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EXPERIENTIA AND AUCTORITAS: ‘ABD AL-LATIF AL-BAGHDADI’S *KITĀB AL-IFĀDA WA’L-I’TIBĀR* AND THE BIRTH OF THE CRITICAL GAZE

Knowledge conforms fully to the object known, because it is the spiritual form of the object known. The difference between the two is that the object known is a form whose substratum is matter, whereas knowledge is a form whose substratum is the soul.

—‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi*

On October 16, 2009, the Neues Museum in Berlin reopened to the public after having been closed for seventy years. As the German Chancellor Angela Merkel officially inaugurated the newly renovated exhibition space, she was photographed contemplating the highlight of the collection, the famous bust of Nefertiti. Images of this moment flooded the news, internet sites, and other media, attracting the attention of the world.¹ It was probably the resonant tête-à-tête of two strong women that made this image so attractive to the public, calling to mind the history of female power and names such as the Queen of Sheba, Cleopatra, Theodora, Eleanor of Aquitaine, as well as, in the modern era, Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher. But apart from the deliberate recontextualization of the bust of Nefertiti within the framework of German history and the history of the Berlin museum—a no less ideological issue readily and frequently advanced in Berlin in order to thwart the oft-repeated demand by the former head of the Egyptian antiquities, Zahi Hawass, to return the bust to Cairo—it is worth reflecting on the particular fascination an object from another culture can exert in its new cultural environment.² In fact, Merkel’s gaze may be seen as epitomizing the long history of Europe gazing, with fascination, at the Orient. It emphasizes aesthetic amazement as a potential first step in a process leading to the acquisition of knowledge.³

This gaze of fascination is, generally speaking, the subject of this article, which examines how a “strange” and enigmatic object from the past history of another culture, in this case Pharaonic, gave rise to a new and novel mode of aesthetic investigation or, more accurately, a new mode of seeing. The object of the other—or really any exotic object—involves other aesthetic canons that challenge our conventional perceptions and as a result can foster new modalities of digesting knowledge. My object of observation is the famous Sphinx of Giza, an object that was, and still is, a source of fascination. For centuries the Sphinx has attracted the eyes of its visitors and been an object of public viewing, as evidenced today by the millions of tourist photographs uploaded to the digital global network and, for the past, by the numerous graffiti inscriptions that, according to medieval Arab writers, were to be seen on the now lost marble panels that once covered the pyramids of Giza immediately adjacent to the Sphinx.⁴ The latter are the best evidence of the medieval tourism that developed around this site, even though it must be pointed out that in the modern era no graffiti have been found on the Sphinx. As Andreas Hartmann has recently suggested, this remarkable one-time presence of graffiti may be due to the fact that the Sphinx was worshipped as a religious deity associated with Helios Harmachis.⁵

A huge map—one could even say *veduta*—created by Matteo Pagano around 1549 and titled *La vera descrizione de la gran cita del Caiero* (fig. 1) includes what is probably one of the earliest depictions of the Sphinx being observed or, rather, marveled at by travelers.⁶ The numerous extant images from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries, especially up to the year 1925 when the excavation of the body of the lying Sphinx began,



Fig. 1. Matteo Pagano, *La vera descrizione de la gran cita del Caiero*. Italy, Venice, ca. 1549. Print on paper, 102.0 × 192.5 cm. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin P.K., inv. no. 924-1000. (Photo: courtesy of the State Museums of Berlin)

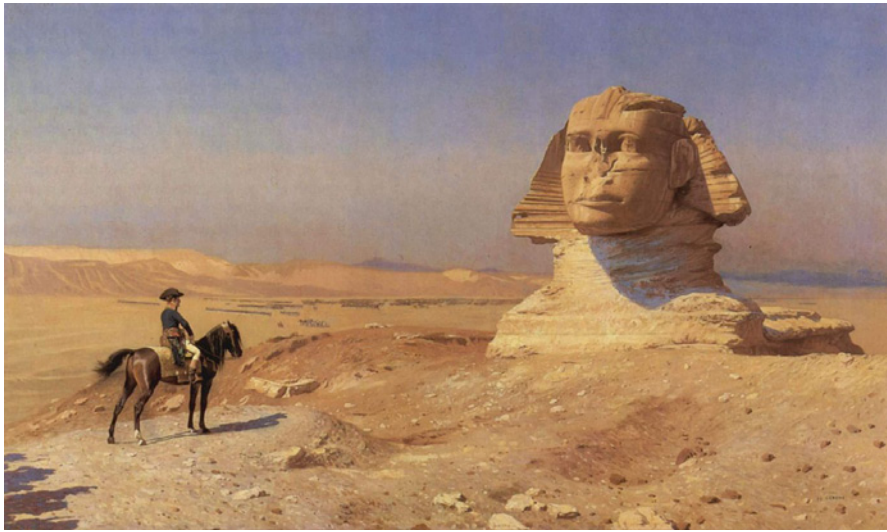


Fig. 2. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Bonaparte before the Sphinx*. France, 1867–68. Oil on canvas, 61.6 × 102.9 cm. San Simeon, California, Hearst Castle, inv. no. 529-9-5092. (Photo: Hearst Castle, San Simeon, California)

clearly attest to the particular fascination this monumental sculpture exerted on humankind.⁷ Of course, we should keep in mind that the entire burial complex with its guardian Sphinx and the huge pyramids, indeed the thousands of years of Pharaonic civilization, remained completely inscrutable until 1822, when the Egyptian hieroglyph script was deciphered. Until then, these monuments were endowed with a special, if not magical aura.⁸

It is tempting to speculate how Napoleon Bonaparte must have felt when he first encountered the Sphinx. Jean-Léon Gérôme (d. 1904) tried to convey this particular pathos-filled moment in a painting he created almost seventy years after Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt, in 1867–68. The painting, *Bonaparte before the Sphinx* (fig. 2), presents the monarch on a horse in front of the Sphinx, in the large and wide desert, as if contemplating the grand history of times past.⁹ In fact, this image of Napoleon strongly recalls the mythological tale of the young Oedipus encountering a Sphinx. Like Oedipus, Napoleon tried to solve the riddle of this sculpture and, metaphorically speaking, that of the ancient civilization.

Arguably, the inception of Napoleon’s comprehensive research project, the *Description de l’Égypte*, in May 1798, marked the beginning of a new chronological

narrative of the history of civilization, a narrative that has had implications not only for the history of culture and humanism but also for political chronicles of the Middle East.¹⁰ A huge project that took about three years (1798–1801) to establish, it resulted in a mammoth descriptive and illustrated series of volumes covering most of the archaeological monuments of Egypt. In February 1802, a commission began to prepare for this monumental publication, and the volumes published between 1809 and 1822 were, and have been regarded ever since as, memorial legacies of the history of civilization, a testimonial for centuries to come. The publication put Egypt, if not the “Orient,” on the large historical map of the world and gave it—mainly its Pharaonic era—a place within the story of human civilization, a framework that to this day dominates the concept of classifying and displaying objects of art in most public museums aiming to tell the story of civilization.

