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Article

A 5th/11th century chronicler from Tripoli

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Abstract

It is generally believed that Tripolitanian historiography began with the chronicle of Muḥammad b. Ghalbūn in the first half of the 12th century AH/18th century AD, before expanding in the 13th/19th. This pattern tends to forget that other players – unfortunately now lost – predated that modern historical writing. The oldest one seems to be related to a Tripolitanian scholar, ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī, who lived at the end of the 5th/11th century/beginning of the 6th/12th, who settled in the East and wrote a short chronicle to give an account of the history of his hometown. This article aims to gather all the data related to him and his works, to show the formation of a local memory in the wake of the political autonomy acquired by Tripoli from the beginning of the 5th/11th century.

نبذة عن أبو الحسن علي بن عبد الله بن محبوب الطرابلسي، مؤرخ من القرن الخامس الهجري / الحادي عشر لميلادي من طرابلس
أوريلين مونتيل
من المعتقد و بشكل عام أن التأريخ في طرابلس بدأ مع تأريخ محمد ابن غلبون في النصف الأول من القرن الثامن عشر، قبل التوسع في القرن التاسع عشر. يميل هذا الاعتقاد إلى نسيان أن أخرين – و الذين فقدوا الآن للأسف - قد سبقوا تلك الكتابة التاريخية الحديثة، و التي يبدو أن أقدمها مرتبط بعالم من طرابلس هو علي بن عبد الله بن محبوب الطرابلسي، و الذي عاش في نهاية القرن الحادي عشر/بداية القرن الثاني عشر، و الذي استقر في الشرق وكتب تاريخاً قصيراً ليعطي سرداً لتاريخ مسقط رأسه. تهدف هذه المساهمة إلى جمع كافة المعلومات المتعلقة به وبأعماله، وذلك لإظهار تكون ذاكرة محلية في أعقاب الاستقلال السياسي الذي اكتسبته طرابلس منذ بداية القرن الحادي عشر.

Tripolitanian historiography through centuries

In Tripolitania, the second Ottoman era (AH 1251/AD 1835–AH 1330/AD 1911) saw an important movement of historical writing, led by authors such as Ḥasan al-Faqīh Ḥasan (who lived the first two thirds of the 13th/19th century)[1] or Aḥmad al-Nā'ib al-Anṣārī (1264/1848–1336/1918),[2] among others.[3]

Before that, premodern historiography is particularly scarce. Historians are usually considering that the oldest narrative we can use is the one written in 1144/1732 by Muḥammad b. Khalīl b. Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ghalbūn, who lived in Tripoli in the 12th/18th century.[4] But despite its very promising title, *al-Tidhkār fī-man malaka Ṭarābulus wa-mā kāna bi-hā min al-akhbār* ('The reminder of those who ruled Tripoli and of what happened there through history'), the chapters related with the first centuries of the Islamic era are very brief, being also based on quotations from medieval authors such as al-Bakrī (404/1014–487/1094) or Ibn Khaldūn (732/1332–808/1406). Its importance is increasing over time, becoming the most essential narrative about what happened in Tripoli after the Ottoman conquest (958/1551), especially during the rule of the Qaramanlı family (1123/1711–1241/1835), to whom the author was a contemporary.[5]

There was a time when things were different. In medieval times, there were some scholars in Tripoli who were considered as historians. Among them, Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī lived in the second half of the 5th/11th century and the first quarter of the 6th/12th. What makes him very special is his personal interest in the history of his own birthplace when others were more interested in wider narratives.

