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THE CONCEPT OF ENCYCLOPÆDIA
ENCYCLOPÆDIC ACTIVITIES IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD:
A FEW QUESTIONS, AND NO ANSWERS

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“So many summaries, so many new methods, so many indexes, so many dictionaries have slowed the live ardour which made men learned... All the sciences today are reduced to dictionaries, and no one seeks other keys to enter them”, said Monsieur Huet, bishop of Avranches and member of the Academy, in French, of course, and three centuries ago, when the English did not yet dream of their Encyclopædia Britannica and when the French Encyclopédistes were still innocent (and, as we may hope, godly) youngsters.¹ Our new millennium is less prone to such misanthropic scepticism. The book market is flooded with handbooks and “encyclopædias” of all sorts, for scholars as well as for lay people like politicians, journalists, or managers. Theologians, academics rather than bishops, still produce encyclopædias of their different denominations, the Protestants as well as the Catholics or the Copts, in spite of their constant talk about their ecumenicity and their preaching one and the same truth. Blurbs written by the publishers praise encyclopædias as the last word of scholarship while a new edition is already on the way, and what is said there in one article is totally unconnected with what is said in the next one. Therefore Monsieur Huet’s problem is still with us: Are encyclopædias in reality a latter day phenomenon, or do they open the horizon for further glorious development?

Neither seems to be the case, and the question is probably not an important one. Encyclopædias are not restricted to one particular period; they are ubiquitous and insofar perhaps fairly negligible. But the role played by encyclopædias in a non-Western civilization is a rewarding topic. Looking at people different from ourselves,

geographically or chronologically, tells us something about our own situation. Do we live in an encyclopædic age or are we simply uncultivated, having replaced encyclopædias by quiz shows? Were other ages or other civilizations more cultivated than we are, and how did those people look at encyclopædias? Did they ever use them, and who had them at his disposition? Did the scholars of the Mamluk period, of a period then which has frequently been called the classical age for encyclopædias in Islam (‘Umarî, Nuwayrî and others), have the feeling that they were latecomers and that the achievements of earlier, more original and more creative centuries were about to get lost? Did they consider it their duty to save what could be saved, especially after Baghda’d had been destroyed by the Mongols, just as the Abbasid caliph, who had been killed by the pagan intruders, had been replaced in Egypt (and only there, not in other countries) by a political phantom in order to make up for the loss of the spiritual centre? Or did they merely lack any new ideas, profiting instead from relative political stability and their personal affluence in order to keep themselves busy by collecting masses of old and worn out stuff? Did they perhaps understand themselves as the registrars and salesmen of a collective memory? Yet the material they brought together was mostly Arabic in kind whereas they themselves frequently happened to be of Turkish descent, members of a special social class, i.e. awlād al-nās, the “children of the Mamluk gentry”.2 Did they therefore want to show that they had been completely assimilated or that they knew more about the past of the country their fathers had been governing than the aborigines who were Arabs? Should we regard then, in certain cases, an encyclopædia as a symbol of identity?

The possibility exists, but it rather applies to modern examples. After the Islamic revolution, one of the first things the new Iranian government thought about was an encyclopædia. This is how we got the (useful and quite learned) Dā’irat ul-ma’ārif-i buzurg-i islāmī3 and,

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3 Tehran 1367/1988ff; there is also an Arabic version of it.
in addition to that, another more specifically Shi‘ī encyclopædia.\textsuperscript{4} These works replaced the enterprise started under the Shāh’s regime, Ehsan Yarshater’s *Encyclopædia Iranica* (first: *Encyclopædia Persica*) which still had a Latin, “Western” name, obviously in imitation of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Somewhat less ambitious were the Turks who, in 1939, started their *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, at a moment when Atatürk had been dead for less than one year. But they, too, wanted to show their particular physiognomy by defining their attitude towards Islam. They simply translated the European *Encyclopædia of Islam* (presumably in its French version) with its articles written by Western orientalists—\textsuperscript{with exception of those on Turkey and its civilization which were now written by Turks. Something similar happened in Pakistan where the *Encyclopædia of Islam* was translated into Urdu after the creation of the state in 1947; in our days, half a century later, nobody would conceive any more such an idea. Yet even if these “nationalist” incentives may be gone by now they always served—or pretended to serve—an older and more respectable purpose. The *İslam Ansiklopedisi* has a long programmatic preface which is introduced by a quotation from the *Kutadgu Bilig*: “bilig kıymetini biliglig bilig”, “Only wisdom knows the value of wisdom”.\textsuperscript{5} This slogan had the advantage of coming from Central Asia from where the Anatolian Turks claimed to be descended, but it also pointed to acquiring and preserving knowledge as a value in itself. This is a motive to which, as it seems, we all can subscribe, less transitory and time-bound than those mentioned before. We should, however, not forget that in Western countries which like to identify themselves as having proceeded beyond nationalism, an encyclopædia is at present first and foremost a commercial enterprise.