As history shows time and again, cultural exposure of the West to the East, an exposure usually mingled with fascination and mystery, propelled and inspired Western academic investigations and intellectual reflection. In the case of Western exposure to Egypt, and especially Western interactions with its Pharaonic art and culture, an additional factor played a role. Since this period

remained completely unintelligible until Jean-François Champollion broke the code of the hieroglyphs and deciphered the Rosetta Stone in 1822, the ancient epoch as a whole was endowed with an immensely powerful, auratic cultural value. It was an indecipherable culture that until then appeared to some extent to be alien to, or placed outside of, world history. The fact that until 1822 no historical date could be attached to it to position it in time made it seem to be outside of history, hence the mystery and enigma associated with ancient Egypt.¹¹

'ABD AL-LATIF AL-BAGHDADI'S INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY

The present article focuses on 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, a scholar and scientist of the Ayyubid period who wrote, taught, and published extensively at the height of the Crusades, in the days of Saladin (d. 1193), and whose fascination with the ancient Pharaonic monuments in Egypt was reflected in his writings and ended up transforming, as I will argue, his views on how to encounter, learn, and understand the visible and tangible world of the past.¹² 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's full name is Muwaffaq al-Din Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi b. Yusuf b. Muhammad b. 'Ali', also known as al-Labbad. He was a prolific writer, philosopher, and scientist. The biographical information about him that has come down to us is found mainly in an edition of his autobiography compiled and edited by his contemporary fellow scholar Ibn Abi Usaybi'ah (d. 1270) in a book called *'Uyūn al-anbā' fī ṭabaqāt al-aṭibbā'* (Sources of Information on Classes of Physicians).¹³ According to this book, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi was born in Baghdad in 557 (1162) into a scholarly and learned Baghdadi family and died there in 629 (1231–32) at the age of 69. Wandering among and teaching in numerous learning centers of the Levant, he began his educational career in his native city of Baghdad, at the Zafariyya Mosque, mostly under the supervision of Wajih al-Din Wasiti (d. 1215). In those early years, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi became a specialist in jurisprudence, grammar, and theology. However, from the very beginning, his interests went far beyond his particular education, extending to other fields such as tribal languages, war methods,

medicine, and philosophy. Moreover, he became particularly interested in changing contemporary practices of learning and methodologies of teaching, which, in his day, were based primarily on memorization and repetition. We are told, for instance, that his knowledge of tribal languages, dialects, and war maneuvers was acquired in those early years through what we today would call fieldwork.¹⁴ One autobiographical anecdote about an early mentor and teacher in Baghdad, Kamal al-Din al-Anbari (d. 1181), shows 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's critical stance toward the teaching methods of the time: "I couldn't understand one bit of his [Kamal al-Din al-Anbari's] continuous and considerable jabbering, even though his students seemed pleased enough with it."¹⁵ Nonetheless 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi was also interested, as mentioned, in medicine, literature, and philosophy, and his interests were arguably focused in particular on the acquisition of broad knowledge, as reflected at the time in the writings of Abu 'Ali al-Husayn b. 'Abdullah Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037), whom 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi knew well, and especially, as I will argue later, on Ibn Sina's novel ideas about human cognition.¹⁶

At the age of 28, in 1189–90, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi began to travel. He visited Greece, Anatolia, Egypt, and Syria. For an intellectual of his stature, especially one who recognized the value of learning outside the madrasa and the library, those travels could be defined as learning expeditions that served to gather experiences and transform them into cumulative knowledge. That same year he also moved to Mosul and started to teach in the "suspended" (*mu'allāqa*) college of Ibn Muhajir. There he was exposed to the works of Shihab al-Din Yahya b. Habash b. Amirak al-Suhrawardi al-Maqtul (d. 1191), which he viewed very critically and considered flawed. During this period in Mosul he wrote a book on the human body that brought him fame, as it became a definitive work for Arab scholars interested in the subject. A year later he was in Damascus and subsequently he joined Saladin on his way to Palestine. In 1191 he spent some time with the forces of Saladin that were camping outside the city of Acre and met with other famous scholars such as 'Imad al-Din al-Isfahani (d. 1201) and Baha' al-Din Yusuf b. Rafi b. Shaddad (d. 1235). The encounter with the Ayyubid forces of Saladin later

motivated him to travel to Cairo, probably also in 1191. His studies in Cairo seem to have been a turning point in his intellectual career. In this city he was first introduced to the writings of Abu Nasr al-Farabi (d. 950), Alexander of Aphrodisias (b. ca. A.D. 200), and Themistius (d. 390), and he met with Cairene contemporary scholars such as Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) and Abu’l-Qasim al-Sha’iri (d. unknown). His encounter with the writings of these scholars, and especially with the ideas of al-Farabi, transformed his thought, as his scholarly interest shifted from Ibn Sina’s school of alchemy and medicine to a more philosophical and aesthetic way of thinking. His encounter with Abu’l-Qasim al-Sha’iri, moreover, seems to have been particularly crucial. ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi apparently settled in Cairo but continued to tour the Ayyubid domains, visiting Jerusalem, meeting with scholars in Damascus and Aleppo, and even traveling as far as Anatolia. On his return to Cairo in 1197, he taught in the mosque of al-Azhar, the famous intellectual center of the medieval Arab world. He describes his daily schedule as follows: “Teaching students at Al-Azhar Mosque from daybreak until about the fourth hour; about midday medical students and others would come to me, and at the close of the day I used to return to Al-Azhar Mosque and teach other students. At night I used to work by myself.”¹⁷

Shortly after a major two-year famine (1200–1202) that ruined Egypt’s economy (described in detail in his writings) ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi left Egypt again and moved to Jerusalem, where he taught at the al-Aqsa Mosque. In 1207, or possibly one or two years earlier, he returned to Damascus and taught at the madrasa of the al-Aziziyah Mosque and at the Great Mosque of Damascus. Later on, perhaps between 1212 and 1218, he taught in Aleppo, and during 1220–28 he also traveled in eastern Anatolia and visited various Seljuk courts. He spent most of his time in the province of Erzinjan, at the princely court of ‘Ala’ al-Din Dawud b. Bahram (d. 1237). In 1228–29 he moved from one court to another, visiting Erzurum, Kemakh (Kamakh), Divrigi, and Malatya. He then returned to Aleppo, where he taught medicine for some time. His last journey was to his hometown Baghdad in 1231, most likely in order to present some of his work to the caliph al-Mustansir bi’llah (r. 1226–42). It is also possible, however, that this visit to Baghdad was

part of a longer journey, a pilgrimage to Mecca. But ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s health deteriorated and on 12 Muharram 629 (November 8, 1231) he died and was buried in Baghdad.

This short biographical account indicates that ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi led a very active itinerant life. Of course, his many travels and relocations to different intellectual centers in the Levant were probably also due to the turbulent times and the associated dangers. He witnessed the wars with the Frankish Crusader Kingdoms of the Levant; he witnessed the recapturing of Jerusalem and the Holy Land by Saladin; and at the end of his short life he could have been aware of the alarming rise in power of the Mongols on the eastern borders of the Islamic world. Yet academic mobility, whether in medieval times or today, leads to stimulating encounters with various scholars and with written texts kept in the major libraries of the various centers. ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi also had a private library, which, according to his autobiography, was partially transferred to Jerusalem in 1202.¹⁸

