

A review of *Inḥiṭāṭ: The Decline Paradigm: Its Influence and Persistence in the Writing of Arab Cultural History*, ed. Syrinx von Hees, Ergon Verlag, 2017.

This is a brief discussion of the main premise and an overview of this collection of articles. I will, in the process, provide some comments on a basic concept of its elements from the vantage point of my experience in the field of traditional Arabic grammar. Notwithstanding any such comment, the enclosed essays provide the understudied field of Arab/Arabic cultural criticism with a valuable much needed contribution, especially with the wide diversity of topics under study. There is a need, especially in the traditional Arab scholarly writings up to the 19th century, for a discussion of the underlying assumptions and founding concepts. This collection deals with one of these concepts, namely the notion of “decline”, or *Inḥiṭāṭ* in Arabic.

The book (221 pages in total) is composed of an introduction by the editor and eight essays on various aspects of the *Inḥiṭāṭ* theme as a cultural concept in the Arab civilization along its history. The editor, in her rather brief introduction, frames the concept of *Inḥiṭāṭ* ‘decline’ in a post-colonial frame of reference. She makes the bold and, I assume, false claim that the European tradition of recording the culture and history of the Arab civilization in a teleological fashion as a golden age followed by a period of decline in the wake of the great Arab empires was adopted perpetuated by Arab writers. In fact, it was, to the author’s understanding, not only a scholarly adoption, it was a public perspective too. This attitude became so pervasive that it controlled public discourse in the Arab sphere despite the differences in motives and tools. In addition, the recent attempts to cast light on that age of *Inḥiṭāṭ* remain marginal eclipsed by the teleology of the European framework. Arab scholars are not the only group whose writings were colored by this perspective. Western scholars of the Arab civilization and Arabic cultural production in turn think along the same lines. In some cases, the author goes on, this frame of thinking is not verbally stated but is the formative feature of the argument.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned claim, the editor states (p. 7) to focus on the Arab cultural production in the age of Sultanates, an age the author does not define. Nor does the sequence of essays help clarify. In the first three essays after the introduction the focus is on the decline paradigm in the religious, musical and literary scholarly traditions in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the following two essays address an earlier period where they concentrate on

literary and sociological themes. In these two essays combined, van Gelder and Khalidi demonstrate that the concept of *Inḥiṭāṭ* as a background against which an argument is made. Both articles focus on literary criticism and sociological pre-modern writings to show that pre-modern writers used the already available notion of *Inḥiṭāṭ* to, respectively, underscore the quality of contemporary poetry and to show the continuity of the scientific endeavors and technical developments despite the political rise and/or fall that might take place in any state.

The following two essays tackle earlier periods. They concentrate on the Mamluk and Ayyubid eras. Brentjes and von Hees work on scientific and historical writings, respectively. Brentjes casts a wider net, shedding light on four non-religious sciences (time, astrology, philosophy and alchemy) and throwing doubt on the notion that this era was one that neglected the natural and mathematical sciences. Von Hees discusses critiques rather soundly the modern framing of the Mamluk historical tradition into the concept of decline. She builds her criticism on detailed textual analysis of the Mamluk historians and the terminology they used. In the final essay, Sajdi also deals with historical writings, but she tackles that in the period between the Mamluk and Ayyubid times and the pre-modern Arab world. This essay deals with the concept of decline inside the tradition of historical writings in the Arab and Muslim Levant in the 18th century. She seems to identify decline in the eyes of the traditional historians as a break from the accepted line of professionals (religious scholars and government officials) and the emergence of outsiders to engage the field. She also sees this diversification as a potential precursor for the *Nahḍa* 'enlightenment'. The last three essays, in aggregate, are a critique of envisioning the scholarship of the post-Abbasid era as symptomatic of decline both by modern scholars and by traditional contemporaries.

The book is based on papers presented in a 2010 symposium. This format and the diversity of topics may justify the less than precise temporal framing of the studies. Although the editor states that the time window is the times of the Sultanate, the essays cover the stretch from the 11th to the 20 centuries. However, the same temporal distribution of the discussions calls to question the main premise of the book, namely that the Arab scholars adopted and internalized the European colonial frame of thinking of the Arab history and culture. For one thing, the last five essays deal with periods in which the Arab scholarship was not in contact with or under the influence of an orientalist or even a European tradition of thinking in a general sense. In addition, there is a native sense of *Inḥiṭāṭ*, which the various traditions of the Arabic language cultivated from the inception of these disciplines.

Two points are worth mentioning here in passing. First, it seems from the totality of the lexical and syntactic tradition, and especially in the field of the *Qur'ānic* reading, that the importance accorded to the chain of transmission of any sort of knowledge stems from and underlying reverence of times past.

In the Arabic language sciences, authenticity and originality has always been tied to the previous epochs, which gives the analogy that from these previous epochs to the later period in which the scholar worked and produced there is an invisible declining line of scientific vigor and trustworthiness.¹ In some cases, the previous golden age is not even identified or identifiable. Ibn Fāris (329/341–395/1004), for instance, defends the notion that the Arabic language that was spoken in his time was not, despite its wide functionality and beauty, even near as perfect as it was in its historical past. To him the sequence of generations correlates with a decline in their innate ability to understand the language.²

Although the previous anecdotes illustrate the point that a perspective of decline existed in the Arab Muslim culture, writing and scholarship before contact with the Western traditions, the purpose is not to deny the pervasive effect of the Western tradition on the modern and revival Arab writers. This is my second remark. A teleological perspective of the of disciplines and periods and the analogy of a decline seem to exert influence on not only native and Western scholars of Arab civilization but also scholars of previous periods as well. A case in point here is the current discussion in the field of late antiquity of significance and the meaning of the term ‘antiquity’. It was and still is discussed as a period of decline from the Classical times and its cultural products and artifacts. In some other cases, the discussion does not use the analogy of decline explicitly. But it defines the period as one in which a flavor of the Classical period remains in some form and in reduced or even different functions.³

References

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¹ See Ibn Muġāhid, especially p. 70.

² For a detailed discussion of the decline phenomenon in Arabic grammar and general Falk linguistic thinking, see al-Sharkawi (2010) and (2016). Also see Ibn Fāris for an example of the sources that discuss both general perception and scholarly conceptions on decline.

³ For a detailed discussion of the decline analogy in the study of late antiquity, see al-Azmeh (2014), especially chapter one.