Modern Oriental encyclopædias have been, until now, mainly governmental projects. This is why the search for identity has become so prominent a feature. For the same reason we should be cautious in projecting this incentive back into the medieval past. The term “encyclopædia” itself is, in a way, modern and certainly Western. The Arabs translated it into *Dā’irat al-ma‘ārif* (*dā’ira* corresponding to

\textsuperscript{4} The *Dā’irat ul-ma‘ārif-i tashayyu‘*.
\textsuperscript{5} Volume I, printed Istanbul 1950, p. i.
Greek κύκλος, the “cycle” in “encyclopædia”) or into mawsū‘a, a neologism which rather emphasizes the comprehensiveness.6

Mawsū‘a is also the term used for the corresponding entry in the Encyclopædia of Islam. Charles Pellat wrote the article, with all his enthusiasm for adab, and he starts with the “encyclopædim” of authors like Jāḥiz or Ibn Qutayba. But this propels us right away into the centre of the problem. Could it be that such a start is responsible for the inflationary manner in which the term is used in our discipline? Are Jāḥiz and Ibn Qutayba, as udabā‘, also “encyclopædic”? Is Ṣafādi’s Wāfī bil-Ḥanāfī a biographical dictionary or simply a summa theologica? Is Qūdāma b. Ja‘far’s K. al-Kharāj wa-sīnā‘āt al-kātib rightly called an encyclopædia by Paul Heck in his Ph.D. thesis,7 or is it simply a manual? And what about Qazwīnī’s ‘Ajā‘ib al-makhlūqāt? Is this book really an “encyclopædia of natural science” as Syrinx von Hees labels it in her dissertation,8 or is it merely a cosmography as it has always been called? In this last case, we are even confronted with a twofold semantic charade: can we talk about “natural science” with regard to this author? Qazwīnī deals with the angels in one of his chapters, the angels which belonged to the cosmos as it was understood in the Middle Ages (thence “cosmography”) but never made it into natural science the way this word is understood when it falls upon a modern person’s ear.9 I do not want to say that speaking of “encyclopædias” in these cases is totally wrong. Nobody can prevent us from using the word in a looser and less determined way. But what we need is a definition. Otherwise what is going to happen might

6 Mention should be made here of the Mawsū‘a Filasfīyya (1–3, Beirut 1978; 2Damascus 1984) which, as a symbol of identity, is unique insofar as the identity is not kept awake by an independent nation but by refugees and victims of an occupation.
7 The Construction of Knowledge in Islamic Civilization (Leiden 2002), p. 1: “Qūdāma’s work must then be understood as an encyclopædia”.
9 Von Hees defends her usage of the term, p. 109ff. For the sake of justice, we have to admit that, in German, “Naturkunde” is not the same as “Naturwissenschaft”. The word avoids the anachronism which is always implied when “natural science” is used with respect to the Middle Ages; it means something like “physiography”, a description of nature. But this is not my point here; the question is rather whether the angels belong to nature.
be what happened to the term “humanism” as used by George Makdisi, Joel Kraemer, Marc Bergé or Mohammed Arkoun: it sounds good but it is extremely difficult to pin down, and everybody understands it according to his own gusto.\textsuperscript{10} We would be left with vague associations.