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE BOOK

Certain books and treatises by ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi were likely the result of his encounter with other ideas and thoughts expressed either in writing or orally, at specific moments and particular locations in the scholarly zones of interaction he visited. It is beyond the scope of this article (and of my field of specialization) to examine, contextualize, and comment in detail on ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s intellectual profile or to scrutinize his writings. In the present study I want to concentrate on a particular, relatively short book of his, the *Kitāb al-Ifāda wa’l-ī’tibār fi’l-umūr al-mushāhada wa’l-ḥawādith al-mu’āyana bi-arḍ Miṣr* (The Book of Instruction and Admonition on the Things Seen [*mushāhada*] and Events Recorded [*mu’āyana*] in the Land of Egypt). This short book discussing the wonders and customs of Egypt became one of the most popular books on Egypt in Arabic literature. The material for it was collected during 1201–2, when ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi was in Cairo, and revised and finalized in Damascus in 1207.¹⁹ According to his introduction, the book was presented

to the Abbasid caliph Abu'l-Abbas Ahmad al-Nasir (r. 1180–25).²⁰

In the early modern era, the book gained a wide interest in Europe and was translated into German by Samuel Friedrich Günther Wahl in Halle in 1790 under the title *Abdallatif's eines arabischen Arztes Denkwürdigkeiten Egyptens*.²¹ A few years later, in 1800, a Latin translation by Joseph White appeared,²² and a decade later it was translated into French by Antoine Isaac Silvester de Sacy.²³ The translation of de Sacy, which also includes excellent notes and annotations, was based on the facsimile of the Pococke manuscript of 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi kept at the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

For all its popularity, the book has commonly been regarded as the "light" version of 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's major monograph on Egypt. This assumption was based on his introduction to the *Kitāb al-Ifāda wa'l-i'tibār*, in which he explains that when he finished writing his book on Egypt, which contains thirteen chapters, he felt he should "extract from it the events which I had witnessed directly."²⁴ Moreover, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi himself defined the book as his "little compendium" (*al-mukhtaṣar*).²⁵ It also seems that its popularity prompted scholars to regard it as a short guide to Cairo, an impression not entirely unjustified considering the book's contents.

The first book consists of six chapters, which are: (1) General Characteristics of Egypt; (2) Plants Peculiar to Egypt; (3) Animals Characteristic of Egypt; (4) Description of Antique Monuments Seen in Egypt by the Author (the focus of the present study); (5) The Remarkable Things about Buildings and Ships Observed in Egypt; and (6) Foods Peculiar to Egypt (probably the main reason for the book's popularity). The second book is divided into three chapters: (1) The Nile, Its Rise, and the Laws Governing It; (2) The Events of the Year 597 [1200–1201]; (3) The Events of the Year 598 [1201–2].

And yet, I would like to argue that the book is a manifestation of a paradigm shift in 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's thoughts on the concept of acquiring knowledge. It is important to note that this shift in his thinking and writing seems to have occurred during his time in Egypt. In other words, although his aspiration and desire to bring change to the established methods of acquiring knowledge had already been evident in his early years

in Baghdad, the *Kitāb al-Ifāda wa'l-i'tibār* is, in fact, the declaration of a new, progressive way of understanding and interpreting nature and history through experience. 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's introduction, with its explanatory remarks on the character of his short book, clearly indicates this change in the evolution of his thought and perception.

When I finished my book on Egypt, which contains thirteen chapters, I thought I would extract from it the events which I had witnessed directly, as it is nearer to the truth, because that part inspires most confidence and excites the most admiration; also, it is more wonderful in its effect upon people who hear it. In fact, everything apart from what I witnessed personally is already to be found, or most of it, and in some cases all of it, in the books of my predecessors. I devoted two chapters of my book to the things I saw, and have separated these to form the relation which I publish today, which is divided into two books of chapters.²⁶

In this introduction 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi presents the individual gaze and the act of observing in general as a scientific tool vis-à-vis the learned books of his predecessors. In his opinion individual observations are hierarchically more stimulating than those transmitted through the long chain of tradition; their value is all the greater because those things he did not witness could already be found in books, that is, in the written tradition. Individual observations are new and personal and, more important, nearer to truth. He therefore challenges the written tradition, as it is repeated by memorization of the writings of former scholars, and suggests a learning process based on observation rather than relying on older written scholarly texts. As mentioned earlier, this notion can be traced to the earliest stages of his academic career and especially to his critical views of his early supervisors and teachers in Baghdad, especially al-Anbari and, later, to his challenging of the writings of al-Maqtul in Mosul.

In his short yet innovative book, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi presents the specific "Egypt" that he saw and witnessed. His eyes are the main tool to bring us, as he says, as close as possible to the truth. There are numerous examples in his book that illustrate this concept, and I will return to them toward the end of this article. It is with this approach in mind that the following observations of 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi in front of the ancient

monuments of Pharaonic Egypt should be read and discussed.

Chapter 4 of the first book is dedicated to the antique monuments of Cairo and titled "Description of the Antique Monuments Seen in Egypt by the Author," thus reassuring readers that he is including only the antique monuments that he actually saw (*mā shūhida min athārihā al-qadīma*).²⁷ An additional explanation is offered: "Of all the countries I have visited or known by report of others, there are not any that can [be] compare[d] with Egypt for its antiquities. I will say [re-late] only about [discuss only] the wonders I saw [*'alā aḡjāb ma shāhadatuhum*]."²⁸

Two issues should be emphasized. The first concerns the fact that the monuments of Egypt, notably its architecture, are regarded as identifiers similar to Egypt's flora, fauna, and its specific foods, which are also discussed in this book. Second, because 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi is interested in its ancient Pharaonic monuments, Egypt's ancient (*qadīma*) history is explicitly viewed as part of its identity. His preference for a specific part of history that predates the "Muslim" era and lends a place its identity is intriguing and suggests a strong sense of time and periodization.

On the Pyramids

The pyramids are one of the wonders. They have engaged the attention of a multitude of writers who have given in their works the description and dimensions of these edifices. They are numerous and all of them situated in the province of Gizeh on the same line as the ancient capital of Egypt, and are comprised within the space of two days' journey. At Bousir also there are many. Some of the pyramids are large, others small. Some are formed of earth and brick, but most of them of stone. Some of them are constructed in the form of steps or stairs: mostly, however, they are of an exact pyramidal shape, with smooth surfaces. Formerly there was a great number of pyramids, small indeed, at Gizeh, but these were destroyed in the time of Salah-eddin Yūsuf ibn Ayyoub. Their ruin was effected by Karakoush, a Greek eunuch, one of the Amirs, and a man of genius. To him was entrusted the superintendence of the buildings of the capital, and he it was who built the stone wall which surrounds Fostat and Cairo, the space between the two towns, and the citadel on Mount Mukattam. He likewise constructed this citadel, and dug the two wells which are found today. These wells themselves are reckoned among the wonders of Egypt. They are descended by

a staircase of nearly three hundred steps.... As to those pyramids, the object of so many recitals, to which I shall now advert, pyramids distinguished above the rest, the superior size of which excites admiration: the number of them is three, and they stand in a line at Gizeh in front of Fostat, at a short distance apart, their angles pointing to each other and toward the east. Two of these pyramids are of enormous dimensions, and the same size. The poets who have described them have given the rein to that enthusiasm they are so well calculated to inspire. They compare them to two immense breasts rising from the bosom of Egypt. They are very near to each other, and are built of white stone.

The third one, a fourth part less than the others, is of red granite, marked with points and so extremely hard that iron takes a long time, with difficulty, to make an impression on it. The last one appears small compared with the other two, but viewed at a short distance and to the exclusion of these it excites in the imagination a singular oppression, and cannot be contemplated without painfully affecting the sight.

The shape chosen for the pyramids and their solidity are alike admirable. To their form is owing the advantage of their having resisted the attack of centuries: they stayed continuously against time, and time patiently waits on them. In fact, after mature reflection on the structure of the pyramids one is forced to acknowledge the combination of efforts of the most intelligent men, an exhaustion of the genius of the most subtle [kind], that the most enlightened minds exercised with profusion in favour of these edifices all the talents they possessed, and that the most learned theory of geometry called forth the whole of its resources to show in these wonders the utmost term of human ability. We may likewise affirm that these structures hold discourse with us even in the present day respecting those who were their founders, teach us their history in a manner intelligible to all, relate their progress in the sciences and the excellence of their genius, and in short, effectually describe their life and news [innovations?].

