

Book Review

Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābiʿ, *Dīwān Rasāʾil al-Ṣābiʿ*. Edited by Iḥsān Dhannūn al-Thāmīrī. 2 vols. (London: Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2017), 832 pp. ISBN 978-1-78814-719-4. Price: £80.00.

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Preparing textual editions is among the most pressing challenges for the progress of the historical study of the premodern Middle East. Yet it is a form of academic work that is not sufficiently acknowledged by the many historians who use these materials. Over the past decade, the Al-Furqān Foundation of London (<https://www.al-furqan.com/>) has undertaken the publication of numerous important texts. Notable among these works are the monumental editions of the *Kitāb al-fihrist* of Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990) (2014, 2nd ed.), the *Kitāb al-mawāʿiẓ wa-al-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-al-āthār* (known as *the Khīṭaṭ*) of Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) (2013, 2nd ed.), and Ibn al-ʿAdīm’s (d. 660/1262) *Bughyat al-ṭalab fī tārikh Ḥalab* (2016, 1st ed.). In an age that is otherwise witnessing the proliferation of cheaply produced and regrettably error-filled versions

of classic texts of Arabic literature, the Al-Furqān Foundation’s efforts in bringing these important books to the scholars is laudable.

Criticism of recently published editions has an important role to play in alerting scholars to the promises and pitfalls of these newly edited texts, and may also encourage the preparation of fiable editions in the future. Experts have offered valuable critiques of two of the previously mentioned historical works. Devin Stewart’s exemplary article-length review of Ayman Fuʿād Sayyid’s edition of the *Fihrist* offered pages of suggestions and emendations, useful in the preparation of any further revised edition.¹ In his review, Stewart lamented the fact that the editor did not address the work of earlier editors and scholars, which admittedly remain difficult to access given the limited

1. Devin J. Stewart, “Editing the Fihrist of Ibn al-Nadīm,” *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 159–205, ISSN: 2214-2371, doi:10.1163/22142371-12340007



availability of specialist publications and language barriers.

Frédéric Bauden similarly authored an important review of Sayyid's edition of al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ*. In it, Bauden considered the work that had gone into making the edition: he critiqued the choices that Sayyid had made in identifying and selecting manuscripts; pointed to the lack of an *apparatus criticus*; noted a certain arbitrariness in separating authorial notations from the main text; and identified the editor's overzealous use of already-published sources to correct al-Maqrīzī. Thus while Bauden positively noted that Sayyid's new edition was based on earlier manuscripts than the 1853 Būlāq edition, he nevertheless concluded that it was impossible to "consider [Sayyid's] work a critical edition, as it is defined nowadays or a definitive one."²

The work under review here, *The Registry of al-Ṣābi's Letters (Dīwān Rasā'il Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābi)* (d. 384/994) edited by Iḥsān Dhannūn al-Thāmīrī, is an essential work for anyone interested in Buyid history, Arabic epistolography, Classical Arabic prose literature, and the conduct of premodern Muslim politics and statecraft. Although precious little remains from the collections of scribes from the period of 2nd–3rd/8th–9th centuries, numerous large-scale *dīwāns* of fourth/tenth century prose writers

such as the letters of al-Ṣāhib b. 'Abbād (d. 385/995), 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Yūsuf al-Shīrāzī (d. 375/985), Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī (d. 383/993) and Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008) were collected primarily for the training of scribes employed in state chanceries. Most of these fourth/tenth century letter-collections have been published, however the editions are based on small numbers of manuscripts and thus need to be used with caution.³

There was perhaps none of this aforementioned group of epistolographers more esteemed by his contemporaries and influential for later generations of scribes than al-Ṣābi'. The number of surviving epistles from his pen more than doubles that of any of these other scribes and is at present the largest known collection of letters from the first four centuries of Muslim rule. Anthologists and critics from his own time, such as Muḥassin b. 'Alī al-Tanūkhī (d. 384/994), Abū Hilāl al-'Askarī (d. after 400/1010), and the preeminent anthologist of the fourth/tenth century, Abū Manṣūr al-Tha'ālibī (d. 429/1039), held his epistles in great esteem. Al-Ṣābi's letters were also influential for later prose writers, such as Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) and al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418).

One possible reason for the oversized presence of al-Ṣābi' and his letters must

2. Frédéric Bauden, "Review of *Al-Mawā'iz wa-l-i'tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār* li-Taḳī al-dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Alī ibn 'Abd al-Qādir al-Maqrīzī. Edited by Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid. Vol. I (London: Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1422/2002), alif-'ayn, 140-772 pp. with several plates. HB £35.00. ISBN 1-873992-63-7. Vol. II (London: Al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1423/2002), 100-614 pp.," *Mamluk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 169-176, 176.