Such a definition (\textit{ta{r}íf}) can, of course, only be a descriptive one, a \textit{rasm}, not a \textit{hadd}. Is dimension, bulkiness, the only criterion? Or is it comprehensiveness, in the sense that a certain “encyclopædic spirit” has to go with it? What does an encyclopædia have to contain, not only for us but according to the perspective of the age in which it was produced? The word was coined by the European humanists, at about 1490, the time when Columbus discovered America. Its origin went back to the \textit{ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία} of the Greeks. But this \textit{ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία} did not primarily materialize in books; it was rather a “\textit{Bildungsideal}”, the cultural code of a period, a normative standard of intellectual formation which developed into a \textit{studium generale}, the “general education” of the kind I still witnessed at the American University of Beirut (a former missionary institution) when teaching there in the 1960s. When books were written for this purpose in ancient Greece they reflected something present in the author’s and the reader’s mind. In other words: an encyclopædia was always the work of one author, and it was in harmony with the wisdom expected from every contemporary, or rather: from every member of a certain class, namely the aristocrats. Is this also true for early Islam, and should we therefore call a book an “encyclopædia” when it reflects the \textit{adab} of its time? This was Pellat’s assumption. However, according to our usage of the term, an “encyclopædic” mind stores and masters the gist of several and different disciplines whereas under the early Abbasids the wisdom of the early days had just started differentiating into the “sciences” of the later period. When did the \textit{ʾilm} of the Qurʾān and the \textit{Ṣahāba} thus change into the \textit{ʿulūm} of the future generations so that one person could be “encyclopædic” whereas others were not? Should we rather call a man like Ibn al-Jawzī an “encyclopædist” who lived a few centuries later and who, though being a Ḥanbali preacher and jurist in the first place, was able to express himself in \textit{kalām} terms or compose poetry? He was certainly

aware of the fact that he was well-versed in a plurality of things. Nevertheless we find him narrow-minded rather than encyclopædic.

This dilemma may have been the reason why Gerhard Endress, in his chapter on encyclopædias written for the Grundriß der Arabischen Philologie, does not mention any endeavour of this sort before al-Fārābī. For him it was the philosophers who developed the concept, inspired by the cycle of commentaries written on the Aristotelian corpus which formed the basis of their curriculum. Aristotle had been universal in his teaching and in his writings, they thought; following him meant presenting all available knowledge in a new, non-theological discourse. All available theoretical knowledge, to be precise. Professional practice was something else; this belonged to the realm of special training, in medicine for instance or in astronomy. Nevertheless collections of specialized knowledge were possible, too, and, if combined with practical advice, even desirable. Ibn Sīnā used for his medical compilation the word Qānūn, a Greek term which seems to have got into Arabic by way of the Islamic tax system. Conversely, he gave his most “encyclopædic” work a medical title taken from Arabic: K. al-Shīfāʾ (The Book of Healing), a medication for the soul, not for the body. We may doubt, however, whether the Shīfāʾ tallies with our understanding of an encyclopædia; the book was rather a huge commentary on the Aristotelian corpus. Ibn Sīnā’s Dānishnāma-yi ‘Alāʾī comes closer to what we mean by our expression; this book, of much smaller size than the Shīfāʾ, contains, in a nutshell, the essential issues of the philosophical curriculum put together for a person who was not a specialist, and presented in a language intelligible to him, namely Persian. Dānishnāma (Book of [the necessary] Knowledge) is a title which elegantly meets this intention and therefore may be seen as a kind of fore-runner to our term “encyclopædia.” As for the al-Qānūn fī l-ḥabb, it is rather what we would call an encyclopædia “of” something; of medicine, in this case, as we have them nowadays for cookery, for tax regulations or for Islamic studies. But since this work was written for the practitioner and specialist we would prefer calling it a handbook or a manual.

11 GAP, vol. III 57ff. We should, of course, keep in mind that Endress was responsible, in this multi-authored work, only for the chapter on philosophy; adab was written by somebody else (vol. II: 208ff, by H. Horst). Cf. now also H. H. Biesterfeldt, “Medieval Arabic Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy”, in: St. Harvey (ed.), The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy (Dordrecht 2000): 77ff.
12 Cf. EF IV 556 (Y. Linant de Bellefonds).
Or is systematisation the main criterion for encyclopædias: putting things in the right order, arranging the sciences according to a hierarchical concept? Fārābī’s Ḩishā’ al-ʻulūm would be a good example. But what about Khwārazmī’s Majātī al-ʻulūm then which lists a great number of sciences but in print only counts some 150 pages? Or Ibn Farīghūn’s Jawāmī al-ʻulūm where the author does not say so much about the disciplines he enumerates but rather presents them in Porphyrian trees, the tashjīr system as it was called in Arabic? And what about Ghazzālī’s Ḥiyā’ ʻulūm al-dīn? Can we read this impressive work as an encyclopædia of practical religious behaviour, a kind of counter-project (“Gegenentwurf”) against Ibn Sīnā’s plainly theoretical Shifā’, counter-project also insofar as its author tended to reduce philosophy to mere propædeutics, in his Muqāsid al-jalāṣifā? Was the “project” as conceived by the philosophers thus early on hijacked by the theologians who took over what they could use from philosophy and left everything else aside? Endress rightly points to the importance of Najm al-dīn al-Kātibī’s Ḥikmat ʻayn al-qawā'id in this respect. But what about Majlisi’s Biḥār al-anwār? Is this an encyclopædia?

