In 1981, when the Lebanese capital of Beirut still remained in the firm grip of civil war, one of the most inspiring intellectual events in the city was the weekly meeting in the house of Iḥsān ʿAbbās, a renowned Palestinian specialist in Arabic history and classical Arabic literature. When on one of these occasions, I asked him about the fifteenth-century Arabic encyclopaedia called al-Mustaṣraf, I was astonished to see him frown and actually advise me not to mention the subject to him again. It was only several weeks later that he informed me about the reason for his harsh reaction: Iḥsān ʿAbbās told me that when he was growing up, the major reading matter available to satisfy his curiosity, in fact the only book in the home of his family besides the Qoran, the holy book of Islam, had been the Mustaṣraf—so he knew it almost by heart and was reluctant to confront his memory. Unfortunately, we never managed to discuss the Mustaṣraf in depth, but since this experience I think of the Mustaṣraf as a kind of Hausbuch of the average intellectual family in the Arab world.

Any effort to evaluate the Mustaṣraf’s position at the turn of the twentieth century not only leads to a discussion of its individual qualities but also necessitates a number of preliminary remarks sketching the historical and literary background of its genesis.

As for the historical dimension, Arabic literature is conventionally divided by analogy to political events into three major periods designated classical, intermediary (post-classical, pre-modern), and modern. The classical period began with the oral literature of pre-Islamic times, had its first major authors in the ninth century C.E. and lasted until the Mongol invasion and the resulting abolishment of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258. The intermediary period, lasting until the end of the eighteenth century, is seen by most Western as well as Islamic scholars predominantly as a period of cultural decline and decadence with few literary products deserving serious
attention; accordingly, only a minute percentage of the literary production of this period has been researched. In terms of literature, this decadence is usually seen in the small number of original, individual, inspiring, or simply new contributions: authors tended to produce highly repetitive compilations of the achievements of the classical period. It is to this period that the Mustařaf belongs. The modern period was initiated by Napoleon’s Egyptian expedition and the ensuing developments, confronting the Arab world with the achievements of the West. In literature, this confrontation on the one hand resulted in a definite break with tradition and the formation of modern literature as influenced by Western models and ideas; on the other hand it led to a conscious appreciation of the heritage of classical Arabic literature, most of whose major works have become available in critical editions.

As for the literary dimension, the Mustařaf belongs to the genre of adab-literature, a genre which aims at combining instruction and entertainment, conveying knowledge in a diverting manner and employing entertaining topics in order to present and discuss serious moral and ethical matters. Moreover, the Mustařaf belongs to the category of encyclopaedia, or more specifically, the adab-encyclopaedia, a category which had already been established by a number of basic works in the ninth and tenth centuries, and to which the Mustařaf represents the last major contribution. So the Mustařaf’s genesis is to be seen against the specific background of a literary product summing up previous knowledge in a period of cultural decline.

In comparison with many other authors of the medieval period, the known facts about the Mustařaf’s author form a relatively clear picture. His name was Bahā’addin Abū ‘l-Fāṭih Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī Muhammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ibšihi. He was born around the year 790/1388 in the village of Abšūya in the Fayyūm (Upper Egypt),

\[1\] The most comprehensive presentation of Ibšihi’s biography is given by T. Paajanen, *Scribal Treatment of the Literary and Vernacular Proverbs of al-Mustařaf in 15th-17th Century Manuscripts: With special reference to diglossic variation* (Helsinki 1995) 15-21 (Studia Orientalia 77). Paajanen’s book is a detailed study of the Mustařaf’s chapter on proverbial sayings (6), making this the only chapter so far covered by extensive research. On the position of the proverbial chapter in Arabic tradition see also R. Sellheim, “Eine fünfte Miszelle zur arabischen Sprichwörterkunde,” *Oriens* 32 (1990) 463-475, at 469.
whence his epithet al-Abšíhî, more commonly al-Ibšíhî. He was educated in the traditional fields of knowledge such as theology, jurisprudence, and grammar, is known to have received lessons in Cairo from Jalāladdin al-Bulqînî, probably was close to Şûfi-circles and appears to have made a living following his father's profession as a preacher. He is said to have died after the year 850/1446. The entry devoted to him in the biographical dictionary of eminent men of the ninth/fifteenth century compiled by his contemporary as-Saḥāwî (d. 902/1497) describes him as a productive writer and author of several other works besides the Mustatraf, but also criticises a certain laxity and inexactitude in grammatical correctness, a verdict amounting to an implicit warning against the reliability of the way he presents his material.

