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AL-'UṬAIFĪ'S DESCRIPTION OF THE JOURNEY
TO SYRIAN TRIPOLI

Ramaḍān ibn Mūsā al-'Uṭaifī (1610—1684), a scholar and a man of letters, lived and worked in Damascus. He is the author of a description of a journey from Damascus to Syrian Tripoli. The manuscript is dated in the last days of Ṣafar 1044, ie. around August 23, 1634 A. D. Al-'Uṭaifī arrived at Tripoli in 1634, that is at the time when Sultan Murad IV (1629—1640) had just sent his troops under the command of Aḥmad Pāshā al-Kajak against Fakhr ad-Dīn II, Emir of Lebanon. After his capture and deportation to Constantinople, Qāsim Pāshā ibn Yūsuf, member of the famous Saifā family, became the governor of Tripoli. Having failed to obey the Sultan's orders (concerning participation in a campaign against Persia), Qāsim went into hiding in the mountains of Lebanon, and his post was taken by Emir 'Alī ibn al-Amīr Muḥammad ibn Saifā. But only two months later 'Alī was ousted in his turn by another uncle: 'Assāf. When al-'Uṭaifī wrote his *riḥla*, 'Alī was not yet back in power in Tripoli.

Al-'Uṭaifī's *riḥla* has been so far preserved only as a manuscript (Collection of the Princeton University Library in Beirut; the only existing copy survived in the Berliner Staatsbibliothek). The second part of the original text of the *riḥla* was first published, accompanied by a short introduction, by Stefan Wild (in *Al-Abḥath, a Quaterly Journal for Arab Studies*, vol. XXIII, Nos. 1—4, pp. 213—222, Beirut, December 1970). The first part, which comprises the praise of the journey, will be published at a later time.

Al-'Uṭaifī was certainly not a prominent personality, and his

rather short work lacks originality. His *riḥla* contains some historical references, but first of all it provides a record of cultural life of his epoch and also, in spite of its schematism, a portrait of an educated man of that time. One has to accept Wild's opinion that his description of the journey is a true miniature „of a prevailing literary genre". Of course, it can be considered as a representative of one particular type of *riḥla* only: a description in which the author, during his voyage through Lebanon, concentrates mainly on his contacts with people of his own cast. An earlier example of this type of *riḥla* is *Riḥla al-Maghribiyya*, written by Abū Muḥammad al-'Abdarī al-Balansī in the 13th century.

'Uṭaiḥī's *riḥla* is a representative of the adab type; the author shows off his stylistic abilities and his knowledge of poetry. It was relatively easy for contemporary men of letters to write such works; it was fashionable, and perhaps even a kind of duty: a condition necessary to be able to enjoy a good reputation. Wild says that „the essential point of interest for al-'Uṭaiḥī, as well as for an-Nābulusī lay in the scholars, politicians and hommes de lettres whom he met and much less in the places which he visited" (p. 214), and further: „following the fashion of his epoch he used *saj'* extensively throughout his descriptions of what he saw; this gives his account in many places the form of stereotyped formulae rather than that of a vivid description" (p. 214).

It must be admitted that, in spite of its obvious schematism, the work clearly shows the author's receptiveness to the beauty of nature, which so often delights him. He is also an admirer of architecture, and his feeling of enchantment is certainly sincere, even though he follows to a certain extent the model of *riḥla* with which he was obviously familiar. His attitude both towards nature and towards architecture is marked by sentimentality, which only partially results from the requirements of contemporary fashion and convention. At the same time he is an optimist, and his joy of life is clearly manifested, for instance in his descriptions of feasts and social gatherings. Thus the lyrical elements of the *riḥla* are evident, as well as it obviously exposed expressive function. In this particular respect, al-'Uṭaiḥī's *riḥla*, in spite of its lack of true literary or historical (in the sense of source infor-

mation) values, excels many other works that belong to the same category.

Structurally, the composition of the *riḥla* is fairly loose. It can be divided into two main parts: the description of the journey itself, ie. the route from Damascus to Tripoli (Damascus, Wādī Baradā, Takkiyat ad-Daura, Zabadānī, Blītār, Ba'labakk, Ra's al-'Ain, 'Ainātā, Ihdil (Ihdin), Tripoli), and the description of Tripoli, which is a series of loosely connected records of meetings with local scholars and men of letters and descriptions of architecture. As far as its structure is concerned, al-'Uṭaiḥī's *riḥla* does not rank high, although it must be remembered that similar manner of writing was frequently followed also by other authors. An analysis of its composition well justifies an assumption that the description must have been written after the author returned to Damascus, and that — apart from casual remarks — he made no notes at the time of his journey.

For what kind of readers was al-'Uṭaiḥī composing his *riḥla*? It can hardly be assumed that he might have had in mind some kind of general reading public. Most probably, he was rather thinking about his own friends — scholars and literary men from his own social circle, whom he wanted to impress by writing a conventional work — a task relatively easy to complete. But, like every writer, he must have been also thinking about the future generations.