Islamic philosophy also provides us with the first example of an encyclopædia being organized and elaborated not by one author only, but by several people who worked together: the Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Īlāf. The Ikhwān were dilettanti, people who loved philosophy (and perhaps used it for a religious purpose) but never made their living out of it, in some respect comparable to Abū Ḥāyān al-Tawḥīdī (who knew them but did not think very highly of them).13 Living in Baṣra, far from the court at Baghdād, they tried to fix the state of the art in all the disciplines an educated layman should be conversant in, like a team working on a “project”, continuing in their own way the tradition of the bourgeois “salon” which had been so typical for this town during the time of al-Jāḥīz. In classical Islam such cooperation was a singular event, never to be repeated until the rediscovery of their corpus by Western scholars.14 We feel reminded

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14 Friedrich Dieterici, Die Abhandlungen der Ichwān as-ṣafā‘ in Auswahl zum ersten Mal aus arabischen Handschriften herausgegeben (Leipzig 1886), with German translations of the most important parts being published from 1858 onward.
of the French Encyclopédistes who, following the initiative of d’Alembert and Diderot, cooperated as a “société de gens de lettres”. They, too, were amateurs in philosophy; today we would call them intellectuals. When they posed as “philosophers” they resembled early Islamic theologians and literati like al-Nazzām who, at Baghdād and during the highest efflorescence of the Mu‘tazila, was called a philosopher by his Christian contemporary Job of Edessa. They were philosophers insofar as they understood their enterprise as a step forward towards emancipation; knowledge meant enlightenment. In a way, this was similar to what Aristotle had had in mind (and, in his wake, the Islamic philosophers) when they said that knowledge enhances a person’s εὐδαμονία or sa‘āda—knowledge as a contribution to man’s happiness. But the Europeans pursued this ideal with a certain missionary spirit, a “mission civilisatrice”. This new and ultimately, somewhat militant tendency reached the Islamic world only with the Turkish İslam Ansiklopedisi. In Europe the Encyclopædia Britannica, with its pretentious name, added an element of national glory to it, at least for our ears; Diderot and his people had never thought of naming their project an “Encyclopédie Française”. The French published their last volume in 1765, the British started only three years later, in 1768. I do not want to say that they had an empire in mind; there had been an attempt in England before, by Ephraim Chambers who had called his work a “Cyclopedia or a Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences” (1728), and the French had originally thought of simply translating this book. But in any case knowledge meant power here, and encyclopædic knowledge had to encompass the entire world (which, to the Europeans, ended at the borders of their continent at that time). The French included numerous and long articles on technology; in classical Islam this has almost never been done.

The history of the Encyclopædia Britannica is a success story; the last edition came out in 2002. It is dedicated “(by permission) to George W. Bush, president of the United States and to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II”. The editors follow an ancient habit; in 1974 the 15th edition mentioned the same Queen together with president R. W. Reagan. Our question is therefore not whether the two addressees of the year 2002 will ever waste much time studying this awe-inspiring

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encyclopædic activities in the islamic world

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book of 29 volumes (and far more than 30,000 pages, if we include the introductory volume and the indexes), but whether Islamic encyclopædias could also be dedicated to somebody and why this was done. Half of the question has already been answered; we mentioned the Dānishnāma-yi ‘Alā‘ī where the epithet ‘Alā‘ī hints at the Kākīyid ruler ‘Alā‘ al-dawla Muḥammad ibn Rustam Dushmanziyār who reigned from before 398/1008 until 433/1044 and whom Avicenna served as vizier. No Islamic book started without an invocation of God (and usually also the Prophet), but this habit never hindered anybody from uttering profuse praise of a prince or a sponsor if this turned out to be timely or necessary.