The most singularly remarkable fact presented by these edifices is the pyramidal form adopted in their structure, a form which commences with a square base, and finishes in a point. Now one of the properties of this form is that the centre of gravity is the centre of the building itself, so that it leans on itself, itself supports the whole pressure of this mass, all its parts bear respectively one upon the other, and it does not press on any external point.

Another admirable peculiarity is the disposition of the square of them in such a manner that each of their angles fronts one of the four winds. For the violence of the wind is broken when cut by an angle, which would not be the case if it encountered a plane surface.²⁹

‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s description of the pyramids is well structured. He starts with a brief introduction, discussing the tradition and providing information about other pyramids. Then he takes a typological approach and distinguishes between large and small pyramids and, based on the material used, between those made of bricks and earth and those made of stones and, based on their shape, between stepped and smooth pyramids. A brief historical account is also provided, stating that several of the pyramids were destroyed in the Ayyubid era, that is, in ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s time, when the walls of Fustat and Cairo were rebuilt. His further description is no less interesting. Drawing on his knowledge of geometry, he discusses the characteristics and architectural advantages of their specific structure. Aiming to reveal the pyramids’ quality of *a‘jab* (wonder), he explains the logos behind their peculiar form and the mysteries surrounding the issue of these giant buildings’ gravity. His approach is enlightened and rational, and he incorporates the pyramids in the history of sciences rather than in the history of the marvels of creation. As he puts it, the pyramids “relate their progress in the sciences.”³⁰

The following description of the various methods used to measure the pyramids is no less important. ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi regards measurement as a scientific tool. He first provides the accepted size of the pyramids—400 cubits in width and height—but then tells of specific measuring experiments that he witnessed: “Of the following fact I was myself an eye witness: when I visited them we had an archer in our company who shot an arrow in the direction of the perpendicular height of one of these pyramids and another in that of its breadth, as its base, and the arrow fell at about the middle of this space.”³¹

Yet another attempt at measuring was undertaken, ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi continues, by a well-trained person from one of the neighboring villages. This man mounted the pyramid up to its top and measured it with his turban.³² Another man skilled in the art of measuring, with whom ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi was personally acquainted, provided him with the following measurements: “a perpendicular height of about 317 cubits, and to each of the sides of the four triangular planes which incline to this perpendicular, 460 cubits.”³³ And

yet ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi is not satisfied by any of these measurements, stating: “I think there must be some error in these measurements, and the perpendicular height must be 400 cubits, but if I have opportunity and God helps me, I will measure it myself.”³⁴

IN FRONT OF THE SPHINX

By far the most attractive structure of the ancient pharaohs of Egypt was—and still is—the Sphinx. ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s account of this sculptured monument is remarkable. His gaze is at once scientific and aesthetically sensitive.

A little more than a bowshot from these pyramids is a colossal figure of a head and neck projecting from the earth. The name of this is *Abu’l haul* [Sphinx] and the body to which the head pertains is said to be buried under the earth. To judge from the dimensions of the head of those of the body, its length must be more than 70 cubits. On the face is a reddish tint, and a red varnish as bright as if freshly put on. The face is remarkably handsome, and the mouth expresses much grace and beauty: one might fancy it smiling gracefully.

A sensible man enquiring of me as to what, of all I had seen in Egypt, had most excited my admiration, I answered: “The nicety of proportion in the head of the Sphinx”. In fact, between the different parts of this head, the nose, for example, the eyes, and the ears, the same proportion is remarked as is observed by nature in her works. Thus, the nose of a child is suitable to its stature, and proportioned to the rest of its frame, while if it belonged to the face of a full-grown man it would be reckoned a deformity. The nose of a grown man on the visage of a child would equally be a disfigurement. The same holds good with respect to all the other members. There are none but should have a certain form and dimension in order to bear relation to such and such a face, and where these proportions are not observed, the face is spoiled. Hence the wonder that in a face of such colossal size the sculptor should have been able to preserve the exact proportion of every part, seeing that nature presented him with no model of a similar colossus or any at all comparable.³⁵

Like many other medieval scholars, ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi mistakenly thought that the head of the Sphinx was part of a huge standing figure. But his observation of the Sphinx’s head is very subtle and detailed. He detects the faint, barely perceptible smile in its face,

an indication of the sensitivity of ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s gaze. Moreover, the handsome face of the Sphinx is explained based on an aesthetic theory of beauty that is based on a harmony between the components and the whole. ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi explains beauty in terms of the exact human bodily proportions that exist among parts and the whole and as related to age and size. For his discussion of the well-proportioned face of the Sphinx, he likely drew heavily on his knowledge of physiognomy (*firāsa*, knowledge of physical features [and their significance]) based mainly on the Arabic translation of the treatise of Polemon. This treatise appeared in Arabic sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries and was incorporated into the canon of Islamic science by Ibn Sina in the tenth century, a work with which ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi was familiar.³⁶

IN FRONT OF THE SCULPTURED HUMAN BODY

We encounter a somewhat similar approach and use of anatomical knowledge of the human body in ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s description of the monumental sculptures of the Pharaonic kings.

Among the monuments of antiquity in Egypt, those must be comprised which are seen at Aīn-Schems, a small town surrounded by a wall still visible, though demolished. It is readily seen that these ruins belong to a temple. Here are found frightful and colossal figures in hewn stone 30 cubits long, the members of which all bear a just proportion. Of these, some are upright on pedestals, others seated in various singular postures, and in perfect order.³⁷

The precise and careful description of the objects of ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s gaze is best illustrated in his account of the two obelisks of ‘Ayn Shams, the so-called Needles of the Pharaoh, for he says:

In this town are found the two obelisks so much celebrated, called the two Needles of Pharaoh. They consist of a square base 10 cubits every way of nearly an equal height, resting on a solid foundation in the earth. From this base arises a square column of pyramidal form 100 cubits in height which near the base is about 5 cubits in diameter, and terminates in a point. The summit is covered with a kind of copper cap in the shape of a funnel which descends about 3 cubits from the apex.³⁸

‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s next description, of idols (*aṣnām*), is astonishing because of the objectivity with which he observes the “pagan” divinities from the Pharaonic, pre-Islamic era. In no way do the words of this pious Muslim indicate rejection or disapproval of the idols. Rather, ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi praises their verisimilitude, suggesting that he regarded the mimetic rendition of nature as an aesthetic quality. Apart from repeatedly emphasizing the ability of the sculptor to maintain certain human proportions in shaping the oversize massive sculptures, ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi also draws on his knowledge as a physician in describing the idols’ physical features. This descriptive tactic lends his writing additional scientific flavor.

As for the idols found among these ruins, whether their number or extraordinary size be considered, they surpass description: nor can even a conception of them be formed; but most worthy of admiration is the nicety observed in their forms, their exact proportions, and their resemblance to nature. I measured one of them which, without its pedestal, was more than 30 cubits high. The breadth of it from the right to the left side was nearly 10 cubits: and in front and behind it was broad in proportion. This statue was formed of a single piece of red granite. It was covered over with a red varnish which appeared only to receive new freshness from its great antiquity.