3. Al-Ṣāhib b. 'Abbād, *Rasā'il al-Ṣāhib b. 'Abbād*, ed. 'A. Azzām and Sh. Ḍayf (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, 1946); al-Shīrāzī, *Rasā'il al-Shīrāzī*, ed. Iḥsān Dhannūn al-Thāmīrī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2010); al-Khwārizmī, *Rasā'il*, ed. M. Pourgol (Tehran: Anjuman-i Āthār va Mafākhīr-i Farhangī, 2005); al-Hamadhānī, Badī' al-Zamān, *Kashf al-ma'ānī wa-al-bayān 'an rasā'il Badī' al-Zamān*, ed. I. al-Ṭarābulsī (Beirut: al-Maṭba'a al-Kāthūlikiyya, 1890).

have been the length of his tenure in the office of the head of the chancery, serving for more than thirty years in Baghdad (*ṣāhib dīwān al-inshāʾ*) from 349–374/959–984. Unlike the other Buyid capitals where viziers held sway, the head of the chancery of Baghdad was responsible for drafting letters on behalf of the caliphs, the Buyid emirs of Baghdad, and their viziers. Al-Ṣābiʾ composed letters of nearly every possible type, allowing readers of his collections of epistles to have a sense for the great range of communication required by the leading state scribes. Moreover, this was surely a momentous time, during which the Buyid emirs of Baghdad refashioned the relationship between the amirate, vizierate and caliphate, and these features are reflected in the correspondence of the era.

The letters of al-Ṣābiʾ are also of great potential interest to historians as sources for the events that they recount, and the role of epistolography in the conduct of state affairs. Details of Buyid dynastic and political history can now be better traced and documented with reference to these letters. As several studies of letter collections such as those of Johann-Christoph Bürgel, Klaus Hachmeier, and the present reviewer have shown, epistles can be an invaluable source for deepening our understanding of the ways that states used chancery writing in the conduct of statecraft.⁴

The collection is also a remarkable window into the life of a leading

administrator and statesman. Abū Ishāq al-Ṣābiʾ was from a family of Sabians of Ḥarrān that had long served the Abbasid administration. He had entered the service of the Buyid dynasty during the momentous reign of Muʿizz al-Dawla (d. 356/966) in Baghdad when the courtly life of the Buyids was at its peak. He remained a loyal servant to Muʿizz al-Dawla's son, ʿIzz al-Dawla Bakhtiyār (d. 367/977), which led to an infamous falling-out with the chief emir ʿAḍud al-Dawla (d. 373/983). The letters, composed on behalf of state officials as well as others, reveal the ways in which state affairs and personal relationships were inextricably bound up with one another.

The letters of al-Ṣābiʾ also reveal the complex intersections between politics and religion. Al-Ṣābiʾ was a non-Muslim, yet his contemporaries praised the extent to which his letters deployed Qurʾānic imagery and language. His voluminous correspondence with contemporary Sunnī and Shīʿī intellectuals in belles-lettres, poetic criticism, philosophy and the natural sciences are valuable witnesses to the diverse intellectual culture of the fourth/tenth century. There is also a remarkable set of letters (2: 602 and following) preserved of his correspondence with members of the Sabian community in Ḥarrān, which should merit the attention of any historian interested in the ways that high-ranking officials might intercede

4. Johann-Christoph Bürgel, *Die Hofkorrespondenz ʿAḍud al-Daulas und ihr Verhältnis zu anderen historischen Quellen der frühen Buyidenzeit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965); Klaus U. Hachmeier, *Die Briefe Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābiʾs (st. 384/994 A.H./A.D.), Untersuchungen zur Briefsammlung eines berühmten arabischen Kanzleischreibers mit Erstedition einiger seiner Briefe* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2002); Maurice A. Pomerantz, *Licit Magic: The Life and Letters of Al-Ṣāhib b. ʿAbbād (d. 385/995)*, Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

on behalf of their families, neighbors, and co-religionists.

The present edition was carefully prepared by Iḥsān Dhannūn al-Thāmīrī. Among editors working today, al-Thāmīrī stands out as having a particular interest and affinity for chancery literature, having previously edited the letter collection of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Yūsuf al-Shīrāzī (d. 388/998) based on a *unicum* manuscript, MS Berlin Staatsbibliothek 8825.⁵

Prior to the edition of al-Thāmīrī, there were several small collections of al-Ṣābi’s letters edited and published, beginning with Shakīb Arsalān’s edition of 1898, which selected 42 letters from the 95 that were contained in MS Istanbul Aṣīr Efendi 317.⁶ This edition was followed by another collection of the letters exchanged between al-Ṣābi’ and al-Sharīf al-Raḍī, edited by Y. Najm and published in 1961.⁷ Klaus Hachmeier published 36 of al-Ṣābi’s letters in the course of his exemplary work, *Die Briefe Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Sābi’s*, published in 2002.⁸ Al-Thāmīrī’s is the first edition to aim at a complete corpus of al-Ṣābi’s letters.