Life and works of Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī

The mother-notice about him is given by the Abū Ṭāhir al-Silafī (born in Iṣfaḥān in 472/1079, died in Alexandria in 576/1180) in his *Mu'jam al-safar*–a dictionary dedicated to the scholars he met in Alexandria, either to learn from or to teach.[6]

After referring to him twice under the name Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥbūb[7] al-Ṭarābulusī, he wrote the following:

> This Abū-l-Ḥasan was from a virtuous family (*min bayt al-ṣalāḥ*). On his mother's side, his grandfather was ʿUmar b. Dārwā,[8] *ra'īs* of Tripoli and one of its most learned and generous men. He settled in Alexandria to learn the *fiqh*[9] and reached his goal.
>
> He had a particular interest in history. He dedicated to Tripoli a short chronicle (*tūraykh*), which I looked at and I excerpted from it what I found curious and what he discussed with me.
>
> He wrote a lot about me. He was gifted in various matters (*funūn*), and his poetry was not bad. He left for pilgrimage (*ḥājj*), and death found him in Mecca, according to what Abū-l-Baqā Yaʿīsh b. al-Mufarrij al-Andalusī[10] reported to me. It happened in *dhū-l-qa'da* of the year 521 [/November-December of 1127]. Before his pilgrimage, he had visited [the Prophet's grave] and left his books in *ḥabūs* to the students (*ṭalabat al-'ilm*) of the Qal'at Banī Ḥammād.[11]

That notice has had a great posterity. It was abridged and quoted by Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (574–626/1178–1229), who presents ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ṭarābulusī as one of the notabilities from Tripoli in the notice he dedicated to the city in his *Mu'jām al-buldān*.[12] Later, this mention by Yāqūt's text was used by al-Dhahabī (673–748/1274–1348), who referred to him in his *Ta'rīkh al-Islām;*[13] and al-Sakhāwī (831–902/1427–1497) enlisted him as the only chronicler from Ṭarābulus in his reflections on Islamic historical writing, *al-I'lān bi-l-tawbīkh li-man dhamma ahl al-ta'rīkh*.[14]

All those mentions stemming from al-Silafī's *Mu'jam* did not present any significant differences, apart from his name, with

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some authors giving 'Makhlūf' instead of 'Maḥbūb'. Regarding the time of his death, Yāqūt is the only one giving *dhū-l-ḥiğğa* of 522 (/November-December of 1128). There is nothing surprising with his name being unknown to the authors of the Islamic West, since he left there in his youth to live in the East where he made his reputation.

From other biographies gathered in al-Silafī's *Mu'jam*, it seems ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī met and learnt from Abū-l-Faḍl Jaʿfar b. al-Ṭayyib al-Kalbī al-Ṣiqillī[15], whom he heard the *Kitāb al-Waʿẓ* ('Book of predication') while staying in Ifrīqiya.[16] He also met the poet Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥasan b. Farrāj al-Ṭarābulusī,[17] in Tripoli.[18] He was probably one of the masters of the mālikī scholar Abū-l-Fawāris Nājī b. Yakhlaf b. ʿAṭiyya al-Hawwārī al-Ṭarābulusī;[19] and it seems quite certain he also was a teacher for al-Silafī himself, after settling down to Alexandria in 511/1118.[20]

Regarding his works, he is known to be the author of an historical text entitled *Mafākhir al-islām wa-intishār amr al-nabī ʿalayhi al-salām*. Written in Mecca, this text belongs to the *sīrat al-nabawiyya* literature. Three copies are known to exist, the oldest one is held in the General Library of Tetouan (Morocco) (ms. 737). Regarding his Tripolitanian chronicle, unfortunately a deep research in the available catalogues of manuscripts from Middle Eastern and North African libraries produced nothing. Given we did not even find the title of the work, only conjectures can be made about its content.

Al-Silafī is clearly claiming to have read and extracted data from his chronicle about Tripoli. Even if the quotation is not clearly referenced, he may have used it when writing the biography of Abū ʿAlī al-Ḥasan b. Farrāj al-Ṭarabulusī,[21] whom ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī personally met. He is also intervening here as a witness for al-Silafī. This paragraph is interesting because it includes a whole *qaṣīda* by Ibn Farrāj, which al-Silafī's probably did not hold in his memory but copied it from the chronicle of ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī. If so, it can be alleged that this work might have included a biographical dimension, perhaps a specific chapter gathering biographies of local celebrities? It could also have been a biographical collection dedicated to the Tripolitanian scholars.

