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MARGINAL PERSPECTIVES
ON EARLY MODERN OTTOMAN CULTURE
Missionaries, Travellers, Booksellers
The Library of Ahmad al-Rabbâṭ. Books and their Audience in 12th to 13th/18th to 19th Century Syria

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Literature does not exist without its social context, its readers, and its market. These factors influence and determine its reception, transmission, and creation. Therefore, the quest for 18th to 19th century Arabic literature, while exploring the "supply side" (i.e. the authors) of its production, should also take due notice of the "consumer- and retail-side" (i.e. a text’s audience and distribution). One of the places where the dissemination of literature occurred and books found their readers, was the library. Libraries, private and public, should therefore be an essential part of our understanding of literary culture.

Unfortunately, we hardly get the chance to see a private library of the period in situ anymore. Rarely surviving the life of their collector or his immediate heirs, they are dispersed today in collections all over the world. A chance to at least partly revive them today is their virtual restitution through a painstaking gathering of ownership statements. And while the great cataloguing enterprises of the 19th and early 20th centuries can only be admired for the sheer mass of accurate information they made widely accessible for the first time, they are usually no help in reconstructing a provenance history of the manuscripts.

The catalogues of Arabic manuscripts in Berlin, Leipzig, Tübingen, and Turin were no exception to this rule. Nonetheless, their compilers – Ahlwardt, Vollers, Seybold, Weisweiler, and Nallino respectively – with the thousands of

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1 This is hardly surprising, since many thousands of manuscripts had to be described, the content of many of which was unknown, let alone printed. Cataloguers, therefore, rightfully paid more attention to the texts than to the actual books in their physical form and with their individual history. It was not until very recently that catalogues would more frequently include the names of former owners and readers of the manuscripts described.

2 Only Seybold, Verzeichnis, and Weisweiler, Verzeichnis, mention a larger number of readers and possessors from the Tübingen collection or hint to the existence of entries in the manuscripts. They are, nonetheless, not exhaustive in this regard.

3 Cf. Ahlwardt, Verzeichnis, vol. 7, nos. 7714, 8188-8195, 846O (in the following, I will always cite the manuscripts from Berlin by their original signature [Wetzstein, Sprenger, or Landberg], not the number in the Ahlwardt catalogue).


5 Cf. Seybold, Verzeichnis, nos. 32, 33, 42.

6 Cf. Weisweiler, Verzeichnis, no. 52.

7 Cf. Nallino, Manoscritti, nos. 54, 55.
names they had to omit, took time to mention a man who has not acquired any lasting fame and whose manuscripts seem to be the only surviving trace of his existence. This man was called al-qayyim al-hādij Abū Hasan Aḥmad al-Shaqqīfātī al-Halabī al-Naqshbandī al-Shāfiʿī, known as al-Rabbāṭ. Most of the texts so catalogued could be described as “popular narratives,” including many sīras or parts of the 1001 Nights cycle, for many inseparably connected to places of popular amusement like the coffeehouse. The copies were usually modern, sometimes in al-Rabbāṭ’s own handwriting, mostly of simple, if not to say cheap appearance, tattered and worn from constant reading. And for nearly a century that seemed to be all there was to know about this man and his library. Since then, few of his books, including epics and vernacular poetry, were catalogued in Damascus. In 1995 Mulasin Mahdi came across al-Rabbāṭ’s name while working on the manuscripts for his edition of the 1001 Nights, thereby perpetuating a notion that he was important only as a lover of popular narrative literature. But new manuscript finds show a library that seems to be more than just the small collection of a man who loved his entertaining stories and liked to scribble down some vernacular poems of his own. Al-Rabbāṭ and his books, rather, might be an example of how a more secular choice of literature, enjoyed by the

8 In the four catalogues of Berlin, Leipzig, Tübingen, Turin as well as the later catalogues of the Zāhiriyya library in Damascus altogether 47 manuscripts of Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ were registered and he thereby found his way as a poet even into Brockelmann’s GAL (vol. 2, 304). Karl Voller’s catalogued the largest share of Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ’s books, a fact that was explicitly mentioned by the two reviewers of his work – Kern and Nallino – who draw the reader’s attention to the respective counterparts in Berlin, Tübingen and Turin (Kern’s review in: Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen 11 [1908], 258-67, Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ is mentioned p. 258; Nallino’s review in: Rivista degli studi orientali 1 [1907], 131-5, mention of Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ is made on p. 132).

9 For a discussion of the problematic term “popular” cf. Marzolph, Popular Literature, 610-11; Bauer, Ibrāhīm al-Mī’ār, 88-92; Petrāček, Volkstäumliche Literatur, 228-41; Bauer, Post-Classical Literature, 151-6. That “high” and “popular” culture were mutually influencing each other is emphasized by Shoshan, High Culture, 87-8.

10 Cf. Voller’s, Katalog, 11, where he describes Voller 31 – a Sīrat al-nabī not from the possession of Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ, but in its appearance completely similar to Aḥmad’s sīra-books (like his own Nasab al-nabī directly following in the catalogue, Voller 32-36) – and for no apparent reason calls it a “Volkisbuch, im Kaffeehause abgenutzt,” although nowhere in the manuscript a coffeehouse is mentioned.

11 For a study of al-Rabbāṭ’s library based on the previously catalogued manuscripts (and therefore outdated), cf. Liebrenz, Handschriften, 105-11.


13 Other researchers working on this kind of literature and with al-Rabbāṭ’s manuscripts, such as Claudia Ott or Thomas Herzog, also mention his name in passing.
most heterogeneous elements of society alike, was received outside the traditional circles of education and how a demand for this literature formed unlikely networks that reached from the very top of society to the bottom of a hardly still literate readership – with al-Rabbāṭ like a conduit in the middle.

1 Ahmad al-Rabbāṭ’s life

On the life of Ahmad al-Rabbāṭ fairly little is known for certain. None of the biographical dictionaries or chronicles of the time mention him and no traveller seems to have taken notice of his existence. The few dates furnished in his manuscripts give no more than a very thin biographical framework. He was apparently a native of Aleppo, hence the nisba al-Ḥalabi, and lived in that city until the year 1202 or 1203/1787-9. The reason for this assumption is a list of that city’s governors continued up to 1202 which Ahmad laid down in one of his safinas (Berlin Wetzstein II 1238), confessing that he was ignorant as to later office holders, because: “then we moved away.” Most probably he moved to Damascus, since virtually all the readers and later possessors of his manuscripts, as far as they can be identified, hail from that city and the texts al-Rabbāṭ composed himself make numerous references to it. Furthermore, the vast majority of the extant manuscripts are part of collections definitely bought in Damascus, like the three Wetzstein collections in Berlin and Tübingen, the Risā‘iyya in Leipzig, or the greater part of the Arabic material in the Sprenger collection in Berlin. The first dated ownership statement he left comes from the year 1202/1787-8, when he finished supplementing the end of an incomplete Sīrat Djiudar b. ‘Umar al-Ṣayyād (Tübingen Ms. Ma VI 42) in his possession. We may assume, therefore, that al-Rabbāṭ was no longer a mere child at that time. Furthermore, while this one note may not in itself be proof of a functional library, the fact that Shākir b. ‘Abdallāh aghā al-Suqiyya read five volumes from al-Rabbāṭ’s library – now dispersed among the collections of Berlin, Leipzig and London – between the years 1203/1788-9 and 1219/1804-5, seems to indicate that he consulted the same collection over this period of time which might, therefore, have been publicly accessible already in 1203/1788-9. The last date al-Rabbāṭ wrote down himself is found in a manuscript of the Risā‘iyya library in Leipzig: Vollers 612, which he also copied, has his dated ownership statement from the year 1252/1836-7. Supposing that he was a grown up man when he left Aleppo in 1202/1787-8, he must have been well into his sixties or even over 70 years old at that point. Some of his

15 Ms. Berlin Wetzstein II 1238, fol. 28r: تَمْ خَرَجْناً مِن حَلْب وَمَا نَدْرَى عَنَا بِمَن حَكَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْأَمْرِ بِالسُّوَايَب.
16 Wetzstein II 543 (1203), 544 (1203), 545 (1203), 1246 (1203); Leipzig Vollers 32/D. C. 156 (1209); British Museum Library Ms. Add. 7404 Rich. (1219).
books are then found in the possession of two of his sons, Muḥammad and ʿAbd, who lent them out for money, at least from 1252/1836-7 onwards. Other books found new owners in the 1240s, so that one can with a fair degree of certainty set al-Rabbāṭ’s death not too long after 1252/1836-7, at which point he was no longer solely responsible for his library.

We may assume that Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ earned his living in two ways. The first was by means of fees for his booklending or even by selling manuscripts. But he also apparently carried out poetic and musical performances. In a manuscript of the Damascus Zāhibiryā (now part of the Asad-) Library, Aḥmad describes the setting of musical performances in a coffeehouse and advises – in the manner of an experienced artist – on how best to set the stage (Ms. Damascus Zāhibiryā 7400).17

One title Aḥmad ascribed to himself on some occasions, namely al-qayyim, has caused some confusion as to its meaning and the occupation it described. It was interpreted by Seybold as “Meistersänger,”18 a translation that Karl Vollers and Martin Hartmann – and this author followed them on one occasion19 – rejected instead translating the term as “Moscheinspektor,” i. e. “mosque supervisor.”20 But not only does Seybold’s translation have the authority of Johann Gottfried Wetzstein (the Prussian consul who lived in Damascus shortly after al-Rabbāṭ’s presumed death and purchased the vast majority of his known manuscripts)21 to back it, it was also common usage in the region to call a leading poet of his generation its qayyim or primus.22 Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ was indeed a poet and – at least in his own eyes and words – a qayyim among his peers. In fact, eight of the ten

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17 My knowledge of this manuscript’s content, which I could not consult, is based on the catalogue entry in Sawwās / Murād, Qism al-adab, vol. 1, 317-18.
18 Seybold, Verzeichnis, 75: “berühmten modernen Meistersänger (шей) von Halab.” The term “Meistersänger” in German evokes the sphere of highly venerated poetry performed in the Middle Ages with musical company by craft masters and guilds, being the bourgeois equivalent of the courtly troubadour (in German “Minnesänger”).
19 Liebrenz, Handschriften, 98.
20 Cf. Vollers, Katalog, 191; Hartmann, Handschriften, 265-6, who discusses the merits of a translation as “Moscheinspektor” in more detail.
21 Wetzstein, Catalog, 6: “bekannten Meistersängers (шей).” It is, nonetheless, unlikely that Wetzstein’s explanation is based on a personal knowledge of al-Rabbāṭ’s position and could therefore be regarded as a qualification of his fame. He rather translated the term qayyim in the meaning he was acquainted with, i. e. not only a poet, but specifically a famous one.
22 Cf. the story of the qayyim of Egypt coming to Damascus and engaging in a poetic battle with the then still aspiring poet Māmiyā (Ibn Ayyūb, Rawd, p. 83-93 of the Arabic text), on whom the same title (qayyim zamanib) is later also bestowed (e. g. in the title of his Diwān Ms. Berlin Wetzstein I 124, fol. 1r); cf. also Ibn Ayyūb, Rawd, p. 77 of the Arabic text, concerning a “qayyim al-Shām fi fann al-zadjal”; Muḥibbi, Khulāṣat, vol. 3, 215 (qayyim al-adab); Ibn Kannān, Yawmīyyāt, 58 (qayyim al-adab).
manuscripts registered by Ahlwardt as being in his possession are safīnas or personal collections of prose and poetry that were also partly the fruits of his own pen.

