back, and end with a signed and dated colophon. Among these transmitters were important Damascene intellectuals – including Bahā' al-Dīn al-Qāsim, the son of the famous historian Ibn 'Asākir – who held their scholarly gatherings in the Great Umayyad Mosque.³² Despite the manuscript being just a preliminary draft, its neat Maghribi script and tidy page layout reveal al-Ma'āfirī's penmanship and meticulousness, which are among the many qualities attributed to him by the sources.³³ Curiously, he dotted *fā'* and *qāf* according to the Mashriqi system, a sign perhaps of his high degree of acculturation. This codex is certainly remarkable because of the light it sheds on transmission practices and the compositional stages of Arabic prosopographic works; however, it also shows the breadth of interests and the intellectual vivacity of one of the most successful Andalusī emigrants in the medieval Mashriq, as well as his repeated and fertile interactions with the local scholarly elites.

3 Damascus: the Maghrib in the Mashriq

At the time when al-Ma'āfirī was gathering material for his book on famous women in the Great Umayyad Mosque, Damascus was already home to one of the largest and most prosperous Maghribi communities of the eastern Mediterranean, whose members played a salient role in the city's scholarly life. As recently shown by Konrad Hirschler in his study of the 7th/13th-century catalogue of the Ashrafiyya Library, books from the western Islamic world constituted a noteworthy group within the original collection, and many of them had probably been brought to Damascus by Maghribi travellers, or transcribed in Syria by Maghribi

³⁰ Chester Beatty MS Ar. 3016; see Arberry 1955–66, 1: 6, pl. 2.

³¹ Kilpatrick 2005, 57–64.

³² Navarro i Ortiz 2012b, 485.

³³ Al-Marrākushī, *al-Dhayl* (1965), 314–316, no. 627.

expatriates.³⁴ Most of these books are now lost or dispersed, but others have survived in the libraries of the city. Among the most interesting and puzzling examples of Maghribi manuscripts in the National Library of Damascus is a corpus of parchment folios containing texts of Mālikī jurisprudence, originally copied in Kairouan between the 4th/10th century and the early 5th/11th century, and then recycled in 7th/13th-century Syria as binding material for locally-produced paper books.³⁵ These fragments, currently under study by Hirschler as part of his research project on document reuse in medieval Arabic manuscripts, seem to attest to the presence in Damascus of a group of North African refugees who had fled the destruction of Kairouan by the Banū Hilāl in 449 H/1057 CE, carrying away with them some precious parchment codices from the city's libraries.³⁶

As already mentioned, one way of understanding the contribution made by Maghribi scholars to the written culture of the Mashriq is through the study of the notes they added in the margins and at the end of certain manuscripts, providing unique insight into the micro-history of the reading sessions they attended.³⁷ The Damascene corpus of reading and hearing certificates (*samā'āt*, sing. *samā'*) from the manuscripts of the Ṣāhiriyya Library, published in 1996 and mostly covering readings of *ḥadīth* works between 550 H/1155 CE and 750 H/1349 CE, includes dozens of names of Andalusī and Maghribi religious scholars.³⁸ When their task was also to write down the actual *samā'āt*, their Maghribi handwriting immediately stands out among the certificates penned by their eastern colleagues. This important corpus, however, is only part of a much greater body of evidence lying dormant in many more libraries and collections around the world, still awaiting systematic research. For example, a voluminous codex in the Escorial Library containing the whole of Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, transcribed in Damascus on 28 Ramaḍān 559 (19 August 1164), presents a series of interesting reading certificates clearly belonging to the same milieu as those of the Ṣāhiriyya manuscripts.³⁹

³⁴ Hirschler 2016, 38.

³⁵ See, for instance, MSS 3829, 3841, 3847, 3850. I would like to thank Professor Konrad Hirschler for having shared with me some images of these manuscripts (see also Hirschler [forthcoming]).

³⁶ Hirschler 2017, 37. On the fragmentary manuscripts of Mālikī *fiqh* from Kairouan found in the Qubbat al-Khazna of the Great Mosque of Damascus, see Sourdel-Thomine/Sourdel 1964, 7–8, 15–20; Sourdel-Thomine/Sourdel 1965, 79, pl. IV a.

³⁷ Hirschler 2012, 33.

³⁸ Leder *et al.* 1996–2000.

³⁹ Escorial MS D. 1007; see Vajda 1963, 76–79.

Fig. 4: Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial MS árabe 1007, fol. 2v. Opening page of a copy of Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ* written in Damascus, in 559 H/1164 CE, by 'Abd Allāh al-Murādī al-Ishbīlī (© Patrimonio Nacional).

