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CHAPTER 19

“Extremely Beautiful and Extremely Long”
Al-Qīrāṭī’s Exuberant Letter from the Year 761/1360

Thomas Bauer

Introduction

It is said that the generation of so-called “digital natives” is able to process information more quickly than older generations and that they are more talented at multitasking. It is also said, however, that they find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on a single, complex text for a long while. This is not the place to discuss this theory, but if it proves to be true, the prospects for the text presented here are rather meager. This text is a letter of exuberant length and complexity, not only by the standards of the twitter generation, but in the eyes of the writer’s contemporaries as well. In print, the letter would amount to about forty pages, a length that was already considered extraordinary at the time the letter was written.

Obviously, a text of this format is not an ideal subject for a contribution to a Festschrift, but the dedicatee of this volume was paying attention to literary prose texts from the Mamluk period back when these texts were only being used as sources by historiographers and being tapped for their quotations of older texts that had been lost in their original form.1 Literary texts such as post-Ḥarīrian maqāmāt or, worse still, letters in ornate prose were disregarded almost completely. Gradually, the situation is improving,2 but major works such as all of Ibn Nubāta’s letters not included in al-Qalqashandī’s Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā are still in manuscript, and there is hardly any study analyzing such texts from an aesthetic point of view.3 This is grounds enough for presenting a text that is interesting for additional reasons:

1 See Rowson, Homoorotic narratives, Alexandrian age, and his reviews in MSR 8 (2004), 315; MSR 10 (2006), 222; and MSR 14 (2010), 233.
2 To mention only the recent editions of aṣ-Ṣafādī, Alḥān and Ibn Ḥijja, Qahwat al-inshā’.
3 See Bauer, Toward an aesthetics of Mamluk literature, 14–20.
1. It is completely unknown. Though preserved in a comparatively large number of manuscripts and highly acclaimed by the author’s contemporaries, the text is still unedited, and no modern scholar has ever taken account of it.

2. It was considered an important text when it was created, and we can therefore assume that studying this text will shed light on the nature of literature and society at the time it was written.

3. Stylistically complex texts—even texts that are much more harmless than the text in question here—have often provoked negative reactions in the last two centuries from both Arab and Western readers. Being confronted with a text like this therefore promises to tell us a lot not only about its time, but about ours as well.

4. Curiosity is the starting point of scholarship, and this is a text that should make every reader curious. A number of mysteries have to be resolved, and a number of questions have yet to be answered. Why was a text like this written? Why did it find acclaim? What, after all, is its message? Even these obvious questions are not always easy to answer.

5. And, finally, for these and other reasons, the text as such is fascinating, which should be reason enough to present it to one of the leading connoisseurs of classical Arabic prose.

This study will neither answer all of the questions nor give an in-depth analysis, but it may demonstrate that al-Qīrāṭī’s text is interesting and deserves further study.

Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī and his Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn

The author of the text treated here is Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī.4 The name al-Qīrāṭī has nothing to do with the unit of weight al-qīrāṭ, but refers to a village in the administrative district of Bilbays (today Zaqāzīq) in the Sharqiyya province of the Nile delta. His father was born in this village and would later become a lawyer, judge and mufti, and, as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī remarks, a “mediocre poet.”5 His son Burhān ad-Dīn Ibrāhīm was born in Cairo in Ṣafar 726/January 1326 and specialized in precisely the field in which his father was only a mediocre talent and became an adīb, i.e. a poet, prose writer and scholar

4 See Ibn Ḥajar, Durur i, 31; id., Inbāʾ i, 312; Ibn al-ʾIrāqī, Dhayl ii, 488–90, Ibn Taghrī Birdī, Manhal i, 89–95, al-Maqrīzī, Sulūk iii.1, 374; aṣ-Ṣafadī, Alḥān i, 52–8.

5 Ibn Ḥajar, Durur ii, 298–9.
in the fields of language and literature—and not a mediocre one. Instead, he is called *khātam al-udabāʾ*, “the seal of the littérateurs of his time,” on the title pages of his *Dīwān*.\(^6\) Quite interesting is a note by one of his biographers, who remarked that al-Qīrāṭī, despite his proficiency as an *adīb*, was a pious and religious man. Obviously, this was not to be taken for granted and an *adīb* was rather expected not to be “firmly rooted in religion.”\(^7\) At any rate, al-Qīrāṭī was both an *adīb* and a religious man, though, as his biographer says, he was arrogant (‘*indahū takhayyul* and had “sort of a bad temperament” (*nawʾ min sūʾ al-mizāj*).\(^8\) In sum: he was an unusually pious littérateur and a rather difficult character. He died in Mecca in Rabīʿ II 781/July 1379.

As for his achievements as an *adīb*, his biographers are unanimous in saying that he was one of the finest. According to Ibn Taghrī Birdī, he was “the poet of his day, alongside Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī, and the one closest to him.”\(^9\) Ibn Nubāta (686–768/1287–1366) was forty years older than al-Qīrāṭī and had established a reputation as the most famous poet and prose author of his time.\(^10\) He was al-Qīrāṭī’s great hero and probably exerted a greater influence on him than anyone else. This point will be relevant when we come to talk about the letter, which was addressed to none other than Ibn Nubāta.

Keen insiders would have recognized al-Qīrāṭī’s affinity for Ibn Nubāta as soon as they read the title of what is most certainly al-Qīrāṭī’s most important work. The book bears the title *Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn*. What does this title tell us? First, it does not rhyme. For centuries before and after, most book titles would consist of two rhyming cola such as *Maṭlaʿ al-fawāʾid wa-majmaʿ al-farāʾid*. This was the title of Ibn Nubāta’s first book, the only one of his books to receive such a conventional title. From his next book (*Sajʿ al-muṭawwaq*) onwards, all of his works would bear short titles that eschewed rhyme for *tawriya*. *Tawriya*, double entendre, had become one of the most popular stylistic devices by the Mamluk period and Ibn Nubāta would turn out to be its master. He was also one of the first authors to use double entendre (*tawriya*) instead of rhyme (*sajʿ*) for the titles of his books. Consequently, for his admirers, *tawriya*-based, non-rhyming titles became a sort of badge by which they could identify themselves as followers of the “school” of Ibn Nubāta, to mention only *Qahwat al-inshāʾ* by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī or *Ḥalbat al-kumayt* by an-Nawājī.