One of the basic problems identified by Devin Stewart in his review of the *Fihrist* was that the editors of texts are often unaware of important research articles published on the works that they are editing. This can often have profound consequences for the subsequent editions, and it must be said that al-Thāmīrī’s work

on the edition would have benefited from a thorough familiarity with Hachmeier’s thesis, book, and articles.

In the case of extant manuscripts of al-Ṣābi’s letters, al-Thāmīrī describes how he has based his edition on ten manuscripts, which he lists in his introduction. However, were he to have read Hachmeier’s 2002 dissertation and subsequent article of 2010, he would have learned that Hachmeier had identified nineteen manuscripts containing al-Ṣābi’s letters. Hachmeier’s descriptions of these manuscripts, updated in the 2010 article with further information, provide the definitive census of the manuscripts of al-Ṣābi’s letters, a description of their contents, and a *stemma* of their probable filiation.⁹

The implication for the present edition of overlooking this earlier scholarship is dramatic. Rather than the 419 letters that al-Thāmīrī has edited, the total extant number of letters found by Hachmeier is 523. This alone should be reason for a new revised edition taking into account the basic manuscript evidence presented by Hachmeier.

Each of the letters in al-Thāmīrī’s edition is identified by the manuscript(s) in which it is located, as well as reference to any literary sources that also reproduce it. In addition, al-Thāmīrī often supplies helpful historical details that provide the immediate context for the authorship of

5. Al-Shīrāzī, *Rasā’il al-Shīrāzī*, ed. Iḥsān Dhannūn al-Thāmīrī (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2010).

6. Al-Ṣābi’, *Al-Mukhtār min rasā’il Abī Ishāq Ibrāhīm b. Hilāl b. Zahrūn al-Ṣābi*, ed. Sh. Arsalān (Ba‘abda: n.p., 1898).

7. *Rasā’il al-Ṣābi’ wa-al-Raḍī*, ed. Y. Najm (Kuwait: Dā’irat al-Maṭbū‘āt wa-al-Nashr, 1961).

8. Hachmeier, *Die Briefe Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābi’s*, 325–452.

9. Klaus U. Hachmeier, “The Letters of Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm al-Ṣābi’: A Large Buyid Collection Established from Manuscripts and Other Sources,” *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph*, no. 53 (2011): 107–222.

the letter. This is all extremely helpful for the modern reader, and al-Thāmirī's linguistic notes are thoughtful and generally on target.

The arrangement of the letters of al-Thāmirī is a modern invention. Thus an extremely helpful addition to this collection would have been a listing of dates of letters (when possible). Often in dealing with a letter collection, the historian is trying to cross-reference details of historical events in chronicles, and to look for contemporary pieces of evidence found in other letter collections. Moreover, it should be said that the current arrangement suffers from a bit of anachronism. For instance, the terms "political letters" (*rasā'il siyāsiyya*) and "personal letters" (*rasā'il shakhṣiyya*) obscure more than they clarify.

This reader would have preferred that the editor retain technical terms for the varied types of letters (e.g., *rasā'il fī al-futuḥ*, *uhūd*, *manāshīr*) found in these manuscripts. This is something where the editor would again have benefited greatly from reading Hachmeier's survey of manuscripts. Hachmeier prudently distinguished between what appear to be "complete" manuscripts of al-Ṣābi's letters, and those which are selections from complete manuscripts, and arranged letters according to their types following the structure of the letter-collections. In so doing, he was able to preserve features of the form in which the letters of al-Ṣābi' were arranged and understood by copyists rather than attempting to place them in assumed historical order.

As for the transcription of individual letters in the collection, I compared a letter in this edition to one transcribed

and edited by Klaus Hachmeier. Because the text of the letters is quite dense with parallelism, figurative language, and long *clausulae*, scribes often would deviate from one another in the ways in which they reproduced the same exemplar. The letter in question is 1:161–70 = letter #218 found on pages 348–352 in Hachmeier's 2002 publication. In the first place, Hachmeier's edition aims to be critical, clearly identifying the sources of the variants he has provided. By contrast, al-Thāmirī provides very minimal notes when he prefers one reading over another. This is unfortunate, because it leaves the reader at a loss as to when the editor has preferred a particular word and why. Thus differences between manuscripts are easier to trace in Hachmeier's edition of the letter because he notes the variants. That said, al-Thāmirī's choices are often quite good and one wishes to know whether there was manuscript evidence behind his emendations. Without recourse to Hachmeier's edition or the manuscripts it is impossible to know.

Scholars of Abbasid history and Arabic literature would be well advised to take a look at this new edition of al-Ṣābi's letters and they should be grateful for the efforts that al-Thāmirī expended in preparing it. They should, however, be aware that this is not a definitive or critical edition of the letters. Students of the letters of al-Ṣābi' would still be wise to consult the manuscripts, and earlier scholarship, in order to be certain of their conclusions. This reviewer is grateful to have a printed edition of these epistles and he hopes that this will spur the editor or other scholars to embark on a more complete and critical revised second edition.