The Mustatraf's full rhyming title is al-Mustatraf ft kulli fannin mustaţraf, roughly to be translated "The most appreciated precious topics from every art regarded as elegant." The French translation by Gustav Rat renders the title as "Recueil de morceaux choisis ça et là dans toutes les branches de connaissances réputées et attrayantes"; and Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall imitates the Arabic rhyme in his German equivalent "Das Entzückende aus allen Kenntnissen Pflückende." The Mustatraf has been characterised by Western scholars as "a vast encyclopaedia of omni re scibili," intending to inform the reader de rebus omnibus et quibusdam aliiis, a veritable "Dictionnaire de conversation" treating just

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3 Al-Mustatraf, tr. O. Rat, 2 vols. (Paris/Toulon 1899-1902). For reviews and related commentaries up to about 1905, see V. Chauvin, Bibliographie des ouvrages arabes ou relatifs aux arabes publiés dans l'Europe chrétienne de 1810 à 1885 (Liège/Leipzig 1892-1922) 9.64-65, no.86.
5 J.-C. Vadet, "al-Ibšíhîl," in: Encyclopaedia of Islam (Leiden/London 1979) 3.1005-1006, at 1005, rendering the statement as supplied in Rat, Mostatraf (as in n.3) author's preface, 1.vii.
6 Orientalistische Litteratur-Zeitung 6 (1903) 289 (H. Reckendorf).
7 Journal asiatique 19,15/1 (1900) 388 (J. Houdas).
about every topic a fourteenth-century Muslim ought to be informed about,\(^8\) a “populäre Moralencyklopädie,”\(^9\) in general a “fully-fledged representative of Arabic encyclopaedic literature.”\(^{10}\) Ibšīhī himself outlined the aim of his compilation in his introductory remarks by first referring to previous authors who had collected “literary subjects, pious exhortations and moral instructions” besides presenting “voluminous books on history, anecdotes, tales, stories, witticisms and delicate poetry.”\(^{11}\) Though he agrees with the merits of those previous compilations, he judges his own work as more comprehensive and more systematically arranged—“so that its reader can find in it everything he looks for and wishes,” and so that anyone studying its list of contents can immediately identify the topic he is looking for.

The Mustatraf is almost exclusively a compilation of material available in previous sources. Ibšīhī explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to two previous adab-encyclopaedias: Kitāb al-‘Iqd by Ibn ‘Abdrabbīh (d. 327/949) and Rabī’ al-‘abrār by az-Zamaḥšarī (d. 538/1144). In addition to these he has exploited a large number of other works of theological, historical, and adab-literature,\(^{12}\) some of which are mentioned at various places in his book. The author’s personal contribution to his work is minimal, restricting itself—according to the recent analysis by Timo Paajanen\(^{13}\)—to four categories:

1. Brief comments and requests addressed to the reader concerning the subject at hand
2. Summaries at the beginning or the end of chapters and [...] short remarks serving as transitional material
3. Descriptions of events based on al-Ibšīhī’s personal experience

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\(^9\) Literarisches Centralblatt 54, 29 (1903) 982 (C. F. Seybold).

\(^10\) Paajanen, Proverbs (as in n.1) 20.


\(^12\) Summarised following Rat, Mostatraf (as in n.3) by Paajanen, Proverbs (as in n.1) 20, n.2.