2 The manuscripts

Recently, the ongoing Refaiya project in Leipzig has given me the opportunity to look thoroughly through more than two and a half thousand manuscripts of Syrian origin in Leipzig and Berlin. The name ʿAḥmad al-Rabbāt recurs more frequently than any other. The collection in Leipzig does not only contain 29 volumes, as the catalogue said, but at least 46. And the ten books catalogued in Berlin turned out to be an astonishing 115 so far. Some more manuscripts in London, Harvard, and Damascus surfaced and today a total of 174 items from this library have been found. Many more can be expected in those parts of the Berlin collection I have not scanned yet, as well as in other libraries apparently all across the world, certainly in those of the historical Syrian realm. Therefore the following observations must be preliminary and al-Rabbāt’s library

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23 For a shortlist of the manuscripts and their contents mentioned in the following chapters, cf. the appendix at the end of this article. In the following I depend for descriptions of the manuscripts and their contents to a large degree – and exclusively in the cases of Damascus, London, and Turin – on the excellent catalogues of these collections without mentioning them in every single case.

24 See: http://refaiya.uni-leipzig.de. Sponsored by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). This site will have an up to date list of all the manuscripts of ʿAḥmad al-Rabbāt I might still be able to find after the completion of this article. A great deal of gratitude has to be expressed for the Staatsbibliothek Berlin and the head of the Oriental Department, Christoph Rauch, who graciously granted me the very privileged access to the manuscript depot that was indeed a prerequisite for this work.

25 The Harvard manuscript has been digitized as part of the “Islamic Heritage Project” (http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/hlp/) and can be inspected here: http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/16005016.


27 This number is misleading in two ways. On the one hand, it is too high, since some of the shelf-marks refer to sets of multi-volume works that could be subsumed under one such shelf-mark. Still, on the other hand, it is too low, since ʿAḥmad al-Rabbāt’s name does not necessarily appear in all the volumes of these multi-volume works or not all of them have been found yet. For example, his owner’s entry in the last volumes of a set of the Sīrat ʿAntar actually refers to the 60 volumes the entire set once consisted of (Sprenger 1313-1313bis) and counting all of them in absentia would automatically push the size of his library to more than 200 volumes. After completing the first draft of this article, I learned that Ibrahim Akel (Paris) is preparing a thesis on ʿAḥmad al-Rabbāt and his books, so more findings are to be expected.
must have been larger – and presumably considerably larger – than is as yet apparent.

The new findings changed my perception of al-Rabbāṭ to a great extent. Far from having a small collection of mostly cheap, worn-out books, his library contained some real cimelia, at least in the context of Ottoman-era Syrian private libraries. Among them we find a fine old copy – written in 761/1359-60 – of the Dewān of Ibn Nubāṭa (Wetzstein I 40) with superb leather binding instead of the usual quarter-leather or cardboard his books are very often covered with. Not quite as old – copied in 1034/1624-5 – but also outfitted with the calligraphy and binding worthy of the library of a bibliophile is a manuscript of al-Damiri’s Hayāt al-Hayawān (Wetzstein I 169). One might also count the so-called Tübingen ‘Umar (Ms. VI 32), a fragment of the Arabian Nights probably from the 15th century, among those treasures, since it is one of the very few copies of this text illuminated with drawings. Still this book is not usually seen in the sphere of learned elite culture and is executed with great effort and devotion but – charming as they are – quite clumsy drawings. The most surprising find in al-Rabbāṭ’s library is Sprenger 5, an undated but very old copy of al-Muqaddasi’s geography Aḥsan al-taqāṣīm fī maʿrifat al-aqālim. This superbly executed manuscript surely deserved a high price, and indeed Alois Sprenger (1813-93) bought the book in 1854 for 500 piasters.28 This is the single highest price I am able to put on an extant manuscript from Syria until that date – though even more expensive ones surely existed.

This book therefore seems like an unlikely find in the library of a man who was thought to have supplied the readers of “coffee-house literature.” It looks less surprising once one sheds the first notion of popular narrative literature as being cheap and realizes that it was, despite its often shabby appearance, not at all the bottom of the Middle Eastern literary culture, but on the contrary one of its most precious commodities – at least in pecuniary terms. Admittedly, with their simple bindings, unattractive script, small size, signs of wear and tear, and entries of, apparently, often only half-literate readers, most of al-Rabbāṭ’s manuscripts do not give the best of impressions. But this first impression is, in many instances, misleading.

Another of al-Rabbāṭ’s books, the illuminated Tübingen fragment of the 1001 Nights, was lent out to the sayyid Ḥasan b. Saʿd al-Dīn al-Ḥārīrī for the duration

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of this man’s trip to the Ḥawrān in 1252/1836 for the price of 5 fīddā29 a day according to a contract found in the manuscript.30 The book was lent out by Muḥammad al-Rabbāt al-Ḥalabi, a son of al-Rabbāt, who, interestingly, possessed and lent out the book in a year his father was still alive. The same contract stipulates that, should the manuscript get “lost, stolen, burnt, or otherwise not returned to us,” Muḥammad al-Rabbāt would take from Ḥasan al-Ḥarīrī its price (thamanahū), set at 300 ghursh. If the fīddā is to be taken as the pāra/misriyya, forty of which would change for a ghursh, then this price is the equivalent of 2,400 days or 6 ½ years worth of its rental fee. Books like these must therefore have been a long-term investment and would not have been for those seeking fast cash. But they most certainly had more than just pecuniary value for their possessors. Also, the 300 ghursh would be the second highest price I have found so far in a manuscript from Syria—trailing only the aforementioned copy of Muqaddasi’s geography, another book from al-Rabbāt’s library, which was, however, sold some twenty years later.

Al-Rabbāt himself mentioned the prices of many of his books in several ownership statements. Unfortunately, most of these numbers are erased now.31 But already the very few surviving ones in 24 manuscripts add up to an amazing 793 ½ qursh! This number is not easy to interpret, though. Al-Rabbāt never actually wrote down the currency qursh in his entries. But since the prices listed sometimes contain fractions (like 3 ½), which could not occur were the number to mean the smaller currency misriyya/pāra, this ascription seems inevitable.32 Once it is established that the numbers refer to the qursh, the next crucial question would be what the price “25 qursh” found in two volumes of the Sīrat ’Antar meant? Does it refer to the whole set of 60 volumes of this work or rather to every single one of them, making the total price to an astounding 1,900 qursh?

A look at real estate prices from the time can serve to put this hypothetical number into context. According to information assembled by Brigitte Marino, houses

29 Usually used in Ottoman Syria of this time to denote the pāra/misriyya, 40 of which constitute one qursh/ghursh or piaster. Mahdi, Nights, 301, tries to put this figure into context by stating that it would be half the daily wage of an ordinary worker in the Aleppo soap industry of the time. While this might be the case—though the numbers provided by Bowring for Damascus in the same period are considerably higher—he fails to give a source for this claim. He might have simply thought fīddā to mean the ghursh, when it really meant the smaller pāra/misriyya.
30 This had already been noted by Seybold, who transcribes the full contract; cf. Seybold, Verzeichnis, 76.
31 Among those with a price erased is Sprenger 5, the geography bought for 500 piasters by Alois Sprenger in 1854. It would have been extremely interesting to compare the two numbers.
in the suburban quarter al-Midān ranged between 50 and 13,000 qursh in the years 1820-30. But only 14% of them cost more than 2,500 qursh, classified by Marino as "grandes maisons," while half (49%) were valued under 1,000 qursh ("maisons modesties") and still 20% cost less than 500 qursh. The range of prices was, therefore, considerable, but it appears nonetheless that a price of 1,900 qursh as proposed for one copy of the Sīrat ʿAntar, the likes of which al-Rabbāt possessed in abundance, constituted an immense fortune and seems, therefore, unlikely.

One could argue that the high price of the Tübingen fragment of the Nights was due only to its unusual illuminations and that for the other, rather shabby sīras in the library a price of 25 qursh must have been sufficient. But informed travellers often noted the great scarcity and resulting high prices of epic literature, especially when one was looking for complete copies like the ones found of several works in al-Rabbāt’s library. And his voluminous 60 volume set of the Sīrat ʿAntar, therefore, seems quite undervalued at 25 qursh, especially since it seems to have gained some prominence at the time among the extant copies of the text: in a note found in another manuscript of this epic, al-Rabbāt’s ʿAntar is counted among the “famous ones.”

A Sīrat Baibars in 26 volumes seems to further confirm this assumption. According to his own entries, al-Rabbāt bought it in the year 1214/1799. Only five volumes still bear the ownership statements, which in turn are fitted with a price. But the price differs from one copy to another, with three of them being valued at 33 qursh (Wetzstein II 561, 567, 573), while two of them cost only 21 (Wetzstein II 577, 580). The only reasonable explanation for this, especially with the above-proposed arguments in mind, seems to be a pricing of each volume individually and resulting prices of several hundred, if not a thousand qursh for each of the many multi-volume sets of popular epics. These extraordinarily high prices, fetched by no other book in this period in Syria among those I inspected,

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33 Cf. Marino, Faubourg, 241. The average price of houses in the cheap suburb of Salihiyya at roughly the same time (1827-30) valued 1,409 qursh, cf. ibidem, 266.

34 “Seeing so much around that reminded me of the delightful stories in the Arabian Nights, I went into the book bazaar close to the mosque, and inquired for an original copy of them; at the first two or three book-stalls I was unsuccessful, and was told they were very scarce and very dear; [...]” Addison, Damascus, vol. 2, 71. Another report is penned in Egypt: “The great scarcity of copies of these two works [Safī Dibā l-Yazan and 1001 Nights; B. L.] is, I believe, the reason why recitations of them are no longer heard: even fragments of them are with difficulty procured; and when a complete copy of ‘The Thousand and One Nights’ is found, the price demanded for it is too great for a reciter to have it in his power to pay.” Lane, Account, vol. 1, 415.

might be the result of the efforts and labor invested in collecting these novels. Since most are either completely or to a great extent recent copies, the cost of labor, i.e. that of a professional scribe, must be taken into account. Judging by the prices for those scribes as given by some informed travellers and in comparison with the actual prices found in the manuscripts I had the chance to inspect—and even quite marvelous copies among them—it would seem that second-hand books would regularly be much cheaper to acquire than commissioning a new copy, even if the latter was not in any way adorned.

A library of this size was therefore, as can easily be imagined, not a common asset and only accessible to those with the necessary financial means. In fact, to even possess a collection of books worthy of the name library was quite uncommon. Rifāʿat al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (1216/1801-1290/1873) relates with amazement how in France everybody, rich or poor, seems to have a bookshelf at home. In his home country Egypt, as well as in Syria, even the most renowned scholars would hardly have a stock of some hundred books at their private disposal. About sixty years before al-Rabbāt is first attested, the paramount Damascene scholar of his generation, ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (1050/1641-1143/1731), sold his private library to some of his offspring. In the surviving document, the list of his books adds up to about 360 volumes. Wherever we hear of larger numbers, going into the thousands, these numbers are either to be found in a literary context and are probably inflated, or they pertain to the libraries of eminent and wealthy statesmen at the center of the Ottoman realm. Libraries like the one of ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī, or a century later that of the Rifāʿī-family in Damascus (about 470 volumes) must be considered the rule. While al-Rabbāt’s library might in terms of its size be comparable to these two examples and possibly even surpassed them in sheer material value, it was quite different in terms of its contents and appearance.

