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Philippe de Mézières and His Age

Piety and Politics in the Fourteenth Century

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HISTORICAL NARRATION AND DIGRESSION IN
AL-NUWAIŘĪ AL-ISKANDARĀNĪ'S *KITĀB AL-ILMĀM*

David Joseph Wrisley

After his sojourns in Jerusalem and Cyprus, Philippe de Mézières had no doubt learned a considerable amount about the Mediterranean basin and the different peoples of the region: it is a knowledge that permeates his lifetime of writing.¹ The age in which Philippe de Mézières lived and wrote was indeed one marked by considerable exchange and trading along its coastlines, but also by violence and raiding of those same areas, and by an eagerness to depict those raids in both Christian and Islamic historiography—albeit in very different ways for both traditions—as a series of campaigns aimed at a confessional other. Description of that violence is far from being the focal point of Philippe de Mézières' writing, but can be found sacralized and idealized between the lines of his crusading propaganda. Generations of historians of the Crusades have looked to Christian authors, Philippe de Mézières, writing from the Order of the Celestines in Paris, Guillaume de Machaut from Reims, or even Leontios Makhairas from Cyprus, in order to make sense of the events of the 1365 sack of Alexandria. Few have looked, however, to the rich Mamluk textual culture of the very lands where those raids took place to understand in what kind of historical writing that violence was narrated.

Late historian Peter Malcolm Holt of the University of London observed some thirty-five years ago that the modern historiography of the medieval Mediterranean suffers a significant "lack of balance"

¹ See Nicolas Jorga, *Philippe de Mézières, 1327–1405, et la croisade au XIV^e siècle* (rept. Geneva, 1976), chs. 4–9; Kiril Petkov, "The Rotten Apple and the Good Apples: Orthodox, Catholics and Turks in Philippe de Mézières' Crusading Propaganda," *Journal of Medieval History* 23.3 (1997), 255–70; Andrea Tarnowski, "Material Examples: Philippe de Mézières' *Order of the Passion*," *Yale French Studies* 110 (2006), 163–75; Philippe de Mézières, "Introduction," *Songe du vieux pèlerin*, ed. Joël Blanchard (Paris, 2008), 9–49; Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Philippe de Mézières' Life of Saint Pierre de Thomas at the Crossroads of Late Medieval Hagiography and Crusading Ideology," *Viator* 40.1 (2009), 223–48.

when it comes to knowledge and use of sources.² Although important work has been done in recent years on Islamic perspectives on the crusades, Holt's observation basically holds true today, despite the fact that these Arabic sources are increasingly published and well known.³ Peter I of Lusignan's campaign against the city of Alexandria is a very good example of such a scholarly imbalance where the focus on the European narrative of crusade singularly overshadows other possible counter-narratives of the same events. As both a military campaign and a spectacular raid of the prosperous Egyptian port city, the sack of Alexandria was heralded in European medieval and pre-modern texts as a grand success against Mamluk power. Some triumphalist national histories continue to celebrate that event even in the twenty-first century. Yet we know that even though Mamluk Alexandria was attacked and pillaged, it was only held for a matter of days, and its sack provoked an extended conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, culminating in the murders of the political figures on both sides of the conflict, the Mamluk vice sultan and the king of Cyprus. On the whole, the attack seems to have achieved very little and the protagonist of the Alexandrian campaign Peter I remains a quite ambiguous hero. Historians seem split over whether Peter I of Lusignan was a pious ruler bravely carrying the mantle of a tradition of crusader kings, or a fanatical architect of a war-provoking fiasco. His murder in his own bed, and at the hands of his own men, so explicitly portrayed in Guillaume de Machaut's *Prise d'Alixandre*, certainly does not help us view his heroism with sympathy or even clarity.⁴ Given the complexity of the historical moment and the imbalance toward European sources, the Alexandrian expedition is in need of reconsideration, and from a more Mediterranean perspective, not so much to elucidate what "actually" happened in the events of 1365, but rather to understand how

² P. M. Holt, "Introduction," *The Eastern Mediterranean Lands in the Period of Crusades* (Warminster, 1977), vii. This statement is cited from the introduction to an edited volume of papers given at a seminar in 1975 at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

³ See, for example, Carole Hillenbrand, *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives* (Edinburgh, 1999). Although her study is about Islamic perspectives during the period of the Latin kingdoms, she does make a passing mention of al-Nuwairi al-Iskandarani's *Kitāb al-Ilmām* in the context of anti-Christian measures taken by the Mamluks (417).

⁴ Guillaume de Machaut, *La Prise d'Alixandre*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York-London, 2002), ll. 8493-832.

they have been recounted and have accumulated meaning with the passage of time.⁵

The details of such a large project fall beyond the scope of this article. The claims of the various Western protagonists about the importance of 1365 need be compared with the principal Arabic source of Peter of Lusignan's sack of the city of Alexandria in order to elucidate the different approaches to representing and making sense of regional violence of the period. The work, written between 1366–1377 by a chronicler-scribe and long-time resident of Alexandria named al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī, is entitled, *Kitāb al-Ilmām bi-l-a'lām fimā jarat bihi al-aḥkām wa-l-amūr al-maqḍiyya fī waq'at al-Iskandariyya* (The Book of Gleanings Relating what Occurred in the Events of the Fall of Alexandria, herein *Kitāb al-Ilmām*).⁶ It is a complex, long historical source (some 2600 pages) that was edited in 1968, and, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been translated into a Western language, either partially or in full. The importance of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* for the age of Philippe de Mézières lies not so much in a demystification of the Western reception of Peter as hero (although it does contain extensive description of the raucous and cruel behavior of the raiding armies that could easily provide evidence for such an analysis) as in serving as an alternative source to the ways that Christian chroniclers, namely Mézières, Machaut, Makhairas and later Italian *remanieurs*, made sense of the event. The *Kitāb al-Ilmām* chronicles the sack of Alexandria and idealizes the bravery of the local people's defense of the city, but as its title suggests, it is much more than just a commemoration of a counter crusade. It uses this extraordinary event as a springboard for exploring many other topics, and, as such, it is bursting with poetry, eyewitness accounts, urban descriptions, and other raw material of interest to the social and cultural historian.

We know that Philippe de Mézières, and the other Western sources of the Alexandria campaign, made quite an effort in consecrating the event as a form of renewed crusade and in celebrating Christian raids on the Egyptian coast as heroic. For the very simple reason that

⁵ Here I use the simple, but elegant, idea of history as "time which has gained sense and meaning" taken from Jörn Rüsen, "Introduction: How to Understand Historical Thinking," *History: Narration-Interpretation-Orientations* (New York-Oxford, 2005), 2.