Assuredly, nothing can be more marvelous than the sight of such minute proportions with respect to the different parts of the body preserved in a statue of this colossal magnitude. No-one is ignorant that all the members of the body, whether they be instrumental [probably the body parts such as the hand or foot] or consimiles [analogous parts such as flesh, muscle, and skin], such as one buttock and the other one matching, have not only certain appropriate dimensions, but also certain proportions with respect to each other. From these dimensions and these relative proportions result the beauty and elegance of the whole figure: if any thing be faulty in these requisites, there follows a deformity, more or less great according to the extent of the defect. Now in these figures this congruity of all the parts has been observed with a truth that cannot be sufficiently admired, firstly, in the precise dimensions of each member separately taken, and afterwards in the proportions which the members respectively bear to each other.

In these statues, if attention be paid, the chest is seen to separate itself from the neck at the point of the clavicle, in the truest manner. Thence the bosom shaped by the upper ribs rises gradually to the two breasts which are protuberant above the surrounding region, and detach themselves from

the remainder of the chest with a surprising exactness of proportion. The breasts have a progressive rise to the nipples which likewise are fashioned with the justest conformity to the size of these colossal statues. Then descending, you examine now the sunken region of the sternum or breastbone, now the interstice formed by the false ribs at the point of the heart, and now the part where is noticed the alternate rise and fall of the ribs and their obliquity, all of which are given in the human frame. You next descend from where the ribs cease to the soft region formed by the exterior integuments of the belly. You see the obliquity of the tendons and muscles of the belly on the right and the left, their tension, and their form; the depression of the parts in the umbilical region adjoining the hypochondria; the exact form of the navel, the tension of the surrounding muscle, the depression of the hypogastrium towards the pubis, the groin, the arteries and inguinal veins, and finally the passage thence to the two bones of the haunches. In a similar manner you observe the separation of the *scapula*, its articulation with the *os humeri* and that of the *humerus* with the forearm, the torsion of the *vena cephalica*, the salient extremities of the *cubitus* and *radius* at the place of their articulation with the carpus, the point of the elbow, the two extruberances which form the articulation of the forearm with the *os humeri* and the muscles of the forearm. Lastly, the softness of the flesh, the tension of the tendons and other matters which to detail would be tedious.

Some of these figures are represented holding in their hand a sort of cylinder, a span in diameter, which appears to be a volume, and the artist has not forgotten to express the lines and wrinkles formed on the skin of the hand when closed, at the part adjoining the little finger. The beauty of countenance of these statues and their just proportions are the complete acme of excellence in the art of sculpture, and as perfect as can be expressed in stone. They want but the imitation of flesh and blood. The figure of the ear and its sinuosities is likewise a counterpart of nature.³⁹

In concluding his discussion of the subject ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi states:

The reflecting man, contemplating these vestiges of antiquity, feels inclined to excuse the error of the vulgar who believed that mortals in those distant ages in which they were constructed lived to a more advanced age than is usual in our days; that they were of gigantic stature, or that by striking a stone with a wand they caused it to obey their orders and to transport itself to wherever their will dictated. In fact, one is seized with a kind of stupor on picturing to oneself the great resources of genius, the profound knowledge of geometry, the resolution and patience requisite for the completion of similar works; the numerous

different instruments and unremitting toil they exacted: the diligent attention which must previously have been paid to the members of animals and the shape of man, to their precise dimensions, their relative proportions, the mode of their articulations, and their position, and the distance at which they should respectively be placed. In man, for example, the lower portion of the body is longer in a determinate degree than the upper, that is to say, the trunk; whereas in all other animals the proportion observed is the reverse. A man of exact proportions should be 8 spans high, the length from the hand to the bend of the elbow should be 2 spans, the arm should measure a span and a quarter, the extent of the span being that of the individual. All the other bones, whether great or small, the bones of the leg, the vertebrae, the bones of the fingers, are alike subject to certain rules as well for the dimensions whence their particular form results, as the proportions they bear to each other. The same holds good in all the other parts of the frame, whether external or internal, as the depression of the sinciput below the summit of the head with elevation above all that surrounds it, the extent of the forehead and of the two arches of the eyebrows, the sinking of the two temples, the elevation of the cheekbones, the flat form of the cheeks, the blunt blade of the nose, the softness of the cartilage that forms the point of it, the opening of the nostrils, the breadth of the isthmus by which they are separated, the thickness of the lips, the roundness of the chin, the cutting and rounded form of the two jaws, and many other particulars which it is almost impossible to describe, and which can only well be comprehended by the eye, by dissection, and diligent inspection of the parts.⁴⁰

‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s scientific gaze leads him to rethink the past and to correct any misleading interpretations that emerged from the noncritical approach of his forebears who tended to blindly marvel at these artifacts and exclude them from the history of human mortals. He points out that it is the aspiration for knowledge that provides us with the key to understanding the past and its marvels, even if for a moment it may seem that “one is seized with a kind of stupor on picturing to oneself the great resources of genius, the profound knowledge of geometry, the resolution and patience requisite for the completion of similar works.”⁴¹ The eye, he points out, is a tool, a device with which one can comprehend the phenomena. And yet ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi is well aware that his discussions of the human body and the proportions of animals’ bodies as related to the sculptures he views verge on blasphemy or hubris,

as they imply a desire on the part of the artists to emulate the creations of God. For this reason he argues quite subtly and cleverly, introducing Aristotle’s concept of the broad scope of human knowledge into his discussion in order to actually emphasize the limits of human wisdom and thereby underscore his full acceptance of God’s unique and perfect wisdom.

Aristotle, in the eleventh article of his Book on Animals, employs one chapter to indicate that although people have displayed much cleverness and exactness in acquiring a knowledge of the parts of animals and their respective proportions, the extent of their information on this head is very limited and mean when compared with truth and nature; and if we place a value on this knowledge, imperfect as it is, the cause is to be attributed to the conviction we feel of the weakness of our faculties and the comparisons we draw between the man conversant in these matters and he who is not. Hence we admire the ant employed in removing a grain of barley, but suffer the elephant to pass unregarded which carries a burden of many hundredweights. The following is the substance of his [Aristotle’s] words, according to my interpretation: “It is a matter of astonishment that we should feel such interest in acquiring the talent of representing things in paintings, or in imitating them by means of the art of the sculptor or founder, and that we should succeed in comprehending the process of these arts, yet at the same time feel no anxiety to fathom the works of nature, especially where the possibility exists of our discovering the causes of them. We ought therefore to have no repugnance to the study of the nature of animals and those even which seem most vile, but should carefully guard against deeming it a toil, and thus imitating the conduct of children. For there are no works of nature but [that] contain subjects of admiration.⁴² Hence, we should seek information on the nature of all animals, and hold for certain that there is not one which is destitute of some natural wonder, for none of them was formed without some purpose, by accident. On the contrary, whatever has received existence from nature was produced for some purpose; I mean to say, for the perfection of the whole: thus each has its station, its rank, and distinguishing merit”.

Blessed be God the most excellent Creator of all things!⁴³

‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s criticism of artists who imitate nature and God’s shaping and making of the world continues in the following paragraph.

As for the interior of animals, the cavities of their bodies, and the wonders they unfold, the description of which is found in the anatomical treatises of Galen and other

authors and in the work of that learned physician “On the uses of the parts”, the study of the smallest portion of these admirable works would be sufficient to make an artist despair of being able to portray them, and in vain would he seek around for one who might assist him or supply his defect of capacity. He must then acknowledge the truth of what God says in the Quran: “Man is created weak”.