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\(^6\)  Ms. Fatih; the ms. British Museum has *sayyid al-udabāʾ* instead.

\(^7\)  Ibn al-ʿIrāqī, *Dhayl* ii, 490: *Matīn ad-diyāna kathīr al-ʿibāda*.

\(^8\)  Ibn al-ʿIrāqī, *Dhayl* ii, 490.


\(^10\)  On Ibn Nubāta see Bauer, Ibn Nubātah, and Bauer, Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Nubātah.
Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn, again a non-rhyming title of only two words, clearly falls into this category. The obvious meaning of Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn is “the place where the two brilliant ones rise.” The “two brilliant ones” is an expression denoting sun and moon, thus “The rising-place of sun and moon.” Were it a rhyming title, this phrase would suit as the first colon, and a second colon would follow. In tawriya-based titles, the second colon is substituted by a double meaning in the phrase. In our case, “the two brilliant ones” cannot only be taken to mean sun and moon. “Brilliant” is also used for brilliant works of literature. But why the dual form? If “brilliant” refers to literature and is used in its dual form, it could, for the contemporary reader, only refer to the two principal forms into which literature can be cast, that is: poetry and prose. This is exactly what al-Qīrāṭī intended. The title thus may mean both “The rising-place of sun and moon” and “The starting point of poetry and prose.” An informed reader was likely to have inferred from the title: first a confession of adherence to the school of Ibn Nubāta, and second the announcement of a book consisting of both poetry and prose. The latter was probably al-Qīrāṭī’s innovation. Though prose had gained more and more importance over time, Ibn Nubāta continued to publish his poetry in the form of a dīwān, a word that denoted collections of poetry exclusively, whereas he published his prose separately, even if a poem and a prose letter had originally gone together. Al-Qīrāṭī himself left a Dīwān that is a collection exclusively of poetry, but it was for Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn that he devised a special title (his dīwān is simply called dīwān), and it was for this book that he gained lasting fame.

The texts in Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn range from two-line epigrams to long panegyric odes and letters of two or three pages in length. In a category of its own is al-Qīrāṭī’s extremely long letter to Ibn Nubāta.11 Not only is it by far the longest text in Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn, it is also one of al-Qīrāṭī’s most famous works. Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, one of the greatest Ḥadīth scholars of all time, and, like al-Qīrāṭī, an adīb and admirer of Ibn Nubāta, wrote:

وله ديوان جمعه لنفسه يشتهل على نظام وثر في غاية الإجادة واشتهرت...رسالتة التي كتبها للشيخ جمال الدين بن نباتة في غاية الحسن والطول

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Al-Qīrāṭī collected a dīwān of his own, comprising both poetry and prose, of utmost excellence. Especially famous became the letter he wrote to Ibn Nubāta, which is of extreme beauty and length.\footnote{12}{Ibn Ḥajar, \textit{Inbāʾi, 312.}}

Note that Ibn Ḥajar found it remarkable that al-Qīrāṭī had compiled a dīwān that included both prose and poetry, and he singled out al-Qīrāṭī’s letter to Ibn Nubāta for special mention. Ibn Ḥajar obviously reckoned it among al-Qīrāṭī’s principal works, and it was not just its beauty but also its length that made it extraordinary. This is corroborated by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (787–837/1366–1434), another \textit{adīb}, who compiled an anthology of al-Qīrāṭī’s works in one small volume. He included the letter almost unabridged.\footnote{13}{Ibn Ḥijja, \textit{Taḥrīr al-Qīrāṭī}, fol. 40a–54a.} All this is reason enough to turn our attention to this marvel of a letter.

\section*{The Text as a Letter}

The text we are talking about is always referred to as a “letter.” A letter is a form of communication, and as such, its purpose is to convey a certain message. In our case, it is not altogether easy to understand what the message is. Upon first reading the letter, one gets the impression that al-Qīrāṭī simply wanted to say: “You, Ibn Nubāta, are the greatest poet and prose writer of our times and beyond, and I would be awfully glad if I could get a letter from you in return.” If this were all he wanted to say, it would not have been necessary to write a forty-page letter. But:

1. The text is not a pragmatic text or at least not only a pragmatic text. Instead, it is quite obviously primarily an aesthetic text. In a letter of this kind, to convey aesthetic pleasure shared by sender and recipient may be more important than a concrete message.

2. A closer look at the letter reveals that there is a pragmatic message indeed, hidden though it may be at first glance. At the beginning of the last third of the letter, we come across the following passage:

\begin{quote}
فُعِّلَ اللَّهُ أَن يُدْعِي مَرَأَةً وَيُقَرْبَ مِنَ الْدِّيَارِ المِصْرِيَّةَ دَارَةً وَيُعِيدْ إِلَى

أَفْقِهَا مِن فَضْلِهِ شُمُوسَةً وَأَفْقَارَهُ
\end{quote}

\footnote{12}{Ibn Ḥajar, \textit{Inbāʾi, 312.}}

\footnote{13}{Ibn Ḥijja, \textit{Taḥrīr al-Qīrāṭī}, fol. 40a–54a.
Perhaps God will bring him (Ibn Nubāta) nearer | and bring his abode nearer the abodes of Egypt | and return—through his noble qualities—his suns and moons to Egypt's horizon . . . [138b/179b]14

