

Rohingya meant jeopardizing her popular support; not doing so equalled the risk of losing external backing' (p. 90). But was it? Aung San Suu Kyi's political options were far less limited than this. For instance, foreign diplomats I spoke to at the time frequently expressed their dismay that Aung San Suu Kyi was not prepared to publicly call for 'restraint' on the part of the military. That action might have served both to limit military violence, empower voices within Myanmar that similarly believed the military had gone too far, and given international actors a sense that Aung San Suu Kyi had done what she could, as Myanmar's civilian leader, to limit the bloodshed. In those circumstances, any military payback against Aung San Suu Kyi would perhaps have resulted in a much stronger international response than materialised four years later when the military deposed her in their most recent coup.

Lubina is far from alone in regarding Aung San Suu Kyi as having been faced with a single difficult choice, and his book makes a genuine contribution to our understanding of her politics. As Lubina points out, we may never know with certainty what motivations lay behind Aung San Suu Kyi's decisions. Lubina explains he was unable to get an answer from her, and others have received only vague comments. Aung San Suu Kyi's ongoing incarceration by the Myanmar military junta means we may never again have the chance to hear from her on this subject.

doi:10.1017/S1356186322000700

A Physician on the Nile: A Description of Egypt and Journal of the Famine Years

By 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī. Edited and translated by Tim Mackintosh-Smith. xlv, 256 pp. New York, Library of Arabic Literature, New York University Press, 2021.

Adam Sabra

Department of History, University of California, Santa Barbara, California, United States of America
Email: asabra@ucsb.edu

The title chosen by the editor and translator of this text acknowledges two famous texts. The first is *Description de l'Égypte* composed between 1809 and 1829 by the savants who accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to Egypt in 1798. Regarded as a foundational document in the modern study of Egypt and a characteristically encyclopedic work of Enlightenment scholarship, *Description* catalogues every aspect of Egypt's culture, from Antiquity to the beginning of the nineteenth century, including the country's geography, flora, fauna, material culture, antiquities, and system of government. The second work is Daniel Defoe's 1722 work *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Once regarded as a historical work, Defoe's book is now classified as a kind of historical fiction.

The work under review was written in 600/1204 by 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, who intended to present it to the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, al-Nāṣir lil-Dīn Allāh (r. 575–622/1180–1225). Al-Baghdādī was born in Baghdad in 557/1162. He spent much of his early life travelling between the principal cities of the Ayyubid sultanate—Damascus, Cairo, and Jerusalem. Like many scholars of his time, his travels were structured by a

perpetual search for patronage. This search was complicated by struggles within the Ayyubid family for control over their patrimony after the death of the dynasty's founder, Ṣalāh al-Dīn Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb (known in the West as Saladin). Eventually, Saladin's brother al-ʿĀdil established his pre-eminence and al-Baghdādī moved to Cairo. Soon after his arrival, in the years 597–598/1200–1202, Egypt experienced one of its worst medieval famines. Not long after he finished his account of those years in 600/1204, al-Baghdādī resumed his travels. He resided in a number of cities over the next few years, including Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo, and Erzincan. Finally, he returned to Baghdad, where he died in 629/1231.

Al-Baghdādī is said to have been a very prolific author. Medieval sources credit him with 173 works, including 53 on medicine and 48 on philosophy. Of these, 16 are extant, in addition to a collection of short treatises. This text survives in only one manuscript. It may be a rough draft, the final version of which was completed three years later, but if so, the finished version does not survive. S. M. Stern argued that it is an autograph, albeit one compared with an earlier version, and that the numerous corrections and annotations belong to the author. Mackintosh-Smith is less certain.

The manuscript has been published twice before. One edition is riddled with errors, while the second is incomplete. Mackintosh-Smith is a good Arabist and this edition is not only complete but precisely executed. The English translation is very readable and accurate. For readers unfamiliar with Arabic, it is a reliable guide to the contents of the text. The introduction, while serviceable, is less satisfactory. Mackintosh-Smith has not made use of the secondary scholarship on the period and major works are missing from his bibliography and analysis of the historical context. He plans a second, scholarly edition with a full textual apparatus, and one hopes that he will address this deficiency then.

The text is divided into two parts. The first is devoted to a description of Egypt, as al-Baghdādī observed it at the turn of the thirteenth century, and as it is recounted in medieval Arabic geographic works. Thus al-Baghdādī describes Egypt's geography, flora, fauna, ancient monuments, buildings and boats, and food. The second part explains the nature of the annual rise of the Nile and relates the traumatic events of the famine years 597 and 598 (1200–1202).

