

‘Amr Munīr, Miṣr fī al-āsātīr al-‘arabīyah.

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‘Amr Munīr is an Egyptian historian and specialist in the history of Medieval Egypt. His primary research area is the folklore and cultural heritage of Egypt in the Middle Ages and early modern era. This present work *Miṣr fī al-āsātīr al-‘arabīyah* (Egypt in the Arabian Myths) examines the myths about Egypt in the writings of Muslim-Arab travellers and historians. It develops a new approach in modern historical studies that differs from the Arab classical historical studies, which present historical studies built on the classic narratives of the past written by the contemporary chroniclers. In contrast, Munīr’s approach may be considered a *transmission* stage in recent Arab historiography combining cultural heritage studies and classic historical studies. He seeks to trace the popular imaginations stored in myths and tales that the traditional sources included, but which have been neglected by previous studies.

Munīr investigates historical and folk sources of Egypt, Egyptian Society, as well as Egyptian Cities and the Nile. To distinguish between myths and historical events, the author examines the old myths about Egypt that people transmitted through the ages. Munīr then compares and evaluates the perception and transmission of these myths in the writings of the classical Muslim historians, chroniclers

and travellers. This method enables Munīr to differentiate between the traditional myths transferred and inherited by generations through the ages, on the one hand, and historical events as recorded in historiographical Arabic sources, on the other.

Munīr considers the account of al-Maqrīzī (1364-1442), *Kitāb al-mawā’iẓ wa-l-i’tibār bi-dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār* (Topographic and historical description of Egypt), which also known as *al-khiṭaṭ al-maqrīziyyah*, as the most prominent source of this study that contains substantial heritage materials about Egyptian history and folklore. Another significant study source is the book *Seyahatnāme Miṣr* (book of travel of Egypt) by Evliya Çelebi (1611-82), an Ottoman traveller through the territories of the Ottoman Empire and neighbouring lands. Munīr states that this traveller provided a unique description of Egyptian society and its folklore, including many popular tales, myths and superstitions circulated among the Egyptian populace. The sources of this work include a wide range of contemporaneous Muslim sources. In broad terms, the majority of the sources and writers were chroniclers, eyewitnesses and classical Muslims historians. Therefore, Munīr’s book relied on a variety of other sources, such as *Kitāb futūḥ Miṣr wa-akhbāruhā* (Conquests of Egypt and

its news) by Ibn ʿabd al-Ḥakam (d. 870 or 871), *Al-istibṣār fi ʿajāʾib al-āmṣār* (Description of Morocco, Egypt, Mecca and Medina) by an anonymous Arab geographer (6th AH/13th AD century) and the account of al-Qazwīnī (d.1283), *Āthār al-bilād wa-akbār al-ʿibād* (Monument of places and history of God's bondsmen). The author also relied on other historical, geographical sources, such as *Al-faḍāʾil al-bāhirah fi maḥāsin Miṣr wa-l-Qāhirah* (The brilliant virtues in the merits of Egypt and Cairo) by Ibn-Zuhīrat (1422-87), *Ṣūrat al-arḍ* (Face of the earth) by Ibn-Ḥawqal (d. 978) and the chronicler al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar* (The meadows of gold and mines of gems). Besides all such sources, the study benefited from the *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldūn* (the introduction) by Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406) and his theories about society and history.

This study focuses on examples of tales and myths that the medieval and early modern Muslim historians' writings mentioned about Egypt from the ancient period to the late Middle Ages. The fanciful image of Egypt in the old writings represented, at times, a part of actual events. However, at other times, such fantasy built an inherent stereotype that displayed many perceptions and illusions. Most probably, such impressions, which swelled

through the ages, attracted some prominent writers, historians, philosophers and travellers from the East and West who were eager to record and discover the wonders of Egyptian history. These wonders are an expression of an axis of the real relations between Africa and Asia, between Europe and the East, between the memory of the past and the actual reality.

This work reveals a new image of Egypt by examining the fragments of historical and religious knowledge merged with the myths and folklore preserved in sources and travellers' reports. In the book's introduction, Munīr mentions that he aims "to raise popular consciousness of the Egyptian cultural heritage, striving to establish a collective comprehension and interpretation of the past." Munīr assumes that psychological understanding of the historical phenomena and events is an essential factor in shaping the collective vision that interprets history. Chapter one discusses the differences, similarities and intersections between history and myth. Munīr presents several definitions of history and legend in numerous civilizations and languages. He defines the relations between history and myth as starting with the beginning of the human effort to discover the surrounding world. Therefore, imagination was one of the techniques

that humans used to fill the anonymous hiatuses in the past, blending reality with fiction. Such a human attempt to explore that past was the first attempt to establish *history* as a science to help in understanding the human presence in the past, present, and future. Munīr, therefore, determines that the first reading of human history was a mythological reading, which later was the basis of the earliest endeavours to record history.

