INTRODUCTION

This is a small book about a very large book, composed in the early fourteenth century by an Egyptian bureaucrat and scholar named Shihâb al-Dîn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhâb al-Nuwayrî. After a high-flying career in the financial administration of the Mamluk Empire, al-Nuwayrî retired to a quiet life of study in Cairo, devoting his remaining years to a project of literary self-edification. This took the form of a compendium of universal knowledge entitled The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition (Nihâyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab). Containing over two million words in thirty-one volumes, the Ultimate Ambition was a work of enormous scope, arranged into five principal divisions: (i) the cosmos, comprising the earth, heavens, stars, planets, and meteorological phenomena; (ii) the human being, containing material on hundreds of subjects including physiology, genealogy, poetry, women, music, wine, amusements and pastimes, political rule, and chancery affairs; (iii) the animal world; (iv) the plant world; and (v) a universal history, beginning with Adam and Eve, and continuing all the way through the events of al-Nuwayrî’s life. Perusing the Ultimate Ambition’s pages, one comes across such varied topics as the substance of clouds; the innate dispositions of the inhabitants of different climes; poetry about every part of the human body; descriptions of scores of animals, birds, flowers, and trees; qualities and characteristics of good rulers and their advisors; administrative minutiae concerning promissory notes, joint partnerships, commercial enterprises, loans, gifts, donations, charity, transfers of property, and much more.

Why did al-Nuwayrî compose this work? What disciplines did it encompass and what models, sources, and working methods informed its composition? How was it received by al-Nuwayrî’s contemporaries as well as by later readers in the Islamic world and Europe? These are the principal questions of this book. Through a study of al-Nuwayrî’s work, I aim to shed light on a tradition of Arabic encyclopedism—of which the Ultimate Ambition was one of the most ambitious exemplars—that witnessed its fullest flowering in Egypt and Syria during the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. The contents, methods of cross-referencing and synthesis, and internal architecture exhibited in this book reveal much about the sources of authoritative knowledge available to al-Nuwayrî and to other large-scale compilers at this time, while the reconstruction of his social and professional environment offers us a glimpse into the world of the Mamluk civilian elite, an educated
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class of religious scholars, government bureaucrats, and litterateurs who were the main producers and consumers of this literature.

By virtue of its multifaceted character, al-Nuwayrī’s compendium has been exploited by readers in different ways in the course of its history. The manuscript record shows that it was copied for several centuries after al-Nuwayrī’s death; other compilers quoted liberally from it and historians used it as a source for their own chronicles. In Europe, the *Ultimate Ambition* became known as early as the seventeenth century, when several manuscripts found their way to Leiden and Paris. The first complete edition of the text was begun in Egypt in 1923 by Aḥmad Zakī Pasha and completed in the 1960s, but its final volumes were only published in 1997. In more recent times, historians of the Mamluk Empire have drawn upon the *Ultimate Ambition* because of al-Nuwayrī’s extensive treatment of the events of his own lifetime. With few exceptions, the work has been approached instrumentally, as a source for other scholarly projects rather than an object of inquiry in and of itself.

My interest in the *Ultimate Ambition* has been motivated from the outset by a curiosity about why this time and place in Islamic history witnessed an explosion of compilatory texts: dictionaries, manuals, onomastica, anthologies, and compendia of all shapes and sizes. In earlier decades, such texts were generally seen as tokens of intellectual stultification and a lack of originality—the baroque sputterings of a civilization content to collect and compile the writings of earlier centuries. In recent years, the growth of scholarship on late medieval Islamic history has led to a recognition of the important role played by compilers like al-Nuwayrī, whose works served as the primary custodians of the Islamic tradition in the early modern period and remain among the most important interpreters of that tradition for modern scholarship and Islamic thought.

Still, the motivations and working methods underlying this movement remain little understood, as are the ways that the Mamluk compilers positioned themselves vis-à-vis the archive they were assembling. I take up this subject in chapter 1 in the course of situating al-Nuwayrī and his text within the landscape of encyclopedic production around the turn of the fourteenth century. As a bureaucrat, scholar, and aspiring litterateur who traveled all around the empire and held various administrative offices, al-Nuwayrī’s biography reflects many of the forces that shaped cultural attitudes towards large-scale compilation at this time. What it does not seem to reflect at all is a fear of civilizational catastrophe brought on by the Mongol conquests, which was long thought to be a principal cause for encyclopedic production in the Mamluk Empire. While the trope of the encyclopedia as a defender and guarantor of civilizational heritage is certainly widely attested in Renaissance
and Enlightenment intellectual history, I propose that it did not motivate the Mamluk compilers to write their books.