⁶ Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī, *Kitāb al-Ilmām bi-l-a'lām fimā jarat bihi al-aḥkām wa-l-amūr al-maqḍiyya fī waq'at al-Iskandariyya*, ed. Aziz Suryal Atiya, 7 vols. (Hyderabad, 1968–76). An abbreviated version is available: *Waq'at al-Iskandariyya min Kitāb al-Ilmām li-l-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī*, ed. Suhail Zakkar (Damascus, 2008).

it does not narrate a campaign led across the sea or into Christian lands, but rather describes resistance to outside attack, the Arabic text offers a largely different perspective on the events of 1365, as well as an excellent opportunity to shift away from the Eurocentric focus of the historiography. In order to use this source effectively, however, it is important to understand how it is constructed. The Arabic source's description of the sack of the city interpolates metadiegetic text into the main historical narrative using a variety of forms of *amplificatio*.⁷ As such, the Arabic narration of the event is indissociable from its focus on *adab*, the indigenous concept in Arabic for belletristic fields like grammar, poetry and philology. Providing reflections (or gleanings) on what occurred in the attack on Alexandria, the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, as we will see, partially participates in a triumphalist version of cross-confessional strife through the use of forms of heroic poetry (see the last section of this article), but for the most part it is of a very different order than the epic-inflected texts of the Christian writers who recount and celebrate Peter I's actions. Through an elaborate matrix of digressions both about early Islam and more recent fronts of conflict in al-Andalus, combined with graphic depiction of struggle against the besiegers of Alexandria, al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's text brings a plethora of meanings to the events of 1365, and in particular critically evaluates the actions of his own city's inhabitants in the face of the violence, all of which might be used to reassess the historiography of the Cypriot campaigns in the late fourteenth century.

Histories written in European languages about the "late crusades" sometimes make mention of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, although they typically repeat what the editors of the text, Aziz Atiya and Etienne Combe,⁸ have written about it in secondary literature.⁹ Before the publication of the Arabic text of *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, Atiya used it in his 1938 book *The Crusades in the Later Middle Ages* extracting narremes of the

⁷ I am using this term "metadiegetic" to refer to the story within the story, which is linked to the main excursus.

⁸ In particular, see Aziz Suryal Atiya, *A Fourteenth-Century Encyclopedist from Alexandria: A Critical and Analytical Study of al-Nuwairi al-Iskandarānī's "Kitāb al-Ilmām"*, (Salt Lake City, 1977). Atiya explains in this essay the genesis of the Arabic edition stemming from his collaboration with Swiss Orientalist Etienne Combe.

⁹ There has not been a comprehensive study of the Cypriot campaign in a Western language. The Arabic source is discussed in a monographic-length study of Peter's campaign written in Arabic: Suhayr Muḥammad Nā'ina', *Al-ḥarūb al-ṣalibiyya al-muta'khira: ḥamlat Butrus al-Awwal Lusignan'ala al-Iskandariyya 1375/767* [The Late Crusades: Peter I of Lusignan's Campaign against Alexandria 1365/767] (Al-Haram, Egypt, 2002).

Kitāb al-Ilmām's account of the prolonged Cypriot-Mamluk struggle as factual complements for the Western sources of the late fourteenth century, essentially completing a Western narrative of the events with details from the other side.¹⁰ In that book, Atiya effectively presented a dismembered narrative of the Alexandrian campaign exiled from its Mamluk context, with no mention of the texture of the historical writing or its various digressions. In 1977, after the publication of the last volume of the Arabic edition, Atiya then wrote a short research monograph, summarizing the contents and importance of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*.¹¹ He argued for the significance of the source as the single most extensive extant eyewitness account of 1365 in Alexandria, and gave al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī the erudite title of "encyclopedist."

Medievalists without Arabic only have access to the limited summaries of Atiya and Combe concerning the work. The latter gave a description of the Berlin and Cairo manuscripts as the prolegomena for a partial edition which apparently never appeared, and his comments about the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* betray his idea of the historical value of the work: "[m]alheureusement cette oeuvre est remplie de digressions étendues, qui détournent l'attention du sujet principal" [unfortunately this work is full of long digressions that distract attention away from the main subject].¹² Scholars of Arabic historiography are indebted to Atiya and to the library of Arabic classics at the Osmania University in Hyderabad for opting in the end to publish an unabridged Arabic edition of the long work. Atiya's own assessment of the work is, however, unfortunately marred by a condescending tone and what reads as a lack of appreciation for the complex textuality of medieval Arabic historiography. Atiya writes that al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī

simply stuffed his data in the text, wandering from one subject to another indiscriminately. Yet, it would be a serious error to discard his work on that premise; for, in the midst of the labyrinth of his somewhat unconnected statements, mainly written in artificial rhymed style, one can stumble over details of the most unusual and important nature, scattered haphazard here and there. We have tried to remedy this confusion

¹⁰ Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1938), 345-78.

¹¹ Atiya, *A Fourteenth-Century Encyclopedist from Alexandria*, passim.

¹² Etienne Combe, "Le Texte de Nuwairi sur l'attaque d'Alexandrie par Pierre I de Lusignan," *Majallat Kulliyat al-Adāb* [Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts, Alexandria] 3(1946), 99-110.

and the author's unjustifiable aberrations by grouping the subject-matter of this vast text into fourteen long indices....¹³

Later in the same essay he points to "wanderings and literary aberrations (mustatradāt)... [digressions that] allowed himself to be drawn into dealing with a multitude of other empires, both ancient and medieval."¹⁴ It has been well established that late medieval Arabic historiography was indeed highly dependent on compilation and intertextuality.¹⁵ This poses a great problem, however, for the medievalist interested in the study of Arabic histories. Putting aside whether such complex textuality is "aberrant" or not, we can only wonder if the source of many of the eyewitness or pseudo-eyewitness events that took place in Alexandria was al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī himself or reliable observers with whom he was acquainted. When it comes to the long passages not directly speaking of, but rather inspired by, the Cypriot attack, in the absence of source studies, we can be less sure of the provenance of such erudite collections of information. Too little work has been done on the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* to say for sure. The thesis of multiple authors, or of forms of complex scribal or authorial *remanie-ment*, cannot also be ruled out. What can be said for sure is that in the section of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* which recounts the siege of Alexandria itself, multiple discursive styles permeate the account of events and the text abounds with anecdotes, fragments of religious texts, snippets of classical poetry, as well as poetry composed for the occasion in a variety of genres: *madah* (praise), *rithā'* (elegy) or *hijā'* (satire). It is to this portion of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, the siege of Alexandria scene, that this article will turn. Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's history not only accommodates these kinds of poetic reflections on past and present, but uses them to heighten the importance of the very events of 1365.

Some Arabic historical scholarship today is even uncomfortable with al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī as a historical source. Placing the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* in the context of the other shorter Arabic sources of the 1365 sack, van Steenberg, for example, has expressed caution with Atiya's assessment that the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is an invaluable source, citing

¹³ Atiya, *A Fourteenth-Century Encyclopedist from Alexandria*, 13.