This is a rhyme group of three cola of increasing length, a form quite common in rhymed prose. As for the content, we learn about the writer’s wish that Ibn Nubāta move back to Cairo. Further evidence is given by the next passage, which reads:

ليُصبح فيها بمعنى ألفاظه القاعدة جليس الملوك...وتصبح أمادحة الملكية السائرة من مشيد نظمه وشره بين القصرين تأصيرة

. . . so that there he will be, by means of his overwhelming/sitting15 expressions, companion to (‘sitting with’) the kings, (…) and that his widely known royal panegyrics—his towering poetry and prose—would help/bring victory between the two palaces. [138b/179b]

Obviously, Ibn Nubāta is invited to come to Cairo in order to write panegyric poems to “kings.” This is corroborated by the reference to “bayn al-qaṣrayn,” the residence area created by the Fatimids, which was an important place of royal representation in Mamluk times.16 Note the tawriya in the word al-qāʿida, which means “overwhelming.” The word jalīs, however, suggests a second meaning, “sitting.” Since this double meaning is only brought to the reader’s mind by a second element, this tawriya belongs to the type called tawriya muhayyaʾa (“prepared tawriya”).

The question remains about who was the “king” for whom Ibn Nubāta should compose panegyrics. The answer is in the word nāṣiriyya, which may mean both “helpful” and “bringing victory.” It is also the name of the ruling Mamluk sultan, al-Malik an-Nāṣir Ḥasan, who in these years ruled the empire for a second time (755–62/1354–61).

Sultan Ḥasan, who is famous for his wonderful madrasa-mosque (but was rather unpopular with his fellow mamluks) had indeed issued an edict

14 Citations to al-Qīrāṭī’s Maṭlaʿ an-nayyirayn are given in square brackets. The folio number of the manuscript in the British Museum precedes the folio number of the Fatih manuscript.

15 In the translation, a tawriya is noted in the following way: The boldfaced expression is the primarily intended meaning; the non-primarily intended meaning is given in italics.

16 See van Steenbergen, Bayna l-Qaṣrayn.
(marsūm) to invite Ibn Nubāta to come to Cairo and assume the position of secretary in the Cairo chancellery. From the chronicles, we learn that he issued this edict in Rabīʿ I 761/Jan.–Feb. 1360.17 In al-Qirāṭī’s letter, we find a reference to the Nile flood of the previous year, and we know that Ibn Nubāta did indeed accept the invitation in the same year (761/1360) and moved from Damascus to Cairo. Since the letter would make no sense if Ibn Nubāta had already been in Cairo, it can be taken for granted that the letter was sent either in close connection or, more probably, together with the sultan’s edict. My theory is that the text was indeed written at the sultan’s instigation. It is conceivable that the sultan did not want to invite the greatest littérateur of his time with a simple edict in plain prose, but wanted to supplement it with a literary text that could arouse Ibn Nubāta’s interest. Al-Qirāṭī was one of the few who could accomplish this task, and one can well imagine his enthusiasm, since to write a letter of this kind to his revered role model must have been the fulfillment of a lifelong dream.

Of course, we do not know if the letter and the edict were delivered together. In any case, al-Qirāṭī assumes Ibn Nubāta’s knowledge of the background. He could therefore minimize his reference to the pragmatic message and concentrate on the aesthetic side of the text.

Aesthetic though it may be, the text is still a letter, and it is at once recognizable as such. Al-Qirāṭī observes all conventions of epistolography and uses common formulas. The result, however, is not a common letter, but one that transgresses all borders and conventions.

This can already be seen at the very beginning. An ordinary letter at that time begins with the phrase yuqabbilu l-ard (al-yad) “He [—the sender—] kisses the earth (or alternatively the hand) of the recipient,” wa-yunhī “and reports”…(and then follows what is to be reported). In artistic letters, a short passage may be inserted between “kisses the earth” and “and reports.” In such a parenthesis, the writer may praise the addressee or affirm his sincere esteem of him. Now let us look at what al-Qirāṭī did!

The letter begins indeed with the formula yuqabbilu l-ard, upon which, obviously, a parenthesis follows: yuqabbilu l-arda llatī saqati s-samāʾu nabātahā, “He—the addressee’s servant—kisses the earth whose flowers the heaven may water…” In this and the following cola, al-Qirāṭī introduces one of the main themes of the letter, Damascus. The earth that is kissed is the earth where Ibn Nubāta lives, the earth of Damascus and the Ghūṭa. As usual, Damascus and its surroundings are depicted as a paradise with trees and rivers and fruits

17 Ibn Ḥajar, Durar v, 487.
and blossoms. Al-Qīrāṭī resumes this topic several times, later also to confront Damascus with Cairo, as we will see. For the moment, he confines himself to praise of Damascus in order to honor the addressee.

The praise of Damascus, however, seems never to end. Rhyme group follows upon rhyme group, full of vivid portraits of nature, imaginative comparisons and metaphors and stunning tawriyas, but there is no end to the parenthesis in sight. The reader keeps waiting for wa-yunhī, and he has to wait for 35 lines (ms. British Museum) or 342 words until the relieving phrase finally appears. In all probability, never before or since has there been a longer parenthesis between yuqabbilu and wa-yunhī in the history of Arabic letter writing.