The description of Egypt in the first part follows the rules of the genre of geographical writing that medieval Muslim writers inherited from Antiquity. One highlight is a detailed description of the farms used to mass incubate eggs. This practice was noted by many medieval travellers to Egypt, but al-Baghdādī's description is particularly rich. Readers familiar with modern Egyptian cuisine will recognise medieval dishes such as *mulūkhiya* (mallow), *qulqās* (taro), and *fūl* (broad beans). Al-Baghdādī also takes an interest in Egypt's classical monuments, especially the pyramids. He even notes the distinctive architecture of Egyptian bathhouses.

Geographers and travellers to Egypt invariably note the annual flooding of the Nile and its significance for Egyptian agriculture. Al-Baghdādī had the misfortune to reside in Egypt during a period of terrible famine, when the Nile rise failed to provide sufficient water to irrigate much of the country's lands. His description of the social consequences of famine takes up the last third of the book. It is full of lurid descriptions of cannibalism. If al-Baghdādī is to be believed, poor people hunted down vulnerable neighbours, especially children, to cook and consume to satiate their hunger. He relates one story after another of appalling human cruelty that beggars belief.

While one should not underestimate humans' capacity for cruelty under desperate conditions, it is clear that these anecdotes belong to an established literary genre. Descriptions of famine and other social crises in medieval chronicles often include stories of the ferocious behaviour of the lower classes, and the idea that the poor are little more

than wild animals is a common trope. Furthermore, the lurid character of these stories is clearly intended to entertain an educated, upper-class audience. Such bestial descriptions of peasants and the urban poor cannot be taken at face value. They tell us more about the prejudices of the urbane, literate class than they do about actual historical events.

Al-Baghdādī claims to have seen some of the cooked corpses of children lying in pots and heard other stories of cannibalism from reliable sources. There may well have been a genuine moral panic during the famine. Rumours of child murder and cannibalism could have been widespread, leading to wild accusations and even executions. In the second year of the famine, stories of cannibalism mysteriously peter out, reinforcing the sense that this was a panic. If this sort of hysteria seems unlikely, one should consider the persistence of the blood libel in the Christian West or the murderous panics of the French Revolution. In any case, al-Baghdādī's stories are best seen as literary entertainment of a particularly nasty sort rather than historical description.

In his introduction, Mackintosh-Smith credits al-Baghdādī's stories of cannibalism. He sees them as evidence of the author's humanity. A more sceptical reader, familiar with the literary representations of the lower classes, is more likely to see this as evidence of Mackintosh-Smith's taste for the sensational. Travel writers seek to entertain their audience and, in this respect, Mackintosh-Smith differs little from al-Baghdādī.

doi:10.1017/S1356186322000426

Quest for Coomaraswamy: A Life in the Arts

By Pratapaditya Pal. 328 pp. Calgary, Bayeux Arts, 2020.

Andrew Topsfield

Department of Eastern Art, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford, United Kingdom
Email: andrew.topsfield@ashmus.ox.ac.uk

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) is remembered as a major founding figure of Indian art history and as a polymath who bridged Eastern and Western cultures in his prolific writings. His career can be said to have had three acts: the young scientist; the art historian and museum curator (as well as socio-political essayist and Indian nationalist); and the ageing metaphysician, in tireless intellectual search of ancient truths. There were, at the same time, evident continuities throughout, both in his writings, with their occasionally polemical flavour, and in his enigmatic and driven personality.

Born in Colombo of Anglo-Ceylonese parentage, Coomaraswamy grew up in England, following the death of his father Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy, a distinguished Tamil lawyer and legislator. After taking a degree in Geology and Botany at University College London, Coomaraswamy undertook field work in Ceylon and was appointed director of its Mineralogical Survey. He was accompanied there by his first wife, Ethel (later Ethel Mairet, the influential handloom weaver), whom he first met while fossil-hunting on the Devon Jurassic coast. In Ceylon they worked together on a survey of the island's traditional arts and crafts, already under threat from Western influences and industrialism, a theme that Coomaraswamy would expound, in full William Morris vein, in his resulting work *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (1908). He had by then come into a large inheritance, and this pioneering book was hand-printed on Morris's former printing press at