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36 Prices of scribes are mentioned for Syria by von Kremer, Mittelsyrien, 143; cf. for Egypt Lane, Account, vol. 1, 210. Upon excluding as worthless some manuscripts from the Refaiya-collection he was about to purchase in 1853, Wetzstein argues in the case of an incomplete copy of Sīrat Hamza Qarrān (also called Agrān in other manuscripts): “Das vorliegende ist umso werthloser als der Rest dieses langen Romans kostspielig zu beschaffen seyn würde, d. h. man müßte sich ihn besonders abschreiben lassen.” Cf. Wetzstein, Catalog der Refaiya, 44 (see in the bibliography “Archival and manuscript sources”).

37 Some thoughts on the distribution of books and the size of libraries based on inventories can be found in Establet / Pascual, Livres, 147-50.

38 Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, Muslim, 107.

39 Shaʾbān, Amlāk, 172-7. My count is only tentative, since in the document the collective volumes (madjāmī) are not in every case clearly separated.

40 For examples cf. Sievert, Provinz, 404-31; idem, Schätze.
3 The texts

3.1 Sīra literature

The core of al-Rabbāt’s library in terms of volume is made up of works from the sīra-genre, historical or pseudo-historical narratives that are entertaining in their nature and would usually be described as “popular.” This problematic term should not be mistaken as a social qualifier, since this kind of literature was enjoyed by virtually all ranks of society up to the Sultan himself. But with its linguistic level not as sophisticated and exclusive as were texts like the Maqāmāt of al-Ḥarīrī they were decidedly open to everybody who could read or – in the environment of a coffeehouse or a similar public display – listen and therefore could in theory have the widest possible audience.

The list of sīras or epics to be found among al-Rabbāt’s books and available to his readers is impressive and virtually exhaustive: the all too famous examples like Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars (Wetzstein II 561, 567, 573, 577, 580, 603, Sprenger 1355), Sīrat al-Barāmika (Wetzstein II 381), Ra’s al-Ghūl (Vollers 633), or Sīrat ‘Antar (Wetzstein II 1043, 1051, 1083), Sprenger 1313, 1313bis) are paired with those few have heard of today, e.g. Hikāyat al-Malik Azād Bakht (Wetzstein II 711) or Qīṣṣat Faḍlūn (Wetzstein II 742).

With few exceptions this type of literature is characterized by books of a rather uniform outer appearance: They are of small size; they have the simplest cardboard or quarter-leather binding; although the script is often professional, clear, and readable, there can be no claim to calligraphic beauty; the texts are bound into many volumes of usually between 30 to 60 leafs, which leads to extremely inflated numbers of volumes for one single text that could – more economically arranged – fit into one or a few volumes. This might have served both the professional needs of the public narrators in the coffeehouses as well as those of the book-lenders who could thereby lend out many parts of a text at the same time. Virtually none of these booklets are the product of a single process of copying; they are usually pieced together from fragments of varying size, age, and style, and it appears that al-Rabbāt – and others like him – took great pains to collect dozens of those fragments, put them in the right order, fill the gaps between

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41 This is apparent from three volumes of Sīrat ‘Antar from the library of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II (1451-81), the conqueror of Constantinople, now preserved in Vienna; cf. Flügel, Handschriften, vol. 2, 6, no. 783.

42 Some of these sīras – like the Sīrat ‘Amr‘Umar al-Nu‘mān – also form parts of the 1001 Nights cycle, but are in these exemplars treated as independent stories without – according to the catalogues – mentioning the Nights.

43 This volume does not bear al-Rabbāt’s name, but verses addressing him are to be found in the middle of the text, fol. 52r.
them, sometimes with his own handwriting, and thereby produce something like a complete recension of these epic texts.\(^{44}\) Also, the copies are mostly of very recent date, that is from the late 12\(^{th}\) and 13\(^{th}\) centuries AH, only sometimes with seemingly older fragments mixed among them.

### 3.2 The Arabian Nights

Closely attached to this genre and sometimes overlapping with it are the stories from the 1001 Nights cycle.\(^{45}\) Many of the books containing parts of this cycle are of larger size and not split into so great a number of volumes as those mentioned above. Furthermore, they are mostly bound more opulently in leather. Such is the case with Wetzstein II 701 and the two large and old volumes Tübingen Ma VI 32 and 33. They were not, as is often alleged, looked down upon by more educated people. The beginning of the Nights and one story from its cycle (Wetzstein II 701) were copied in 1207/1793 in his youth by Muṣṭafā b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Ṣalāḥī (d. 1265/1849), who would later have some higher literary ambitions on his own, compiling a commentary-anthology of bāḍūr now preserved in Berlin.\(^{46}\) Only the two volumes preserved in Turin (nos. 54 and 55 in Nallino’s catalogue) belonged to a multi-volume set identical in format and size to those of the other epics mentioned above. Therefore the stories of this famous collection may by their outer appearance be generally classified in a category different from the sīras, at least as far as the library of Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ is concerned.

### 3.3 Advice literature

Also to be found in al-Rabbāṭ’s library is the classic Kalīla wa-Dīmna (Wetzstein II 672), the famous piece of advice literature in the disguise of fables translated

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\(^{44}\) Maybe a testimony to the process of piecing these books together is an enigmatic note by al-Rabbāṭ in Wetzstein II 636, fol. 1r, in which he lists those who copied or carried (naqala) certain numbers of the altogether ten quires (karāris) of this book. Two, e. g., are with al-Rabbāṭ himself (fī yadībī), while another one is found “fī yad al-faqīr Muḥammad.” This might also refer to the lending out of several layers of a book before it received its binding, but in this case the appearance of al-Rabbāṭ’s name would be puzzling.

\(^{45}\) In fact, so little difference was made by the copyists and compilers between many works of this genre that they, when confronted with a fragmentary recension of the Nights, took no pains to add missing parts from some of the mentioned sīras or Kalīla wa-Dīmna. Cf. Chaîbi, Notes, 172.

\(^{46}\) Al-Bayṭār, Ḥīlyat al-bashār, vol. 3, 1539. Many of the manuscripts of his apparently very rich library are now preserved in Berlin and Leipzig. His autograph anthology is Ms. Berlin Landberg 948; cf. Bauer, Anthologien, 78.
by Ibn al-Muqaffa. It is of course impossible to ascertain whether the readers enjoyed the book for the underlying philosophy and stylistic brilliance or for its entertaining narrative qualities – as the rational for reading a certain book or the impression it made on the readers are hardly ever mentioned. In any case, the book was added to Aḥmad’s collection only when he copied it for himself in 1246/1830, and therefore probably just shortly before his own death. Another specimen of advice literature is al-Ghazālī’s “mirror for princes” al-Tibr al-masbūk in the small fragment Wetzstein II 714.

3.4 Poetry

Besides his own poetry collections and anthologies in nine safinas (Berlin Sprenger 1240, 1235, 2007, 2008; Landberg 1031; Wetzstein II 1236-1238; Damascus Zāhiriyyya 7400) and one madjmū‘a with zadjal and mawāśli verses treating some historical incidents in Damascus during the author’s lifetime (Damascus Zāhiriyyya Ms. ‘ām 8749), more refined verses from the classical repertoire and prosimetric adab collections also take up some space in al-Rabbāt’s library. The previously mentioned Dīwān of the renowned Mamluk writer Ibn Nubāta (Wetzstein I 40), one of the more splendid volumes of the collection, is found in this category as well as the Dīwān of the celebrated Egyptian poet and mystic ‘Umar Ibn al-Fārid, cherished and often commented on by Syrian scholars in the Ottoman period and represented here by a small volume (Wetzstein II 187). Lbg. 360 encloses Ibn al-Habbāriya’s al-Ṣādīḥ wa-l-bāghim. Wetzstein II 256 contains the commentary of ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Badrūn on a qaṣīda called al-Bassāma fi arwaḥ al-hamāma by ‘Abd al-Madjid Ibn ‘Abdūn on the fall of the Aftasids, one of the Tawā’il-dynasties of 5th century Muslim Spain. ‘Alawān al-Hamawi’s Nūr al-‘ayn fi sharh Silk al-‘ayn presents another poetic commentary, this time on a late Mamluk-era poem. An anonymous collection of mostly Ottoman-era poetry by such venerated authors as ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nābulusi (1050/1641-1143/1731) and Aḥmad al-Khaṣīf (d. 1069/1659) but also Mamluk-era classics such as Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadi ended up in al-Rabbāt’s hands (Damascus Zāhiriyyya 3884, madjmū‘a 151).

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47 I am very certain that another book of fables closely imitating Kalīla wa-Dīmna, namely the Marzubān-nāma Sprenger 1248, did in fact belong to al-Rabbāt. The typical design of the title page together with a note by one of al-Rabbāt’s attested readers, ‘Abdallāh al-Djabbān, leaves little doubt that a completely erased note next to the title once bore the name Aḥmad al-Rabbāt.

48 The themes are mostly the especially hard winter of 1248/1832-3, and social unrest resulting in the fighting between the governor Muḥammad Salīm Bāshā and the people of Damascus. Cf. Rayyāl, al-Tārikh, 401-11.

3.5 Adab

The *adab* anthologies in the library are: a *Diwān Law‘at al-shā‘ī* (Vollers 612), an anthology full of homoerotic verses on the theme of lovesickness; the *Nāsīmat al-Šabā* (Vollers 617) by Ibn Ḥabīb; the anonymous *Qatr al-nabāt* (Spr. 1181); Ahmad b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-‘Adjamī’s commentary on al-Zamakhsharī’s *Rabī‘ al-abrār* (Lbg. 568); and *al-Yawāqīt fi ba‘d al-mawāqīt* by Ahmad al-Ṭa‘ālibī, literary conceits juxtaposing praise and condemnation of various items (Wetzstein II 1872).

3.6 History

Far from being satisfied with poems, *adab*, and the adventurous *ṣīra*-stories, al-Rabbāt took some interest in the contemporary history of his region. Testimonies to this are a history of the Lebanese Mountains (Wetzstein II 377) and a history of the French occupation of Egypt under Napoleon (Wetzstein II 378). These texts were written during his lifetime and al-Rabbāt was therefore a conduit for their immediate distribution. His readers might have turned to his library when they wanted to inform themselves on matters of contemporary political interest. And it is important for us to know that readers actually could find these topics represented in what was something of a “public library.”

Treating Mamluk Aleppo several centuries earlier is a copy of *al-Durr al-muntakhab fi tārikh Ḥalab* (Vollers 656). And al-Rabbāt’s historical interests reach further back to the beginnings of the Islamic expansion. In this area, the manuscript Sprenger 34 shows al-Rabbāt as a compiler of *futūh* works. A note of his reads:

> “These conquests in a single volume (*mufrad*) cannot be found on the market (‘*adim*) and the examples of men who compiled something like it are few, because every conquest of one region is treated in a single work. I collected all these conquests and made them one *futūh* work.”