Translation:

„In the name of Allāh, the Merciful, the compassionate. Praise be to Allāh, who guides his servants during their journeyings through many countries and along the roads which they choose following the way towards their goals. Blessed and peaceful be our Master, Muḥammad.

Here is my description of how we made our way to Syrian Tripoli, which consists of two parts: the first one comprises the praise of the journey, and the second its route and progress. I recorded it as follows. I started on the journey early in the morning, on a Thursday, 25th of the month of Dhū'l-Ḥijja, 1043 (June 22, 1634), in the company of a faithful friend, a man of good birth

and noble character. He was shrewd, clever and subtle. He guessed my wishes, endeavoured to give me pleasure, agreed with me in all things, made no complaints about anything. I found it difficult to part with him, even for a short while. I would compare him to the man mentioned in the words of a poem (in *al-tawīl* metre):

*He dwells in my soul from whom I cannot be parted,
And who is more faithful than my beloved brother...*

On our departure (from Damascus), we shortened our way by taking the mountain path of Dummar, which led us to the Baradā river valley. The valley appeared to us like a carpet full of flowers, spread out in the shadow of the trees. Its charm made us feel as joyful as gaily singing birds. We were delighted by the sight of water splashing against the rocky river bank. That place filled our eyes and our ears with overwhelming joy. Half way up the river we came across the ad-Daura encampment, situated in a lovely place; there is a mill next to it. It is there that the Baradā river valley comes to its end and the area called az-Zabadānī spreads out. We spent the rest of that day and the whole night in the encampment. We got up and went to saddle our camels, having decided on our departure, early in the morning, as soon as the first signs of the coming day became visible and the night disappeared with its darkness. Passing through the az-Zabadānī region, we could still see the valley from afar. Az-Zabadānī is something like the Eden of Allāh the Supreme. The land is full of trees, sweet-scented plants and flowers. In the streams, water running among the rocks glimmers like pearls and rubies. Truthful are the words of the poet (in *al-mutaqārib* metre):

*It is like a stream amongst meadows filled with flowers which,
Turned towards the sky, look up as if they wanted to watch
the clouds passing and the sparkling stars that appear above...*

We stopped for a while in the shadow of the trees at the village of Blītār (today: Brītāl), and then we entered the town of Ba'labakk. We looked at the ruins; the town was destroyed by Fakhr ad-Dīn during his campaign against Banū al-Ḥarfush, which is described at some length in historical chronicles. Nothing was left there, except a large mosque, a temple and a nearby inn. As

far as the local stronghold is concerned, Fakhr ad-Dīn tried to demolish its gate, but he did not manage to do it. The stronghold is a true marvel, one of the most magnificent monuments, built by Sulaymān. Then we went on towards Ra's al-'Ain. With our own eyes we saw the famous spring and drank fresh water out of it, and we breathed the sweet fragrance of the gardens that surround it. Our memory revived the not sufficiently praised poem written by Ibn ash-Shahīd¹, included in his most beautiful collection of poems (in *al-kāmil* metre):

*When I arrived at Ba'labakk, I was enchanted by the spring
Which is there...*

Later on our way we came to a stopping place where we spent the night, and then we reached 'Ainātā. The village is situated at the foot of the water-abundant mountain. Half way up towards the summit there issues forth a spring, whose water flows down a green valley, in which the trees grow so high that one cannot see the rays of the sun through their foliage. And the stream meanders amongst these trees, and the valley is full of birds and flowers. We spent the rest of the day and the night there. Then we went to the village called Isfhdil (Ihdin), which spreads over the valley; there is an abundance of various trees and streamf there. We spent the night at that village and at dawn set off again on our journey; finally we reached the goal of our travels: we arrived at the town of Tripoli (Tarābulus). We lodged in a pleasant district. The inhabitants of the town received us with kindness and respect.

Tripoli is a pretty town, there is no shortage of food or water there. All the houses are built without the use of timber: they are made from stones, all of which seem to form a single whole. The town is cut in two by a wide river; in both parts there are mosques, Moslem schools and palaces with barred windows. The water from the river is not fit to drink, and people do not use it in houses or city baths. It is conveyed to the highest place around, that is to a tower erected on the top of the mountain; it is purified

¹ Ibn ash-Shahīd = Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad an-Nābulusī (1327—1390).

there and flows down the slope of the mountain as drinkng water. There is also another river in that town; it runs along the bottom of the valley. You can see there all the kinds of fruit found in Damascus and most of the plants that grow in Egypt; it is for that reason that the town is called „Damask-and-Egyptian”. I also heard the people say that their town is „like a little India”. Tripoli is surrounded by gardens, thick bushes, and parks. One feels the sweet breath of the wind, the fragrance of flowers and plants. Most of the trees that grow around this area are lemon trees. The town is situated at the seashore, and the gardens descend so that they almost touch the water. Many poets have sung the praises of this town, and I was delighted by one such poem (in *ar-rajaz* metre):