¹⁴ Atiya, *A Fourteenth-Century Encyclopedist from Alexandria*, 17.

¹⁵ For one recent study of the role of compilation in the historiographic tradition of the Zanj rebellion, see Kurt Franz, *Kompilation in arabischen Chroniken: Die Überlieferung vom Aufstand der Zang zwischen Geschichtlichkeit und Intertextualität vom 9. bis ins 15. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2004).

factual inconsistencies in the account and what he terms al-Nuwairi al-Iskandarānī's "[Muslim] fanaticism and personal involvement" in the events as possible reasons for his "bias" as historian.¹⁶ While caution is no doubt required when using such a complex text, the judgments of the above scholars have, I believe, unfairly diverted attention away from Al-Nuwairi al-Iskandarānī as an essential source for elucidating the kinds of historical thinking one finds about the violence in the fourteenth-century Mediterranean. Al-Nuwairi al-Iskandarānī's *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is a long work indeed that addresses many different subjects and it is written from time to time from a providential perspective, but far from being "unjustifiably [aberrant]", it is a fascinating text for scholars of the fourteenth century, not for the reason cited by Atiya, that it is full of dusty gems of erudition, but that it provides us with such an unfamiliar account of crusade-dominated narratives of the second half of the fourteenth century. Recent work on medieval European historiography has made strides in studying the most subjective eyewitness and pseudo-eyewitness of historical events,¹⁷ and there is no reason that the study of the highly personal digressivity of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* could not provide equally fascinating insight into the way that eyewitness events of the present—especially the instability of the Bahri Mamluk period and the catastrophe of the sack of Alexandria—are linked to a discourse of origins and are portrayed in the unfolding of the "sacred history" of Islam. The *Kitāb al-Ilmām* offers, in a nutshell, a unexploited window of opportunity for the intercultural analysis of the period beyond the polarizing terms of crusade and counter-crusade.

Further issues are raised in the problematic use of terminology in previous scholarship. The use of the word "digression" as a translation for two of the indigenous Arabic terms of discursive form (*istiṭrād*, *muṣtaṭradāt*) requires great care, as we will see below. Furthermore, by labeling al-Nuwairi al-Iskandarānī an "encyclopedist," Atiya was perhaps fairer in his judgment of the Mamluk text than Combe, recognizing the importance of the scope of material in his historical

¹⁶ Jo van Steenberghe, "The Alexandrian Crusade (1365) and the Mamlūk Sources: Reassessment of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* of an-Nuwairi al-Iskandarānī (D. A.D. 1372)," in *East and West in the Crusader States: Context—Contacts—Confrontations*, eds. K. Ciggar and H. G. B. Teule (Leuven, 2003), 3: 123–37.

¹⁷ For the example of Froissart, see Peter Ainsworth, "Contemporary and 'Eyewitness' History," in *Historiography in the Middle Ages*, ed. Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis (Leiden–Boston, 2003), 248–67.

writing. It is perhaps, however, a misnomer, to call the *Kitāb al-Ilmān* an “encyclopedia” since it does not really resemble the systematically encyclopedic texts of the Latin and Arabic middle ages (Vincent of Beauvais or al-Nuwairī, author of the *Nihāyat al-Arab*, for example).¹⁸ The variety of discourses found in al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī is reminiscent of the discursive complexity of Mézières’ *Le songe du vieil pelerin* or numerous other long texts of the fourteenth century. Mézières and al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī are both well-informed authors, and to borrow a term from Konrad Hirschler, we might say that both are “authors and actors” in history.¹⁹

Digression, a common medieval rhetorical art, should not be understood in the modern pejorative sense of the word as a mass of either unrelated or marginal information, but rather as a self-conscious form of *amplificatio*. In both the Latin and Arabic traditions, it is a form of writing discussed at length in excurses on poetry and rhetoric, connoting a departure from (and return to) the main subject material of a text.²⁰ Some have gone so far as to claim that digressions are not at all of secondary importance, but rather work rhetorically hand in hand with the central excursus of medieval writing. They can also serve as the warp and weft of authorial self-fashioning.²¹ Future studies of al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī in the context of medieval Mediterranean historiography must address this issue of digressivity and its role in

¹⁸ Even though he bears the same first name, this author al-Nuwairī is a different author, and is much better known in Mamluk studies.

¹⁹ For a treatment of subjectivity in Mamluk historical writing, see Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors and Actors* (London–New York, 2006).

²⁰ There is a lively debate over *istiṭrād* (digression) in the Arabic poetic tradition. It is of course on a smaller scale since in poetry it generally involves transitions and image shifts in poems. See Gustave E. Grunebaum, “Arabic Literary Criticism in the 10th Century AD,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 61 (1941), 51–57; S. A. Bonebakker, “Aspects of the History of Literary Rhetoric and Poetics in Arabic Literature,” *Viator* 1 (1970), 75–95; and G. J. H. Van Gelder *Beyond the Line: Classical Arabic Literary Critics on the Coherence and Unity of the Poem* (Leiden, 1982), especially 35–37, 87–89, 94–96; see also Danièle James-Raoul, “La digression dans les arts poétiques des XII^e et XIII^e siècles: aperçu théorique,” in *La digression dans la littérature et l’art du moyen âge. Actes du 29^e colloque du CUERMA 19, 20 et 21 février 2004 Senefiance* 51, ed. Chantal Connochie-Bourgne (Aix-en-Provence, 2005), 227–43.

²¹ It has been suggested that the digression is a meta-literary device in one of the Latin Europe’s most encyclopedic texts, Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum historiale*. See Mattia Cavagna, “La notion de digression dans le *Speculum historiale* de Vincent de Beauvais,” in *La digression dans la littérature et l’art du moyen âge. Actes du 29^e colloque du CUERMA 19, 20 et 21 février 2004, Senefiance* 51, ed. Chantal Connochie-Bourgne (Aix-en-Provence, 2005), 89–98. For a more general theoretical treatment of the issue, see Randa Sabry, *Stratégies discursives* (Paris, 1992).

historical thinking. Atiya and Coimbe, without specifying exactly what they meant by the term digression, effectively asked whether such instances of *amplificatio* are autonomous, sufficiently distant from the central axis of the work and therefore “dispensable” from a partial edition, or if they are imbedded in the writing itself, and, therefore, “indispensable” parts of the historical thought. Weintritt has effectively argued that the digression (*istiṭrād*) is not an unfortunate defect of al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī’s historical writing, but rather a voluntary structure for organizing historical information and setting the narration of events inside a system of meaning; he calls it “conceptualized digression” [*konzeptualisierte Digression*] and qualifies it as a key form of late medieval Arabic historical representation [*Geschichtsdarstellung*].²² Given this way of understanding the link between literary forms and historical narration, I would like to argue here, following Weintritt’s more general comments, that in the fifty some pages of the description of the sack of the city of Alexandria which provide the most event-rich core of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, digression is not only present, but even there it serves as a essential conceptual matrix for the historical argument of the text.²³ Digressions on events distant, both in time and subject, from the siege of Alexandria itself are used in a highly self-conscious manner in the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* establishing connectivity not only between the events of 1365 and other moments of rise and fall in the Islamic world, but also between those events and illustrious moments in Arabic poetry as well as Islamic traditions of hadith—the accounts of the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions.