These remarks are signed by al-Rabbāt “‘alā yād nāsikhibī li-nafsibī.”\(^{50}\) This does not mean that al-Rabbāt copied the whole book that he compiled in the prescribed manner and could therefore claim some kind of authorship by rewriting a classic in his own words. Instead, the small manuscript is made up of several, sometimes apparently quite old copies of *futūh* works ascribed to al-Wāqidī treating the different regions of early Islamic conquests. Al-Rabbāt rather had them bound together and also filled the tiny narrative gaps between them with his own text.

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\(^{50}\) Ms. Berlin Sprenger 34, 148.
Al-Rabbāt’s library boasted two volumes of the universal history *Akhbār al-
duwal wa-ʻāthār al-duwal* by al-Šarāmānī. The first (Spr. 1973), a voluminous
copy with additions by its scribe up to the year 1151/1738, entered the library
only after 1230/1815, since it was purchased in that year by Ibrāhīm walad Yūsuf
Ṣalāma – quite possibly a Christian – in Constanstino ple. The second (Spr. 1974),
much smaller and comprising in fact only the preface, was copied by al-Rabbāt
himself, supposedly after he acquired the aforementioned complete version in
1230 and obviously before the first dated reader’s note in 1252/1836. Whether al-
Rabbāt ever came around to finish his own complete copy remains an open
question.

A compilation entitled *DJawāhir al-buhūr wa- waqā'i‘ al-umūr wa-ʻadjā‘ib al-
duhūr* (Vollers 664)\(^{51}\) covers the history of Egypt from its pre-Islamic begin-
nings. While the narration begins with an Egypt full of the unbelievable miracles
of a fairy tale, it sober up the more it advances into the Islamic period until the
time of the Mamluk Sultan Qalāwūn.

The field of biographical dictionaries, closely tied to the annalistic histories and
also called “tārikh” in the contemporary parlance, is represented by the fragment
of a collection of biographies called *al-Nūr as-sāfir* by ‘Abd al-Qādir al-
‘Aydarūs (Vollers 867 II).\(^{52}\)

### 3.7 Encyclopedia

The encyclopedia *Irshād al-qāsid* by the Egyptian polymath Ibn al-Akfānī (Voll-
ers 2) eludes categorization by its very nature. It comprises many of the afore-
mentioned topics with its parts on rhetoric, style, and language, while its focus
on the exact sciences and medicine opens up a completely new chapter otherwise
apparently not so well represented in al-Rabbāt’s library.

### 3.8 Law and science

Fields which stand out among the overall focus of al-Rabbāt’s library destined
mostly for entertainment and *belles lettres* are those of law as well the natural
sciences and medicine. The one juridical work in his collection does, nonetheless,
fit well with the practical needs of ordinary readers in need of some purely for-
maic advice. The text entitled *Bidā‘at al-qādī* (Vollers 866 II) is arranged as a
manual giving proper wording to all kinds of possible legal cases. At least one
reader apparently felt encouraged to use some free space in the manuscript to put

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\(^{51}\) The usual ascription to Ibn Waṣḥīf Shāh is clearly wrong, although some work of his was a ma-

\(^{52}\) This work is usually called *al-Nūr as-sāfir ‘an akhbār al-qarn al-‘āshir*. 
what he learned into practice and copy some formula. The book may have been
used to enable public scribes to formulate waterproof documents which the legal
parties could bring into court for affirmation. Found in a lending library it may
shed an interesting light on the actual practice of drawing up documents in the
judicial system of the day.

Turning to medicine, we find in Harvard Ms. Arab. 396 a treatise by the Mamluk
veterinarian Abū Bakr b. Mundhir al-Baytār, called Nukhbat al-afkār; ophthal-
mology was covered with a Tadhkirat al-kabhāin (Tübingen Ma VI 138); Vollers
859 IV contains an anonymous Kitāb al-Mufrihat fi 'ilm al-ṭibb, and in Vollers 867
I we find al-Qalyūbī’s al-Fawā’id al-ṭibbiyya – here not identified and simply called
Kitāb ḥikma. The parts of Ibn al-Akfnī’s encyclopedia Irshād al-qāsid (Vollers 2)
concerning the subject may also be subsumed under this category.

A special treatise on hunting birds (Vollers 859 III) was available as part of a
madjmū’a in the library. This same volume also contained a treatise on astron-
omy (Vollers 859 I). Users of al-Rabbāt’s library could also find one of the out-
standing books on geography in the Arabic language, the already mentioned
Ahsan al-taqāsim by al-Muqaddasī (Sprenger 5), as well as the widespread zool-
ogy Ḥayāt al-bayāwān by al-Damīrī (Wetzstein I 169-169bis).

3.9 Religion

A remarkable feature of al-Rabbāt’s collection is that the literature of the theologi-
cal curriculum (ḥadīth, exegesis, kalām, fiqh), so dominant in the public libraries of
his time, has not been found in his library so far. What we do have are works that
tend not so much to the theoretical but to the spiritual needs of their readers, people
who might not necessarily need reason, but comfort and inspiration. Therefore two
kinds of works dominate this section, the one paraenetic, often with a Sufic touch,
the other consisting of the lives or legends of saints and prophets. Among the first
category is Qūt al-qulūb by Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Dāmaghānī (Vollers 161), as well as
the Mukāṣhasat al-qulūb, erroneously ascribed to al-Ghazālī, together with a text
on interpreting dreams (Wetzstein II 1577). The madjmū’a Wetzstein II 1806 con-
tains several mystical and dogmatic treatises by al-Qūnawi and al-Ghazālī.

In the second category, Rawd al-rayāḥin by al-Yāfī’ī (Vollers 174), contains the
lives of 500 saints. Vollers 865 is a collective volume with traditions and a fragment
on pious men and women called Salwat al-ahsān. Vollers 32-36, Sīrat nasab al-
nabi, and Vollers 40, Ghawwaz Ḥumayn, narrating a chapter of the life of the
prophet, are close to the sīra-epics, only these having the prophet Muhammad as
their main hero. Two books treat Islamicized versions of pre-Islamic prophets:
Qīṣṣat Ayyūb al-Ṣabīr (Vollers 110), and the Manẓūma wa-qīṣṣat nabi Allāh Yūsuf
al-Ṣiddīq (Wetzstein II 719), a fine copy that stands out through its leather binding.
3.10 Overview

Classifying a literary work to put it in a graph is a complicated task. It suggests the heuristic value of one single label where there often are no clear-cut divisions between the genres. The mystical thoughts of a Sufi or the grammatical rules of a philologist may have taken the formal appearance of a poem. These reservations notwithstanding, a graph can literally paint a picture otherwise blurred in the written account.

The contents of al-Rabbāt’s library may be summed up in the following way:

![Graph showing distribution of genres in al-Rabbāt's library](image)

In this graph, works and not volumes are counted. A collective volume of mainly religious epistles like Ms. Berlin We II 1806 would therefore have a disproportionate impact in this display. The bulk of al-Rabbāt’s library, as far as we know it, was made up of epic prose literature. Their true proportion could not be adequately displayed here since most sīras came down to us in no more than a few of their once numerous volumes. Still, a general picture emerges that shows the great emphasis the collector put on entertaining prose, poetry, history and belles-lettres. Together they outweigh the graphically overrepresented religious texts by a ratio of three to one. The relatively small number of works on natural sciences and medicine, on the other hand, does not do justice to the significance of their mere existence, since these topics are vastly underrepresented and often absent in any Levantine library of the period, especially those publicly accessible.
4 The readers

Contrary to the usual practice in Arabic manuscripts of Ottoman-Syrian origin, al-Rabbāṭ’s books are drowned in reader’s notes, many clearly dating to his lifetime, but bear very few ownership statements. It is, therefore, quite certain that his collection was publicly accessible beyond a confined circle of personal friends. Unfortunately we have only sparse information about the reality, economy, and practical dealings of this or any other library of its kind. The last date we can ascribe to al-Rabbāṭ is 1252/1836, when he finished transcribing the anthology *Law’at al-shākī* for his own use (Vollers 612). Many of the very frequent reading notes and all the commercial book-lending notes commence after this date. The lending out for money in two notes is explicitly connected with the names of his sons Muḥammad and ʿAbd. And al-Rabbāṭ even included verses against the lending of books or at least urging for a deposit (rahn) in several of his manuscripts. While there are, in fact, no explicit traces for a lending of books against money from al-Rabbāṭ himself, at least two letters preserved in two of his manuscripts indicate that readers approached him for books and had them sent to their homes. Al-Rabbāṭ himself narrates the story of how a veterinarian friend (ahad al-ḥabab min al-bayāṭira) approached him in search of a certain book on his art which al-Rabbāṭ was able to produce only after a search of eight years! The readers, in this case at least, shaped their library! Looking at them will shed at least some light on how this library was received.

Those of al-Rabbāṭ’s books I have been able to inspect furnish us with the names of far more than two hundred of their readers or possessors. They made for a diversified audience. Among them we find scholars, high-ranking military and administrative personnel, traders, or artisans. Just to enumerate them here in full would exceed the boundaries of this article, not to mention the arduous and often enough impossible task of identifying every one of them. But some general

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53 Counting only the notes dated between the years 1200 and 1250 yields the names of more than 40 readers, many perusing several volumes over a number of years.

54 Tübingen Ms. Ma 32; Wetzstein II 378.

55 Wetzstein II 1236, fol. 1v. The verses are not his own, though. They are found in a number of manuscripts of different origins even as far as India.

56 Wetzstein II 596, fol. 1r.

57 Wetzstein II 1043/67v; Wetzstein II 1577/229r. Both are written in a truly horrible language with quite impossible orthography and can hardly be transcribed or even translated here. Wetzstein II 1043 reports the return of volumes 25 and 26 of *Ṣirāt ʿAntar*, of which it formed a part, and asks for volumes seven to ten of the epic. It also says that *Saif (= Dhu l-Yazan)* must have reached al-Rabbāṭ with the same shipment of books. Wetzstein II 1577 equally reports the arrival of the book in which the lines are inscribed together with one of al-Rabbāṭ’s *safinas*.

58 Harvard Ms. Arab. 396, fol. 1v.
observations as well as some exemplary specimens should paint a broad picture of the reading public al-Rabbāṭ served with his books.

When talking about the readers of al-Rabbāṭ’s library, one group stands out from among the vast majority of readers of the manuscripts of Syrian origin in general as far as I collected them. It is a group of people that cannot be identified by means of the usual biographic literature – which traditionally only covers members of scholarly elite – but whose names and titles sometimes point to their profession or social standing. It consists of men who could obviously read and write, but many of them hardly rose above the level of basic command of the latter. Their handwriting would often tend to the unreadable and the abundant grammatical and orthographical mistakes would betray a difficulty in handling both, as well as distinguishing between the spoken and the written language. While a common pious formula finishing an entry after the reader’s name would read غفر الله ولواجه, al-Rabbāṭ’s average reader would nearly unanimously corrupt such a sentence into something the likes of غفر الله له ولابنه. The change of letters according to their vernacular spelling (nadara instead of nazara); plain writing of defectively written, but elongated sounds (like in la-hū); missing or wrongly added articles; wrong case endings; and the like are common features of the language they employed, which nonetheless still strives to be above the vernacular. Names like Ṭabbākh (“cook”), Sammān (“butter vendor”), Qahwadjī (“coffee merchant”), Djabbān (“vendor of dairy products”), or ‘Aqqād (“rope-maker”) occur with suspiciously high frequency among the readers. These might point in their cases to actual professions rather than inherited family names. But there are also many readers with titles pointing to a military or administrative background. Most of them are readers only, i.e. they only read books and statements and cannot be found as possessors of books outside the realm of al-Rabbāṭ’s library.