*I saw in Tripoli a meadow that spread out like
A carpet full of silken anemones...*

Al-Majd al-Firūzabādī² wrote in his dictionary: „Ṭarābulus (Tripoli) has the following vocalization: the consonant *ṭā* has a *faṭḥa*, and the sounds *bā* and *lām* have a *ḍamma*. It is the name of a town situated in Syria and Maghrib. The name of Syrian Tripoli can also be spelt with a hamza at the beginning of the word. The name of Roman (Maghrib) Tripoli is translated as „three towns”. The entire first day of our stay in that town we spent in the most beautiful valley and in the lofty castle. What kept us there was the unique charm of the town and the verses of the casida, revived in our memory. At that time the governor of the town was the great Emir ‘Alī ibn al-Amīr Muḥammad ibn Saifā, who held the post on behalf of his uncle, Qāsim Pāshā. I visited his heavily guarded palace and received a warm reception. Scholars, dignitaries and poetry reciters used to meet in that house. He received me with particular respect, and asked me not to forget to visit him again during my stay in the town. And I paid him visits, following his words: „Come to see me, and our friendship will grow” (may Allāh bless and protect him). Emir ‘Alī told me much about his father, his merits, his generosity,

² Al-Majd al-Firūzabādī (1329—1415) is the author of *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*.

his courage and his friendship with scholars, poets and men of letters. During our meetings he recited his father’s poems for me. Here is one of them, written in praise of bravery:

*I have sworn an oath, and when the drums give the sign of war,
It will not be the time for love festivities...*

He also wrote lyrical poems:

*Do not fear. Dark nights are your protection and your power,
So kiss the mark of beauty on the cheek and the mouth covered
by the veil...*

I also listened to poems written by Tripoli poets, who praised the life of his father and lamented his death. Here are the words of one of those poets (in *at-tawīl* metre):

*When the time came for Muḥammad al-Amīr ibn Saifā to meet
his fate,
A magnanimous man and a man of great courage, I was astonished,
It was as if a sword were to be buried in wet soil,
As if someone wanted to cover the sea with a shroud...*

Emir ‘Alī also told me one of the anecdotes about his father. The story is connected with the mountain on the top of which the stronghold was erected. One of its slopes is covered by a dune of white sand. The Emir’s father often visited that place and walked around with no particular purpose. Looking down from there, one can see the town and the gardens that surround it; farther on, the red sands covering the ground, and still farther a green meadow which reaches the shore of the sea. It has one of the most magnificent views imaginable. One day Muḥammad al-Amīr was sitting there, accompanied by a young slave who was fanning him. The young man was exceptionally handsome and very brave; enchanted by the marvellous view, he said to the Emir’s father: „Master, will you look at the red sand, the green meadow and the blue sea”. Muḥammad al-Amīr asked: „And why don’t you mention the dune of white sand, which spreads behind you?” The young man, somewhat ashamed, answered: „I do not deserve blame just because I did not mention that hill. It is like any other hill”. People store in memory all kinds of tales, stories and

poems, but words, when uttered, take too much time to make it possible to repeat them, and a pen is not able to put everything down either. The Emir 'Alī listened willingly to the literary works and interesting stories that I recited for him, and he told me to write down for him those with which I was familiar. It gave him pleasure to continue the work of his noble ancestors and, most of all, of his much respected father. The stories about the Saifā family mention their merits, their generosity, and their kindness to people, both rich and poor. People from all around the town sought their firendship: those who needed their help as well as those who came disinterestedly. This is a well known thing. It is said that they brought the line of Barmakids back to existence. In the records there is to be found a detailed account of their destruction by Fakhr ad-Dīn ibn Ma'n, who ruined their Tripoli homes and chased them out of their town and their country. But the tides of fate changed with time; Al-Amīr 'Alī, the sone of Fakhr ad-Dīn, was killed, and Sultan Murad sent his soldiers, under the command of Aḥmad Pāshā al-Kajak, against Fakhr ad-Dīn. In 1043 (1634) Fakhr ad-Dīn was captured and delivered to Murad. Then it became known that some members of Banū Saifā's family, scattered and living in hiding, had survived: those were the already mentioned Emir 'Alī, Qāsim Pāshā and their military commanders: Ḥasan Agha, Yūsuf Agha, and others. But they did not live easy lives, they were defeated in their plans and their hopes, and their fame passed away in a short time. Thus it happened according to Allāh's will.