\(^13\) Paajanen, Proverbs (as in n.1) 21, with references in n.36.
4. Insertions of his own verses and poems in the text

Furthermore, a recent Arabic editor of the *Mustatraf*\(^{14}\) has pointed out that Ibsihi probably owes more to the *Kitāb al-'Iqd* than a body of borrowed material, but probably even modelled the title of his own book on a remark in the introductory passage in which Ibn ‘Abdarrabbih explicitly mentions a tale (*ḥabar*) “regarded as elegant,” using the same word *mustafr* later employed by Ibsihi in coining the title of his encyclopedia.

The *Mustatraf* contains a total of 84 chapters. Jean-Claude Vadet, the author of the entry on Ibsihi in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*,\(^ {15}\) has made the only attempt at analysing the *Mustatraf*’s larger groups of chapters treating similar topics:

- chapters 1-16: human mind and the natural lights of reason: religion, wisdom, good customs, various talents
- chapters 17-22: a sort of treatise on society and its most characteristic categories
- chapters 23-51: “pure” morality
- chapters 52-76: various thoughts on the marvels of nature and the profane arts of poetry and music

Vadet’s grouping is admittedly rough. It constitutes a first attempt at deciphering a system which obviously does not disclose itself easily. On the other hand, there is no absolute necessity to presuppose a systematic arrangement of the material in the *Mustatraf*. Arabic *adab*-encyclopaedias usually work with a fair amount of associative criteria often resulting in a kind of “holistic” creative chaos, and the *Mustatraf*’s author is right in underlining the comparatively strict organisation of his own work. And yet, though this may be predominantly the obsession of a Western analytic mind, it is unsatisfying not to be able to discover a master-plan in the *Mustatraf*’s inner structure.

In this respect, it seems worthwhile to consider again the role of the *Kitāb al-'Iqd* as model, pointed out by ‘Abdallāh Anis al-Ṭabbā‘. In addition to moulding the title of his encyclopedia on the quotation from the *Kitāb al-'Iqd*, Ibsihi might have drawn some inspiration for the arrangement of his material from Ibn ‘Abdarrabbih, the chapters of whose book are arranged as a necklace

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\(^{15}\) Vadet, “al-Ibshīḥī” (as in n.5).
of precious stones, lined up in symmetrical sequence of twelve jewels on each side around a centrepiece, thus amounting to 25 chapters altogether. Though it is not possible to decipher a strict arrangement of chapters in the Musta'raf comparable to the parallel naming of chapters in the 'Iqd, there are some striking similarities in structure. A closer examination of the Musta'raf at first reveals a frame of predominantly religious topics: the opening chapters deal with the basic tenets of the Islamic creed (1) and the Qoran (3), besides discussing (as equally basic, yet subordinate elements) reason, intelligence and stupidity (2);\textsuperscript{16} the concluding chapters (77-83), on the other hand, while abruptly following the merry chapters on women, wine, jokes and anecdotes (73-76), close the frame with an intense \textit{memento mori} elaborating prayer, destiny, repentance, illness, death, patience, and the uselessness of attaching oneself to this world. A final chapter (84) praises the prophet Mohammed. This predominantly religious frame is filled by two halves of unequal length, the first of which (chapters 5-45) focuses on moral and ethical qualities while the second deals with distracting (46-62) and entertaining (63-76) matters. Within this general description, several groups of between two to seven chapters with a common theme can be identified, following one another like rough jewels on a string:

5-9: language  
10-13: virtues and vices  
14-20: government  
21-25: social life  
30-31: saints  
40-41: courage  
46-48: the body  
63-67: wonders of creation  
68-73: entertainment  
75-76: jocular narratives

Some of the chapters are arranged according to the principle of contrasts, such as 19-20: justice and injustice, 26-27: modesty and pride, 33-34: generosity and stinginess, 51-52: richness and poverty; others follow with a loose or even without any apparent con-

nection to the previously treated topics, such as 35: table-manners following 34: stinginess; 50: travel following 49: names; 59: the ancient Arabs following 58: slavery.