Of course, a parenthesis of this length runs the risk that the reader may despair about ever hearing the transitional phrase or may simply forget that the part he is reading at the moment is still part of the parenthesis. Al-Qīrāṭī, however, found an ingenious way to solve this problem. He simply repeated the phrase yuqabbilu l-ardin immediately before wa-yunhī, but this time in a meaning completely different from the original one. This time, it is the rain that kisses the earth. At the same time, the reader is reminded of the initial phrase while the following wa-yunhī signals the end of the parenthesis but may at the same time also be understood as an act of the rain, delivering his greetings to Ibn Nubāta:

So may God bless with rain … those lands whose beauty grows with every passing day up until the Day of Judgment | and those venerated regions in which, when the rain pours down from clouds, it kisses the earth.ll and reports … [129a/171a]

To achieve this solution, al-Qīrāṭī had to use the word ard as final word in a colon. This means that he had to find a word rhyming with ard, which is almost impossible. One of the few words rhyming with ard is ʿard, which is the ordinary word for “breadth.” In the phrase yawm al-ʿard, “day of presentation,” it refers to the Day of Judgment, in which sense it is used here. The word ṭūl, “length,” in the same phrase, however, suggests the meaning “breadth.” This is a tawriya muhayya ʾa again. This pair of cola is thus not only an ingenious play with signals marking the structure of the text, but adds also a quite complicated stylistic device.
This rhyme group alone gives an idea about the refinement and complexity of the letter—a letter that transgresses borders in several respects. For a letter, it is by far too long. Further, it transgresses the bounds of genre. It is a letter, no doubt, but not only a letter. Instead, it includes texts of a different nature. In addition to the letter, we get a *taqrīţ*, a *mufākhara*, and a *maqāma*, but in all three cases, borders are transgressed again, since none of them completely complies with the conventions of genre or text type. We will direct our first attention to the *taqrīţ*, which comprises about eighty percent of the whole text.

**The Taqrīţ “Commendation”**

A *taqrīţ* is a commendatory appraisal of a text and its author. From the beginning of the eighth/fourteenth century onwards, *taqārīţ* played an important role in the fields of scholarship and belles-lettres. *Taqārīţ* served to establish networks and to foster mutual relations. They enhanced the prestige of the person who got the commendation. In turn, the writer of the *taqrīţ* could distinguish himself by composing an extraordinarily fine *taqrīţ*. Young scholars often went in search of *taqārīţ* for their debut works to secure their position in the scholarly establishment. Ibn Nubāta is a case in point. He sent his debut work *Majmaʿ al-farāʾid*—the one with a rhymed title—to scholars in Syria, collected eleven commendations and published them in an enhanced form in a separate book, which no one had done before. In this respect, Ibn Nubāta was an innovator in the field of *taqrīţ*.18 Forty years later, al-Qīrāṭī wrote his *taqrīţ* for Ibn Nubāta, and again this was an innovative *taqrīţ*. First, it is again of extraordinary length. Second, the object of praise is not a single work by Ibn Nubāta; instead, the praise of several of his works alternates with an appraisal of Ibn Nubāta's oeuvre in general.

While praising Ibn Nubāta, his works, his style and his poetic ideas in general, several works or groups of works receive special attention. The first group is Ibn Nubāta's panegyric poems directed to Abū l-Fidāʾ, who ruled Ḥamāh as al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad until his death in 732/1331. The *Mu'ayyadiyyāt* had established Ibn Nubāta's fame. The next work given detailed treatment is a *Diwān* of *qaṣīda*s in miniature, each seven lines, entitled *as-Sabʿa as-sayyāra*. The title refers to the seven “moving stars” (sun, moon and the five planets) and, by way of a *tawriya*, to the “seven lines (of poetry) that become widely known.” At the time of al-Qīrāṭī's letter, this was Ibn Nubāta's most recent work. Finally,

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18 See Bauer, Ibn Ḥabīb, and How to create a network.
al-Qīrāṭī talks at length about Ibn Nubāta’s *muwashshahat*, which were quite popular at the time. The different parts of the commendations do not come in separate blocks, but are entwined with one another. At the very end, when readers would have expected the *taqrīz* to end, al-Qīrāṭī resumes the *taqrīz* in the form of a coda in order to end by praising Ibn Nubāta’s letters, which is of course a very fitting ending for a letter. It goes without saying that in al-Qīrāṭī’s case, the *taqrīz* was more important for the writer than for the recipient. At an age of 73 (solar) years, Ibn Nubāta was at the height of his fame and did not need any further commendations. Al-Qīrāṭī on the other hand, only 34 years old, must have enthusiastically seized the opportunity to distinguish himself with this unconventional monumental *taqrīz*.

Very characteristic for the *taqrīz* are superiority passages, in which the commender states that the author of the work is superior or at least equal to his predecessors in the same field. Superiority passages constitute the very core of many *taqārīẓ* and may reach considerable length. Al-Qīrāṭī’s letter is full of them, and altogether the stupendous number of 110 people is mentioned, which is not only without precedent, but also demonstrates a remarkable knowledge of literary history, since many of the persons mentioned are rather obscure figures.

The poets mentioned in the following passage are well known. The first rhyme group consisting of two cola rhyming in -iyyā starts with Ibn al-Muʿtazz (247–96/861–908), heir apparent (walī al-ʿahd) to the caliph al-Muʿtazz (r. 252–5/866–9); the word bi-llāh is both the object of *aqsama* as well as part of the caliphal title “al-Muʿtazz bi-llāh.” Ibn al-Muʿtazz was not only a poet but also the founder of the discipline of stylistics. Consequently, he is mentioned in connection with *balāgha*, “eloquence.” The next to acknowledge Ibn Nubāta’s genius is Abū Nuwās (d. c. 198/813), one of the most famous Arabic poets of all times. Three cola are dedicated to him, the first ending the -iyyā rhyme group with a quotation from the Quran, the next opening a rhyme group of three cola ending in -ān. The first two cola pun on Jinān and ʿInān, the names of two women Abū Nuwās addressed in his love poems. The word *nabātiyya* is of course an allusion to the name Ibn Nubāta, who had used the similarity of nabāt and Nubāta himself when he entitled a collection of epigrams *al-Qaṭr an-nubātī*, “Nubātian drops,” or *al-Qaṭr an-nabātī*, “sugar molasses.” A colon about the lesser-known poet al-ʿAttābī, who died in the early third/ninth century, follows. Al-Qīrāṭī uses the fact that ʿattābī also designates a sort of taffeta to create an elaborate play with textile terms. A last colon about the judge and prose author at-Tanūkhī (329–84/940–94) concludes the rhyme group with a well-known legal maxim which holds that a judge should not pronounce a judgment while angry:
...and Ibn al-Mu‘tazz would swear by God that our lord (Ibn Nubāta) has become heir apparent of ‘eloquence’ and ‘penmanship’, | and al-Ḥasan ibn Hāni’ (Abū Nuwās) would say: “God raised him through his brilliant eloquence to a ‘high place’” (Q Maryam 19:57), | and its gardens (jinān), abounding with plants, would distract him (Abū Nuwās) from Jinān, | and its outstanding (verses)/noble horses would divert his reins (‘inān) from ‘Inān, | and (Ibn Nubāta’s) elaborated details/silky and soft pieces of cloth would make al-ʿAttābī/the thick taffetta look critically on the thickness of his filling words/its (own) thick selvedge, | and the judge at-Tanūkhī would wrathfully condemn his inability to produce the equivalent; so people said: ‘the judge judged in his wrath!’” [133a/174b]