The second chapter studies the myths and tales related to the origin of the name *Egypt*, the origin of the Egyptians and the implications of those fabulous tales about the Egyptians' pride in their country. It also investigates the debate regarding the Egyptians' origins: Hamites, Greeks or Arabs. It reveals that these three heritage features were used to satisfy cultural-social needs for individual communities in Egypt at the time. The third chapter reveals the folk materials about the merits of Egypt recorded in historical, cultural, folklore and even religious writings. Writings about the virtues of Egyptian cities commenced by the beginning of the third century AH, the ninth century AD, as a type of authorship that combined history with myths and popular heritage, along with religion and literature. It was a result of the intercommunication of Islam, the Arabic language

and the local cultural heritage throughout Egypt and the Islamic Caliphate.

Chapter four discusses the myths and tales of the ancient Egyptian civilization in the Muslim sources and as addressed by Muslim travellers. The ancient Egyptians drew the attention and admiration of storytellers and writers, who wrote numerous stories and legends about them and their economic, political and civilizational development. Historical memory transmitted such myths or tales with a romantic perception that attracted the eye of Muslim and Arab narrators and travellers. Chapter Five relates the legends and anecdotes regarding the burial customs of the pharaohs and their treasures. It illustrates that some of the tales of the pharaonic treasures have some truth to them, but other tales are exaggerated. The author has also tried to display the images of the ancient kings of Egypt that were ignored by historians' writings, some of which are characterised by an excited imagination. The sixth chapter displays the myths of the ancient Egyptian cities, including the news of wonders and tales, which clarifies the extent to which the narrators were impressed by the achievements of ancient Egyptian civilization, which was evident in these legendary stories about the mysterious works of the ancient Egyptian kings.

Chapter seven describes the urbanization of Egypt, its folktales and the wonders existing in the land of Egypt. The tales uncover the degree to which the imagination enwraps the history of Egypt and narrators' inability to identify its actual history. Such folktales sought to present real answers about this ancient civilization and about its antiquities that have persisted to this day. Some assigned most of the accomplishments of the pharaohs to witchcraft and paranormal powers. However, most of these fictions hold a kernel of historical facts. Chapter eight investigates the myths and tales about the Nile River and Egypt's water resources. The Egyptians have adored their country and their Nile; the legends phrased this passion and love in beautiful and sensational form. The chapter confirms that the life and existence of the Egyptians ultimately relied and still relies on the Nile River and that they regarded this fact with awe. The last chapter deals with the folklore related to the Egyptian character. Historians, whose writings were sometimes prone to exaggeration and other times exhibited some reality, subjected the Egyptian persona to debates, analysis, and conflicts of opinions. To conclude, Munir mentions that his study aims to illustrate some of the merits of the historical writing of the Muslim historians and their method of

thinking at the time. It also strives to represent the popular vision and understanding by analysing some elements of folklore, such as myths.

Overall, this work is a milestone in the historiography of the myth and its impact upon history and particularly the history of Egypt in the Middle Ages and early modern period. It is impressive, showing an encyclopaedic depth of understanding, not merely of the history of Egypt as a whole, but also of the mythological and popular heritage of Egypt. The study contains *broad-detailed historical data* that could be displayed in a better way or in multi-separate studies. The period of this study includes hundreds of sources and historical materials that are rarely brought together in a single study. Each part of this study should be studied as a separate work. However, despite its breadth, it does take into account the medieval and early modern myths mentioned in the Muslim-Eastern sources without considering other medieval sources, such as the contemporaneous Latin and Byzantine sources that dealt with Egyptian history. That opens the gate to other scholars to take such study as a model for further studies that may investigate the topic of each chapter of this study in a separate work, while taking into consideration other contemporary

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sources, not only the Arabic Muslims sources and travellers.

Munīr's could also have made more use of folk studies literary history and of historical methods like those of the *New Historicism* to develop his methodological tools. It is highly desirable to extend our historical studies beyond the classical historical approaches that use political-military archives and materials to present history from above and only for the upper and ruling classes. Munīr's book makes a substantial effort to pay the same attention to folklore and myths as vital historical sources. It is necessary to use folklore, myths, literature, poetry, and other popular-cultural materials, and not only historical and archival sources, to present something new for historical knowledge.

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