The book was copied, in Maghribi script but with *fā'* and *qāf* dotted according to the Mashriqi system, by a certain 'Abd Allāh b. 'Isā b. 'Ubayd Allāh b. 'Isā al-Murādī al-Andalusī al-Ishbīlī. The name of this scholar is not recorded in the

available biographical dictionaries, nor does it appear in any of the published Damascene *samā'āt* of the period. All we know is what this manuscript and its certificates (fol. 294r) tell us: al-Murādī read the whole volume to a *shaykh* from Badajoz – Abū 'Alī al-Anṣārī al-Baṭalyawsī – in the Great Mosque of Damascus, during a series of sessions ended on 3 Ṣafar 560 H (20 December 1164). Then, he collated it a second time during a public reading given by the famous Damascene historian and *ḥadīth* transmitter Ibn 'Asākir (d. 571 H/1176 CE). It is possible to identify the copyist of this manuscript with the Sevillian *faqīh* named al-Murādī that Ibn Jubayr met in the Great Umayyad Mosque twenty years later, in 580 H/1184 CE, standing by a column to which “a special endowment is attached, a benefit that can be acquired by whoever leans against it to study and give lectures”.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the Valencian traveller includes this passage immediately after his mention of the Mālikī sector of the mosque, abutting the western wall, where the city's Maghribi students gathered and were taught according to their special curriculum.⁴¹

In one of the most important sources for reconstructing the history and society of Islamic Syria, the monumental *Ta'riḫ madīnat Dimashq* (“History of Damascus”) by Ibn 'Asākir, Maghribi and Andalusī expatriates occasionally feature as real protagonists. To give just one example, the North African Mālikī jurist Yūsuf b. Dūnās al-Findalāwī lived and taught in Damascus during the second quarter of the 6th/12th century, and there he became revered not only as a “zealous defender the *sunna*”, but also as a miracle-worker and a saint-like figure. Aspiring to martyrdom, he joined the warriors who fought the Crusaders outside the walls of Damascus in Rabī' I 543 (20 July–18 August 1148). Despite his old age, he could not be persuaded to desist from taking part in the battle, and “before the day was over, he attained the martyrdom which he had longed for as the greatest happiness of all”.⁴²

Perhaps less known is the fact that one of the earliest surviving manuscripts of Ibn 'Asākir's *Ta'riḫ* was copied by an Andalusī Damascene scholar, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Birzālī al-Ishbīlī (577–636 H/1181–1239 CE). Al-Birzālī had left his hometown of Seville in 602 H/1205-6 CE, and before settling down in Syria, he had resided for a few years in Alexandria, Cairo, Mecca, and travelled

⁴⁰ Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥla* (1964), 245.

⁴¹ Ibn Jubayr, *Riḥla* (1964), 245: “*li-l-Mālikiyya zāwiya li-l-tadrīs fi al-jānib al-maghribī, yujtami' fihā ṭalabat al-Maghāribā, wa-lahum ijrā' ma'lūm*”.

⁴² Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'riḫ* (1995–2001), 74: 234–236. See also Mourad/Lindsay 2013, 36–37.

extensively across Iran and Khorasan; he died in Hama in 636 H/1239 CE.⁴³ As one of the most highly esteemed traditionists of Greater Syria, he was appointed head professor of *ḥadīth* at the Ibn ‘Urwa *madrasa* (*Dār al-ḥadīth al-‘Urwiyya*), located just outside the eastern gate of the Great Mosque of Damascus. In the corpus of reading and hearing certificates of the Ṣāhiriyya Library, his names appear 41 times as an attendee, reader, or teacher at various scholarly gatherings held between 614 H/1217 CE and 635 H/1235 CE.⁴⁴ What is particularly interesting about al-Birzālī’s activity, however, is his incessant dedication to copying books for his own use and for the benefit of his colleagues and pupils in an elegant Maghribi script, a quality for which he was renowned and praised by his biographers in both the Islamic East and West.⁴⁵ The surviving parts of al-Birzālī’s copy of Ibn ‘Asākir’s *Ta’rīkh*, originally in 80 volumes, are now dispersed in several libraries around the world, including the Azhariyya Library in Cairo and the Khuda Bakhsh Library in Patna, India, and indeed show al-Birzālī’s superior penmanship as well as his painstaking attention to the correct transmission of the text.⁴⁶ The Khuda Bakhsh volumes, for instance, contain four colophons and 20 marginal notes stating that they were copied in 614 H/1217 CE and 615 H/1218 CE in the Mu‘īniyya *madrasa*, collated with a manuscript of Ibn ‘Asākir’s son Bahā’ al-Dīn al-Qāsim (d. 600 H/1203-4 CE), and read by al-Birzālī in the presence of several disciples of Ibn ‘Asākir, between 617 H/1220 CE and 619 H/1222 CE.⁴⁷ At the same time, al-Birzālī’s assiduous study of the original manuscript that belonged to Bahā’ al-Dīn al-Qāsim is demonstrated by the hearing certificates left by the Andalusī scholar on its folios, 70 of which are now part of the collection of the Leiden University Library.⁴⁸ It is also worth remembering that, thanks to al-Birzālī’s alacrity as a copyist, another important work by Ibn ‘Asākir has come down to us: entitled *Arba‘ūn ḥadīth li-l-ḥathth ‘alā al-jihād* (“Forty *Ḥadīth* for Inciting *Jihād*”), its only surviving manuscript, copied and annotated by al-Birzālī with his characteristic accuracy, is today kept in the Damascene Ṣāhiriyya Library.⁴⁹

43 PUA, id. 10797. For a complete biography of Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Birzālī al-Ishbili, see Navarro i Ortiz 2012a.