It is interesting to see that al-Qīrāṭī distinguishes between average poets and great ones. Whereas geniuses like Abū Nuwās or al-Mutanabbī simply “acknowledge” Ibn Nubāta or praise him, less important figures become completely ruined when they encounter Ibn Nubāta’s works.

Almost a Mufākhara

A mufākhara is a literary debate, a genre with a long, even pre-Arabic, tradition in the Middle East. Ibn Nubāta contributed to it with his Mufākhara bayna s-sayf wa-l-qalam, “Debate between the sword and the pen,” a popular subject of literary debates. Another popular subject of mufākharāt were debates between two towns, which would in turn praise their own virtues and denigrate the other.

The purpose of the letter is, as we have seen, to bring Ibn Nubāta from Damascus to Cairo. A debate between these two towns is therefore most suitable, even more so since the addressee is himself the author of a famous literary

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19 See van Gelder, Conceit of pen and sword.
debate. Al-Qīrāṭī, however, wrote something like a mufākhara manquée, again an unconventional specimen of a literary genre. There is no immediate dialogue between the two towns, nor is there any criticism of Damascus. Perhaps Damascus really was so beautiful that nothing blameworthy could be found, nevertheless it is likelier that al-Qīrāṭī found it impolite to criticize the town where Ibn Nubāta was living and had spent the greater part of his life. By then, it was still uncertain if he would leave his abode for Cairo. Cairo, instead, is not treated so leniently. It is a beautiful town, yes, but a town full of ignorant people in which the most mediocre apprentice gets the highest positions. Al-Qīrāṭī seizes the opportunity to quote al-Mutanabbī’s famous line:

... in a land in which you can find everything the heart desires; the only thing missing are noble people.20 [139a/179b]

This is why Ibn Nubāta was so bitterly needed here. The main text about Egypt forms a distinct section, a text that can be considered a maqāma and that treats the subject that is most intimately connected with Egypt, the Nile.

The Maqāma of the Nile

The maqāma of the Nile is again a text remarkable in several respects. First, whereas all other themes are treated in an entwined and entangled way, this is the only longer self-contained text in the whole letter. Second, the genre of the maqāma has attracted a lot of attention in recent years, and it may be of interest to learn about a maqāma that has been unknown so far, especially since this one might have influenced the development of the genre. Thirdly, it is again a remarkable, unconventional piece of literature.

As for the literary background of the maqāma, its function is to counterbalance the long and extensive praise of Damascus by adding a long text about Egypt. Furthermore, it is an homage to Ibn Nubāta, whose letters about the flood of the Nile were so acclaimed that they even found their way into popular anthologies. Again, al-Qīrāṭī, who is not otherwise known as an author of maqāmāt, found a subject that allowed him to demonstrate his ability as an author of stylized prose.

20 See al-Mutanabbī, Dīwān iv, 194; meter wāfīr.
The flooding of the Nile in the year 760/1359 gives the situational background. The nilometer served to measure the level of the Nile during its flood in August and September. If the flood reached the mark of 17 cubits, an optimal harvest was granted for the next year. If it were two or more cubits less, not enough fields would be irrigated, the harvest would turn out meagre and the prices of grain and vegetables would be high.

In the year 760/1359, a catastrophe of the opposite kind happened. The flooding did not stop at 17 cubits, but reached a level of twenty cubits and four fingers, which proved to be devastating. Land was ruined, houses were destroyed, cattle drowned. This is the story that al-Qīrāṭī tells in his maqāma: How the Nile rose and rose and did not stop, how men, animals and houses were ruined, how people cried for help, but often in vain, as in the following passage, in which he incorporates a line by al-Ḥuṣrī al-Qayrawānī (d. 488/1095).

It was common practice in maqāmāt not to cite verses of one’s own, but those of other poets (usually without mentioning their name). These lines were often given a surprisingly different meaning in their new context, as is the case here. Remarkable is also the tricky jinās (paronomasia) between aqāl and fa-ğāl, which allowed al-Qīrāṭī to make the trivial phrase “he said” part of a rhyme and give an interesting flavor to it:

The people demanded that he (—the Nile—) grant relief, but he wouldn’t, and everyone whose house was surrounded by water exhorted his neighbor to bail him out, but he replied: “You are not Noah so that your ark can help me, nor am I the Messiah so that I can walk on water!”