The group so defined is found in their largest numbers in the popular narrative literature of sīras, exotic fables and pious saintly stories. This mass of poorly educated readers is unprecedented in earlier times. There were those who could not transcribe their readership statements without mistakes in earlier centuries, but in the library of al-Rabbāṭ this becomes the rule. Is this indicative of the spread of a reading culture to other segments of society and a concomitant – either as a result of or reason for the former – change in the literary market in the 18th and 19th centuries? Is it a parallel to the rise of a new middle class with a new taste for books as suggested by Nelly Hanna for 18th century Egypt? Or is this picture misleading because “popular” literature was put into writing and was

59 For examples of some of the most recurring mistakes cf. Liebrenz, Handschriften, 108-9.
60 Hanna, Praise, especially 79-103.
being read by the same audience in earlier times, the traces of which simply did not survive up to this day?\textsuperscript{61}

But there is another group of readers materializing. They, too, can be predominately found in a certain discernible set of manuscripts (already defined in the second chapter), distinguishing itself by an unusually rich appearance combined with elaborate content (e. g. Wetzstein II 40, 169; Sprenger 5). Indeed, the names found in these manuscripts are of a very different nature, and Sprenger 5 portrays this very well, since its former possessors extended to the very top of the Ottoman religious bureaucracy, namely in the person of Fayd Allâh (or Feyzullah) Efendi, mufti at the Sublime Porte. His ownership statement is dated 1115/1703, which is also the year this powerful and notorious figure was deposed together with his sultanic overlord in a coup d’état.\textsuperscript{62} These men were usually also the possessors of the books they read and are among the very few to be found in this capacity in al-Rabbâṭ’s books. Since they mostly consulted or possessed the works before al-Rabbâṭ’s lifetime they are not actually to be counted among the audience of his library. And Wetzstein I 40 does not even have a single trace of a reader from al-Rabbâṭ’s times. Were these books not in fashion with his clientele or was their content too elaborate to understand? Were their rental fees probably higher? Or did those who could not produce a legible reader’s statement shy away from tarnishing the title page of a beautifully exacted copy?

How this group of manuscripts and their readers stand out amongst the greater lot of al-Rabbâṭ’s library becomes apparent when they are juxtaposed with exemplary samples of its more popular parts. One could be the Sîrat al-Malik Badrân (Vollers 627, twelve small volumes). This epic attracted a score of readers, many of which left no more than unhelpful first names (like in one case Muhammad b. Muhammad). A former Daftârdar of Damascus, whose name is unfortunately erased, read it in 1233/1818. In 1268/1852 it was ‘Umar al-Laḥḥám, explicitly marked resident of a village i. e. not a city-dweller, who looked at the manuscript. Some undated notes include Muḥammad ‘Arab al-Ṭabbā, Shākir al-Ṭarābulusī, son of Muḥammad al-Halabi the qazzāz-bāshī (head of the silk-merchants guild), Muṣṭafā al-‘Aṭṭār, Aḥmad al-Fattāl, and Ibrāhīm b. Ḥusayn al-Qawwāf (whose entries are otherwise dated 1237/1822, cf. Wetzstein II 638, fol. 36r). Therefore all the names bear either the title of a mili-

\textsuperscript{61} Wetzstein at least believes this to be the case when he asserts that his manuscript of the 1001 Nights, Tübingen 33, might be the oldest one surviving, “da die 1001-Nacht nur für den Gebrauch der Kaffeehäuser copiert und daher bald abgenutzt wird.” Wetzstein, Catalog, 6.

\textsuperscript{62} The negative and even hateful reception of his controversial policies in Damascus – as the puppet master of the Sultan he was perceived as helping the Christian enemies of the Empire or even as a secret Christian himself – and the joy over his deposition is reported by Ibn Kannân, Yawmiyyât, 72-3. The extent of his nepotism is outlined throughout the study of Abou-El-El-Haj, Rebellion; cf. also Tayşi, Feyzullah.
tary or administrative position, or are derived from handicrafts that were most likely also the professions of these men. In terms of social stratification, the readership reaches up to the important post of a Daftardār, i.e., financial administrator, of Damascus. The absence of names with a clear connection to traditional scholarly training is, however, apparent in this as in the other books of its kind. But then again, the manuscript was bought later on by ‘Umar al-Rifāʿī al-Hamawī – a man Wetzstein calls a former qāḍī⁶³ – for his library, the famous Rifāʿīyya now preserved in Leipzig. He did, however, not leave a readership statement in the book. But since that was the case with all of his manuscripts, one may not deduce from this fact that it was inappropriate for a man of traditional religious learning to put his signature in a book of this content.

4.1 Crossing borders: between the “popular” and the “elite”

There is little overlap between these two groups of readers, but there are a few men who did cross the borders between them and the two distinct levels of literature they are associated with. Among them is Saʿīd Saqāmīnī, a man I was not able to identify until now. He was in possession of six manuscripts, now in Leipzig, Berlin, and Damascus respectively. Many more of his notes give nothing more than his name, making it impossible to decide whether he was the possessor or merely reader of the book.

He is surely identified as reader only in a volume of al-Rabbāṭ’s Sīrat Djuḍar (Wetzstein II 675). Among al-Rabbāṭ’s books, his name is also found in Vollers 110, the Islamic legend of Job Qiṣṣat Ayyūb al-Šābir, as well as the splendid copy of al-Muqaddasī’s geography Aḥsan al-taqaṣīm fi maʿrifat al-aqālim (Sprenger 5), here again as a reader. The last work is by its content and physical appearance more in line with the rest of those he read or possessed, which were mostly treating religious studies and belles-lettres.

The books definitely from his own collection are: two small and unattractive volumes (Vollers 845) of a madjmūʿa containing several collections of poetry and paraenetic poems; the prayer book Qurrat al-ʿayn by Mahmūd al-Qādirī (fl. 2nd half of the 11th/12th century; Wetzstein II 1557); the Thabat of ‘Umar al-Shammāʾ (d. 936/1529; Wetzstein II 412); among his books were three adab collections, namely al-Laʿālī wa-l-durar by al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038) in a nice red leather binding (Wetzstein II 1225), a Kitāb al-adhkiyya by Ibn al-Djawzī (d. 597/1201) in an early copy dated 828/1425 (Damascus Zāhirīyya 5827), and an untitled collection of stories (Damascus Zāhirīyya 4186).

It is not certain whether Saʿīd al-Saqāmīnī read or possessed the remaining six copies: Ibn al-Djawzī’s (d. 597/1201) Kitāb al-Irshād wa-l-taṭrīz fi faḍl dhikr Allāh

⁶³ Wetzstein, Catalog, 1 of the unpaginated “Vorwort” (preface).
wa-tīlāwat kitābihī al-‘azīz (Wetzstein II 338); the very old (dated 535/1141) copy of Shāfi‘ite legal responsas (fatawā) of ‘Abdallāh al-Djuwaynī (d. 438/1046; Wetzstein II 1477); Wetzstein II 1495 Uṣūl al-fiqh by al-Bazdawī (d. 480/1089), also from the sphere of Islamic law; Tārikh al-Djazīra (Sprenger 199), the anonymous history of Mesopotamia written by a clerk from the circle of Saladin; lastly Wetzstein II 1812, a collection of treatises on rhetoric and poetry. The readership and ownership statements in all these volumes he did not definitely use as a reader have a general audience quite different from that of al-Rabbāt’s books. But the background of these copies shall be symbolized here by Wetzstein II 349, a fragment of Ibn Sa‘d’s (d. 230/844) al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā: it was in the former possession of the two eminent Ottoman bibliophiles Abū Bakr b. Rustum al-Shirwānī and ‘Effāt, known for their splendid libraries. For Sa‘īd al-Saqāmīnī – like al-Rabbāt – reading bibliophile treasures from famous libraries was apparently very well reconcilable with the popular epic of the fisherman Djūdar.

Another man bridged the gap between two works that stand emblematic for the very popular and the most refined in Arabic prose literature, even reading both of them in the same year. Şālih b. Ismā‘īl Djurbadjī al-Mahāyīnī may be identified with a strongman from the Damascene suburb al-Midān who died in 1285/1868. He was imprisoned in connection with the massacres of 1860, but was soon released and Mikhāyil Mishāqa explicitly lauds his protection of the Christians during the events. For his bravery he was even awarded medals and honors by European powers such as France and Russia. Long before that, in 1235/1820 he read a collection of stories (qisās) in the style of the 1001 Nights, also partly taken from this source and narrated by Shahrazād (Wetzstein II 662) from al-Rabbāt’s library, but also a very old copy of al-Ḥarīrī’s (d. 516/1122) Maqāmāt now preserved in Michigan (Isl. Ms. 650), the latter one not from al-Rabbāt’s collection. Both are certainly very entertaining and have received global recognition as such, but still only one is considered among the gems of Arabic language and stylistics. Şaliḥ must have read both books at a very young age, probably in his twenties or even earlier, since he did not die until 50 years later in 1285/1868. Already his father Ismā‘īl b. ‘Isā Djurbadjī al-Mahāyīnī read in 1205/1791 the manuscript Berlin Wetzstein II 640, a volume of the Šīrat Sayf Dhū l-Yazan which was most probably in al-Rabbāt’s possession at that time, since many volumes of this set – among them those directly preceding and following – bear al-Rabbāt’s ownership statements. Therefore, a more regular acquaintance between the two families can be imagined.

64 Cf. Sayyid, Marques, 19, 22.
65 Cf. Richard, Lecteurs, 82.
67 The oldest dated entry from a reader is that by Tağhri Birdī b. ‘Abdullāh al-Zaynī al-Zāhirī in 854, but the copy itself is probably from the 8th century.
68 Cf. al-Uṣūwānī, Mashābid, 150, 190; Mishāqa, Murder, 30, 251.
4.2 Christian and Jewish readers

Statistically overrepresented among the readers and possessors of al-Rabbāt’s books are members of religious minorities, i.e. Christians and Jews. Wetzstein II 697, a Ḥikāyat al-malik Shahramān, was read by ḥawādja Mūsā Salmān and Rūfā’il b. Yusuf Zakāk in 1259/1843. Rūfā’il Ishāq Linyāda al-Ḥalabi, a Jewish reader, enjoyed eight volumes of Sirat Muḥammad al-Kūrī b. Karkhān between the 18th and 21st Radjab of 1243/February 4-7, 1828 (Wetzstein II 542-549) as well as the Hikāyat Qamar al-Zamān wa-Shams al-Zamān (Tübingen Ms. Ma 41) two days later, the 21st and 22nd Radjab 1243/February 7-8, 1828; another Jewish reader – Ishāq Ezrā wala d Mūsā Ezrā – is found in al-Tha’alibī’s (d. 429/1038) adab-anthology Yawāqīt al-mawāqīt (Wetzstein II 1872, dated 25th Dhū l-Ḥijja 1245/June 17, 1230). The Christian physician Anṭūn Dījabbāra, who bought the geography Sprenger 5 in 1241/1826 has already been mentioned. Some Hebrew scribbling and verses in praise of Christian saints can be found on the flyleaves of Sprenger 2007, one of al-Rabbāt’s Safinās. They may not be connected to the textual body of the book, but they nonetheless show that al-Rabbāt had access to the discarded papers of Christians and Jews and was not shy about using them without erasing their texts even though they were of a religious nature. The adab-anthology Nasīm al-Ṣabā (Vollers 617) bears on its title page the reader statement of Me’ir b. Yusuf of the important Jewish Damascene Lizbūnā family. After a conventional beginning, though, this entry turns into a full-fledged contract between the ḥawādjas Ibrāhīm b. Ḥayyīm and Yusuf b. Dāniyāl about the purchase of large quantities of soap. This contract is dated 1250/1834, and since a document of this kind would hardly be expected from someone who just borrowed the book for a short time, this date is most likely also the terminus ante quem for al-Rabbāt’s selling of the book. Lastly, two Jewish scholars or rabbis (ḥākhām) looked into al-Rabbāt’s Qiṣṣat Dūdār (Tübingen Ma VI 42). The topics represented in al-Rabbāt’s library are indeed those which, judging from the preserved notes I could gather, attracted religious minorities the most, i.e. entertainment – both popular and more refined in the form of classical adab –, history, and the natural sciences.