44 Leder *et al.* 1996–2000, 1: 575–576.

45 Ibn al-Abbār, *al-Takmilā* (1887–89), 1: 349–350, no. 1012; al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* (2004), 3779–3780, no. 6006: “*wa-nasakha kathīran li-nafsihi wa-li-l-nās bi-khaṭṭ ḥalw Maghribī*”.

46 Cairo, Azhariyya Library MS 452 *ta’rīkh*; see *al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya* 1945–78, 5: 379. Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Library MSS 800 (vols. 31–32) and 801 (vols. 51–52); see *Catalogue* 1908–1970, 12: 144–148, <http://kblibrary.bih.nic.in> (accessed Mar. 2020).

47 Navarro i Ortiz 2012a, 254–255.

48 MS Or. 12644; see Witkam 2002, 602–603.

49 MS 1592/3; see Mourad/Lindsay 2013, 82–99; Leder *et al.* 1996–2000, 2: 226–233.

Fig. 5: Patna, Khuda Bakhsh Library MS 800, fols. 1v–2r. Beginning of the 31st volume of Ibn 'Asākīr's *Ta'rikh madīnat Dimashq*. It was copied in Damascus by Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Birzālī al-Ishbīlī, in 614 H/1217 CE (© Khuda Bakhsh Library)

4 Conclusion

It would exceed the scope of this brief overview – and tax the reader's patience unnecessarily – to introduce yet more manuscripts copied in the Islamic East by Maghribi scholars, in Maghribi scripts, between the 6th/12th century and the 7th/13th century.⁵⁰ Hopefully, the few examples here presented will suffice to stimulate a reflection on the cultural and aesthetic impact that the production

⁵⁰ At least two other manuscripts could be mentioned, both copied in Damascus in 632 H/1234–5 CE: MS Şehit Ali Paşa 2499 of the Süleymaniye Library, containing a large portion of Sibawayh's *Kitāb*, signed by Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Mayūrqī (see Humbert 1995, 279–281); and MS arabe 610 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, containing a work by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sakhāwī titled *al-Wasīla ilā kashf al-'aqīla*, transcribed by 'Abd Allāh b. Mālik b. Mawḥab al-Andalusī; see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11004247t.r=Arabe%20610?rk=214593;2> (accessed Mar. 2020).

and circulation of such books had on their readership. The scholarly world of medieval Islam was a place of plurality and constant encounter between different schools of religious and philosophical thought, textual traditions, literary genres, lines of transmissions, and intellectuals acting as highly mobile nodes within an incredibly interconnected network. While it is true that these men of letters were principally defined by the masters they had studied with, the travels they had made in pursuit of knowledge, the works they had transmitted, and sometimes by their engagement with *jihād* in its many forms and geopolitical manifestations, it is equally clear that their lineage and origins continued to play an important role in the way they perceived and presented themselves in such a diverse arena.

The use of Maghribi scripts was a significant aspect of the activity and academic output of expatriate scholars from the western Islamic world, being the visible expression of a cultural background shared by individuals who, through their travels and experiences, had all acquired multiple identities. Occasionally, their handwriting suggests a certain degree of acculturation: a case in point are the above-mentioned manuscripts copied by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Maʿāfirī and ʿAbd Allāh al-Murādī, where *fāʾ* and *qāf* are dotted according to the Mashriqi system, but the autographs of the famous Murcian mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638 H/1240 CE) could also be mentioned here, as they include in their script and layout a few Mashriqi features, owing to the influence of the milieux in which they were written (primarily Mecca, Damascus, and eastern Anatolia).⁵¹ Still, most Maghribi scholars proudly upheld and cultivated the calligraphic norms and scribal conventions they had learned in their homeland even after leaving it, and the societies of their adoptive countries perceived them as a cohesive group also because of the distinctive appearance of the books they transcribed. In light of the evidence here discussed, it would seem worthwhile to engage with the manuscript production of these expatriate communities on a more direct and intimate level, interrogating its visual qualities and material aspects as well as its contents. Perhaps this field of research will prove a suitable testing ground for new methodological approaches to Arabic manuscripts, at the intersection between intellectual history, palaeography, and social anthropology.

⁵¹ See, for instance, the autograph manuscript of Ibn ʿArabī's *Diwān* now in the Khalili Collection (MS 225), written in Damascus before the year 634 H/1237 CE, discussed in Hirstenstein 2006. One of the earliest dated manuscripts containing some of Ibn ʿArabī's treatises was copied by one of his pupils in Malatya in 602 H/1205 CE, in Maghribi script (*Islamic Art and Manuscripts* 1/5/2001, lot 57).

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