I say, moreover, that the admiration excited in us by works of art forms part of what we experience at those of nature. For the productions of art under a certain point of view are the works of nature, seeing they are the effect and offspring of natural faculties. Thus the engineer is worthy of our praise who succeeds in removing an enormous weight; but would he not have much greater claim on our admiration could he form a model capable of itself to remove a weight of whatsoever value it might be?

“It is God Who has created you, you and all that you do.”⁴⁴

CONCLUSION: BEING EMPIRICAL IS BEING CRITICAL

In sum, it seems likely that the specific chapters of ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s short book on Egypt should not be regarded as anecdotal or less scientific than his major treatise on Egypt, as has been suggested by some scholars, but rather as a manifesto of his ideas on knowledge and its appropriate mode of acquisition. His decision to create an abridged version of his large book on Egypt to focus on the things he actually saw is deliberate and based on his credo as a scientist that the best tool for understanding any given object is the eyes. Through careful observation one can learn the phenomenology of the universe and thus appreciate and evaluate traditions. This principle explains why, at the very beginning of the chapter on the monuments of Egypt, ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi explicitly states he will speak only about the wonders that he saw (*‘alā a’jāb ma shāhadatuhum*). Moreover, it may also explain his specificity in the two final chapters of the book, which are records of the events of the years 597 and 598, that is, the time he spent in Cairo, between 1200 and 1202.

‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s central concern, however, is how to read and examine the scholarly writings (*taqlīd*) of his predecessors. This concern is evident in his criticism of his teachers as well as colleagues and in his firm rejection of the educational method of

memorizing by heart the writings of prominent, erudite scholars. His early criticism of the teaching methods in Baghdad was quite explicit: "Most of my time was spent in learning traditions ... and I gained diplomas from various sheikhs. During this time I learned writing: I memorized the Quran, the Fasih [a manual of grammar], the Maqamat of Hariri, the poetry of al-Mutanabbi, and other works of the sort, beside a compendium of law and another of grammar."⁴⁵ As a result, as we learn from his autobiography, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi quickly lost interest in this sort of learning and "in the year 585 [1189], when there no longer remained in Baghdad anyone to win my heart or to satisfy my desires, or to help me resolve what was perplexing me, I went on to Mosul."⁴⁶ But even there he was deeply disappointed.⁴⁷ In Damascus he criticized the renowned learning methods and ideas of 'Abd Allah Ibn Na'ili (d. unknown), saying: "I saw through him, though. He was not at all what I had expected. I was thoroughly unimpressed by him and his methods."⁴⁸ And he reserves a rather malicious remark for Maimonides: "When Maimonides came to see me, I found him to be tremendously learned, but overcome with the love of leadership and of service to worldly lords."⁴⁹ With regard to Maimonides's attitude toward the canonical writings of his predecessors, and in particular of the ancient scholars, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi expresses a categorical disapproval of Maimonides's uncritical recycling of traditional knowledge: "One of his works was on medicine, based on the sixteen books of Galen and on five books by others. He took it upon himself not to alter a single word unless it was an 'and' or a 'so,' and, in point of fact, copied sections in their entirety."⁵⁰

It is interesting to see how 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi relies on his senses in assessing the writings of others. When describing the characteristics of the sycamore tree, for instance, he tells us only what he actually saw: "I have seen some of them at Askalon [Asqalan, today Ashkelon] and on the coast. This tree seems to be a wild fig, its fruit growing on the wood and not under the leaves." He also tasted its fruits to be able to describe their flavor: "There are those which are excessively sweet, more so than the fig; but one always finds, when one has finished chewing, a woody taste."⁵¹ In another chapter of his book that includes a description of the

plant *al-Kolkasu* (*Colocasia*),⁵² he provides information clearly based on close observation: the *al-Kolkasu* plant has "a root the size of a cucumber; some kinds are small, like the fingers. Its colour tends to a light red: they peel it and split it like the turnip. This root is thick and compact, its taste like that of a green unripe banana, its flavour slightly styptic, with a strong pungency, hot and dry."⁵³ 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi collected data on this plant by using at least three senses: sight, taste, and, to some extent, touch. He even performed an experimental procedure to learn more about the plant: "Boiled, it loses all its pungency, and then it joins to its slightly styptic taste a sort of gluey viscosity which was already present but was not made apparent because of the acidity which disguised it."⁵⁴ 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi also refers to a debate between Dioscorides (the famous first-century author on medicine) and another scholar called Israili (most likely a converted Jew) about the flower of this plant. Drawing on his observations, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi goes on to decide this dispute: "I say Israili was mistaken, and what Dioscorides says is true ... that which I say I have seen with my own eyes [*wahadhā ru'ayātu 'ayānan*]."⁵⁵ This statement clearly puts experience front and center in deciding the dispute over this plant.

'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's accurate, indeed hyper-realistic, descriptions of the famine in Cairo are probably likewise attributable to his firm belief in detailed description. It is thus not surprising that readers are shocked by his accounts of cannibalism, specifically stories about hunting for human flesh in the streets and about cannibalistic "dinner parties." He even passes along various recipes for preparing human flesh for consumption.⁵⁶

'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's reference to classical knowledge in combination with observations of the contemporary visual world is astonishingly advanced and bold. He proposes a scientific process in which concepts of knowledge are no longer part of an established theoretical canon but, rather, part of an exercise of testing objects on the ground, mainly through the scrutinizing examination of the scholarly eye. The result is, indeed, revolutionary: classical traditions and concepts of geometry, beauty as well as nature and anatomy, are introduced, along with the personal experience of the

beholder, into an interactive process vis-à-vis the particular object of observation. This specific interaction of text and experience may signal the emergence of a phenomenological approach based on individual experience. I suggest, then, that 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi used empiricism as a scientific methodological tool and thus discovered the critical gaze. He then established new paradigms of sensorial approach to the world. Yet above all he genuinely and, for his time, boldly aspired to marry tradition and individual experience. His updating of writings from the classical past and his own tradition by subjecting them to criteria drawn from his knowledgeable eye may be regarded as foreshadowing the Renaissance, which two centuries later would profoundly change Europe. In fact, as other medievalists have suggested earlier, it seems that around the same time, in the second half of the eleventh century, a visual turn was occurring in Latin Europe. Selfhood and reinventing the self as individual, or at least group-affiliated, were central to this development, a prelude of sorts to the humanistic age of the Renaissance.⁵⁷ 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi may be seen as part of this global—that is, Mediterranean—change in the understanding of knowledge and its acquisition through vision.⁵⁸ It is worth going back to his definition of knowledge in the *Mā ba'd al-ṭabī'a* (a commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*) quoted at the beginning of this article: "Knowledge conforms fully (*muṭābiq, musāwī*) to the object known, because it is the spiritual form of the object known. The difference between the two is that the object known is a form whose substratum is matter, whereas knowledge is a form whose substratum is the soul."⁵⁹

It is important to note that besides the well-established medieval hierarchical distinction between *materia* and spirit—which 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi obviously follows, as he contrasts spiritually based knowledge with the material-based object—his one-to-one juxtaposition of the known object and the acquisition of knowledge can be regarded as a clear-cut, positivistic approach, especially compared with the mystical thought of Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240). Ibn al-'Arabi, who visited Cairo on his way to Mecca the exact same year, 1202, that al-Baghdadi witnessed events in Cairo, developed an entirely different approach to the phenomenological world and brought another dimension of thought into

the interesting discussion of perception—that of the imagination. In fact, Ibn al-'Arabi's definition of knowledge almost seems conceived to refute the concept developed by 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi. Ibn al-'Arabi asserts:

Knowledge is not the perception [*taṣawwur*] of the object known, and it is not the concept [*ma'anā*] that perceives the object known, for not every object known is perceived, and not every knower perceives. Perception comes to the knower only from his being one who uses imagination [*mutakhayyil*], and the form for the object known consists in its being in a condition seized by the imagination [*khayāl*]. There are objects known not seized by the imagination at all. Consequently, they certainly have no form.⁶⁰

For all the difference between the two, 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's progressive method of gazing at nature and reevaluating established knowledge of the past deserves to be reassessed and appraised. It should have become clear that the time 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi spent in Egypt in front of its ancient "wonders"⁶¹ was inspiring. It exposed him not just to visual phenomena that stimulated his eyes and mind but also to classical writings and scientific treatises that caused him to rethink and reorganize his knowledge.⁶² Perhaps his early encounter with Ibn Sina's thoughts on the importance of estimation and intuition in the process of arriving at knowledge, and especially the linkage between intuition and epistemology, strengthened his theory of the importance of the *mushāhadāt* (the "Things Seen," that is, "the sights") and encouraged him to write an entire book based on his sensorial experiences in Egypt.

'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's dialogue with the learned Sheikh Abu'l-Qasim al-Sha'iri in Cairo was most likely no less important. This encounter forced 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi to refine his ideas and clearly define the scope of his novel scientific thesis. Let me conclude this brief study with an astonishing, intense, and sharp-witted description of the scholarly interaction between the two from 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi's autobiography that offers us a glimpse into the clash of minds between the two Cairene scholars.

When we engaged in debate, I would surpass him in disputation and the use of language, and he would surpass me in producing proofs and in the strength of his arguments. I was inflexible in not submitting to his enticements and

did not abandon my stubborn and passionate resistance to his theorizing. But he began to present me with work after work by al-Farabi and by Alexander Themistius to tame my aversions and to soften the tenor of my intransigence, until I began to incline toward him, hesitant, unsure which step to take next.⁶³

‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s book on things he saw and events he recorded in Egypt appears then as the petition of a progressive scholar who, similar to Walter Benjamin’s famous angel of history, is propelled into the future while his gaze is still fixed on the past.⁶⁴

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NOTES

- * The epigraph is from ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, *Mā ba’d al-ṭabī‘a*, fol. 163a, quoted in Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 60.
1. This image appeared in numerous newspapers and readily comes up in a Google image search for “Merkel and Nefer-titi.” See, for example, its publication in *Al-Arabiya News*, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/01/25/134938.html> (accessed December 27, 2014).
2. For a recent study on the modern history of this bust in its museum context, see Bénédicte Savoy, ed., *Nofretete: Eine deutsch-französische Affäre, 1912–1931* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2011).
3. For a critical discussion on the reception of this bust in Berlin, see Horst Bredekamp, “Der Keil der Nofretete, oder: 8 mm entscheiden die Welt,” in *Synergies in Visual Culture: Bildkulturen im Dialog: Festschrift für Gerhard Wolf*, ed. Mauela de Giorgi, Annette Hoffmann, and Nicola Suthor (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013), 579–90.
4. See Andreas Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Reliquie: Objektbezogene Erinnerungspraktiken in antiken Gesellschaften* (Berlin: Verlag Antike, 2010), 189n857. Still, it should be noted that ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi’s account of the many inscriptions seen on the marble panels of the pyramids likely referred to hieroglyphs rather than to later inscriptions from the post-Pharaonic period. In any case, Hartmann also makes reference to a particular kind of graffiti associated with Trajan.
5. Ibid., 188–89. See also Ulrich Haarmann, “Die Sphinx: Synkretistische Volksreligiosität im spätmittelalterlichen islamischen Ägypten,” *Saeculum* 29 (1978): 367–84. Al-Maqrizi (d. 1442) also points to the ancient worship of planets and stars associated with the Sphinx. See Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrizī’s text on the pyramids in his *Khiṭaṭ*, in *Das Pyramidenkapitel in al-Maqrizī’s “Ḥiṭaṭ,”* ed. and trans. Erich Graefe (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1911), Arabic text on p. 30 and English translation on pp. 74–75.
6. On this image, see Nicholas Warner, *The True Description of Cairo: A Sixteenth-Century Venetian View*, 2 vols. (London and Oxford: Arcadian Library and Oxford University Press, 2006).
7. For earlier “excavations” of the Sphinx, which usually involved clearing the masses of piled up sand, see Hartmann, *Zwischen Relikt und Reliquie*, 188–89.
8. A sense of curiosity with regard to the “secret” past of the pharaohs existed in the early Abbasid period. It is related that the Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun (r. 813–33) assigned a group of “excavators” the adventurous task of investigating the pyramids’ interiors and that that they broke into largest pyramid near Fustat. Tombs and mummies were inspected, and several treasured objects were sent to the caliph’s palace. See the account of al-Maqrizī, *Das Pyramidenkapitel in al-Maqrizī’s “Ḥiṭaṭ,”* ed. and trans. Graefe, esp. 20–21 (English translation, pp. 66–67); Jan F. M. van Reeth, “Caliph al-Ma’mun and the Treasure of the Pyramids,” *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 25 (1994): 221–36. For the attitudes of Ibn Tulun (d. 884), his son Khumarawayh (d. 896), and Saladin’s son al-Malik al-‘Aziz ‘Uthman (d. 1198) toward the pyramids and Pharaonic past, see also the discussion of Ulrich Haarmann, “Evliyā Çelebis Bericht über die Altertümer von Gize,” *Turcica* 8, 1 (1976): 157–230, esp. 182.
9. This painting was first displayed in the Paris Salon of 1886 (no. 1042).
10. Commission des sciences et arts d’Égypte, *Description de l’Égypte, ou, Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française, publié par les ordres de Sa Majesté l’empereur Napoléon le Grand*, 17 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1809–22). For the Palestinian view of Napoleon’s intervention in the region as the very beginning of colonialism and even Zionism, see Dan Ba-On and Sami Adwan, “Das Historische Narrativ des Anderen kennen lernen,” <http://www.berghof-conflictresearch.org/documents/publications/PrimeTextbuch.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2010). See also Joseph Croitoru, “Schwierige Zeiten für ein Visionäres Projekt: Ein Geschichtsbuch wollte beiden Seiten des Nahostkonflikts gerecht werden—und stösst auf wenig Echo,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 3, 2010, <http://www.nzz.ch/aktuell/feuilleton/literatur/schwierige-zeiten-fuer-ein-visionaeres-projekt-1.8247968> (accessed December 28, 2014).
11. It is true that medieval and early modern accounts of the pyramids place them in particular moments in history and associate them with specific legendary figures, such as Shaddad ibn al-‘Ad, biblical figures such as Noah, Joseph, and even figures such as Aristotle and Alexander the Great. But the mythic components embedded in these accounts imply that the moments chosen are usually times

