Fruit of Knowledge, Wheel of Learning

*Essays in Honour of Carole Hillenbrand*

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Al-Suyuti’s Ta’rikh al-Khulafa’: A History of Politics or Piety?

In his introduction to the Ta’rikh, al-Suyuti includes only a few hints that can help to establish what function or purpose he intended for the work. The introduction is uncharacteristically long for al-Suyuti and includes a significant polemical passage attacking the Ima’mīs and the Fatimid caliphate. The majority of the introduction comprises a series of passages that outline issues regarding the nature of the caliphs and the caliphate, such as a discussion about why Muhammad left no clear mechanism for establishing a successor, all of which al-Suyuti acknowledges he has taken from al-Dhahabi’s Ta’rikh. However, at the beginning of the introduction, al-Suyuti makes it clear that the Ta’rikh is part of a series of tabqūtī works compiled on the subject of prophets, the Companions of the Prophet, the commentators of the Qur’an, hadith transmitters and many other groups of people within Muslim society. He explains how he made a conscious decision to separate these tabqūtī works, rather than including a voluminous work incorporating all in the same place, commenting, ‘I wanted to separate all the groups [of people] into separate books, making it advantageous for whoever wanted to know something about a specific group [of people] and easier to study.’

In his Islamic Historiography, Chase Robinson briefly categorises the Ta’rikh as part of the chronological genre of Arab historical writing, ‘yet it would seem more appropriate to place it in the tabqūtī/prosopographical genre. In his own discussion of the differences between biography and prosopography, Robinson comments that “[b]iographies accentuate the individual; prosopographies make individuals members.’ Throughout the Ta’rikh there is a sense that the work is describing a collection of individuals that are part of a greater whole: the work is not interested in the careers of each individual, but in the lessons that can be learnt from them. Donald Little’s reflections on Mamluk tabqūtī literature also seems to suggest that the Ta’rikh should be regarded as prosopography rather than a form of chronological history. Little writes:

Other than to name a few virtues and defects, the Mamluk biographer shows little interest in character at all, less in the development of character, since deeds and accomplishments constituted a person’s contribution to the umma. Even deviations from this purpose, arising from fascination with striking and unusual detail, militate against the portrayal of an integrated...
personality, since such interest leads to the narration of anecdotes focused not so much on the person as the detail.9

This is certainly true of the Taʾrikh, where there is very little in the way of character development, and also very little in the way of historical, annalistic information.

The Taʾrikh does share approaches to historical writing in common with al-Suyuti’s history of Egypt, Hum al-Muhadara, which is his other main historical work. Franz Rosenthal maintains that the Hum was a ‘handbook full of information, a useful reference work, which, however, can no longer be called a history’.10 The Taʾrikh can likewise be considered a ‘handbook full of information’, which moves the work into the realm of anecdotes and curiosities, hence allowing it, like many of his other works, to be easily categorised as adab literature. Similar to other adab literature, here the author firmly controls what is and is not included. In an analysis of Fedwa Malti-Douglas’s work on medieval biography, Julia Bray maintains that ‘medieval Arabic biographers are argumentative: they select data and themes according to their attitude towards the biographical subject or what he or she is believed to represent, and according to their agreement or disagreement with previous biographers’.11 Likewise, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the Taʾrikh is highly selective in the information it includes, containing little annalistic material and often little in the way of characterisation such that after reading each notice the reader will often struggle to gain a real sense of the individual.

Mustafa Banister has compared al-Suyuti’s view of the caliph with other historians of the classical period, concluding that ‘whereas other ulama historians recognized the demoted status of the caliphate for what it was, al-Suyuti insisted on the continuity between the current line of Abbasids at Cairo and the great caliphs of history who wielded incomparable power’.12 Banister argues that al-Suyuti’s position regards the caliphs as embodying spiritual power and authority, whereas the caliphate included many that failed to live up to the piety of the rāshidūn. Al-Suyuti’s spiritual, pietistic and idealistic view of the caliphate is deeply contrasted with the holders of the office itself; indeed, much of the work deals with political failures and moral laxity.