The Mustatraf has been known to Western scholars at least since the early eighteenth century, when it was the subject of a short entry in Barthélemy d’Herbelot’s Bibliothèque orientale (originally published in 1697), the first encyclopaedia of Islam ever conceived.\(^\text{17}\) The fact that its “overall plan is less easy to discern”\(^\text{18}\) has prompted a number of highly critical evaluations, most of them published in contemporary reviews by leading Arabists of the time of Gustav Rat’s French translation,\(^\text{19}\) which appeared in two volumes in 1899 and 1902—making the Mustatraf the only Arabic encyclopaedia to be translated in full into a European language. René Basset regards the lack of originality as a characteristic trait of this kind of literary work, and of that of Ibšihi in particular, to whom he concedes “peu de personnalité”;\(^\text{20}\) Maurice Gaudefroyes-Demombynes sees the Mustatraf as an important source of second hand information, extracted in the course of the extensive and varied readings of a good scholar, who—without aiming to think himself [!] (“sans chercher à penser par lui-même”)—wanted to leave the fruits of his efforts as a heritage for his fellow-citizens.\(^\text{21}\) While Hermann Reckendorf laments a lack of (intellectual) depth,\(^\text{22}\) Baron Bernard Carra de Vaux senses a “multitude of treasures” in the Mustatraf, but advises us first to work the ore so the pure metal can

\(^{17}\) Bibliothèque orientale, ou Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement Tout ce qui regarde le connaissance des Peuples de l’Orient. [...] par Monsieur d’Herbelot (Maestricht 1776) 634 qualifies the Mustatraf as “un Florilege d'élegances Arabiques.” On d’Herbelot see H. Laurens, Aux Sources de l'Orientalisme. La Bibliothèque Orientale de Barthélemi D’Herbelot (Paris 1978) and the criticism most pointedly voiced in E.W. Said, Orientalism (New York 1978) passim.


\(^{19}\) Rat, Mostatraf (as in n.3).


\(^{21}\) Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature 37,2 (1903) 124-125, at 125.

\(^{22}\) Orientalistische Litteratur-Zeitung 6 (1903) 290: “In die Tiefe freilich geht das Werk nirgends.”
show. Michael Jan de Goeje at least concedes an "honourable position" for the *Mustatraf*.

While several specific essays on Egyptian encyclopaedic literature towards the end of the Middle Ages treat their subject without even so much as mentioning the *Mustatraf*—which in itself appears to be a judgmental measure—few evaluations are predominantly positive. Thus, Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall while introducing the *Mustatraf*'s Turkish translation speaks of one of the most famous Arabic anthologies and one of the most important, instructive and entertaining encyclopaedias; Max Weisweiler regards the book as a brilliant supplement to Ibn 'Abdrabbih's compilation; Sergej Shuiskii in a short encyclopaedic survey qualifies the *Mustatraf* as one of the "practical handbooks that are real treasure troves of cultural data." Yet in most of the more recent statements, a highly critical attitude prevails. For Jean-Claude Vadet the *Mustatraf* is a "rather clumsy work" with a "rather haphazard arrangement" which however he admits not to be "entirely illogical." Hartmut Fähndrich sees in the *Mustatraf* an inner, material continuity of this kind of *adab*-literature through the centuries, but clearly discerns a limited intellectual capacity ("begrenztere geistige Fähigkeiten") in its author. And Franz Rosenthal in his discussion of the presentation of knowledge in what he labels "*adab anthologies*" is wise enough not to qualify the *Mustatraf at all, but

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23 Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature 34,2 (1900) 370-373, at 369.  
24 Deutsche Litteraturzeitung 24 (1903) 466-467, at 466.  
26 Hammer-Purgstall, "Bericht" (as in n.4) 255, 256.  
27 M. Weisweiler, Arabische Märchen (Düsseldorf/Köln 1966) 2.287.  
29 Vadet, "al-Iḥshihāl" (as in n.5).  
makes it clear that he finds it difficult when characterising Ibšihi’s achievement to “speak of a development.”