69 Seybold, Verzeichnis, 76.
70 Other examples of Christian and Jewish readers of epics are found in Tübingen Ms. Ma VI 42 (cf. Seybold, Verzeichnis, 88-9); a volume of the Sirat ‘Antar, read already in 1061/1651 by the priest (khūrī) Makāriyyūs Ṣaḥyūn (Wetzstein II 924); and another volume of the same text (Wetzstein II 1055) where the readership statement from 1265/1849 of Salmūn b. Rūfā’il (last name not legible) is found.
4.3 The reading process

One would like to know whether anything can be said about the process of reading, specifically reading frequency and pace. Those readers represented by more than one or two entries are deplorably few. Deplorably, because it is hardly plausible that so many would have read, for example, only one volume from the middle of one sīra and many years later another one from the end of a second novel. The many instances where this is the case most probably show how many notes have been either lost or were never even been written down in the books.

Where many entries allow us to follow a reader over the course of many books or even the duration of many years, the reading frequency is often astonishingly irregular. Two men with a constant appetite for reading, not the least in al-Rabbāt’s manuscripts and sometimes in the very same volumes, may furnish as examples. The first is ʿAbd al-Qādīr Shānū, surnamed al-ʿAqqād, which, besides being his name in the sense of a personal identifier, must also be taken as this man’s actual profession (rope maker) because it sometimes comes in an expanded version followed by the location of his trade at the Sūq (Wetzstein II 682) or Hammām al-Khayyātīn (Wetzstein II 547), i.e. in Damascus. ʿAbd al-Qādīr left 36 readership statements in the manuscripts I studied. Twelve of those were in volumes definitely belonging to al-Rabbāt, three more were quite probably also from the same source. The earliest date he left is found in Wetzstein II 542, which he read in 1250/1834. He consulted the rest of al-Rabbāt’s books between 1253/1837 and 1262/1846, and therefore probably after their original owner’s death. First he was interested in his contemporary history as a reader, in 1253/1837, of the History of the French occupation of Egypt (al-Ghāwī al-munṭawī, Wetzstein II 378). That same year he also studied at least one volume of Sirat al-Barāmikā (Wetzstein II 381) and the Sirat al-Malik ʿUmar b. al-Nuʿmān (Wetzstein II 682). Six years elapsed before ʿAbd al-Qādīr Shānū dated another of his readership statements. It was at the end of 1259/1844 that he pursued a volume of Sayf Dhū l-Yazan (Wetzstein II 641), followed one month later at the beginning of 1260/1844 by Wetzstein II 506, a volume of Ghazwat al-Arqāt, which he took up again nearly three years onward at the end of 1262/1846. In between those dates fell his reading of the following volume of the same Ghazwat al-Arqāt (Wetzstein II 507), which he completed one month after the first. The last of al-Rabbāt’s books he used was the paraenetic collection of exemplary biographies Rawd al-rayāḥīn (Vollers 174) in 1262/1846.

71 E.g. ʿAbd al-Qādīr al-Ṭūkhī read in 1232/1817 one volume of the Sirat al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāb (Wetzstein II 492) and ten years later in 1242/1827 two volumes of the Sirat Muḥammad al-Kūrdī b. Karkhān (Wetzstein II 542-543).
The entertaining stories collected in Wetzstein II 704 seem to have aroused the special interest of 'Abd al-Qādir Sbānū, since he returned to it no less than four times over the course of seven years! They are not marked as a possession of al-Rabbāt, but bear a note of a certain Amīn al-Rabbāt, probably a son of the elder al-Rabbāt, and may therefore – especially given the many readers of this volume also found in books definitely belonging to the father – quite possibly be ascribed to Ahmad al-Rabbāt himself. 'Abd al-Qādir turned to this volume first in 1253/1837, then read it again in each of the next two years, and finally five years later in 1260/1844. In 1254/1838 he was accompanied by Şāliḥ al-‘Azīziyya al-Midānī, a man otherwise known as a reader of many of al-Rabbāt’s books. Two those must have been some kind of reading companions, since they read the same work together again on at least two occasions. Indeed, reading sessions in groups, also in a private setting, were probably not uncommon, even if the reader’s entries are mostly silent about that aspect. Not everybody liked to read alone in his chamber. Public reading – besides the well-known sessions of scholars for the purpose of studying – occurred on many levels and was by no means confined to the sphere of the popular epic. The Damascene chronicler Ibn Kannān (1074/1663-1153/1740) reports in many instances how he and his learned companions sought on their frequent trips to the gardens and countryside of Damascus to amuse themselves with all kinds of texts, among them his own chronicle.

All the 24 other books 'Abd al-Qādir Sbānū al-'Aqqād read belonged to three different complete sets of the Sirāt 'Antar, which were nonetheless all in the possession of 'Abdallāh al-Baghdādī, another important figure on the market of popular epics in Damascus and a man who apparently took over many of his books from al-Rabbāt. And at least two volumes among al-Baghdādī’s last set read by al-'Aqqād indeed belonged to al-Rabbāt. As far as they are dated, the volumes were all read in the last two months of 1260/1844 and the first two months of the following year in a straightforward fashion, which thereby marks

72 Wetzstein II 378 (Kitāb al-Ghāwī al-muntawī, 1253), 381 (Sirāt al-Barāmika, in 1253), 636 + 638 (Sayf Dhib 'l-Yazan, in 1255), 679 + 682 (Sirāt 'Umar al-Nu'mān, in 1253), 691 (Ghazwat al-sab' husūn, in 1251), 697 (Hikāyat al-Malik Shabramān, twice in 1254). He is equally called Şāliḥ 'Aziz or 'Azīz.

73 While both men left separate readership statements in Wetzstein II 697, the Hikāyat al-Malik Shabramān, they are both dated on the same day, 2 Sha’bān 1254/21 October 1838 (and therefore the same year they also read Wetzstein II 704 together). The same is true for Wetzstein II 682, the Sirāt al-Malik 'Umar b. Nu'mān, which both men read 24 Radjab 1253/24 (December 1837). The two are also found as readers of Wetzstein II 924, but at a difference of seven years between their entries. Only one day separates their respective readership notes in Wetzstein II 378.

74 Cf. Ibn Kannān, Yawmiyyat, 340.

75 Wetzstein II 924, 926, 927, 928, 929, 930, 931, 932, 933, 937, 938, 940, 943, 945, 946, 947, 949, 950, 955, 956, 957, 958, 1053, 1054.
his busiest reading period. It also shows how al-Baghdādi — and certainly al-Rabbāt like him — kept three different complete sets of this enormous collection in his library and handed out those parts needed by a reader to continue a story straightforwardly by taking the necessary volumes from all three collections as they were available.

The second exemplary reader, ‘Abdollāh al-Djabbān, was probably a vendor of dairy products as his name suggests. A reader’s entry he left in Vollers 161 may be indicative of his level of erudition: Obviously unable to or uncomfortable with penning his own entry, he rather chose to copy an ownership statement from the year 1055/1645 which he found on the same page. Unfortunately for ‘Abdollāh his source was equally unable to express himself correctly and concluded his note with the phrase “ghafara a-l-h [scil. Allāh la-hū] wa-li waladihi [scil. wālidayhi] wa-li muslimīn min.” None of the mistakes are particularly unique to this writer, but the totally absurd repetition of the last syllable of the word muslimīn is striking and is something I have never encountered anywhere else, which makes it all the more telling to see ‘Abdollāh faithfully repeat the same “muslimīn min” two hundred years later in his own entry. ‘Abdollāh al-Djabbān was, nonetheless, a busy reader who left readership statements in 50 volumes over the course of 14 years. Three of these books definitely belonged to al-Rabbāt and three more probably did. The three works from al-Rabbāt’s library are: the Qīssat Ayyūb al-Ṣābir (Vollers 110) read in 1255/1839, al-Rabbāt’s own copy of Kalīla wa-Dīmna (Wetzstein II 672) in 1264/1848, and the paragentic Qūt al-qulūb (Vollers 161) with a now erased date probably in the 1250s. Outside the library of al-Rabbāt there is one astonishingly dense period of reading in which he consumed — in this order — no less than the story of Maryam al-Zanānīriyya (Wetzstein II 698, the story is found in the Arabian Nights), parts of al-Tāyyr al-nāṣiq (Wetzstein II 654, 655, 658), al-Malik Sayf Dhu l-Yazan (Wetzstein II 643), and the Iskandar-novel (Wetzstein II 522, 523, 524), all in nine days between the 2nd and the 11th Djamādā I 1269/February 11-20, 1853. Unfortunately, he does not inform us whether this was his usual reading pace and he had a natural craving for stories, or if this was an extraordinary break from his daily routine, perhaps caused by an illness or the like. Other works consulted by ‘Abdollāh al-Djabbān are a volume of the novel Hamza Aqrān (Wetzstein II 685) in 1266/1849, the fable-collection Marzūbān-nāma (Sprenger 1248) in the same year, the collection of stories Wetzstein II 704 in 1261/1845, the pseudo-historical Futūḥ al-Shām by al-Wāqīdī (Wetzstein II 725) in 1261/1845, and another novel Diwān al-Harās (Wetzstein II 900) without a date, but after 1261/1845 when the volume was copied.