It is important to note that the vast majority of the work concerns an age when the caliph was no longer the sole political and spiritual authority within the Muslim community; therefore, al-Suyuti’s view of the religious and political superiority of the office of the caliph is continually juxtaposed with the caliphal weakness that was the historical reality. So how should readers interpret the Taʾrikh al-Khulafaʾ? As will be seen, the main function of the Taʾrikh seems to consist of offering a didactic discussion of piety, using the caliphs as real case-study examples rather than as a means to idealise and romanticise the glories of past days. Apart from the rāshidūn, the caliphs are not viewed or portrayed as exemplars, since the work seems to acknowledge that although some caliphs were pious, a great number had dubious moral character;13 and yet, the life of each person, good or bad, can offer something that can be used in illustrating moral conduct for readers.

### Historical Detail or the Lack Thereof

One of the most striking facts about al-Suyuti’s Taʾrikh is its lack of historical detail. Even if the History of the Caliphs is read as a series of biographies, that is, as a work that blurs the boundaries between sīḥa and taʾrikh, the paucity of information remains shocking.14 The entry for ‘Aḥ, for example, mentions nothing about his actual rule as a caliph at all; and this scarcity of information is a general trend throughout the entire work. The entry for al-Nasir, the caliph ruling during part of the Muslim counter-crusade, is sparse in detail, given the importance of the period. Al-Nasir had ambitions to re-establish the primacy of the role of the caliph, which, although not realised, constituted an important moment in the history of the Abbasid Caliphate.15

Even when al-Suyuti does provide historical details, there is a tendency to mention events only in passing without giving any specific data. For example, in the entry for al-Nasir, there is a passing reference to the conquests of Salah al-Din. Al-Suyuti writes:

> During [the year] there were many victories. Sultan Salah al-Din took many of the Syrian towns that had been in Frankish control, the most important of which was Jerusalem, which had been in Frankish control for ninety-one years.16

Al-Suyuti does not provide any information about the towns which were taken, when they were taken, or any specific details about the conquests themselves. Although other historians provide significant details about these events,17 al-Suyuti does not consider this kind of specific information to be important. The passage continues:

> The Sultan removed what monuments the Franks had established [in the city], he pulled down the churches that had spread [throughout the city], and he established a Shafiʿi madrasa on the site of one of the churches. May God reward Islam well! However, he did not destroy the Church of the Resurrection,18 following ʿUmar—may God be pleased with him!—who did not destroy it when he conquered Jerusalem.19

This gives us some indication of what details al-Suyuti regards as being important or unimportant: the number of the churches that are destroyed are not mentioned or even guessed,20 nor is there any mention of Salah al-Din placing...
the minbar in the Dome of the Rock,20 nor his re-establishing of Muslim places of worship within the city. Other sources abound in details, such as the fact that the church that was turned into the Madrasa al-Salahiyya was the Church of St. Anne.21

In contrast al-Suyuti goes to some lengths to emphasise the link between Salah al-Din and the ṣakhirīn Caliph ʿUmar, who created a sunna in the so-called ‘Pact of ʿUmar’ for Muslim dealings with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other places of Christian (and Jewish) worship.22 For al-Suyuti the general action of destroying the Christian monuments, and establishing new Muslim ones is all that needs to be conveyed; specific detail is unimportant.

Such selective manner of relating some details but not others can also be observed in the entry for the late Mamluk caliph al-Qiʿim bi-Amrīthalāh, who ruled immediately before al-Suyuti wrote the Taʾrikh. Al-Qiʿim had a dispute with the Mamluk sultan, ʿInal al-Ashraf, to which the caliph responded by raising troops against the sultan; an enterprise that quickly led to failure. The dispute concerned a request for camels to be used in a campaign in the Nile Delta, which was blocked by ʿInal al-Ashraf. The Taʾrikh simply states:

Then discord arose between the caliph and ʿInal al-Ashraf because of the rising of an army against him. He [Inal al-Ashraf] removed him from the caliphate in the month of Jumada II and sent him to Alexandria. He imprisoned him there until his death in 883 and he was buried with his brother, al-Mustaʿin.24

There is no detail given about any of the events themselves, the nature of the dispute, or even what actually happened. Instead the focus is on the fact that a conflict emerged between the caliph and the sultan which resulted in the caliph being deposed.