In Avicenna’s case it was necessary, for he had written his compendium at the order (be-fermān) of his master as he says in his preface. The title itself was added later, by a pupil of his.16 Another—and even better—example is Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī (died 606/1210) who, in 574/1179, wrote his Kitāb-i sittīni, a kind of encyclopædia for beginners which enumerated 60 different disciplines and was called Žāmī‘ al-ṣulūm, again in Persian, and dedicated to the Khwārazmshāh Abū l-Muẓaffār Tekish (reigned 567/1172–596/1200). He says in his introduction that he “has gathered together there all the sciences of his age in order to establish a repertoire for scholars at the court to use”.17 We may assume that these “scholars” were not very fluent in Arabic,18 but as far as Persian was concerned they may at least have used their reading ability. For they were offered, among other things, a chapter on military science which dealt with the production of kettle-drums (tubūl) and (permitted) means of mass-destruction like inflammable sulphur compounds.19 The noise made by these formidable instruments helped Tekish to defeat the last representative of the Great Seljuks in Persia; consequently, in 595/1199, one year before his death, he was invested by the caliph al-Nāṣir with the Sultanate of Iraq. We must admit, though, that this experience with technology did not bring his successors much luck; the caliph was in the end not deposed and killed by the Khwārazmshāhs but by the Mongols.

18 The book exists, however, also in an Arabic version (cf. GAL2 1/669, S 1/924).
When, more than a century later, the Mongols had equally transgressed the peak of their power in Iran Shams al-dīn-ī Āmulī composed an even bigger encyclopædia, the *Nafā‘is al-funūn fī ‘arā‘īs al-tuyūn* which covered 120 sciences altogether: he dedicated it to Abū Islāq İnī, the prince of Shiraz whose liberal rule was, as is well-known, nostalgically remembered by Ḥāfiz. Iran was a productive area in this respect; Āmulī had doubled the number of disciplines in comparison to Rāzī’s catalogue. In Iran, Ibn Sīnā’s impetus remained effective during the centuries, and there was always an audience who wanted to be educated. Mamlūk society provided such an audience, too, but Egypt had a different past. There was no Avicenna available; the Egyptians were not particularly philosophically-minded, and the hey-day of their cultural achievement had been under the Fātimids. This was a precarious heritage for a Sunni community; it is true that Maqrīzī revived it, but other authors preferred a different canon to shape the collective memory. The Islamic West had been in a similar situation. Pre-Islamic Spain had nothing to offer with regard to Greek philosophy, and there was only one Latin author whose work was taken up in an Arabic translation: the historian Orosius. In their collective memory, the people of al-Andalus remembered their Syrian origins as long as they were under Umayyad rule; this is why we feel tempted to interpret Ibn ‘Abdrabbih’s *Iqd al-farīd* as a kind of encyclopædia for the “New World”, *sit venia verbo*. But we would certainly be using the term in a metaphorical way then. The only work of Magribī origin which deserves the compliment of being “encyclopaedic” is Ibn Khaldūn’s *Mugaddima*; the author profits from the (rather short-lived) rise of philosophy in Spain when he, besides talking about history, describes and evaluates, in the sixth part of his introduction to the *K. al-Ibar*, a number of other

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21 Ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī, *Orosius: Ta‘rīkh al-‘īlam. Al-Tarjama al-arabīyya al-gadīma* (Beirut 1982); cf. G. Levi Della Vida, ‘La traduzione araba delle storie di Orosio’, in: *al-Andalus* 19 (1954): 257ff. Another Latin work which has certainly been used was the agronomical treatise *De re rustica* by Columella, but it always remained anonymous, and the contents were not philosophical either.
sciences in a systematic order. However, his reputation is founded on his ideas about the growth and decay of civilizations. As for the rest, he rather displayed a respectable knowledge of Eastern material; he summarized without saying much new.

Encyclopaedias were, of course, always only as good as the expertise of their authors. They could serve as an instrument of education, but then it all depended on what the audience wanted to learn. Every area had its own cultural background. In Fakhr al-dīn al-Rāzī’s Jāmi‘ al-‘ulūm Arab adāb boiled down to dry terminology and occasional advice of poetical or rhetorical craftsmanship; the only artistic past-time which was found worth being mentioned in greater detail was, except warfare, playing chess. In Egypt, on the contrary, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umarī (700/1301–749/1349), not a theologian and philosopher like al-Rāzī, but a rather unsuccessful government official, concentrated, in his Masāliḵ al-abṣār, mainly on history and geography. He fulfilled his promise to describe “the earth and its inhabitants”, i.e. to follow the paths (masāliḵ) visible to everybody’s eye (baṣār), but he had nothing to say about war technique. What he offered instead were remarks about administration, a topic exhaustively handled later on by his fellow-countryman al-Qalqashandi. And Ibn Khaldūn was mainly a solitary and homeless thinker who, after some unhappy experiences as a diplomat, wrote his work in seclusion at Qal‘at Ibn Salāma and ended up as a jurist. The examples are good altogether for showing one thing: what we should never expect from any encyclopaedia, whether medieval or modern, is originality.