Of course, al-Qīrāṭī could not end with a disaster like this. Instead, the text follows the pattern of al-faraj baʿda sh-shidda, “relief after distress.” People pray for relief, and the lord of heavens treats the people of the earth with kindness. Gradually, the flood recedes and the situation returns to normal. In the end,
al-Qīrāṭī resumes as follows, again using a quotation by al-Mutanabbī introduced by short cola abounding with *jinās*:

على أنَّ النَّيلَ يَا مُولِّانَا قد أُسِفَتُ أَضْعَافُ مَا أُسِفَتَ *وُوُسَبََتَ*

اَكْرُمُ مَا نَهَبَتَ *وَأَخْلَفَ فَوْقَ مَا أَلَفَ *

وَإِنَّ يَكُونُ الفِعْلُ الَّذِي سَاءَ وَاحِدًا *فَأَفْعَامَةُ اللَّائِي سَرَّرَنَّ الْوَفََ

In general, my lord, the Nile has helped | many times more than he has harmed, | and given | more than taken away, | and his compensation was above his destruction. | “If one of his deeds has caused grief—his deeds that bring delight are thousands!”23 [140b/181a]

This is again a very elegant and sophisticated text, which enhances our knowledge of ornate prose in the eighth/fourteenth century, a century which was especially fruitful for the *maqāma* genre. Nevertheless, the question remains whether al-Qīrāṭī’s text can be called a *maqāma* without reservation. As we have seen, al-Qīrāṭī’s letter radically transgresses the text type ‘letter’; his *taqrīż* breaks with a number of conventions; and his *mufākhara* is not a real *mufākhara*. So, what about this *maqāma*? The ways in which it differs from earlier *maqāmāt* such as those by al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī are obvious. Most conspicuous is the fact that al-Qīrāṭī’s text does not have a fictional narrator who is introduced by a chain of transmitters (*isnād*), nor does it have a fictional hero. The *maqāma* expert Hämeen-Anttila felt a bit uneasy with texts of this kind because they blur the boundaries between letter and *maqāma*.24 Nonetheless, if contemporary readers considered the text a *maqāma*, we have no right to deny its ‘*maqāmaness*.’ But was it one? The text bears no headline whatsoever (it simply begins with the words ‘*alā dhikri n-Nīl* . . . “speaking of the Nile, I won’t forget the damage he did in the year 760”), and is never referred to as a *maqāma*. Therefore, it is hard to decide whether it was perceived as a *maqāma* at this time or not. What we can say for certain, though, is that it would have been considered a *maqāma* a century later, when we have a text that displays striking parallels to al-Qīrāṭī’s, and is explicitly called a *maqāma* by its author. This text is the *maqāma* of the Nile, *al-Maqāma al-baḥriyya*, by Jalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, a well-known text about the flooding of the Nile in the

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23 See al-Mutanabbi, *Dīwān* iii, 36; meter *ṭawīl*.
year 897/1492.\textsuperscript{25} It treats the same subject as al-Qīrāṭī’s \textit{maqāma}, the Nile that either brings \textit{rakhāʾ}, “abundance,” in case of a flood in the right measure, or \textit{ghalāʾ}, “dearth, inflation,” if it is either too low or too high. What happens in as-Suyūṭī’s \textit{maqāma}, however, is the exact opposite of the events in al-Qīrāṭī’s. In al-Qīrāṭī’s text, the Nile rises too high before it recedes; in as-Suyūṭī’s, the Nile starts to rise a little, but then stops and everybody guesses that the flooding has come to an end, which would have meant inflation and famine. People pray and lament, and after 17 days, the flooding surprisingly recommences and everybody thanks God.

The parallels between the two texts are more than obvious, and it is highly improbable that as-Suyūṭī did not know al-Qīrāṭī’s text. If as-Suyūṭī called his text a \textit{maqāma}, it is again quite improbable that al-Qīrāṭī did not consider his text as such. It is much more probable, instead, that al-Qīrāṭī’s text reflects contemporaneous developments in the genre of the \textit{maqāma} even if it did not contribute substantially to those developments by itself.

The ‘Entwined’ Style

When we finally shift our perspective from the macrostructure to the microstructure, we realize that both have an important trait in common. The keyword for this is given by Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī, who introduces his moderately shortened version of the letter with the following words:

\begin{quote}
 هذه الرسالة من غرار ترسل الشيخ برهاان الدين القيراطي كونه الى الشيخ جمال الدين بن نباتة رحمه الله تعالى ولم أختصر منها إلا الأقل لتشغيلها بعضًا يغرض
\end{quote}

This letter is one of the highlights in the literary correspondence of Burhān ad-Dīn al-Qīrāṭī because it was written for Jamāl ad-Dīn Ibn Nubāṭa—may God have mercy on him. I omitted only very little of it because everything in it is entwined.

\textsuperscript{25} As-Suyūṭī, \textit{Maqāmāt} i, 249–70.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibn Ḥijja, \textit{Tahrīr} fol. 53b–54a.
As we have seen, this is true for the macrostructure, where the maqāma and the different parts of a mufākhara are entwined with a taqrīz, which in turn is entwined with the formal parameters of a letter. It is also true, however, for the microstructure. Just as the subject of Damascus appears first in what could be called an exposition and occurs again by way of a recapitulation at the end, a large number of words, motifs and themes occur and recur again in the course of the whole letter. Again and again they appear in a new light in a different context but at the same time refer to all their other occurrences. These recurrences form a dense network of intratextual references similar to leitmotifs in music. A structure like this can be considered as especially characteristic of Ayyubid and Mamluk literature, and it may indeed be the case that what during these periods is characteristic of poetry may have had its origins in ornate prose.27 Al-Qīrāṭī’s texts and Ibn Ḥijja’s characterization of it as being mutashaʿʿib, “ramified,” corroborate this.

To create a leitmotif, the author may choose a concept, an image, a certain stylistic device or even a single word. One of the words that are used as a leitmotif in al-Qīrāṭī’s text is the word niqs (“ink”), an obvious word in a letter that, among other topics, deals with writing and is directed to a writer. All in all, it occurs ten times in the letter. The context is sometimes similar, but it always adds something new and unprecedented, as these samples show:

(1) The word niqs occurs first when al-Qīrāṭī praises Ibn Nubāta’s expressions with the following words:

\[
\text{فَسْبَحَّاَنَّ مَن أَسْرَى بِهَا فِي لَيْلٍ نَفْسِهَا إِلَى المَحْلِ الأَقْصَى} \quad \text{خَبَآَا}
\]

Exalted is he who makes them travel in the night of their ink to the most distant place | and endows them with virtues innumerable [130b/172b].