That is not to say, however, that the Taʾrikh does not include any useful historical information. The majority of the entries for al-Mustakfi comprises a copy of the covenant of al-Mustakfi.25 The covenant was, according to al-Suyuti, drafted by his own father, ʿAlī ibn ʿAbd al-Rasūl b. Muḥammad, and the text that was drawn up is simply stated:

This text only states: “During [the year] there were many victories.”41 Conjunctions of the first day of the year with other ‘firsts’ is immediately followed by the passage seen earlier about Salah al-Din’s victories in the Levant, with the simple statement, ‘During [the year] there were many victories.’42 Conjunctions of constellations such as these were highly valued in the late medieval period, with people who were born under conjunctions, including Muhammad himself, often being called a ‘Lord of Conjunction’.43

Alongside certain supernatural events that are interpreted as signs of God’s approval and disapproval and the theological beliefs associated with natural disasters such as earthquakes44 and plagues,45 al-Suyuti’s Taʾrikh moves into a territory that is more pietistic than much contemporary historiography and even quite different in focus to localised ʿulūm ilāli literature. This suggests a highly spiritualised view of history; although, it is one that rejects astrology, since after the sighting of the six planets in Libra, al-Suyuti writes:

Elsewhere, the details that al-Suyuti provides are unusual, surprising and, on the face of it, historically less relevant. In the entry for al-Nasir, he includes the following information: in 581/1185–86, a child was born with a forehead a span and four fingers long, with only one ear;26 in 582/1186, six planets were in conjunction with Libra;27 in 583/1187, the first day of the year was the first day of the week and the first day of the solar year and the sun and the moon were in the first sign of the zodiac;28 in 592/1193–94, a red sandstorm fell over the Arabian Peninsula and the rukn al-yamānī (Yemeni corner) of the Kaʿba fell down;29 in 593/1196, a meteor fell to earth;30 in 596/1199 there was a significant drought and the Nile did not flood, which led to widespread famine and cases of cannibalism;31 in 597/1200 there was a significant earthquake in Cairo;32 and, in 600/1203, a woman gave birth to a child with two heads, two arms and four legs.33 This list mostly describes events which were seen as ill omens. Mamluk society sought to avoid physical contact with those with birth defects and abnormalities. Natural disasters were perceived as a form of divine punishment, wrath and displeasure; although wonders such as meteors, and the alignments of ‘firsts’ were often propitious omens.

Given the general lack of any historical information in the work as a whole, the presence of these curiosities is interesting, notwithstanding their number. There was, however, a general interest in the extraordinary and the supernatural—the qīṭāb and the gharāʾib—in Classical Islam and in Islamic historiography; for example, al-Maʾṣūde engages with aspects of the supernatural in his Muruj al-Dhuhur,34 as was common in Muslim histories during the Ottoman period.35

In the Taʾrikh there is a correlation between strange omens with defeats at the hands of the Franks and good omens with victories. For example, the conjunction (qirān) of the first day of the year with other ‘firsts’ is immediately followed by the passage seen earlier about Salah al-Din’s victories in the Levant, with the simple statement, ‘During [the year] there were many victories.’36 Conjunctions of constellations such as these were highly valued in the late medieval period, with people who were born under conjunctions, including Muhammad himself, often being called a ‘Lord of Conjunction’.37

The astrologers predicted general devastation from a torrent of wind in all the provinces. So the people went into trenches dug out at the edges [of the city] and barricaded themselves against the wind. They carried water and provisions to their dugouts. They waited there for the night that they had been warned...
of other admirable personal qualities. Al-Suyuti includes Ibn al-Najjar’s comments on the caliph:

He was of good character, handsome, witty, articulate and eloquent. He was accustomed to do what was right and to say helpful things. His days were a beauty spot on the face of the age and a pearl in the crown of honour. 15

On the other hand, al-Suyuti includes the following comment by Ibn Wasil (d. 697/1298): ‘He did behave contrarily and he became a Shiʾi and favoured the Imami School, in contrast to his fathers.’16 And a statement by Ibn al-Athir:

Al-Nasir led an evil life. During his days, Iraq was devastated by the taxes he raised and he took their goods and property. He used to do one thing, as well as its opposite. He would throw hazelnuts to the ground and was fond of bathing.17

Al-Suyuti’s work is not hagiographical in the sense that it sees only good in all the caliphs; rather, it seeks to display a range of human behaviour and characteristics such as piety among all those who have held the highest spiritual and political office.