Al-Djabbān was also reader of the same sets of Sīrat ‘Antar from the library of ‘Abdollāh al-Baghdādi as ‘Abd al-Qādir Sbānū and his name is found in 34 of the
many volumes in their libraries. But he was less straightforward in his reading attitude. It sometimes seems as if he read the story backwards, e.g. when he consulted Wetzstein II 977 in 1261/1845, Wetzstein II 976 in 1263/1847, and Wetzstein II 975 in 1264/1848. His reading experience is also marked by large intervals. Therefore it took him more than three years to follow up on Wetzstein II 980 (6th Rabī' I 1261/March 15, 1845) with the following volume Wetzstein II 981 (5th Dhū l-Ḥijjādja 1264/November, 2 1848), while in the meantime he did read, among many others, Wetzstein II 984, 989, and 992 from the same collection. This is most certainly indicative of, on the one hand, how one took those volumes available at a particular time without paying too much attention to how the storyline unfolded. On the other hand it may show how those epics were read not with the aim of pursuing a coherent epical story from beginning to end, but enjoying its pieces independently. Some of them may have stuck and made the reader want to return to it. That is why ʿAbdallāh al-Djabbān, like ʿAbd al-Qādir Sbānū, reread many of the books, sometimes with many years between the first and second consultation. Wetzstein II 997 was first read in 1264/1848 and picked up again only in 1269/1853, Wetzstein II 999 in 1264/1848 and 1270/1854. Or did ʿAbdallāh al-Djabbān simply forget which of the innumerable volumes of popular sīras he had already read and it was the booklender’s hand which determined that he should come across a certain volume again?

4.4 Possessing and lending: Why turn to Ahmad al-Rabbāt’s library?

There are a few readers of al-Rabbāt’s books who had libraries of their own. A comparison between the books they read with al-Rabbāt and those they possessed themselves might reveal for what reasons they frequently turned to an outside source when in some cases they clearly had the means to buy their own manuscripts. Two members of the Damascene Zaytūna family are a perfect example for this. Muḥammad Amīn b. ʿUmar al-Zuhdi b. Ibrahim aghā, known as Zaytūna (born in 1237/1821, d. after 1293/1876) did not catch the attention of a contemporary biographer or chronicler, but in 1869 he was friends with Albert Socin (1844-99) and Eugen Prym (1843-1913), two German scholars residing in Damascus, and provided them with precious books, which may have been his

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76 Wetzstein II 904 (19.10.64), 905 (13.09.69), 907 (12.10.64), 909 (25.10.64), 917 (15.11.64), 934 (25.10.1259), 954 (12.03.1263), 966 (22.04.1263), 970 (11.09.1262 + 6.05.1263), 975 (64), 976 (22.05.63), 977 (26.02.1261), 980 (6.03.61), 981 (5.12.64), 984 (61 + 17.05.63), 989 (5.07.1263), 992 (10.07.64), 996 (17.02.70), 997 (64 + 26.03.69), 999 (27.07.64 + 17.02.70), 1001 (4.02.1263), 1003 (64), 1004 (15.01.65), 1009 (22.02.63 + 11.03.1270), 1010 (5.03.68), 1012 (17.03.1270), 1013 (10.09.64), 1015 (13.09.64), 1018 (21.09.1263), 1019 (28.09.1264), 1020, 1021 (2.10.64), 1028 (5.09.1263 + 28.10.1263), 1050 (24.03.63).

77 The date of birth is taken from biographical notes on the Zaytūna family found in Ms. Berlin Wetzstein II 1148, fol. 50v.
main profession. Born into a world of manuscripts, he was later to become one of the first Damascenes to use the printing press to spread his literary predilections as an editor of five classic Diwâns in 1293/1876. He was a reader of six manuscripts from the former possession of al-Rabbât in the years from 1257/1841 until 1259/1843, being between 20 and 22 years old. His father 'Umar Zaytûna (born 1218/1803) had, at the young age of fifteen, already used four books from al-Rabbât's library in the year 1233/1818. And a fifth one (Wetzstein II 566), in which his entry’s date is unfortunately erased, most probably also belonged to al-Rabbât, since it is part of a large and uniform set of the Sirat al-Zâhir Baybars of which some volumes bear al-Rabbât's ownership statements.

Apart from al-Rabbât’s books, the father ‘Umar Zaytûna read three more volumes he apparently did not own himself. One of them was the second part of the encyclopedic adab collection Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā’ wa-muḥāwarzāt al-shu‘ara’ (Wetzstein II 424) by Râghib ibn Iṣâfâhânî (d. 502/1109). The date is erased, but this is one of only two books he shared with his son Amîn, who read it on 18th Muḥarram 1267 (November, 23 1850). Another madjmû’a ‘Umar read in 1258/1842 (Wetzstein II 1233) is somewhat complementary to the first volume, only the texts here assembled deal with the art of music. That ‘Umar Zaytûna was

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78 Socin, Diwâne, 667-8: “Dieser Mann ist meinem Freunde Prym und mir von unserem Aufent- halte in Damascus her wohl bekannt. Er war damals (1869) unser Buchhändler; öfters brachte er halbe Tage bei uns zu, und es war interessant, ihm, dem weitgereisten zuzuhören. Er brachte zur Seltenheit schöne Handschriften.” Interestingly, Socin could have been acquainted with Amîn Zaytûna’s name as well as with that of his father from manuscripts he might have used in the Rifā‘iyya library that found their way to Leipzig - where Socin studied and would later ascend to the chair of Arabic - even before he embarked on his journey to Damascus.

79 Cf. ibidem. The work was printed in Cairo.

80 Berlin Wetzstein II 378 (1259), 486 (1257), 487 (1257); Tübingen Ms. Ma VI 32 (17.10.1258), Tübingen Ms. Ma VI 42 (27.11.1257); Leipzig Vollers 612. Although Wetzstein II 486 does not carry an ownership statement by al-Rabbât, it may – since it belongs to the same set of Sirat al-Hâkim bi-Amrillah and was read by Amîn at the same date in 1257 as Wetzstein II 487 - safely be assumed that it belonged to al-Rabbât as well, though Amîn read it sometime after his assumed date of death.

81 The date of birth is taken from biographical notes on the Zaytûna family found in Ms. Berlin Wetzstein II 1148, fol. 50v. He was first given the name Muḥammad, but when the shaykh 'Umar al-Kallâb visited the family he was renamed Bâni Hâni, Târîkh, 362, lists him among the “kibâr al-ashrâf.” In the document cited by him, ‘Umar is called: “al-âmâthil al-‘izâm al-sayyid ‘Umar djalâbî b. iftikhâr al-amâthil al-fikhâm Ibrâhim aghâ Zaytûna.” Even with the pompous style of the court scribes taken into account, the family must have had some standing in the city.

82 Berlin Wetzstein II 513 (1.3.1233), 514 (3.1233), 515 (1.3.1233), 516 (1.3.1233).

83 There is also some regional touch to it, since the last work of the collection, Muḥammad Efendî al-Kandîjî’s (d. around 1150/1737) Bulûg al-munâna fi tarâdîm abîl-ghunâ treats the biographies of the author’s contemporary singers and musicians in Damascus.
part of a network of readers that may have had al-Rabbāt at its center is suggested when looking at another reader of Wetzstein II 1233, Muṣṭafā b. Ahmad Barakāt. This man read Wetzstein II 578 in the year 1227/1812, a volume belonging to the same set of Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars as Wetzstein II 566 which ʿUmar Zaytūna read while many of the volumes of this set bear ownership marks of al-Rabbāt. The same people frequently came to the same library to read the same books and possibly also to exchange their views about them. It may, therefore, be assumed that al-Rabbāt could also be the owner of Wetzstein II 1233. But it may well be that it was the ties between several of the readers that established a network reaching to other libraries and not the library of al-Rabbāt that connected them. Lastly, there is Michigan Isl. Ms. 503, the Sufic Kitāb al-Djawāḥir wa-l-duwar by ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Shaʿrānī (898/1493-973/1565), which ʿUmar read in 1250/1834, followed two years later by his son. The son Muhammad Amin Zaytūna is registered as a reader outside the library of al-Rabbāt only in the two volumes (Michigan Isl. Ms. 503 in 1252/1836 and Wetzstein II 424 in 1267/1851) already mentioned among those used by his father.

ʿUmar Zaytūna possessed at least ten books and this is also true for his son. But at least in the case of the latter this was certainly only the smaller part of a very fluctuating library, since all of the manuscripts entered the market and were purchased both for the Rifāʿiyya library and for the Wetzstein collections when Amin was still a young man and long before his death. In the books of their own possession both father and son shared the predilection of al-Rabbāt for poetry and refined as well as entertaining prose or prosometric literature (adab). Works of these genres make up for the most part of their collections. Among them is the first part of Zawāhir al-djawāḥir (Vollers 607), a voluminous adab-anthology compiled by Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Anṣārī al-Kātib in the 7th/13th century with the ownership statement of Amin. ʿUmar Zaytūna possessed the Dirāwān of Bahaʾ al-Din Zuhayr (581/1186-656/1258; Wetzstein I 43), that of Ibrāhīm al-Qiraṭi (726/1326-781/1379; Wetzstein I 45), and also a selection from the Dirāwān of al-Mutanabbī (303/915-354/965; Wetzstein I 47). He bought a voluminous collection of poems bound in red leather, called Rawdat al-mushtaq wa-bahdjat al-ʿushbahq by the local Damascene poet Māmayh al-Rūmī in 1251/1835 (Wetzstein II 243). His son Amin, too, participated in the local veneration for this man and bought another copy, though not as beautifully adorned, in 1267/1851 (Wetzstein II 163). Especially interesting in this segment is the appearance of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s Dirāwān twice among the books of Amin Zaytūna. First, he completed an essentially older fragment in 1265/1849 (Wetzstein I 146) and then shortly afterwards bought a small copy, dated 867/1463 (Wetzstein I 35), in the year 1267/1851 – and apparently resold both of them in that same year since they are

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84 This man was reading the same text preserved in a manuscript of the Rifāʿiyya in Leipzig, Vollers 546.
part of the first Wetzstein-collection which was acquired around the year 1850. Amīn could have read this book in al-Rabbāt’s library as well. ‘Umar Zaytūna was also interested in the fine penmanship necessary for learned secretaries and men of letters from the heyday of Islamic chancellery. He possessed a part of al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 732/1332) manual for scribes, Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab (Wetzstein II 1) – which had an illustrious pre-possessor in Abū Bakr b. Rustum al-Shirwānī, an Ottoman bibliophile85 – and Usāma b. Munqidh’s (497/1104-584/1188) al-Badi’ fi l-badi’ (Wetzstein II 134).

Historical interest in Muslim Spain can be found on Amīn Zaytūna’s part in Vol- lers 669, containing an abridgement of Naṣḥ al-ṭib min ghusn al-Andalus al-khaṭīb by al-Maqṣarī (d. 1041/1631-32) and Bashtakin’s (d. 830/1427) abridgment of al-Ibāta bi-tārīkh Gharbāta by Līsān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1374) on the history of Granada. Like al-Rabbāt, Amīn Zaytūna possessed manuscripts with ties to the Ottoman elite, as is witnessed by a small history of the Ottoman dynasty, or more accurately that of the Sultan Salīm b. Bāyāzīd. This al-Djawālib al-muṣāf a fi ayyām al-dawla al-uthmāniyya (Sprenger 198), the work of the high profile Damascene scholar Quṭb al-Dīn Muhammad Ibn Sulṭān al-Dīmašqī (870/1466-950/1543), consists of only a few small pages and its modern cardboard binding does not attract the eye, but it was superbly executed and ordained with a lavishly ornamented title page which states that the work was transcribed for the library of the Ottoman Sultan Selim – the very man praised between its covers.86 Amīn bought the booklet in 1266/1850. Some history is also found in the madjmā’ā Wetzstein II 422, which contains texts on Egypt, biographies, but also some mystical treatise by Ibn ‘Arabī, copies of documents, verses, and legal reasoning on inheritance and ḥasbiḥ. Two more madjmā’ as assemble – as usual – widely diverse texts: Wetzstein II 1725 offers the manual for physicians Da’wat al-ḥibbā by Ibn Buṭlān (d. 458/1066) along side poetry, prayers, biographies, one Sufic and one philosophical treatise, while Wetzstein II 1755 serves uplifting stories of ascetic saints next to a collection of law court documents.

