

## Kitabiyat/Book Review

# *The Notebook of Kamāl al-Dīn the Weaver: Aleppine notes from the end of the 16th century*

Edition, notes and study: Boris Liebreuz and Kristina L. Richardson.  
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Scarcity of source materials reflecting the perspectives of commoners in the non-European contexts, is often considered as an impediment to the advancement of micro-history. However, within the realm of Ottoman historiography, this rooted belief has already started to erode, primarily due to the burgeoning field of manuscript studies. The recognition of this evolving trend is further underscored by the substantial reservoir of as yet undiscovered manuscript materials awaiting exploration, cataloging, and digitization. As scholarly investigations in this realm progress, there arises a pressing need for the comprehensive reassessment and updating of existing literature.

The lack of this sort of textual sources is at times interpreted as the lack of self-reflective individuals in the East; even if there are some, that their agency as expressive entities was inherently unverifiable. However, this framework is undergoing a serious reevaluation for a few decades. Dana Sajdi and Nelly Hanna have significantly contributed to this scholarly reassessment by presenting texts that illuminate the perspectives of people situated at the margins of the elite or '*ulamā*' circles, particularly in the transformative period characterized by shifts in class structure during the 18th century. Noteworthy among Sajdi's contributions is the conceptualization of "nouveau literacy," a term emblematic of the emergent phenomenon, which means that common people liberate the writing from the monopoly of the elite or '*ulamā*' class not only as a technology but also as an epistemic tool.

Despite the valuable insights offered by these scholarly endeavors, a discernible bias has also emerged, like that such textual sources are predominantly concentrated particularly during the 18th century. However, empirical evidence suggests otherwise, revealing the existence of narratives including personal revelations as early as the 17th century. This assertion gains further credence through the meticulous examination conducted by Boris Liebrez and Kristina Richardson, whose study unearthed an example of such manuscripts dating back to the 16th century, thereby challenging prevalent historiographical paradigms and enriching our understanding of the agency of these historical figures and their textual representation.

Discovery, edition and analysis of *The Notebook of Kamāl al-Dīn the Weaver* [Ayyām Kamāl al-Dīn al-ḥāik] (Gotha orient A. 114), indeed as the remnant of an extended copy, spanning the years between 997 and 998/1588 and 1589, stands as a significant contribution to the understanding of the literary landscape, shedding light on one of the diverse practices of literacy that have emerged throughout various contexts and historical periods. This study expands upon the existing literary landscape by juxtaposing this new finding with previous works, rather than contradicting them. Initially, Liebrez and Richardson embark on the task of making this manuscript notebook intelligible and annotating it when necessary—given its original form of the manuscript, which may pose challenges for uninitiated readers accustomed to regular layouts. However, their scholarly en-

deavor extends beyond mere editorial tasks, involving a thorough examination of the text. In their analysis, editors contextualize the notebook within Kamāl al-Dīn's social milieu, meticulously reconstructing both his immediate surroundings and the broader societal context in which the author lived. They explore various aspects of the text, including its intended audience, linguistic characteristics, and the historical context of its composition. Notably, the study delves deeply into the genre of the notebook and the subjectivity of its author, engaging in extensive discussions on these matters. Through their rigorous examination, Liebrez and Richardson offer valuable insights into the various dimensions of the notebook thereby enriching our understanding of its significance within the related historical context.

The manuscript presents an intricate amalgamation of textual fragments, characterized by a cursive, non-uniform script sprawled across the paper's surface. These fragments encompass various entangled genres, including *'ajība*, *mathal*, *hikma*, *ta'rīkh*, vernacular poetry, chronograms, obituaries, even riddles and recipes. Notably, almost each entry is often accompanied by a date, reflecting a recording of events, observations, and personal experiences. Editors have offered diverse descriptions of the notebook, highlighting its multifaceted nature. At times, it is likened to a commonplace book, reminiscent of the miscellanies of the era, where a wide array of information is compiled. Alternatively, it is dubbed an *aide-mémoire*, serving as a supplement to oral practices and memory. Another apt characterization is that of a journal, given its daily recording format. However, it firmly diverges from a diary in modern sense, which typically delves into inner world of the writer and his emotions, and even from a *ta'rīkh*-diary coined by George Makdisi for Ibn al-Bannā's narrative. Despite not being an autobiographical work, subtle glimpses into the author's personal life and reflections can be discerned, both within the content and the form of the notebook. In terms of content, the notebook seamlessly weaves together practical knowledge of everyday life with significant events and figures from the social and cultural history of Aleppo in the late 16th century. This juxtaposition situates into a historiographical text, contributing to the traditional writing of *tarājim* and *hawādith* within Arabic literature. Through its intricate blend of genres, the notebook serves as a rich tapestry of historical, cultural, and personal narratives.

