

Ibn Khaldūn versus the occultists
at Barqūq's court:
The critique of lettrism in *al-Muqaddimah*

Ulrich Haarmann Memorial Lecture

ed. Stephan Conermann

Volume 18



ANNEMARIE SCHIMMEL KOLLEG

History and Society during the
Mamluk Era (1250 - 1517)

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at Barqūq's court:
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Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte
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Umschlag | Layout: Rainer Kuhl

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Berlin 2020

ISBN: 978-3-86893-290-4

Internet: www.ebverlag.de
E-Mail: post@ebverlag.de

Printed in Germany

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Introduction*

In what follows, I conduct a close examination of Ibn Khaldūn's (d. 808/1406) chapter on "the science of the secrets of the letters" in the sixth *faṣl* of his monumental *al-Muqaddimah*,¹ a treatment of the Sufi occult discourse known as the "science of letters and names" (*ilm al-ḥurūf wa-l-asmā'*)—or "lettrism," as scholars recently have taken to calling it. I argue that the chapter, along with other closely related parts of the work, is best understood in light of a strong and growing interest in lettrism among the learned classes of late-eighth/fourteenth-century Cairo, particularly at the court of Ibn Khaldūn's patron al-Malik al-Zāhir Barqūq. Drawing on manuscripts of *al-Muqaddimah* produced over the course of the author's time in Cairo, I demonstrate that his arguments on lettrism developed over time from a somewhat veiled critique of the science into an outright condemnation of it as a form of sorcery (*siḥr*). In doing so, I argue that Ibn Khaldūn's inveighings against lettrism and related discourses shed important light on the burgeoning popularity of occultism in Mamluk religious and intellectual culture, and at Barqūq's

* The author wishes to thank Bethany Walker, Stephan Conermann, Abdelkader Al Ghouz, Mohammad Gharaibeh, Claudia El Hawary, and others at Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg during the 2015-16 academic year—including, of course, the other fellows, who were great sources of knowledge and inspiration. He is also grateful to have had the opportunity to present elements of this paper at two gatherings outside the Kolleg: the "Islamic Occultism in Theory and Practice" conference at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University in January of 2017, organized by Liana Saif, Matthew Melvin-Koushki, Francesca Leoni, and Farouk Yahya; and the "Magic and the Occult in Islam and Beyond" workshop at Yale University in March of 2017, organized by Travis Zadeh. Special thanks are also owed to Cornell Fleischer, Anna Akasoy, Nicholas Harris, Eryn Kropf, and Mohamad Ballan for their comments and other assistance, as well as to Alexander Knysh for his guidance on the dissertation in which the topics of this paper were initially raised. Any errors are the fault of the author alone.

¹ I refer throughout this paper to various manuscripts of *al-Muqaddimah*, discussed below. I also frequently include references to two printed renditions of the work: Abdeselam Cheddadi's comprehensive 2005 edition and Franz Rosenthal's widely available 1958 translation. From this point forward, these are cited simply as "Cheddadi" and "Rosenthal."

court, particularly in connection with a tide of millenarianism that was rising amidst the upheavals of the period.

The main locus of my investigation is Süleymaniye MS Damad Ibrahim 863, the codex of *al-Muqaddimah* that Ibn Khaldūn dedicated to Barqūq's *khizānah*, and the earliest witness of substantial revisions to the work that he undertook in Cairo. Considering Ibn Khaldūn's arguments on lettrism and related topics in relation to the teachings of occultists in Barqūq's circle such as Sayyid Ḥusayn al-Akhḷāṭī (d. 799/1397) and Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Kūmī (d. early ninth/fifteenth century), I propose that pertinent sections of the recension for Barqūq can be read as reflecting conflicts between Ibn Khaldūn and these figures or others like them. Because modern editions and translations of *al-Muqaddimah* tend to obscure the development of the text over time,² I include what is essentially a Bédierian "best-text" edition of the chapter as it appears in Damad Ibrahim 863, along with a brief excerpt from a later autograph, Süleymaniye MS Atif efendi 1936. Images of the relevant folia from these manuscripts are included as well. I also offer a new translation of the text based on the edition. While it is no doubt less mellifluous than other renderings, I have attempted to be more attuned to the technical terminology and internal logic of lettrism and related discourses, and to be warier of various conceptual pitfalls endemic to modern studies and translations of medieval texts on occultism.

² This is not necessarily to fault the efforts of previous editors, especially Abdesselam Cheddadi, whose excellent scholarly edition of *al-Muqaddimah* I have relied on heavily and cite frequently throughout this paper. It is to point out, however, that editions which account for multiple recensions of a text typically render difficult the task of focusing on a specific recension, especially if it is not the one privileged as the "copy-text" for the edition. In the case of Cheddadi's edition, for example, one would have to work quite rigorously with the critical apparatus to arrive at the text of Damad Ibrahim 863. Even then, important codical details are obscured, such as the tipped-in leaf discussed below.