- of rupture and that the figures involved were extremely idealized in the medieval collective memory. On the Arabic sources on the pyramids, see mainly Else Reitermeyer, *Beschreibung Ägyptens im Mittelalter aus den geographischen Werken der Araber* (Leipzig: Seele, 1903), esp. 80–144; al-Maqrīzī, *Das Pyramidenkapitel in al-Maqrīzī's "Ḥiṭaṭ,"* ed. and trans. Graefe, 49–95; 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī, *The Eastern Key: Kitāb al-Ifādah wa'l-i'tibār of 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī*, trans. Kamal Hafuth Zand, John A. Videan, and Ivy E. Videan (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), esp. 107–77; Alexander Fodor, "The Origins of the Arabic Legends of the Pyramids," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 23 (1970): 335–63; Christian Cannuyer, "L'intérêt pour l'Égypte pharaonique à l'époque fatimide: Étude sur l'Abrégé des merveilles (*Mukhtaṣar al-ʿajā'ib*)," in *L'Égypte fatimide son art et son histoire*, ed. Marianne Barucand (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999), 483–96. For accounts referring to biblical figures as well as to Aristotle's tomb in one of the pyramids, see Haarmann, "Die Sphinx," 370n11; see also Haarmann, "Evliyā Çelebi's Bericht über die Altertümer von Gize," 157–230, esp. 179–88; Ulrich Haarmann, "Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43, 1 (1980): 55–60. The legend that claims the pyramids were built, like Noah's Ark, to survive the Flood is illustrated in the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella, specifically in Paolo Uccello's *Fresco of the Flood* (215 × 510 cm), which probably dates from 1446–48. For the description of these pyramids, see Rudolf Kuhn, *Komposition und Rhythmus* (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann, 1980), 21–26.
12. See S. D. Goitein, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1954–2002), s.v. "'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī"; Claude Cahen, "Abdallatif al-Baghdadi, portraitiste et historien de son temps: Extraits inédits de ses Mémoires," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales* 23 (1970): 101–28; Shawkat M. Toorawa, "The Autobiography of 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdadi," in *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, ed. Dwight Fletcher Reynolds (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 156–64; Shawkat M. Toorawa, "The Educational Background of 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdadi," *Muslim Education Quarterly* 13, 3 (1996): 35–53.
 13. See Aḥmad ibn al-Qasim Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a, *ʿUyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aʿtibbāʾ*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1882). See also Shawkat M. Toorawa, "Travel in the Medieval Islamic World: The Importance of Patronage as Illustrated by 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdadi (d. 629/1231) and Other Littérateurs," in *Eastward Bound: Travel and Travellers, 1050–1550*, ed. Rosamund Allen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 53–70.
 14. See 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī's introduction in *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 5.
 15. Quoted in Toorawa, "Travel in the Medieval Islamic World," 59.
 16. On Ibn Sina's epistemology, see mainly Dimitri Gutas, "Intuition and Thinking: The Evolving Structure of Avicenna's Epistemology," in *Aspects of Avicenna*, ed. Robert Wisnovsky (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 2001), 1–38. See also Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), esp. 159–76.
 17. 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 6.
 18. For the information gathered by Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a in his *Sira*, partially translated into English, see Toorawa, "Autobiography of 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdadi," 162.
 19. See Toorawa, "Travel in the Medieval Islamic World," 64.
 20. 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 13.
 21. *Abdallatif's eines arabischen Arztes Denkwürdigkeiten Egyptens in Hinsicht auf Naturreich und physische Beschaffenheit des Landes und seiner Einwohner, Alterthumskunde, Baukunde und Oekonomie, mit vielen medicinischen Bemerkungen und Beobachtungen, historischen, topographischen und andern beiläufig eingestreuten Nachrichten auch vornehmlich einer merkwürdigen Annale der Jahre 1200 und 1201*, trans. Samuel Friedrich Günter Wahl (Halle: Waisenhauses, 1790).
 22. Joseph White, trans., *Abdallatīphi historiae Aegypti compendium, ar. Et lat. Partim ipse vertit, partim a Pocockes versum edendum curavit notisque illustravit* (Oxford, 1800).
 23. Antoine Isaac Silvester de Sacy, trans., *Relation de l'Égypte par Abd al-Latīf* (Paris: De L'Imprimerie impériale, 1810).
 24. 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 13.
 25. *Ibid.*, 13–15.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. *Ibid.*, 107.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. *Ibid.*, 107–13.
 30. *Ibid.*, 113.
 31. *Ibid.*, 115.
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. *Ibid.*, 123–25.
 36. On this topic, see Robert Hoyland, "The Islamic Background to Polemon's Treatise," in *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam*, ed. Simon Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 227–80. See also Antonella Ghersetti, "The Semiotic Paradigm: Physiognomy and Medicine in Islamic Culture," in *ibid.*, 281–308.
 37. 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 125–27.
 38. *Ibid.*, 127.
 39. *Ibid.*, 141–47.
 40. *Ibid.*, 147–51.
 41. *Ibid.*, 147.
 42. On this specific tendency of observing the world, see Persis Berlekamp, *Wonder, Image and Cosmos in Medieval Islam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011).
 43. 'Abd al-Latīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 151–53.

44. Ibid., 153–55.
45. Ibid., 5 (cited from Uṣaybi‘a’s text on ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, see n. 18 above).
46. Quoted in Toorawa, “Autobiography of ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi,” 159.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 160.
49. Ibid., 161.
50. Ibid.
51. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 37.
52. Ibid., 47–55.
53. Ibid., 47.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 53.
56. Ibid., esp. 223–69.
57. On this issue, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31, 1 (1980): 1–17; Colin Morris, “Individualism in Twelfth-Century Religion: Some Further Reflections,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31, 2 (1980): 195–206; Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), esp. the introductory chapter, “Change in the Middle Ages,” 15–36; Susan Kramer and Caroline Walker Bynum, “Revisiting the Twelfth-Century Individual: The Inner Self and the Christian Community,” in *Das Eigene und das Ganze: Zum Individuellen in mittelalterlichen Religiosentum*, ed. Gert Melville and Markus Schürer (Münster: LIT, 2002), 57–85; Ittai Weinryb, “The Inscribed Image: Negotiating Sculpture on the Coast of the Adriatic Sea,” *Word and Image* 27, 3 (2011): esp. 327. I would like to thank Ittai Weinryb for calling my attention to this debate. See also Hans Liebeschütz, “Das zwölfte Jahrhundert und die Antike,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 35, 3 (1953): 247–71.
58. See Suzanne Conklin Akbari’s excellent discussion of this change in acquiring knowledge through vision in the twelfth century in *Seeing through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), esp. 3–20. See also Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
59. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, *Mā ba’d al-ṭabī’a* [Istanbul Ms. Carullah 1279], fol. 163a, quoted in Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 60.
60. Quoted in Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant*, 65.
61. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 107.
62. On the importance of Egypt as the land of science and knowledge in the Arabic tradition, see Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt,” 55–66.
63. Quoted in Toorawa, “Autobiography of ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi,” 162. See also ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, *Eastern Key*, trans. Zand, Videan, and Videan, 6, where the translation is slightly different: “When we conversed together I used to outdistance him in dialectic and mastery of words, but he [outdistanced] me in power of applying arguments and making his point prevail, yet my spear would not bend in his vice, nor would I give up in spite of all his subtleties. Then he cited one passage after another, taming thereby my defiance, and wearing down my natural intractability, until finally I began to yield, like a man who puts one foot forward and the other back.” On the relationship between the two scholars, see Shawkat Toorawa, “Language and Male Homosocial Desire in the Autobiography of ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdādī,” special issue on Arabic autobiography, *Edebiyât*, n.s., 7, 2 (1997): 251–65.
64. Walter Benjamin referred to Paul Klee’s famous 1920 print *Angelus Novus*, which he had bought in 1921. For Benjamin’s discussion of this image, see “On the Concept of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2003), 4:389–411. See also Nissim Man-nathukkarem, *The Rupture with Memory* (Pondicherry: Navayana, 2006), esp. 58–74.