The “night of the (black) ink,” the most common image for ink, provides the frame for a nightly journey, on which the poet has sent his alfāẓ, “expressions,” to “the extreme place” of beauty. The analogy is the prophet Muḥammad’s isrā’ from Mecca to Jerusalem, a reference to Q Isrā’ 17:1 and it is quite a daring and unusual image.

27 Bauer, Toward an aesthetics of Mamluk literature.
(2) On the same page, the “night of the ink” appears a second time. But here the “night” is not only the object of comparison to the ink, but a metaphor in turn, standing for a “curtain” that protects the “virgin” (= innovative) ideas of Ibn Nubāta's poems in praise of al-Malik al-Mu’ayyad of Ḥamāh:

The virgin (= innovative) ideas in them are well protected, for a curtain made from the night of their ink was spread out above them… [130b/172b]

Here the poet compares the unprecedented poetic ideas in Ibn Nubāta’s Mu‘ayyadiyyāt to noble virgins, protected from penetrating glances by a (black) curtain which, in the form of a phantastic etiology (ḥusn at-taʿlīl) is provided by the metaphorical “night of the ink.” As if these stylistic devices were not enough, al-Qīrāṭī adds a colon that is virtually untranslatable due to the many associations it creates. It is part of a superiority passage, and its most obvious meaning is: “… and Badīʿ (az-Zamān al-Hamadhānī) admits that his use of the stylistic device of antithesis (ṭibāq) falls short in comparison to the verses, in which these (Ibn Nubāta's) ideas occur.” Badīʿ az-Zamān (358–98/969–1008) is one of the 110 littérateurs mentioned in the letter’s superiority passages. He is chosen here not for his famous maqāmāt (Ibn Nubāta did not compose any) but for his poems, or rather, for his name al-Badīʿ. The word badīʿ is also the term for “stylistics,” a meaning that is suggested retrospectively by the stylistic term ṭibāq at the end of the colon. Now the virgins come in again: They live in “castles,” which the word quṣūr, “falling short of,” can also mean, and in “houses” since bayt means both “verse” and “house.” For creating a tawriya, the fact that both should have a different plural form is irrelevant. Consequently, one could also bring in ṭibāq in connection with ṭabaqa or ṭabaq meaning “floor, story (of a house).” The non-primarily intended meanings “castles,” “houses” and “floors” cannot be connected in a grammatically meaningful way, but they are semantically closely related. This is the stylistic device known as tawjīḥ, but whereas the secondary, non-intended meanings of tawjīḥ hardly contribute to the overall sense of a text in many cases, here these meanings strongly suggest that the well-protected “virgins” of the preceding colon live in magnificent palaces. There is even a third, longer colon to complete this rhyme group, but the analysis so far may suffice to demonstrate the complexity of the
text and the inexhaustible wealth of meanings and associations. The following examples will be treated more concisely.

(3) Already on the following page, the ink occurs again, but this time it is not compared with the night, but with ghāliya “galia,” a perfume of black color. The passage is in praise of Ibn Nubāta’s seven-liners as-Sabʿa as-sayyāra. The writer finds them so admirable that he even venerates the ink with which they are written. This may seem “excessive,” but there is another allusion in the word aṭnaba since in Arabic rhetoric iṭnāb designates an exhaustive style. Its counterpoint is ījāz, “conciseness.” Therefore, the writer reacts with iṭnāb to miniature qaṣīda representing the utmost ījāz. Note also the jinās between ghāliya and taghālā:

লেগে কাম মিমলুক লেহসী সাদিক ইজলাশ ও উত্তের হেন গুলারি গুলারি

“The servant rose in reverence for these seven moving stars | and was excessive and exaggerated even for the galia of their ink.” [131a/173a].

(4) Two pages later, the “night of the ink” appears again, this time in contrast to the “day” of the white paper, a common combination, but both comparisons remain unspoken. The reader’s knowledge of this comparison is presupposed. The main function of the reference to the ink is to introduce a line by al-Būṣīrī, which completes the colon:

واصغت قُسْهَا وَطَرَسَهَا الْحَرْبَ بِيَنْ حُسَانِهَا

Their ink and paper provoked a war between those who envy them (Ibn Nubāta’s works), “And the strife between them lasted from the beginning of the night to the early morning.”28 [132a–b/174a]

(5) Some pages later, the same double comparison reappears, this time in an outspoken way. In a triple comparison, sun, moon and stars (Ibn Nubāta’s works), night (ink) and day (paper) form a murāʿāt an-naẓīr, “harmonious choice of images”:

28 al-Būṣīrī, Dīwān 224 (no. 17 l. 31); meter sarīʿ.
In every moment of their ink’s night and their paper’s day, shining (celestial bodies) rise. [135a/176b]

(6) On the next page, the ink finds another object of comparison, the ambergris. It reminds the reader of the gala of example (3) but is not identical with it and is introduced in a completely different context:

When Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār clings to them/ perfumes himself with their musk, they intensify the fragrance of eloquence with the ambergris that their ink exudes. [135b/177a]

In a superiority passage, we learn that Ibn Nubāta’s muwashshahāt surpass those of the Andalusī poet Abū l-Qāsim Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār, an early writer in this poetic form.29 The name of the poet, “Son of the perfumer,” provokes the tawrīya in at-tamassuk “clinging to” and “perfuming oneself with musk.” Dependent on the key verb fataqa “and enhancing the fragrance of musk by adding other perfumes” are the metaphors “fragrance of eloquence” and “ambergris of the ink.” The Tertium comparationis is found in the first instance in the black color shared by both ink and ambergris, but also in the fragrance of the perfume and, in a metaphorical way, in the text that is written with the ink.