Another aspect of the ongoing genre discussion is related to whether this text could be acknowledged as an ego-document. In the narrowest definition of an ego document, if one of the most important requirements is audience as the author itself, another fundamental is the direct usage of the first person pronoun “I”. Throughout the study, editors hesitate to classify this text as an ego-document, yet they tend to discuss it in the same framework, drawing from the possibility of discerning clues about the author through the personal traits embedded within the text. They firmly argue that the text addresses an imaginary audience in the future rather than contemporary readers of the author’s time, particularly due to author’s embracing of an explanatory style despite initial impression that the notes or quotes may appear to be taken practically for the author’s personal use. On a broader sense, as the Arabic title of the notebook, *Ayyām* suggests, this journal-like genre could potentially be considered as one of the contemporary equivalents of ego-documents within the Ottoman context. Indeed, confusing nature of the text under examination, along with similar examples that may emerge subsequently, offers an opportunity to enrich the existing discussion regarding the criteria for categorizing a document as an ego-document.

The identity of Kamāl al-Dīn the weaver, is another significant discussion within the study. Unlike previous figures in related literature who often occupy the positions in the margins of society, such as Abu-Dhakir of Hanna or Ibn Budayr of Sajdi, Kamāl al-Dīn is portrayed as both commoner and elite rather than being in-between. This framework acknowledges his ability to exhibit scholarly knowledge when necessary, while always recognizing his primary identity as an artisan. Even he may possess scholarly insights, his identity as a weaver is consistently present throughout the notebook. Kamāl al-Dīn’s multifaceted identity is reflected in his writings as well. On the one hand, he quotes poetry, discusses grammar, or engages with topics of *fiqh*, indicating his scholarly inclinations, on the other hand he takes care to record elements of material culture such as trade and textiles, which are integral to his world as a weaver. This dual perspective offers a unique insight into his life and surroundings, combining scholarly pursuits with the practical realities of his artisanal profession.

Kamāl al-Dīn’s political stance distinguishes him from his predecessors, as some of them may have adopted a critical attitude towards authority. While refraining from openly challenging established power structures, he

also exhibits a willingness to document specific narratives related to the social history of Aleppo, even those susceptible to censorship in official sources. For instance, the account of a hashish addict serves as a prominent example among many others found in the notebook. Another intriguing aspect of Kamāl al-Dīn's notebook is its depiction of trans-confessional interactions from an interpersonal perspective, which might be challenging to find in chronicles or archival materials. This openness to documenting interactions across religious lines provides valuable insights into the diverse social fabric of Aleppo during the 16th century. In essence, Kamāl al-Dīn emerges as a figure who transcends the conventional boundaries of social hierarchy and identity. Just as his notebook disrupts the conventions of customary layout, Kamāl al-Dīn also resists categorization, challenging simplistic interpretations of his societal role.

One of the strengths of this study lies in the editors' deliberate emphasis on utilizing non-textual sources. For instance, their reference to the Aleppo Room housed within Berlin's *Museum für Islamische Kunst* serves as a strategic tool for engendering a nuanced visualization of Kamāl al-Dīn's social environment and the intricate world depicted within his notebook, even though it would be impossible to pinpoint any of the specific locales frequented by Kamāl al-Dīn himself. Equally compelling is the attention paid to artisanal signatures, which adorn a myriad of materials including glass, ceramic, wood, and textiles. While manuscript studies have traditionally relied on colophons as autobiographical sources to unravel the subjectivity of authors or scribes, the oversight of signatures on artifacts crafted from diverse materials has generally been a neglected gap in scholarly inquiry.