The critical and even devastating evaluation by Western scholars is in sharp contrast to the Mustatraf’s unquestioned appreciation in its original environment. Most major libraries in East and West contain one or more manuscripts of the Mustatraf, some of them compiled comparatively close to the author’s lifetime; Ibšihi’s actual autograph, however, has not yet been identified. A number of imitations and extracts prepared by later Arabic authors demonstrate the Mustatraf’s popularity, as does the (enlarged) Turkish translation prepared by Es‘ad Efendi at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, the rich manuscript tradition of the Mustatraf appears to have given way to an equally rich tradition in print since about the middle of the nineteenth century. Between 1850 and 1950 the Mustatraf was printed (in Būlāq or Cairo) probably up to twenty times, and since then the Cairo editions have been republished numerous times in photostatic reprints (in Beirut); the book was finally published in modern type (and in an allegedly first critical edition relying on several, though undisclosed, manuscripts) in the early 1980s. In the 1990s, Beirut publishers even produce small excerpts almost of a chapbook character with titles such as al-Mustatraf min al-Mustatraf (“The most elegant pieces from al-Mustatraf”) clearly aiming at a reading public with limited financial means such as those buying from the numerous sidewalk peddlers and newspaper stands in the big cities of the Arab world. Both recent Arabic editors of the Mustatraf stand to its defence, not so much against the Orientalist criticism, but rather against critical evaluations such as the one stated in as-Sāhāwi’s biographical dictionary. Mufid Qumaiḥa stresses the author’s intention to support

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31 Rosenthal, Knowledge (as in n.16) 274.
32 Paajanen, Proverbs (as in n.1) 22-30, 257-258.
33 C. Brockelmann, Geschichte der arabischen Literatur, 2nd ed. (Leiden 1943) 2.68; Supplement (Leiden 1938) 2.55-56.
34 See Hammer-Purgstall, “Bericht” (as in n.4).
35 Ed. ‘Abdallāh Anis aṭ-Ṭabbā’ (as in n.14); ed. Mufid Qumaiḥa (Beirut 1983), 2 vols. I would like to thank Hilary Kilpatrick for pointing out to me the new edition by Darwīṣ al-Guwaidī (Beirut 1996) as advertised in Sulaimān’s Bookshop List no. 92 (January-March 1996).
36 as-Sāhāwi, Da‘ū (as in n.2).
and strengthen human qualities and underlines his effort to employ simple yet illustrative passages from the Qoran and the prophet Mohammed’s sayings, “which enter the heart and the mind without any obstacle”; furthermore, he stands up against those who regard Ibšihî as an uninspired compiler, a Materialhuber (Arabic ġammaā’), by underlining the Mustaṭraf’s character as the product of an intentional educational process.\textsuperscript{37} ‘Abdallâh Anîs at-Ṭabbâ‘ points out the ‘Iqd’s role as model, defends Ibšihî against the reproach of grammatical laxity, and advertises the Mustaṭraf as a direct successor to the model compilations of the classical period, labelling it as “book of the books, treasure of traditional literature, and ultimate goal to be attained.”\textsuperscript{38}

Both views, the nationalist praise as well as the Orientalist criticism, miss an essential point, probably the essential point constituting the Mustaṭraf’s timeless importance and responsible for its privileged position over a period of more than five centuries. True, the Mustaṭraf’s author may not claim to be an original thinker, which in the eyes of Western criticism would alone deserve recognition and praise. Yet, as I have elaborated in a different context,\textsuperscript{39} and as is similarly the case in the field of European compilations of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in contemporary opinion a work did not necessarily have to have an individual approach in order to deserve high esteem. As for Arabic compilations, the individual contribution of an author often did not consist in what was presented, but rather in how he presented it. The raw material would be regarded as a kind of common stock which everyone was entitled to exploit, and the achievement of an author would be judged according to the quality of the authorities he quoted from and the individual way in which he organised his material.