Moreover, there were fields of cultural interest which, as separate and independent subjects, were never incorporated into an encyclopaedia. Poetry was one of them, in spite of its relevance even for the common man. Poems had been collected all the time, in diwāns first and later in anthologies; the most comprehensive works of this sort have become available only recently: Ibn Maymūn’s Muntahā l-ṭalab

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23 Jāmi‘ p. 220ff, with numerous diagrams.
24 The topoi of Islamic world-history are treated by B. Radtke, Weltgeschichte und Weltschreibung im mittelalterlichen Islam; Beirut 1992 (Beiruter Texte und Studien, 51).
25 This work was completed in Baghdad in the year 589/1193 (GAL S 1/494); ed. Muḥ. Nābil Ṭarīfī, 1–9, Beirut 1999.
and Ibn Aydamir’s *Durr al-farīd*. But this remained a world by itself, being not so much a matter of education but of aesthetic pleasure. Something similar may be said of lexicography. From the beginning, the Arabs had been obsessed by the analysis of their language (their own one only); they were much better at that than Isidore of Seville. But this predilection, for understandable reasons, merely resulted in dictionaries, though sometimes of encyclopaedic size, like an “ocean” (Firūzābādī’s *Qāmūs* which, however, still needed Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī’s “bridal garland”, *Tāj al-ʿarūs*, in order to be really crowned with ultimate success). And finally biographical literature, “famous men”, the celebrities modern encyclopaedias and contemporary newspapers are so fond of this genre also largely remained something apart. Saʿadī was, as Hellmut Ritter fully recognized for the first time, the greatest protagonist in this field, especially since he wrote, in addition to his *Wāfī*, another dictionary in which he enumerated his contemporaries, the *ʿAyn al-ʿāṣr*, there he could no longer build on earlier sources.

We have to bear in mind, though, that European encyclopaedias varied in their approaches, too. In the Western world the cultural background and the reading public mattered as much as everywhere else. When the Germans published their first encyclopaedias their country did not yet exist as a nation; nobody therefore thought of a name corresponding to that of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. They were latecomers in this like in other respects, and their encyclopaedias did, at that moment, not commemorate a people but the individuals who financed and published them: Brockhaus (in 1796) and Meyer (in 1840). Both persons were not scholars but entrepreneurs like Ephraim Chambers in early 18th-century England. Interestingly, they both did not call their project an encyclopaedia; they called it a “Konversationslexikon”, something useful for conversation, culti-

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26 The autograph dates from 680/1281. The author had witnessed the fall of Baghdad; his father had been killed when the Mongols entered the town (*GAL* S 1/444; cf. G. J. H. van Gelder in *EI*² Suppl, 635 s.n. *Muḥammad b. Sayf al-Dīn* with further literature). The most famous anthology is, of course, Abū Tammām’s *Hamāsa*. The book was edited as early as 1828 by G. Freytag (Bonn, with Latin translation, 1857–61). The *Būāq* edition of 1284/1867 depends completely on this German one. And for Spain we should not forget Ibn Bassām’s *Dhakhīra* (ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās, 1–8, Beirut 1399/1979).

27 The metaphorical connection between the “ocean” and the “bridal garland” is made in the title of the commentary: *Tāj al-ʿarūs min javāhir al-Qāmūs*; the pearls which are found in the ocean are put into the crown of the bride.
vated conversation, of course, “Meyers Conversations-Lexikon für die gebildeten Stände” as the second one of them formulated it, “a book of reference for the cultivated people”—or rather “Stände”, the upper classes, not just “people”, since “Bildung” (culture) was conceivable only with a certain elevated status. This brings us back to the early Arabs: the encyclopædia as a tool for practicing adab in conversation.28 Everybody who wants to talk with other people has to show interest, and in order to show interest he has to know something about everything; otherwise he would be boring, as boring as a modern specialist. Specialists are possibly competent, but they are also isolated. They are not “gesellschaftsfähig” as educated people used to say in the earlier days. The word is difficult to translate (“sociable” is not enough. You can be sociable and an ignoramus at the same time). Baldesar Castiglione has described this elitist attitude which fits so badly into our modern democratic societies, in his famous Libro del Cortegiano at the beginning of the 16th-century: you have to keep your conversation going with witty anecdotes and pertinent comparisons. To take only one example: you should know something about music and demonstrate an exquisite taste with regard to it, but you should avoid sounding the trumpet during a party because you would have to blow up your cheeks for that and you would look funny. Did Ibn Qutayba think this way? Adab as a normative ideal then, and Ibn Qutayba’s Adab al-kâtib or his K. al-Ma‘ārif as “encyclopædias” for somebody who had to know something about everything? Not too much in any case—and the right things, of course, things which are socially correct; Castiglione talks about love, Ibn Qutayba does not.