One criticism concerns the methodological approach adopted in incorporating supplementary primary and secondary sources to reconstruct the socio-cultural milieu of late 16th century Aleppo. The editors posit that the newly discovered notebook could address lacunae arising from inadequacies in extant archival materials. However, this argument, though not devoid of merit, appears tenuous without supporting the available source by means of thorough archival research. Certain Ottoman archival sources cited<sup>1</sup> in the study appear more suited for exploring secondary topics rath-

1 İstanbul Kadı Sicilleri Galata Mahkemesi 65 Numaralı Sicil (1051-1053/1641-1644) [The Istanbul Kadı Court Registers of Galata Court no. 65]; 29 Numaralı Edirne Şer'îye Sicili (1050-1052/1640-1642) [Edirne Sharia Registers no.29]; Edirne Askerî Kassamı'na Âit Tereke Defterleri (1545-1659)

er than aligning directly with the primary focus of the book's context. A comprehensive scholarly endeavor might have entailed a primary focus, such as examining court registers of Aleppo, which conspicuously lack citation throughout the study. In this sense, the non-inclusion of *6 Numaralı Halep Şer'iye Sicili (994-999/1586-1591)* [Aleppo Sharia Registers no.6] as an additional primary source is intriguing, given its precise overlap with the timeframe mentioned in the notebook. These records have the potential to contain substantial information about Kamāl al-Dīn's contemporaries, the societal structure, and the economic circumstances they experienced.

Regarding the reproduction of the edited version of the notebook, it involves the generation of a printed version wherein the dispersed fragments from the manuscript are organized and put in a new layout. English subtitles are assigned to these fragments without including a facsimile copy of the original manuscript. This approach diverges from the traditional edition-critique method by not providing transliteration or translation. While this methodology provides a concise presentation of the text, it also imposes limitations, particularly for readers unfamiliar with Arabic language. Such readers can only recognize the topics discussed in the study but may struggle to discern nuances or discrepancies in the text's presentation, thereby impeding their ability to fully engage with the material.

The linguistic nuances embedded within the text are also significant challenges faced by editors, significantly influenced by both the faulty application of Kamāl al-Dīn's grammatical constructs and broader socio-linguistic practices prevalent during the period under consideration. Notably, it is possible to discern traits of Middle Arabic, such as the common usage of *hamza* and *alif maqṣūra* instead of *yā'*. While editors often opt to retain grammatically erroneous constructions that serve to preserve the author's stylistic idiosyncrasies, they particularly correct prevalent instances of Middle Arabic usage from that epoch. Without doubt, these editorial interventions serve to enhance the text's accessibility to most of the readers. Nonetheless, this editorial inclination presents its own predicament, particularly when there is a paucity of opportunities to scrutinize the original orthography as presented in extant edition. Among Arabic literati, the normative grammatical structure of the Arabic language is largely regarded as a

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[Edirne Estate Inventory of the Military Class]; 397 Numaralı Haleb Livâsı Mufasssal Tahrîr Defteri (943/1536) [Tax Registers of Aleppo Provence no. 397].

foundational precept, whereas the legitimate status of Middle Arabic remaining largely unestablished, except for the discernment of Arabic language specialists. Moreover, given the conjecture that Middle Arabic is uniquely associated with textual productions emanating from Jewish and Christian communities, the juxtaposition of such linguistic characteristics within a manuscript authored by a Muslim commoner engenders curiosity as a trans-confessional practice. Hence, despite the limitations uttered by editors, particularly regarding the idiosyncratic nature of the manuscript in question, the inclusion of a facsimile edition alongside the present transcription could have facilitated potential audience in navigating the printed text while simultaneously fostering an appreciation for the meticulous editorial efforts invested therein.

Undoubtedly, this study appears tailored to a rather specialized audience familiar with the concept of “nouveau literacy” or the socio-cultural history of Aleppo in the 16th century. Nevertheless, its potential transcends such narrow confines, offering relevance to an interdisciplinary readership encompassing fields from manuscript studies to sociolinguistics. Indeed, *The Notebook of Kamāl al-Dīn the Weaver* is a promising discovery amidst the vast array of manuscripts awaiting cataloging and digitization, makes our understanding improve about the historical landscapes within the Ottoman Empire and the Levant. Such sources, presenting a distinct perspective from archival material, furnish novel data that encourage critical reassessment of established paradigms, identifying certain gaps in them with fresh insights and engendering the formulation of new frameworks.