In this respect the Mustaṭraf has achieved incomparably more than any of its successors. First, the material is presented in a comparatively structured way in chapters which are easy to locate; second, the presentation of material within the respective chapters

\textsuperscript{37} Qumailîa (ed.), Mustaṭraf (as in n.35) 58.
\textsuperscript{38} at-Ṭabbâ‘ (ed.), Mustaṭraf (as in n.14) 23.
follows a pattern which is both traditionally accepted and convinc­
ing: introductory passages from the Qoran are followed by sayings of the prophet Mohammed; next come those of his companions, until the level of presentation gradually descends from the sacred to the profane, to anecdotes and poetic verses; third, and most im­
portant, the complete work does not comprise more than a single volume. This makes the Mustatraf the first major representative of the genre of encyclopaedic vademecum, a book which not only offers its rich treasury of traditional knowledge in the dignified and secluded atmosphere of public or private libraries, but which is available as a constant mobile companion, supplying ready refer­ence for questions on all vital subjects of everyday life.

Given its unique position of addressing a large audience, it is important to recall the nature of the Mustatraf’s material. On the one hand, it is of a definitely traditional nature. Ibšīhī has picked the “most appreciated precious topics from every art (traditionally) regarded as elegant.” Yet he has arranged the material in a specific order, and his distinct imprint implicitly reveals itself in the choice of topics as well as their arrangement. Charles Pellat, for instance, has pointed out the significant position of the Mustatraf’s last chapter (84) on the praise of the prophet Mohammed. According to Pellat, Ibšīhī’s contemporaries in the fifteenth century were well aware of the fact that the cultural and political decadence they faced did not leave much choice but to ask God’s blessing for the prophet Mohammed and his community, hoping that the situation could be improved and the glory of Islam would be restored. Franz Ro­
senthal has emphasised the position of the chapter on knowledge (2), ranking only second after the introductory chapter on the pillars of Islam. In his opinion, this position is indicative of the author’s evaluation of all secular learning as secondary to religious identity: “the intellect ranks in importance below the duties of the religious law.” And Pellat goes so far as to suggest a twofold moral func­tion of the Mustatraf, inasmuch as it not only supplied basic information on useful topics but also in a period of stagnation helped to strengthen confidence by recalling the achievements of the classical

40 Cf. Journal asiatique 19,15/1 (1900) 389 (J. Houdas).
41 Pellat, “Encyclopédies” (as in n.8) 643.
42 Rosenthal, Knowledge (as in n.16) 274.
period. Thus, one might even regard the Mustatraf as an essential factor in shaping the identity of its readers.

Pellat, Rosenthal and others understand Ibšīhi’s “concern with impressing upon his readers the religious and moral virtues of knowledge” as an inevitable result of the “intellectual climate of his time.” From the present perspective, at the turn of the twentieth century, it is evident that Ibšīhi’s work over the centuries since its compilation has lost little of its original appeal. So if the Mustatraf at the time of its compilation constituted an essential factor in shaping the identity of its readers, its permanent appeal is bound to signal a lasting continuity of this very meaning. Obviously, modern readers still delight in and profit from the Mustatraf’s presentation. On the other hand, the new vigour the Muslim world has gained since about the middle of the twentieth century has resulted in the strengthening of its traditional identity, and religious as well as traditional cultural values of the classical period are held in higher esteem than ever. For those concerned, this is not indicative of a new period of decadence or a feeling of inferiority, but rather expresses a new consciousness of dignity and pride referring to the cultural achievements of the classical period. Time will show whether under these conditions a work like the Mustatraf, preserving cultural values of the classical period, moulded in the specific understanding of its fifteenth-century Egyptian author, and presented in its almost unaltered medieval form to a modern audience, will retain the privileged position it has held for so many centuries.

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43 Pellat, “Encyclopédies” (as in n.8) 643-644.
44 See Fähndrich, Begriff (as in n.30) 335: “trotz der dem Geist seiner Zeit entsprechenden stärkeren Betonung des Religiösen bei al-Ibšīhi”; cf. G.E. von Grunebaum, Der Islam im Mittelalter (Zürich/Stuttgart 1963), especially chapter 1, where the Mustatraf is cited in several places (see index).
45 Quotations from Rosenthal, Knowledge (as in n.16) 275.
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PRE-MODERN ENCYCLOPAEDIC TEXTS


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