There is a greater share of religious works – especially spirituality, prayer, and mysticism – to be found among Zaytūna’s books when compared to al-Rabbāt’s. Amīn had a small volume with simple Coranic exegesis and a treatise on the eternal light of the prophet Muḥammad (Wetzstein I 102). Sufism was represented as well in the books of his father, in this case by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Djilī’s Sharḥ al-khāla wa al-muṭlaqa (Wetzstein I 115), which he bought in 1263/1847 from the estate of ‘Abdallāh al-Uṣṭuwānī. ‘Umar Zaytūna’s earliest

85 Cf. note 64.
possession in 1241/1826 was a small collection of dogmatic treatises (Wetzstein II 1533).

So the question remains, why did the Zaytūnas frequent al-Rabbāt’s library? When comparing the dates of Zaytūna’s ownership statements with those of the reading entries in al-Rabbāt’s books, the first seem to be clearly of a later stage in their lives. ʿUmar Zaytūna read al-Rabbāt’s novels at the young age of 15 in the year 1233/1818. As far as we know, he started buying his own books in 1241, but most of them in the late 1250s and 60s. Amīn read al-Rabbāt’s books in 1257/1841 and 1259/1843, being 20 to 22 years old at the time, but all the ownership statements date from 1265/1849 through 1271/1854. Also, the books they bought for themselves, as well as those they read in other libraries at a more advanced age, were all of a serious nature or of widely accepted linguistic brilliance, fit for scholars and men of letters. They apparently turned to al-Rabbāt when they wanted more epic-like entertainment. And both men’s young age at the time they did so might have played a role in the choice of this reading.87

5 The afterlife of the library

Parts of al-Rabbāt’s library clearly stayed in the hands of at least two of his sons, ʿAbd and Muḥammad. The two left little evidence of their possession in the books, but the entries of some readers who used many books now scattered in different collections over a long period of time after 1252/1836 give the distinct impression that much of the library continued to be accessible as a whole, e. g. in the cited examples of ʿAbdallāh al-Djabbān and ʿAbd al-Qādir Sbānū. The fact that many readers from the Berlin manuscripts are also found in the Rifāʿiyya in Leipzig at very late dates leaves open the possibility that the Rifāʿiyya itself was either a lending library for popular literature – a rather unlikely scenario – or the bulk of the remains of al-Rabbāt’s library were sold off only at a very late stage. This is supported by the fact that Johann Gottfried Wetzstein and Alois Sprenger alone bought no less than 130 volumes from al-Rabbāt’s possession around the year 1270/1853, the date the Rifāʿiyya was sold.

Some manuscripts, on the other hand, must have been sold while al-Rabbāt’s was still alive. Saʿīd al-Khālīdī, servant at the shrine of Bīlāl al-Ḥabashī, is known as the reader of four manuscripts between 1240/1825 (Sprenger 5) and 1250/1835

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87 In the autobiographical report of the Medieval Jewish convert to Islam Samawʿal al-Maghribī, appended to his polemic ʾIshām al-yahūd, he explicitly links his own early fascination with popular epics such as ʿAntar to young age, while maturity made him seek out more reliable books of history. The passage is discussed in Reynolds, Popular Prose, 254; cf. also Rosenthal, History, 46-7. Cf. another example from the 19th century cited in Strauß, Who read what, 50-1.
(Vollers 32). With one exception, all were at some point in the possession of al-Rabbāṭ. This makes it quite certain that he used the books when they were together in one library, i.e. al-Rabbāṭ’s. Since al-Khālīḍī read Sprenger 5 in 1240/1825 the book would at this point be found in al-Rabbāṭ’s collection and Antin Djabbārā, who purchased Sprenger 5 1241/1826, would have bought it from al-Rabbāṭ. The latter date must then be regarded as the terminus ante quem for al-Rabbāṭ’s possession, meaning – if correct – that he parted from this very precious item during his lifetime. But 1252/1836 indeed seems to be some kind of a watershed moment. Those readers who consulted books before 1252/1836 and also at a later date are very few, supporting the notion that parts of the library changed hands around this time, but probably essentially stayed together in the hands of his two sons, albeit with a slightly altered network of readers.

Many of al-Rabbāṭ’s books, especially the sīra-collections, later passed into the hands of ʿAbdallāh al-Baḥḍāḏī al-Qādirī, who probably acted in just the same manner with regard to the segment of entertaining prose and adab literature as al-Rabbāṭ’s did before or next to him. Many of these multi-volume sets bear the names of both men, and in many instances they even shared the same readers, like the aforementioned ʿAbdallāh al-Djabbān or Abd al-Qādir ʿSāhu al-ʿAqqād ʿAbdallāh al-Baḥḍāḏī’s exact lifetime is unknown, but that it was him who followed al-Rabbāṭ in the possession of the latter’s books – and not the other way around – is secured by two of al-Rabbāṭ’s ownership statements that were erased and his name replaced by that of al-Baḥḍāḏī. Furthermore, the only one dated among al-Baḥḍāḏī’s books bears the year 1266/1850, a time when al-Rabbāṭ was quite certainly no longer alive. The library of this man, as far as their remains were accessible to me, is different from that of al-Rabbāṭ only in the absence of the very precious books which lend such a distinctive contrast – both in terms of outer appearance and content – to al-Rabbāṭ’s otherwise quite poor-looking collection. But the example of al-Baḥḍāḏī’s son shows once again how the borders between the literary worlds of popular entertainment, pious learning, and higher education were constantly blurred. This man,

88 Only Muhammad Nadjīb al-Ḥusaynī was a reader in the 1240s as well as the 1250s: Wetzstein II 556 (Shawwāl 1256), 636 (1245), 637 (1241), 641 (1241), 677 (middle Dijmāda I 1242), 680 (Shaʿbān 1251), 682 (6 Ramaḍān 1250).

89 Also, the few new ownership dates point to the same timeframe. Generally, the marks of possession dated during or after al-Rabbāṭ’s lifetime are very sparse: 1231 (Vollers 2); 1236 (Wetzstein II 579); 1248 (Wetzstein II 521, the buyer in this instance being also in 1243 a reader of al-Rabbāṭ’s book Wetzstein II 679); 1248 (Harvard Ms. Arab. 396); before 1250 (V 617, contact between Jewish merchants from that date combined with a reader’s statement); 1241 (Sprenger 5); 1253 (Wetzstein I 169 and 169bis; Damascus Zāhiriyah 3884 madjmūʿa 151).

90 Wetzstein II 702, fol. 74r and Wetzstein II 794, fol. 1r.

91 Wetzstein II 1723, fol. 125r.

92 This might very well be a problem of transmission.
'Abd al- Раհmān b. ‘Abdallāh al-Baghdādī, took over at least some of the sīra-library of his father.93 But he, unlike his father and much like al-Rabbāt, also possessed very elegant copies of texts from a more scholarly environment.94 This is not surprising, since ‘Abd al- Раհmān al-Baghdādī describes himself in some of his notes as “al-qādī bi-Dimashq al-Shām” and “ḥafid al-qādī al-‘āmm bi-Dimashq al-Shām”95 and therefore hails from the same class of career jurists-prudents as ‘Umar al-Riḍā’i al-Ḥamawī, the former judge who bought no fewer than 46 of al-Rabbāt’s manuscripts for his own library, the Riḍā‘iyaa.

6 Conclusion

The interested readers of the Ottoman Empire’s Arabic-speaking provinces had little in the way of public resources to turn to in their quest for information and literary entertainment. The pious endowments of mosques or madrasas, in the hands and under the watchful eyes of supervisors often scolded for their mismanagement, were usually not trying to establish collections beyond the realm of the religious curriculum. The private libraries of scholars and dignitaries, on the other hand, were mostly open only to a small network of peers.

A private, but apparently publicly accessible manuscript collection like that of al-Rabbāt must, therefore, have been one of or the only key for many segments of society to gain access to non-religious literature and learning. Al-Rabbāt’s surely catered to the needs of those with an appetite for sīras, but his library attracted an audience not only from every social strata but also interested in a wide array of literary genres apart from those taught in the traditional religious curriculum. The collection’s content was as inclusive as were its readers, ranging from vernacular poetry to epics and entertaining adab-collections to geography, medicine, or law. And at least some readers showed an openness and the ability to cross the lines between the venerated classical texts and those of their own time and within the most diverse literary genres. It is this variety and social openness, intangible in any contemporary chronicle or biographical dictionary and shown by people otherwise often completely unknown, which should be kept in mind when searching for the social-historical background of literary developments in the Middle East. After all, it was this audience that was to be confronted and had to adopt any foray into new literary territory. For the contemporary chroniclers and biographers that usually define our understanding of the cultural sphere of

93 Wetzstein II 962–980 (Sīrat ‘ Antar).
94 Wetzstein II 256, a commentary of Ibn al-Fārīd’s Diwān by al-Ḥasan al-Būrīnī, a fine copy for which al-Baghdādī paid 190 qursb in the year 1269/1852.
95 Wetzstein II 999, fol. 84v and back cover.
the Damascene society, this literary territory was on the margin of what they believed to be truly important and noteworthy. But for many users of al-Rabbāṭ’s library it was clearly in the center of their literary interests.

Like the totality of manuscripts and collections of the same regional origin and time period that I had the chance to study, this Damascene library, although not antiquarian and containing also works of contemporary history, does not show an interest in or a reception of literary trends of European origin which were beginning to be felt in Syria towards the end of al-Rabbāṭ’s lifetime. On the other hand, we should not jump to hasty conclusions. After all, the whole extent of this library is not yet and may never be completely known. Did al-Rabbāṭ possess translations of European texts? Did he even include in his library the first printed Arabic books, which had reached Damascus – though to an unknown extent – with the Egyptian occupation and which by definition would not show up in any manuscript collection? Al-Rabbāṭ was a contemporary to the first movement of translating modern European textbooks into Arabic, a movement that in the Egyptian port of Dimyāṭ at the beginning of the 19th century was largely upheld by Christian scholars from the Syrian lands with a knowledge of Greek like the priest Ḥusayn Petro (Bītū). Whether the circle of al-Rabbāṭ knew of this man’s works – which included translations of modern treatises on philosophy or astronomy, but also a history of China – is not known. But the connections between Dimyāṭ and Damascus existed, as a translation by Petro of a Greek history of the first century of Christianity made for Dībīji’s Shāh hāda Šabbagh al-Dimashqī in 1817 suggests. Since it was open to Christians and Jews, there is no reason to assume that other contemporary, less exclusively Christian texts translated from the Greek may not have entered al-Rabbāṭ’s library through these contacts. Surely, this collection will have more surprises to offer.

96 Cf. on him recently Reichmuth, Wissenstransfer, 35-48.
97 Ms. Princeton, Yahuda collection 2326.
98 The manuscript is now preserved in Leipzig – where, ironically, the original Greek work had also been printed – under the shelf mark Vollers 1069.
The reconstructed library of Aḥmad al-Rabbāṭ as identified until now

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