The very bad, such as al-Walid ibn Yazid, are given short shrift. Al-Suyuti writes that he ‘was profligate, a drinker of wine, a violator of the holy things of God. He wanted to perform the pilgrimage so that he could drink [wine] on top of the ka’ba’.18 Yet al-Suyuti is also quick to dismiss al-Walid’s alleged atheism, quoting al-Dhahabi who says that ‘it is not true that al-Walid was an unbeliever and a heretic. Although it is well-known that he drank and was a homosexual’19 and also an anecdote attributed to the later caliph al-Mahdi, who said that ‘the caliphate is a job too glorious to be taken by a heretic’.20 Al-Suyuti’s reformist agenda

A great many of al-Suyuti’s works can be seen as containing an underlyng didactic message about virtue, often rooted in an advocacy for a return to a more Qur’anic and hadith-centred approach to knowledge and spirituality. In many respects this casts al-Suyuti in the mould of a reformer: his works call for a return to ‘orthodoxy’, advocate the development of personal piety amongst all people and, perhaps most importantly, reassert the authority of the ulama within the spiritual and social world of late-Mamluk Cairo. This can be seen in a number of his fatwas,21 in his numerous hadith compilations22 and in his exegetical works,23 but comes across most strongly in his attacks on the qāṣīṣī (‘storytellers’). Al-Suyuti sees the qāṣīṣī as causing the masses to deviate from true knowledge or interpretation, from threatening the integrity, authority and value of the ulama and from prohibiting growth in piety through misleading or providing ignorant knowledge.24 The two trends of encouraging a move towards the Qurʾan and hadith, and a stress on personal virtue, appear to be highly influenced by his Shadhilism,25 giving an impression that al-Suyuti was orchestrating a subtle Shadhili Reformation.

The extent to which Shadhili spirituality lies behind a great number of al-Suyuti works, which has also been noted as a theme in this study of his Taʾrikh al-Khulafaʾ, suggests a concerted attempt by al-Suyuti to change the world around him. In this sense, al-Suyuti is a reformer or, at the very least, someone actively advocating and preaching for renewal of the Muslim community. This renewal comes through a return to the Qurʾan and the hadith, to the observance of personal piety, but also a return to ‘orthodox’ social order, in which the caliph and the ulama were the respected conduits of good governance, propriety and prosperity. The social hierarchy envisioned in the Taʾrikh al-Khulafaʾ also invests the ulama with a powerful role within the community. However, unlike figures such as Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Hazm and Ibn al-Hajj,26 al-Suyuti is not advocating an adversarial form of reformation countering popular religion, but one which quietly, but continually, calls for a return to piety and tradition, with the role of scholars as the arbiters of what is acceptable.27

The links between Sufism and movements seeking to reform, renew or revive Islam are well-known in Islamic history, particularly in later periods as the Muslim community sought to understand its fall from dominance. In their study of North African Sufi reformism in the eighteenth century, Nehemiah Levtzion and Gideon Weigert note that ‘[e]mphasis on the study of hadith was one of the characteristics of eighteenth-century revivalism in the haramayn and in Egypt’.28 Levtzion and Weigert see these trends rooted in the Khabarfiyya order in Egypt,29 an order that emerged in the late Mamluk period and began to flourish in the eighteenth century.30 Both the Shadhili and the Khabariyya advocated a Qurʾanic and hadith-based spirituality, which sought a renewal and reform of Muslim society. It is interesting to note the parallel with many Sufi reformists of the eighteenth century, who advocated a similar view of popular piety with a focus on hadith-based spirituality. Sufi reformers often clashed with the Wahhabis in the Hijaz who approached Sufism and popular religion in a similarly antagonistic vein to Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Hajj.31 Al-Suyuti’s vision of the world is one in which popular virtue is an important part of the way in which people are able to engage with the divine.
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5. See Al-Suyuti, Taʾrîkh al-Khulafāʾ, 6. Al-Suyuti even adds a disclaimer that the responsibility for the work is his ('al-lāh fī-amrihi al-Suyūṭī).

6. Al-Suyuti leaves these words unnamed, possibly because they had not yet been written at the time he wrote the Taʾrîkh al-Khulafāʾ. He compiled a series of ūṣūrī works, including Tabaqat al-Muhammad, Cairo 1976, Tabaqat al-Muğaffal, Beirut 1994, Bughyukl al-Fāṭima, Tabaqat al-Luhūmiyyin wa'l-Nuhat, Cairo 1984.

7. See Al-Suyuti, Taʾrîkh al-Khulafāʾ Sultan.


15. For a discussion of the difference between šīr and naskh, see Chace F. Robinson, Islamic Historiography, Oxford 2003, 11.