If we compare the European accounts of the Alexandrian sack of 1365, particularly Machaut’s *Prise d’Alexandre* and Mézières’ *Life of Saint Peter Thomas*,²⁴ with the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, the most obvious difference we can note is that both Christian authors follow the generic

²² Otfried Weintritt, *Formen spätmittelalterlicher Islamischer Geschichtsdarstellung: Untersuchungen zu an-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānīs Kitāb al-Ilmām und verwandten zeitgenössischen Texten* (Beirut–Stuttgart, 1992), 87–100. Older studies of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* include I. J. H. Paul Herzsohn, *Der Überfall Alexandriens durch Peter I. König von Jerusalem und Cypren*, Diss. University of Bonn, 1886; Paul Kahle, “Die Katastrophe des mittelalterlichen Alexandrien,” *Mélanges Maspero. III, Orient islamique* (Cairo, 1935), 137–54.

²³ The siege of Alexandria is found mainly in the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* 2: 130–83.

²⁴ Philippe de Mézières, *The Life of Saint Peter Thomas Edited from Hitherto Unpublished Manuscripts*, ed. Joachim Smet (Rome, 1954).

contours of hagiography and heroic literature to cast the protagonists of the campaign in a largely positive light as well as their actions in it as virtuous. It seems a bit obvious to say, but the events have no such primary hagiographic "pull" in al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī, and in his work not only is Peter I of Lusignan vilified from the initial pages, but even the local Mamluk leader is portrayed from such a critical perspective. Whereas the 1291 end of the Latin kingdoms and other French losses in important battles of the Hundred Years War loom in the background of works of the Christian fourteenth century, and permeate different idealistic plans to recover the Holy Land, the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is haunted with a different kind of loss, the recent loss of the author's own city. That fact of the loss and destruction of his own city is the focal point around which the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is structured, and, importantly, around which this author at times criticizes the very people of his city and the ineffective protection of its army, all the while recalling moments of former defeats and conquests in the history of Islam.

The *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is a very long text, the section on the siege of Alexandria being only a small portion of the full work. The siege scene opens explaining that vice sultan Khalīl Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Bin 'Arām was absent on *hajj* and that the Amir Yalboḡhā, also known as Janghrā in the text, was sent to Alexandria in his place. Yalboḡhā is described as the heroic protector of the city, but is ultimately deeply criticized at the same time by al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī. The *Kitāb al-Ilmām* describes the arrival of the Cypriot fleets in front of Alexandria, their reconnaissance forays into the city, and the beginning of their attacks on the walls. The arrival of the Cairene reinforcements leads to battles in the shallow waters near the shore. The numerous people of the walled city attempt to flee the violence, the foreign residents of the city are punished for the external aggression of Cypriots, and the Christian armies pursue their attack shooting balls of fire into the city. Extensive passages describe how the invading forces raid and pillage the city, and so greedily overload their ships with booty that they began to sink in the harbor. At the end of the scene, and after all the destruction of the city, the text portrays the army of Yalboḡhā making a heroic advance into the city as the Franks are seen sailing off to sea. The siege narrative, not unlike the rest of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is replete with poetic insertions about the tragedy of Alexandria; it also contains numerous accounts by many people in the town who witnessed the events.

The author describes how he was present for the attack, how he fled Alexandria with his family, and how he returned later on, both to collect his material and compose his *Kitāb al-Ilmām*.

It is not possible to analyze all the various forms of digression in al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's work here. Four selected examples are translated and discussed below in an attempt to illustrate the complex discursivity of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, and to argue, against the position of Atiya and Combe, for the indispensable role played by digression in the siege scene, and more generally for the work as a whole.

A DIGRESSION ON EARLY ISLAM

After his description of the very high waters of the Nile at the exact moment that the Cypriots decided to land in Alexandria, a situation that prevented reinforcements from arriving from Cairo, al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī inserts a long digression on the conquests of lower Egypt by the Arabs. Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī, as Atiya reminds us, is particularly interested in this early moment in Egyptian history. He begins writing of 'Amrū bin al-'Aās, commander and famous companion of the prophet Muhammad who settled the Arabian tribes in and around Alexandria:

Yazīd bin Habīb said that when 'Amrū bin al-'Aās—may God be pleased with him—conquered Alexandria he found its home and its buildings empty and he thought that he should live there. He said: "these dwellings will suffice for us" and he wrote to 'Umar bin al-Khattāb—may God be pleased with him—asking him to accept that they live there. 'Umar told his messenger: "Is there water between me and the Muslims?" The latter responded: "Yes, Prince of the Faithful, provided the Nile flows." So, 'Umar wrote to 'Amrū: "I do not want to house the Muslims with water separating us, be in it winter or in summer, there are simply too many of them." So, 'Amrū bin al-'Aās left Alexandria for Cairo. 'Umar bin al-Khattāb—may God be pleased with him—had done that out of fear, since if he wanted to send them help, so few Muslims lived there, it was so far away and the course of the Nile through the mountains makes it dangerous. 'Amrū sent them people from the Arabian tribes: Lakham, Juthām, Kinda, al-Azd, Ḥaḍr al-Mawt, Khuzā'a, and al-Mazā'ina and he settled in them in two groups to protect them. The Lakham lived in a place known as Kūm al-Dikka, the Juthām in Birkat Juthām, the Kinda in Barākil, and al-Azd in Bahārat al-Azda. Ḥaḍr al-Mawt settled in Bahārat al-Hadārima, and Khuzā'a settled with al-Mazā'ina in Nāḥiat al-Būqīr to the east of the outskirts of Alexandria. They guarded its

port. Those from the abovementioned tribes who lived in the center of Alexandria watched over two ports, one to the east and one to the west of the peninsula.²⁵

This digression is important since it relates a conversation that took place between 'Amrū bin al-'Aās and 'Umar bin al-Khattāb, two of the Ṣaḥāba—the companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Given these interlocutors and their proximity to the Prophet it is a conversation that has particular authority among Muslims, falling inside the prophetic tradition of "hadith." The digression adopts an important form not uncommon in Arabic historiography: beginning with the *isnād*, the names of the scholars who have passed on this information (in this case Yazīd bin Habīb), followed by the hadith and then the small narrative. In al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī this kind of digression usually comes to a close with the expression "*intaha*," signifying "the end." Such a structure from the *isnād* to *intaha* frames the digression, arguably giving it a form of textual autonomy. The digression is not so much autonomous and therefore dispensable, as it is intimately connected within the meaning of the siege narrative, as will become clear below.