Castiglione wrote his book not only about the cortegiano but also for the cortegiano, the courtier, the cultivated aristocrat of the Italian renaissance who excelled not only by his finesse d’esprit but also by his virtú, his morality. Similarly, the ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία was originally destined for the free man, at least in the circles of the Sophists. Was adab then originally something for Arabs only, not for the clients, the mawâli who were merely specialists, like the slaves? This is, of course, the question: to what extent and from which moment onward was Islamic society an egalitarian society, as far as non-Arabs were concerned. However, analogies are dangerous, and we should avoid

indulging in vague omnicomparatism. We only want to ask questions. Was adab really encyclopædic? With Ibn Qutayba or Qudāma ibn Ja‘far it seems rather to have been practical, like the “Konversationslexikon”. With respect to their adab people wanted to have, as for anything else, something where they could look up everything they needed or where they found all they had to learn. In German we call this a “Nachschlagewerk”, a reference-work. This is much more modest than “encyclopædia”—and in a number of cases perhaps more appropriate. There are other words we can think of, “Sammelwerk” for instance or, in lexicography, “thesaurus”.

Should we leave then the grandiloquent term “encyclopædia” for a few ambitious specimens the criteria of which we would still have to define? Talking about encyclopædias in terms of reference works brings us down to the level of practical usage; conceived in this way encyclopædic activities have always been necessary, in the Middle Ages as well as in our days, in the East as well as in the West. The conditions of working, however, have changed. Do we have to assume, as we normally do, that all the medieval authors we mentioned, whatever the size of their literary production, represented the type of the lonely scholar, a type revered in the West (in Europe rather) for centuries but dying out at present, just before our eyes? As far as Şafadī is concerned, to take only one example, this seems to be true; we still possess the brouillon (muswaddā) of his Wāfī bil-wafayāt, and we can see how he inserted leaflets with material he had found somewhere, perhaps on his many journeys in Syria or Egypt. But we know from our own experience that complex societies also need the other type, the impresario, the scholar who finances or tries to find money for pretentious projects. What about ‘Umarī then who died at the relatively young age of 48 years and who left, besides his Masālik al-ḥabār, still another, possibly more original work, the Taʿrīf bi-muṣṭalaḥ al-sharīf? Was he, as ibn al-nās, rich enough to afford some research assistants (whom he never mentions, of course), as did Leone Caetani, the principe di Teano, poi duca di Sermoneta, for his Annali dell’ Islam. Or was he simply quick and active, though not so much

29 A dictionary would be a “thesaurus”, however, only when it has some historical dimension. In order to find a “treasure” one has to dig deeply; insofar the metaphor differs from “ocean” which emphasizes the breadth rather than the depth.
in “writing” (in the sense of composing) but in compiling? And what about Rashid ul-dîn, the vizier of the Ilkhânid rulers Ghâzân Kâhn and Óljeitû? We cannot suppress the feeling that, as far as his Jâmi‘ ul-tavârîkh is concerned, a world-history of encyclopædic format including China and even unimportant Europe, he did not write it all by himself. He did not have the time for that; he seems to have had ghost-writers. The book was copied at his expense and illustrated with precious (and costly) miniatures. For his theological treatises, which, compared to his historical “encyclopædia”, were of minor value but important for his prestige, he left money in his famous waqf at Tâbrîz;31 the scholars of his time were invited to write blurbs (taqârîz)—and did not blush to do so.32