This hypothesis is in fact supported by a mention made in the *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī taʾrīkh Ḥalab* by Syrian biographer Ibn al-ʿAdīm (Aleppo, 588/1182-Cairo, 660/1262). Indeed, he said to report the biography of the Tripolitanian devout Zahrūn b. Ḥassūn al-Ḥammāl (d. 356/967) from a copy made by Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ibrāhīm b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī directly from a draft of the *Riyāḍ al-nufūs fī ṭabaqāt 'ulamā' al-Qayrawān* by its very author, Abū Bakr al-Mālikī (d. after 464/1072).[22] The *Bughya*'s formulation does not imply that ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allah b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī intervened in the biographical discourse. One can only note that his own copy of the *Riyāḍ al-nufūs* still existed more than a century after his death, since Ibn al-ʿAdīm used it as a source for his own biographical collection. But as he probably started this work while in Aleppo and completed it in Cairo, it is difficult to know how he could access and read it.[23]

The general silence about this text, which is never mentioned or quoted by any other author than al-Silafī, can be seen as a clue to the early disappearance of Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Ibrāhīm b. Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī's 'short chronicle' about Tripoli.

Conclusion

The loss of this text is very prejudicial for historians, but it remains particularly interesting, inasmuch as it shows the emergence of a local historical consciousness, clearly distinct from the rest of Ifrīqiya, especially from its capital cities. Such cultural evolution can be seen as a consequence of the political autonomy that Tripoli progressively managed to acquire from the first years of the 5th/11th centuries onwards, under the rule of the Banū Khazrūn family.[24] In fact, during Ibn Maḥbūb al-Ṭarābulusī's lifetime, Tripoli was an independent city-state, officially freed from the Zirid power of Ifrīqiya. This situation ended only when King Rogier II of Sicily took the city in 540/1146. This would not be surprising, since other cities of Ifrīqiya experienced the same evolution. The rich kairuanese historiography began soon after Ifrīqiya separated from the Abbasid caliphate, during the 3rd/9th century. In the Hafsid context (7th/13th–9th/15th centuries), the development of a local historiography went along the acquisition of an important autonomy: in Bugia (modern-day Algeria), a local historiographical tradition was written down in the dawn of the Hafsid era by al-Ghubrīnī (644/1246–704/1304), who composed the *'Unwān al-dirāya fī man 'urifa min al-'ulamā' fī-l-mi'a al-sābi' bi-Bijāya*. In doing so he tried to stress the importance of his city and to justify its autonomy within the structure of the Hafsid state.

Later, the foreign conquests seem to also have stimulated the local writing, so as to record the memories of those who lived there before. A good example of this is given by the biographical literature. For centuries, Tripolitanian scholars were included in biographical dictionaries dedicated to Ifrīqiya and focused on al-Qayrawān–like the *Ṭabaqāt 'ulamā' Ifrīqiya* by Abū-l-ʿArab al-Tāmimī (d. 344/945) and al-Ḫušanī (d. after 360/971), the *Riyāḍ al-nufūs* by al-Mālikī (d. after 464/1072), and the *Ma'alim al-īmān fī ma'rifat ahl al-Qayrawān* by al-Dabbāgh (d. 696/1296) and Ibn Nājī (d. 839/1436). After his departure from Tripoli following the Spanish conquest (916/1510), Tripolitanian scholar Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Ḫarrūbī (d. 963/1552) wrote a short biographical collection dedicated to the pious men of the city, *Dhikr ba'ḍ awliyā' bi-Ṭarābulus*. In doing so, he confirmed the richness of local historiography long before its modern developments, adding a specific layer in the middle of the 10th/16th century. Despite its potential, this text still needs to be studied, and it is currently being edited and translated.

Notes

1 He was the author of the *Yawmiyyāt al-Lībiyya*, which gives a very detailed account of the story of the city of Tripoli from the Ottoman conquest to his lifetime. Only a section of this 1000-page text has been published (Ḥasan al-Faqīh Ḥasan 1984).