This digression not only maps onto the topography of Alexandria a lineage going back as far as the various Arab tribes, the very peoples who were spread around the newly fortified cities of early Muslim conquests, but through the emphasis on water and especially on water separating a people, it also comments on the long standing weaknesses of the city of Alexandria, the city's two-port topography and the vulnerability of the city to the ebb and flow of the waters of the Nile Delta. Alexandria is portrayed in digressions such as these, not so much as the city of Greco-Roman antiquity known in the Western history, but as a strategic and symbolic city dating from the very origins of Islam. Alexandria represents but one moment of victory in the history of Muslims, particularly of the dawn of Islam, that al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī uses constantly throughout his *Kitāb al-Ilmām*. I do not agree with the judgments of Atiya that our author "labored in search of Islamic triumphs as counterparts to those inglorious defeats to uplift the spirit of Muslims" or that accounts of military conquest given in the text "may be only regarded as illustrative of al-Nuwairī's interest

²⁵ All translations from the Arabic are mine. *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2:134–35.

in Islamic belligerency across the Middle Ages.”²⁶ Such claims are more histrionic than scientific and reduce the many forms of conquest and violence in the history of Islam used by al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī (or any other author for that matter) in historical writing to a singular and vague concept of “holy war” or “counter-crusade.” The text is undeniably full of historical knowledge of the early conquests and later defeats (see below the digression on Lurqa/Lorca) and it is certain that one of the themes in his work is without a doubt the rise and fall of cities up through the thirteenth century, across the Islamic world from al-Andalus to Baghdad. As the digression goes on, however, the desire to assert continuity in identity is clearly reinforced:

The children of those tribes are today in the year 775 [1365] still known as the “tribes” in Alexandria. They have their own matters and they have thirty-three chiefs who oversee a portion of the tribes. They still dress in Arab garb. The cloth on their turban hangs low and they roll up their sleeves just like their ancestors the Arabs did. ‘Amrū bin al-‘Aās divided up his men, a quarter of them to protect Alexandria, a quarter for the coastline and half of them stayed with him in Cairo. In Alexandria a half of them stayed for six months, and the next shift came for another six months. End.²⁷

Here the description of the conquests establishes a link at the very moment of the siege in the narrative between Alexandrians of early Islam and those of al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī’s day, and this, through a double comparison: the ancestral heritage found in the distribution by tribes and the enduring vestimentary traditions of the city. Furthermore, at the time of ‘Amrū bin al-‘Aās Alexandria was very important for the protection of Cairo, just as it no doubt was in the fourteenth century. As it can be seen clearly from this example, Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī’s digressions are a self-conscious deviation from, and return to, the “main topic.” When the various associations in such digressions can be recognized, it seems prejudicial to judge them as unimportant to the Egyptian version of the siege narrative.

²⁶ Atiya, *A Fourteenth-Century Encyclopedist from Alexandria*, 23. I do not think that we are dealing with the genre of the “book of comfort” as Tarif Khalidī has called the work of al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandarānī’s contemporary Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī known as *Mu’id al-Ni’am wa Mubīd al-Niqam*. See Khalidī’s *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 187–88.

²⁷ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 135–36.

A DIGRESSION ON HISTORICAL BATTLES AND MARTYRDOM

After a horrific description of the carnage in the city in which many Alexandrines lost their lives fighting the “Franks” (al-Faranj), al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī describes both their distress at the pillaging of their city and their heroism and martyrdom defending it:

Then, the people of Alexandria saw what they had never witnessed before, never in their whole lives, and their hearts pounded with fear. Each one of them lost his mind as they saw heads flying, and horses dead on the ground. They all pushed each other at the gates. People were slaughtered here and there. Some people stayed put and faced the enemy and they kept the faith (*mujtahid*) and they killed as many Franks as was possible before their heroic martyrdom (*astashada*). It was said that Muhammad al-Sharīf the Butcher attacked the Franks with the slaughterhouse cleaver, he broke all their bones, and said: “*Allahu akbar!* The infidels are dead.” Then a big group rallied against him and he died a heroic death on the island—may God have mercy upon him. One could even see some old jurists, one of whom was Muhammad bin al-Tufāl and he charged the Franks with his sword. Someone told him: “You are going to die Sheikh Muhammad!” And he responded: “That makes me even happier since I will be next to the Prophet Muhammad. What death is better than jihad in the service of God, since I will go to paradise.” He charged them and they exchanged blows until God bestowed martyrdom (*ruzaqa al shahāda*) upon him and finally he attained happiness.²⁸

From this excerpt of the siege narrative, we cannot help but notice the valorization of struggle against an infidel and an uncompromising heroism in the face of death, both being examples of the complex and evolving discourse of martyrdom in Islam.²⁹ Interestingly, this scene is also populated with everyday figures from the contemporary city of Alexandria: Muhammad al-Sharīf the Butcher as well as one of the old jurists, Muhammad Ibn al-Tufāl. What is striking about these examples, in particular the emphasis of the weakness of Alexandrines facing the great violence of the Cypriot-led attack, is how the contemporary

²⁸ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 148–49.

²⁹ Whereas this paper cannot go into the subtleties of notions of martyrdom and jihad in Islam, it is worth noting that the glorious death here while related to battle does not come about as a result of an organized military campaign against an enemy, but rather a defense of one’s city in a surprise attack. While one might disagree with some of his premises, one can begin with the forms of military martyrdom in early Islam discussed by David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge, Eng., Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 2.

example leads, without any particular transition, into a digression, that of the historical Battle of Uḥud (625 AD) where another companion of the Prophet Muhammad met with martyrdom:

It was said that 'Amrū bin al-Jamūh used to limp and he had four sons with the strength of a lion who participated in the war (*yashadūna... al mashāhid*) with the God's Prophet—Peace be upon him. The day of the Battle of Uḥud his sons tried to forbid him from leaving to war and told him: "God will forgive you. It is said 'It is no fault in the blind / Nor in one born lame.'"³⁰ So he went to the Prophet of God—Peace be upon him—and told him: "O Prophet of God, my sons want to keep me from seeing you and going with you. By God I hope to limp all the way to paradise!" And the Prophet of God—Peace be upon him—said God forgives you. You have no obligation to do so (*fa la jihād 'alaik*). And he said to the man's sons: "Do not forbid him. Perhaps God wants to bestow martyrdom upon him." So the man left with the Prophet and he died—May God have mercy upon him. End.³¹

To understand the analogical importance of this battle and the martyrdom of the lame old man for this moment in Alexandrian history, some context is necessary. The Battle of Uḥud was one of the most famous battles of early Islam, where Muhammad and his men faced the Quraish tribe outside of the city of Medina. The Muslims in this battle were outnumbered, as were the Alexandrians in the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, yet the former achieved an early advantage making it seem they were going to win, were it not for a fatal tactical mistake. By analogy, the famous battle serves as a matrix through which al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī can not only create suspense in the moment, but also underscore the heroism of the fighting Alexandrians, or in other words, as an exemplum through which the present can be shaped through the image of the past. The implicit comparison between the two battles not only allows him to depict the battle before the city of Alexandria as a key moment in the history of Muslims, but it also affords him the opportunity to reflect retrospectively on the mistakes of the battle at hand; al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī repeatedly underscores Janghrā's weakness and the tactical mistake of not closing Bāb al-Diwān during the siege. This double-pronged analysis of the event is common in al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī; he writes simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically, of the divine will behind such an event, and of the human

³⁰ Qur'an, Surat al-Nūr 24: 61 (Trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali).