Rather, encyclopedists such as al-Nuwayrī were moved by other factors entirely, chief among them the feeling of an overcrowding of authoritative knowledge in Cairo and Damascus, the great school cities of the empire. The explosion of investment in higher education and the changing migration patterns of scholars in West and Central Asia had a transformative impact on the sociology of scholarship at this time, making new texts available for study and prompting the formation of new genres and knowledge practices. In chapter 2, I present a bird's-eye view of al-Nuwayrī’s work—its internal arrangement, structural divisions, and overall composition—comparing it to other Mamluk encyclopedic texts as well as earlier exemplars within the adab tradition. What emerges from this panoramic view of the work is a sense of how dramatically it brought together compositional elements from different genres—the classical literary anthology, the chronicle, the cosmographical compendium, and the scribal manual—and fashioned something altogether new by combining them. This generic hybridity was not unique to the Ultimate Ambition; I argue that the processes of summary, concatenation, and expansion on display in al-Nuwayrī’s work can be seen as productive of a diverse range of encyclopedic forms in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries.

In chapter 3, I explore the influence of the scholarly milieu on encyclopedic compilation. The cities of the Mamluk Empire were flourishing centers of learning: in the mid-fourteenth century, there were nearly one hundred colleges in Damascus, while, a century later, Cairo could boast of seventy colleges operating on its famous Bayn al-Qaṣrāyīn street alone. As scholars have shown, these institutions of learning produced and consumed an astonishing range and quantity of books. Again, al-Nuwayrī is an ideal guide to this world, as he was a resident overseer of two important scholarly institutions, the Naṣiriyya Madrasa and the Manṣūrī Hospital. I address the eclectic range of subjects being taught in this environment at this time and the challenges that this eclecticism posed for reconciling diverse authorities in all-encompassing encyclopedic works. After a discussion of al-Nuwayrī’s principal sources, I conclude by discussing the epistemological ecumenism of the Ultimate Ambition: the ways in which al-Nuwayrī managed diverse and often contradictory truth claims.

Having explored the world of scholarly institutions, I turn to the parallel world of imperial institutions, chanceries, and financial bureaus in chapter 4. Insofar as many Mamluk compilers served as clerks in the administrative nervous system of the empire, they were particularly attuned to the processes...
of centralization and consolidation that transformed the politics of their time. Extensive portions of Ultimate Ambition were written with such an audience in mind, and serve as a kind of testament to the connections between encyclopedism and the imperial state, as observed in other historical contexts by scholars such as Trevor Murphy, Jason König, Greg Woolf, and Timothy Whitmarsh. I consider the differences between scholarly and administrative knowledge, which reflect not merely a distinction in subject matter but a different epistemological valence and standard of corroboration.

In chapter 5, I address the strategies of collation, edition, and source management used to produce large compilations in the Mamluk period. What working methods did copyists use to assemble multivolume manuscripts? How did one distinguish one’s own copies of authoritative texts from those of other copyists? What kind of training was necessary to become a successful copyist? Al-Nuwayrī’s Ultimate Ambition offers us an ideal opportunity to consider these questions, as several autograph volumes of the text have been preserved, which allow us to reconstruct its composition history, shedding light on the mechanics of encyclopedic compilation in a world before print. Furthermore, al-Nuwayrī addresses the education and practice of the copyist in his enormous discussion of secretaryship, which lies at the heart of the Ultimate Ambition and in certain ways is its raison d’être.

My book concludes with a discussion of the Islamic and European reception of al-Nuwayrī’s compendium. Which of his contemporaries read this work and cited it? What portions of it were of greatest interest to European orientalists? Focusing primarily on the Dutch reception, I explore the engagements with the Ultimate Ambition by such figures as Jacobus Golius, Johannes Heyman, Albert Schultens, and others, which set the stage for the modern edition and publication of the book by Aḥmad Zakī Pāshā in the twentieth century.