There were certainly more such examples. We still have to find out how, under similar circumstances, but in an earlier period, Jâyhâni, the supposed author of a geographical “encyclopædia”, got his work done; he was the minister of the Sâmânîd ruler Nasr II. b. Ahmad (reigned 301/914–331/943) and probably had an entire staff at his disposition. A book on geography which also dealt with the non-Islamic, the unknown world (for practical purposes, of course; it is difficult to trade or make war in an area which is unknown) had to be readjusted and enlarged all the time; this is why other members of Jâyhâni’s family who equally functioned in the Sâmânîd administration apparently added further material to it. For a member of the secretarial class an encyclopædic approach to the world he had to administer was a professional necessity. Mu‘âthhar b. Tâhir al-Maqdisî’s K. al-Bad’ wal-tavârîkh is worth some further investigation in this respect.33 He worked for a Sâmânîd governor in the province of Sîstân, at Bûst, and his book, of moderate dimensions, though published in six volumes, comprises history as well as geography, a lot of (Mu’tazîla-inspired) theology together with Greek philosophy and cosmology, unknown information about non-Islamic religions and civilizations in addition to a (somewhat conventional) survey of

31 Cf. my Der Wesir und seine Gelehrten, Wiesbaden 1981 (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes XLI 4); now also Birgitt Hoffmann, Waqf im mongolischen Iran: Rashîduddîns Sorge um Nachruhm und Seelenheil (Stuttgart 2000).
33 Cf. EP VII 762, where the work is called a “historical encyclopædia”.
the most important Islamic denominations or “heresies”, a “Konfessionskunde” as Rudolf Strothmann used to call it.\textsuperscript{34} The conservative title hides an astonishing amalgamation of indigenous and foreign knowledge; “whoever has a look into this book”, says al-Maqqūsī, “gets as-it-were a bird’s-eye view of the world.”\textsuperscript{35} As a historian, Maqqūsī is more cosmopolitan but less detailed than Ṭabarī. In any case, he was a keen observer and a very independent thinker—an Arab (a man from Jerusalem?) in the service of the Iranians, as Ṭabarī was a Persian working for an Arab audience in Iraq.

Finally, there is one fact which we should not forget: all the authors we mentioned lived in a world which did not yet know the art of printing. Knowledge had a high reputation; acquiring it was encouraged by the religious ethos: \textit{uthlub al-‘ilm wa-law fi l-Ṣīn}, “Look out for knowledge, be it in China.”\textsuperscript{36} But manuscripts were not always available, and books could disappear completely; knowledge was vulnerable and perishable. Collecting the wisdom of the age, even without any originality, was a cultural exploit, in a way even a necessity. The identity of the society was at stake, its “civilization” in the original sense of the word; there were not many other ways to have it survive. However, the task became increasingly more difficult. Assiduity was an important virtue then, but also curiosity, though curiosity with regard to the past rather than to the future. The reception depended on the linguistic medium; in Iran (and later on in India) encyclopædias, like poetry, had to be presented in Persian. The immediate motive for getting to work could change: from practical reasons in the case of Ibn Qutayba to programmatic considerations like those of the philosophers or, perhaps, nostalgia and personal identity problems in the Mamlūk period.

This variety of incentives and realizations suggests that too rigid a definition would not be of much help. What we rather need is a variety of terms and an attempt at periodization. For encyclopædism

\textsuperscript{34} The term “heresiography” which we tend to use nowadays is much less appropriate. The \textit{Maqṭūḥ al-‘ulām} of al-Khwārazmī, a contemporary of Maqqūsī’s, and again a Sāmānīd kātib, also contains a list of the Islamic denominations.


\textsuperscript{36} Cf. F. Rosenthal, \textit{Knowledge Triumphant} (Leiden 1970).
is in itself a historical phenomenon, and history is a world of change. The only common denominator underlying this time-bound but, in a way, also timeless process is perhaps the undying illusion that knowledge is able to achieve something. “Illusion” insofar as knowledge has to be spread for that. The old way of achieving this goal was reading, a cultural device of venerable reputation which reached its culmination in the Gutenberg galaxy. Will the Internet be encyclopædic? For the moment encyclopædias seem mainly to be functioning as reference works for scholars who are searching, in an alphabetical jungle, for a synthesis which they themselves are no longer able to achieve. We are not “encyclopædic” ourselves. But have we ever been? The problem is rather that the specialist is still expected to give, as an “expert”, encyclopædic answers; this is something he, by definition, cannot live up to. Monsieur Huet would probably have nodded in sarcastic agreement. But who cares?