³¹ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 179.

error which led to the downfall. Also, the point about the infirmity of the jurists, like the lameness of 'Amrū bin al-Jamūḥ, resonates with a refrain in his text about the cruelty of the Franks who attacked children and the elderly without scruples. It is worth pointing out that Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's text here has inverted the form found in the previous digression, from narration it leads to a Qur'anic verse, then to hadith-like discussions between the Muhammad and his companions. The author renders the tenacious fight of Alexandrians for their city particularly heroic, through his use of such conversations rooted in a distant past of early Islam.

A DIGRESSION ON THE BESIEGED ANDALUSIAN CITY OF LURQA

The capture of the city of Alexandria via its inlet occurred much faster than would have been expected, a commentary which is corroborated by the Christian and the Muslim sources. The destruction to the city was extensive. Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's siege narrative emphasizes these two points:

Some were killed, others were detained. Some were saved, others were defeated. Still others escaped after they threw down their arms struck with confusion. Some of them left their country and emigrated. Some crowded at the gates and they perished. Some were ruined and were cursed to be scattered all over. As fast as they captured the inlet, the hearts of the inhabitants were struck were sorrow. The Franks gained victory on the very same day that they disembarked from their ships onto the land of the embankment (*al-barr*). The Frankish siege did not take two days, instead they defeated the Muslims in two hours. It has been said: "The siege of the cities and the fortifications usually needs a year or two."³²

What follows this small saying about sieges is a longer digression, related by a local sheikh, most likely of the Andalusian diaspora, given the subject of medieval Iberian Islam and his family name, al-Tūnsī:

Abo 'Amrū al-Tūnsī, the learned, commendable teacher, sheikh and theologian, told me about his maternal grandfather who said: "I am of the people of the city of Lurqa (Lorca) in the barr al-Andalus. I was in my city when it was besieged by the Franks for more than twenty-three years. They built a whole city next to it. Toward the end, the Muslims

³² *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 159–60.

were in such dire straits that a man would go out with a plate full of gold and jewels and could not even barter them for wheat and barley. There were no dogs or cats or rats left since they had eaten them all. They had even taken the wood from their roofs and their house and burned it underneath their vats of gruel. Later the Franks finally claimed victory." The Muslims left the city after all this time and the Franks captured the city. The Franks took Alexandria from its people in a few days as they were all escaping even though they had enough food and water to last until help came from Cairo—there is no power and no strength save in God—but it was fated to happen this way. If the Muslims had stayed in the city, and each and every one threw stones at the Franks from the roofs of their houses, they would have saved their homes.³³

This digression is based on a comparison between the swift, unexpected fall of Alexandria and the long debilitating siege of the city of Lurqa (now Lorca) in southeastern Iberia, likely during the Murcian rebellion in 1264. It echoes the poetic tone of loss in other parts of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* as it remembers the slow devastating loss of the lands of al-Andalus.³⁴ Both parts of the comparison are also about European victories over the Muslims, however Alexandria was taken so quickly that the people, including al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī himself, were forced to flee into the surrounding countryside. The siege and destruction in Alexandria, as al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī emphasizes throughout his narrative of it, was both avoidable and fated to happen. Alexandrians had not been incapacitated to the point of starvation, nor had their city been slowly and cruelly besieged. Such a comparison underscores perhaps the volatility of the region and the luck with which Peter I of Lusignan was able to carry out the siege. The author is clear that the city was caught off guard, and that as simple a plan as lapidating the Franks could have bought them time and saved them.

Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's history is indeed a rich text from a political or a military perspective full of anecdotes about political struggles in the Bahri Mamluk period and about war and military techniques. In it one can find a critique of the powers that be in fourteenth-century Alexandria and a focus on tactics and the unfolding of the siege. The historical writing, as in the above example, sometimes attempts to

³³ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 160–61.

³⁴ The parallel, established in longstanding rhetorical traditions among Arabs and Europeans, of mourning loss in the fourteenth century, on the one hand of the lands of al-Andalus and on the other of the Latin kingdoms, is potentially a rich topic for future work. I acknowledge Jeff Richards for making this observation.

explain the particularity of the tactics, their successes and their failures. Other times al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī cites other author's predictions of the fall of the city (from previous poetic texts and series of dreams throughout the Islamic world), and even gives his famous "seven reasons" for the Cypriot attack on Egypt. The above example of digression is tantamount to contemporary oral history, coming not from great authorities of the past, but from one of al-Nuwayri al-Iskandarani's contemporaries who holds the memory of the loss of Lurqa. This is a very different kind of authority than that we have seen above. The *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is so not much presentist, projecting back the tensions of a contemporary world into past events, recent or far, as it uses the past to elucidate the present, ultimately creating a mirroring effect between distant past and tumultuous present. There are nonetheless tensions that exist between the different kinds of digressive parallels created with moments in Islamic history through hadith and poetry: recent ones including the sieges of al-Andalus, as we saw here, and the Mongol attack on Baghdad in 1258 by Hulagu Khān, or more distant ones such as the Bahraini emir Abū Ṭahir's siege of Mecca in 919. It goes without saying that the world was a very different one in 1365 from the earlier years of Islam. These parallels between different moments of the history of Islam form a matrix, albeit an eclectic and uneven one, through which early Islam and contemporary history exist in dialogue with one another, but also through which *adab* and poetry capture that fatality of Alexandria as the next city to fall to the assaults of the Franks. There are many yet undiscovered connections and tensions to be understood in al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's text between past, the time of the event and the unfolding of history by the will of God.

A POETIC DIGRESSION

In the siege of Alexandria scene, Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's successive short poetic insertions written in a variety of styles seem to serve many purposes: irony, dramatic tension, or reinforcement of the horrific reality of the siege. There are two moments of complex literary flourish, which stand out however, framing the entire event from initial siege to departure of the Franks. The opening of the siege scene is replete with pageant-like performance and a display of the military power of the city with fancy textiles, weaponry and military

maneuvering. The metaphor of a colorful garden extends this earthly display of elegance, the senses and military prowess to the providential luck of the people of Alexandria: "these are the people of paradise."³⁵ The vice-sultan Janghrā's initial boast sounds impressive, but rings ironic, within paragraphs where we realize that his ruler's insight is highly flawed, not to mention in the previous digression when we read that God has fated the Alexandrians to be defeated.