2 He is known to have written a chronicle about Tripoli (*al-Manhal al-ʿadhb fī taʾrīkh Ṭarābulus al-Gharb*) as well as a biographical dictionary dedicated to the famous men linked to the city (*Nafḥāt al-nisrīn wa-l-rayḥān fī-man kāna bi-Ṭarābulus min al-aʿyān*). Both texts have been published (al-Nāʾib al-Anṣārī 1960, 1994). Also see Juḥaydar (2008).

3 About this movement, see Sievert (2020).

4 Ibn Ghalbūn (1930) and Ibn Ghalbūn (1936). About this text, see Nimr (2008).

5 Another text from the 12th/18th can be mentioned, the *Seder HaDorot* by Abraham Khalfon (1741–1819). As a leader of the Tripoli Jewish Community, he wrote a history of the Jews of his hometown, from ancient times to the present dau. This text is now considered lost – fortunately, extensive parts were quoted by later authors such as Mordechai Ha-Cohen (1856–1929) and Nahum Slouschz (1872–1966). See Hirschberg (1981, 150 sqq).

6 al-Silafī (1993, 272).

7 A note in the margin specifies that this *ism* is often substituted by Makhlūf – which is precisely the name given by Yāqūt and all who quoted from him.

8 This character remains unknown, except for this mention by al-Silafī.

9 Regarding the functions of Alexandria as a place of learning in the late-Fatimid Egypt, see Walker (2014).

10 He was an Andalusian scholar from Seville. Like others, he settled in Alexandria, where he seems to have died c. 530/1135 (Ibn al-Abbār, 1990, IV, 235; al-Silafī, 1993, 460–461; Ibn al-Zubayr, 1993–1995, V, 305).

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11 al-Qalʿa was the first capital city of the Ḥammādid dynasty (395/1004–547/1152), who reigned over central Maghreb. Located northeast of M'sila in the Hodna Mountains, the city quickly became an important place of trade, as well as a major centre of learning. An extensive study of the Qalʿa, meanwhile, remains to be carried out by scholars. For a quick insight, see Aïssani and Amara (2015, 6649–6652).

12 Yāqūt, 1977, IV, 26. It is interesting to note that this is the mention by Yāqūt which made his posterity, since ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Makhlūf (*sic*) al-Ṭarābulusī is mentioned by some modern historians, such as al-Nā'ib al-Anṣārī (al-Nā'ib al-Anṣārī, 1994, 92, 99), al-Ṭāhir al-Zāwī (1890–1986) (al-Zāwī, 2004, 267–268) or ʿAlī Muṣṭafā al-Miṣrātī (b. 1926) (al-Miṣratī, 2002, 13–14).

13 al-Dhahabī (1990–2004, XXXVI, 66).

14 al-Sakhāwī, (1986, 254).

15 Little is known about him, although some pieces of his poetry were recorded by ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (519–597/1125–1201) in his *Kharīdat al-qaṣr wa-jarīdat al-ʿaṣr* (al-Iṣfahānī 1986, I, 112–115).

16 al-Silafī, 1993, 271.

17 This character remains unknown, except for his mention by al-Silafī.

18 al-Silafī (1993, 271).

19 This character remains unknown, except for his mention by al-Silafī.

20 al-Silafī (1993, 404).

21 al-Silafī (1993, 271).

22 Ibn al-ʿAdīm (1988–1989, IX, 3867–3868). It is remarkable that the comparison of the two versions is showing a great number of significant variations. See al-Mālikī (1994, II, 383–388).

23 There is a manuscript copy of the *Riyāḍ al-nufūs* in Cairo (Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, n° 116), but this copy is dated from the year 654/1255, making it impossible to be of al-Ṭarābulusī's hand.

24 In 399/1009, the governor of the city Falfūl b. Khazrūn tried to reject the Fatimid-Zirid power by recognizing the caliph of Cordoba Muḥammad II al-Mahdī as the rightful *imām* (Montel, 2021, 147–148). This initiative is viewed as the first manifestation of the autonomous aspirations of the city (Brett, 1986, 80–81). About this family and the evolution of Tripoli during their reign, see al-Sāmarrā'ī (2018).

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