(7) Still on the same page and still in praise of Ibn Nubāta’s muwashshahāt, the ink appears again:

Or (if) al-Abyaḍ (could see these muwashshahāt), his wrath would make him blush and pale in turns, and, convinced of the supremacy of their ink, he would say: “Certain things make you a leader/ black.” [135b/177a]

Now it is Abū Bakr al-Ishbīlī al-Abyaḍ, another Andalusī writer of muwashshahāt,30 who is eclipsed by Ibn Nubāta. Neither he nor Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār

29 See eal. 563.
30 See eal. 52.
is a well-known figure. The fact that al-Qīrāṭī knew them and trusted in Ibn Nubāta's knowing them as well, demonstrates the breadth of the literary canon in their time. Whereas in all comparisons and metaphors the black color of the ink is the tertium comparationis (or at least one of several), blackness has not been mentioned explicitly thus far. Here it is. Parallel to a passage dealing with fragrance stimulated by the name of Ibn al-ʿAṭṭār, al-Qīrāṭī writes two cola dealing with colors stimulated by the name of the washshāḥ al-Abyaḍ “the White,” who turns “red” and “pale.” The punch line is the word yusawwad, a tawriya meaning either “being made black” or “being made a sayyid.”

(8) The taqrīḥ-section ends with sort of a coda before the Damascus section and the maqāma of the Nile set in. There are no new elements but rather reminiscences of earlier motifs. Among them is another occurrence of the ink, in which the well-known metaphor of the “night of the ink” is used:

وَكَلِمَةٌ أُزَهِّرَتْ بِالنَّشْرِ أُوْرَاقُهَا وَنَارَتْ بِمَعَايِنِهَا فِي نَيْلِ نَقْصِهَا آفَاقُهَا

... the leaves on which these words are written, blossom with gillyflowers and their horizons gleam in the night of their ink through their ideas.

[136b/177b]

This pair of cola combines the realms of plants and stars. The “gillyflowers” are also a reference to Ibn Nubāta's collection of ornate prose entitled Zahr al-manṭūr, a book title in which manṭūr means both “gillyflower” and “prose.” This rather unspectacular treatment of the ink seems appropriate for a passage displaying the character of a résumé.

(9 and 10) In the second section on Damascus and the maqāma of the Nile, the ink does not show up again. It is only on the penultimate page when it surfaces again and for the last time, this time not once, but twice. Thus far, the ink occurred in al-Qīrāṭī's praise of Ibn Nubāta's poems or works in general. In the final passage, al-Qīrāṭī asks Ibn Nubāta to respond to his letter with a letter of his own and in this context praises Ibn Nubāta's letters:

وَأَيَضَّتْ عَيْنَ الْحُسْوَ هِلْسَادْ يَقِسُهَا وَأَسْوَدَتْ الْدُّنْيَا فِي عَيْنِهِ لِيِّضٍ مُّقَرِّبُهَا وَأَنْظُمُتْ فِي أَسْوَلاَكْ السُّطُور حَبَائِلُهَا وَأَشْرُقَتْ فِي أَحْلَاكِ لِيِّلِ النَّقْصِ نِيرَائِهَا وَحُسْنُ دَراَرِيِّ الكْوَلِكِ أَنْ تَرَى طَوَالَّ عِنْدَ مِنِ اللَّيْلِ غَيْهُمَّـب
The blackness of their ink turns the envier’s eye white (blind) | and the whiteness of their paper makes the world black in his eyes. || Their beads are strung on the strings of verses, | and their brilliant stars shine in the darkness of ink-nights: “How beautiful are brightly shining stars when you see them rise in a jet-black night!”31 [141a/181b]

This last invocation of the ink is like a summary of previous passages. The enviers are known from example (4), “blackening” in contrast to whiteness was subject of example (7); the “night of the ink” occurs throughout, but it is not in contrast to the whiteness of the paper here but to the “stars” of Ibn Nubāta’s verses recalling example (5). A line by al-Buḥturī rounds off the image, and the tashaʿʿub, “ramification, entwinement,” is all too obvious.

Conclusion

In the year 761/1360, the Mamluk Sultan an-Nāṣir Ḥasan sent an edict to Damascus to invite the most famous poet and prose stylist of his time, Ibn Nubāta, to come to Cairo. For this occasion, the poet al-Qīrāṭī, an admirer of Ibn Nubāta and one of the most prominent poets in Cairo at the time, wrote a letter that probably accompanied the sultan’s edict. It is a letter of exuberant length and stylistic sophistication. It is a gigantic taqrīẓ “commendation” and encompasses passages that could be considered a mufākhara and a maqāma, but above all, it is a formidable example of the unparalleled stylistic level of ornate prose in this period. In the seventh and eighth/thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Arabic epistolography was probably at its zenith with prose stylists like Shihāb ad-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī (644–725/1246 or 1247–1325), Ibn Nubāta, Shihāb ad-Dīn ibn Faḍlallāh (700–49/1301–49), Lisān ad-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb (713–76/1313–75), al-Qīrāṭī, Ibn Ḥijja al-Ḥamawī (767–837/1366–1434) and many others. Modern scholars have seen their stylistic refinement rather as an impediment to understanding the content of the text than as an enrichment of it, and indeed a letter such as the one discussed here is far from easy reading. Nevertheless, its beauty and fascination is undeniable. Ibn Ḥajar’s characterization of it as of “utmost beauty and length” evokes Robert Schumann’s appraisal of Franz Schuberts C-major symphony as standing out for its himmlische Länge, “heavenly length”—precisely the same could be said of al-Qīrāṭī’s letter.

31  See al-Buḥturī, Dīwān i, 193 (no. 63/27), meter ṭawīl.
Bibliography


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