After the extensive description and some fifty pages of text al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī brings the attack on Alexandria to a close with a complex poetic ornament. It is a moment that deserves our attention. After the excessive violence, pillaging and burning of the city, as the Franks got back into their booty-laden ships and began to set sail, we witness a military advance led by Janghrā, "like a swarm of locusts." There we find a fragment of an elegiac poem written by an unnamed poet that idealizes the army's power:

The Franks took off as someone wrote in his elegy (*marthiyya*) on Alexandria:

Oh to set the broken limb	if he wants it to be set
From his high honored seat	bounty covers the earth like the sun
Yabolgha, lion of war, contained	the renegades' tyranny with his sword. ³⁶

It is easy to feel transported by the old Arabian epithet, "lion of war" (*laith al-waghgha*) and the triumphant tone of the verses into a heroic realm in this paragraph.³⁷ The poetic insertion continues:

The barr filled up with valiant armies
 Leaders, men of action, white-starred
 Lean-bodied horses attacking and retreating,
 assailing the enemy
 The fearless lion Yalboghā lead them to protect religion
 He took revenge on the enemy; until there was no trace of them in the inlet

When the Franks saw his army advancing on them at full speed
 They knew there was no way out from a huge battle, save flight.³⁸

The "leaders" of the city come to protect it as saviors, as fighting "men of action," (*min ūlī al-'azm*) a term used in Arabic for the most important five prophets: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Muhammad and sometimes

³⁵ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 130.

³⁶ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 178.

³⁷ See also above the digression on historical battles and martyrdom where the lame 'Amrū bin al-Jamūh is also called a lion.

³⁸ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 178.

for Isaac, Jacob, David, Job or Jesus. The comparison portrays such great men ushering civilization to safety and seems to bring the present into alignment with sacred history. The irony of the possibility of a further battle could not be greater, since the European sources, especially Guillaume de Machaut, recall that it was Peter I's men who refused to stay in Alexandria for fear of not being able to hold the city, preferring instead to run off with the booty. Such heroic exaggeration is doubly ironic when one considers how the "fearless leaders" late arrival was unable to stop the massive pillaging of the city, but described as able to avert a really "huge battle." Here we are faced with an all too common moment in the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* where the desire to depict contemporary history in the lineage of great salvational struggles is confronted with the shocking documentary value of eyewitness. Whether al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī meant such flourish to be ironic, and therefore, another criticism of the delayed Mamluk response to the attack, is unclear. A thorough analysis of his use of poetic insertions of all kinds—elegiac, heroic, satirical—into the prose text is needed to be able to say with greater certainty. What follows this passage, however, is yet another opportunity for the author to show off his poetic prowess. He inserts a small verse florilegium, which fuses together three lines from the Andalusian poet Ibn Zaidūn, with two from pre-Islamic poetry Imru' al-Qais, followed by more of Ibn Zaidūn. This subject material of this "fusion poetry," namely the lost beloved, is a rather direct reference to the hostages who had been taken from Alexandria in the attack, but also metonymically, I believe, an allusion to the other lost, ravished beloved here, his city.³⁹ It is unclear to me whether al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī confected this poetic miscellany himself or if he copied it from somewhere else. In line with the rest of the work, its clever composition buckles together two key moments in history no doubt, the Arabian peninsula of the pre-Islamic period and al-Andalus, but also two moments of Arabic literary memory, the contemplation of the traces of the beloved who has left, and the story of another lost beloved set inside the tale of a lost homeland. By striking this register and evoking the interiorization of the lost beloved and city, activating many associative and poetic meanings of loss, al-Nuwayri al-Iskandarani ends the section describing the details of the sack of Alexandrian of 1365.

³⁹ *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2: 179.

This poetic frame for the siege of Alexandria bears a slight resemblance to the hagiography and heroic literary paradigms of the Western sources, Machaut and Mézières, in the sense that they both cast the protagonists of the military standoff as heroic, but the heroism of the flourish is not sustained throughout the *Kitāb al-Ilmām*. There are of course numerous other interpolated anecdotes that one could analyze—in a span of text amounting to less than two percent of the total work—from the merchant who tried to flee the gates of the city carrying so much money that it dropped from his hands; the description of the sheikh who watched from inside the eaves of a storehouse as the Franks murdered a young boy in the street; the elderly man thrown from the top of the minaret who fell to his death snapping his neck; the flight of Alexandrians to the countryside into precarity; or even the foreign merchant's desperation and slow descent into insanity. There is even a long interpolation on the techniques of Alexander and the Indian kings in time of war to use flying pigeons with vials filled with flaming naphtha tied to their legs in order to set the thatched roofs of cities aflame. They deserve further attention in a more in-depth study.

* * *

Al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's graphic depictions of the violence brought upon the city and the dense materiality in the descriptions of the pillaging of a city are shocking and apparent to even the general reader. The details in this section of the work are indeed very powerful, and they provide a vivid contribution to knowledge of the raid of fourteenth-century Alexandria, as Atiya so clearly suggested. The discussion here of the digressions has attempted to illustrate that al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī has imbedded numerous digressive micro-narratives in his work designed to illustrate, by a number of literary associations, analogy and even metonym, how the singular unfortunate events of 1365 fit with a larger matrix of historical culture. It also has shown how the heroicization of the Alexandrian resistance is only one part of this complex historical source and suggests how problematic the simple label "counter crusade" actually is. This essay began with a plea to discard the claim that al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's historical writing was marked by an aberrant and excessive personal involvement, and in particular, by "dispensable" digressions. It ends with the conclusion that historical writing in the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* illustrates the catastrophe which befell the city interwoven with fragments of Islamic cultural

memory, relating it to other such losses in the century preceding the life of the author, as Mamluk society regained the lands of Palestine from the crusaders and mourned from a distance the slow loss of cities from the borderlands of the chaotic Taifa kingdoms of al-Andalus.

The *Kitāb al-Ilmām* obviously does not share with Mézières or Machaut the master narrative of a renewed tradition of crusade in the fourteenth century as the reason for the attack on Alexandria. It sets violence in the contemporary Eastern Mediterranean inside of a much larger frame than just the post-1291 period. It also offers a fascinating counterpoint to the other events of 1365 on account of its complex texture that does not fix the narrative focal point to be the crusader king or saint. Far from offering such hagiographic portrait of a military leader, or a sacralization of their military prowess in the manner of a Froissart,⁴⁰ or a Machaut, al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī vocalizes a number of popular opinions from the citizen-on-the-street to bolster his rather critical view of the strategic decisions taken in the face of the attack of his city. To borrow a term from Tarif Khalidi, al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's text has something in it of a *siyasa*-oriented history, sharing a bit of his contemporary Ibn Khaldūn's philosophy of history.⁴¹ By *siyasa*-oriented history is meant historical thinking that tackles issues such as the problems faced by sedentary civilization, problems of the city, governance and princely behavior. Even though the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* is full of references to early Islam, the problems of fourteenth-century Mamluk Egypt stem from a very different, chaotic urban landscape, which, not unlike Peter's Cyprus, was a highly unstable dynasty marked by multiple episodes of violence. Clearly, the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* did not jettison the attachment with a Bedouin early Arabian past as the first two digressions illustrated. Khalidi writes:

This 'then-and-now' motif was a fertile source of historiographic speculation, re-exciting memories, demanding comparisons, relativizing moral and political values and instituting a quest for patterns of private and public conduct by which the community could be morally and politically re-armed to face the dangers of the hour.

⁴⁰ See Ainsworth, "Contemporary and 'Eyewitness' History," 271-73. He writes "Froissart's major preoccupation seems to be representing and consecrating the spectacle of the apertises d'armes of knights, he is their clerical disciple, secretary and celebrant", 273.

⁴¹ Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, 182-231.

The third digression and various other passages in the text show how for al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī, the political body of the city of Alexandria is not only its inspired prince, but is rather made up of numerous actors, from the merchants all the way up to the vice sultan. The fourth digression cited here seems so idealistic and rarified as if to relegate the vice sultan to a fantasy world of old-fashioned chivalrous *fait d'armes*. Each of them illustrates a different aspect of digression in al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī's text. Much more analysis of the texture of his historical writing needs to be done.

Ultimately how one views the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* will depend on which part of it is read. It is a complex and multivocal text. More work also needs to be done to resituate the events of the Alexandrian campaign of Peter I of Lusignan, behind which lurk the ideological writings of Philippe de Mézières, in terms of the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* as a way of equalizing that imbalance of historical perspective of the period. This introductory study has not looked at the multiple descriptions of the aftermath of the Alexandria campaign, to see if the various raids on the Turkish and Syrian coast and the end of the Cypriot-Mamluk conflict are set in similar terms as the sack of Alexandria. It has also not looked to all the extradiegetic digressions of al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī. From this small sample of digressions, it is clear, however, that the *Kitāb al-Ilmām* presents a fascinating counterpoint of our understanding of the various meanings attached to the events of 1365 by the pen of one Muslim author. A fuller published translation of the Mamluk source in the future will no doubt challenge scholars to nuance their conception of historical writing of such crisis moments in the fourteenth century, and perhaps even to opt for a study of the raid, not the crusade, for a more global understanding of violence in the period. That, in turn, will hopefully provide an opening for deeper forms of intercultural analysis that such a well documented moment in Eastern Mediterranean history can provide.

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Cover illustration: British Library Royal 20 B. vi. (Philippe de Mézières' *Epistre au roi Richart*). Folio 2r. Presentation Miniature. In this imagined scene, Philippe presents his work to Richard II, King of England.

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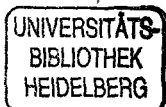
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Kiril Petkov</i>	

A TANGLED WORLD: LITERATURE OF CONNECTIVITY IN MÉZIÈRES' AGE

Entre Occident et Orient. Philippe de Mézières (vers 1327–1405): itinéraires maritimes et spirituels	19
<i>Philippe Contamine</i>	
“Noi siamo mercatanti cipriani”: How to Do Things in the Medieval Mediterranean	41
<i>Sharon Kinoshita</i>	
Philippe de Mézières and the Peace Movement	61
<i>Michael Hanly</i>	
Trois lettres pour la postérité: la correspondance entre Philippe de Mézières, Boniface Lupi et François Pétrarque (ms. Arsenal 499)	83
<i>Evelien Chayes</i>	
The <i>Vieil Solitaire</i> and the <i>Seulette</i> : Contemplative Solitude as Political Theology in Philippe de Mézières, Christine de Pizan, and Jean Gerson	119
<i>Lori J. Walters</i>	

POLITICS AS SPIRITUAL ALLEGORY

How to Become the “roy des frans”: The Performance of Kingship in Philippe de Mézières’s <i>Le songe du vieil pelerin</i> ...	147
<i>Daisy Delogu</i>	

The Figure of Peter I and the Status of Cyprus in <i>Le songe du vieil pelerin</i> : Crusade Ideology, Salvation History, and Authorial Self-Representation	165
<i>Kevin Brownlee</i>	
Literature and Chivalric Education in Philippe de Mézières' <i>Le songe du vieil pelerin</i>	189
<i>Stefan Vander Elst</i>	
Une exemplarité déconstruite: la polémique sur Alexandre et le procès de la littérature de fiction dans <i>Le songe du vieil pelerin</i>	207
<i>Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas</i>	
A Religion in Its Time: Numerology and Moral Alchemy in Philippe de Mézières' Work	225
<i>Joël Blanchard</i>	
The Consolations of Writing Allegory: Philippe de Mézières' <i>Le songe du vieil pelerin</i>	237
<i>Andrea Tarnowski</i>	
Contempler le miroir de la passion: Philippe de Mézières et les mystiques	255
<i>Anna Loba</i>	

A SOLDIER AND A DIPLOMAT

Philippe de Mézières et les républiques maritimes italiennes	271
<i>Michel Balard</i>	
Philippe de Mézières and the Military History of the Fourteenth Century	283
<i>John France</i>	
War or Peace? Philippe de Mézières, Richard II and Anglo-French Diplomacy	295
<i>Anne Curry</i>	

English Members of the Order of the Passion: Their Political, Diplomatic and Military Significance	321
<i>Adrian Bell</i>	

AFFINITIES & CONTRASTS:
MÉZIÈRES, HIS FELLOW-TRAVELERS,
AND HIS "OTHERS"

Machaut, Mézières, Makhairas and <i>Amadi</i> : Constructing the Reign of Peter I (1359–1369)	349
<i>Peter Edbury</i>	

Apologists or Critics? The Reign of Peter I of Lusignan (1359–1369) Viewed by Philippe de Mézières (1327–1405) and Leontios Makhairas (ca. 1360/80–after 1432)	359
<i>Angel Nicolaou-Konnari</i>	

Western Merchants, Pilgrims, and Travelers in Alexandria in the Time of Philippe de Mézières (ca. 1327–1405)	403
<i>David Jacoby</i>	

“Alexandrie, ville sous haute surveillance.” Voyage et espionnage aux XIV–XV ^e siècles, d’après les récits de voyageurs et de pèlerins occidentaux	427
<i>Henri Gourinard</i>	

Historical Narration and Digression in al-Nuwairī al-Iskandarānī’s <i>Kitāb al-Ilmām</i>	451
<i>David Joseph Wrisley</i>	

SPECIAL NOTE

Philippe de Mézières et l’université	477
<i>Sylvain Piron</i>	

Appendix: Brief Overview of the Great Schism of the Western Church (1378–1417)	485
Contributors	489
Bibliography	497
Index	525