One of the men whom my companion and I met in Tripoli was Muḥammad Effendī ibn ad-Dinnī, the mufti of the hanafite school, a magnificent man and a great scholar; he spoke Arabic and Turkish and had beautiful handwriting. When I arrived at his home, I found him sitting in a hall, every wall of which was made of coloured marble, and the furniture was upholstered with silk and coloured woollen cloth. He owned a couple of particularly excellent slaves: they were handsome, well-mannered, and displayed many other good features. Ad-Dinnī asked me many questions about Damascus and about our scholars — each one separately — and most of all, about our Shaikh 'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-'Amādī and Shaikh Yūsuf Effendī al-Fathī. He had exchanged

letters with them, and he let me see some of them. To give a short description of him, he is a man worthy of respect; his attitude and his knowledge of Greece and many other countries are truly impressive.

In Tripoli I also met Muḥammad Effendī ibn Hibat Allāh, the preacher at the Great Mosque, a much respected leader of the faithful. He can speak Arabic and Turkish and is a gifted orator. A refined man of distinction, he is on a level with those who participate in royal councils. He is a hanafite priest; endowed with a melodious voice, he preaches solemn sermons and reads in a most beautiful style.

In the town I also met Shaikh 'Abd al-Karīm al-Ḥamawī, a shāfi'ite mufti, a man of distinction and a prominent scholar. He knew Egypt well; he had been a student at the university at the al-Azhar mosque, where he reached the supreme heights of his knowledge. I used to meet him in his zāwiya, situated on the bank of the river, which flows through the town on the eastern side. I also saw him once during a council of scholars, dignitaries and men of letters. He devotes all his time to matters of learning and religion. An expert in Moslem law, he frames and renders verdicts; he is great-hearted and unassuming. When I saw him for the first time, he asked about our Shaikh Muḥammad aṣ-Ṣaidāwī and said: „He was my friend in Egypt, we were both students at al-Azhar". When I told him that the Shaikh was in good health, he was pleased with the news. Two or three days after I made his acquaintance he asked me to come and see him at the zāwiya previously referred to. I got up early and went there in the morning. He was already waiting for me. Leaving the district beyond the centre of the town, we went towards the sea. Walking amongst gardens, meadows and streams we reached the place where a green meadow was spread out, cut in two by the river — the same river which runs through the town and which flows into the sea there. The estuary is of a unique shape, and it is marvellous to look at. The name of this place is Ra's an-nahr, and it suits the purposes of walking equally well as Marja in Damascus. Surrounding that meadow there are gardens full of flowers and birds, and one side of it adjoins the sea. Looking from there, one can enjoy a magnificent sea-view with the sight

of the passing vessels. Some tents had already been put up, all with carpets inside, as well as pots for cooking food. A party of dignitaries and scholars were awaiting our arrival. We stayed there for the whole day, spending the time talking about poetry and prose, reciting beautiful poems and listening to tales. At the end of the day, when the sun was beginning to set, everybody got up and they all went back to their houses. The experience of that day was the most intense impression of the voyage; it was the most wonderful day in my life. Truthful are the words of the poet (in *al-kāmil* metre):

*Oh, how wonderful are the meadows, with their amazing beauty,
The odour of wet soil, moistened by the dew...*

In Tripoli I also met Ḥusain Naqīb al-Ashrāf. He is a man of dignity, kind-hearted, gentle, noble and unassuming; he treats all people with kindness, and for that reason they respect him and hold him in high esteem. I paid him frequent visits and personally became familiar with the beautiful features of his character, which made people admire him; a poet says about him:

*He has 'Amr's courage and Ḥātim's generosity,
He equals Aḥnaf in his kindness, and in his wisdom he is on
a level with Iyās...³*

There I also became acquainted with a worshipper of Allāh, shāfi'ite Shaikh Muṣṭafā, who is like „the sea of purity” and „an inexhaustible treasury of kindliness”. He preaches in the Great Mosque and performs the duties of an imam there; he is a friend of the above mentioned Ibn Hibat Allāh. A prominent scholar and a noble man, he will never refuse his help to anyone who might need it, and he extends his kindness to all people. He is a keen reader and he teaches reading, collects literary works of value, has beautiful handwriting and devotes all his time to performing acts of kindness. I often stayed in his room, situated in the western wing of the Great Mosque, and became familiar with his subtle nature. I did not recite poems for him, and he

³ *Dīwān Abī Tammām*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abduh 'Azzām, Cairo 1937 II, p. 244.

did not recite either. But on one occasion, after I had said the sunset prayer in that mosque, he asked me to come to his room and there we awaited the hour of the evening prayer; it was then that during our conversation I recited an appropriate piece of poetry (in *mujtathth* metre):

*Sunrise is something that is most beautiful, tell it to those
Who hold it in contempt...*

In answer, he recited a similar poem:

Sunset is even more beautiful, and I have arguments to prove it...

One I was invited to one of the houses in the eastern district which overlooks the town with gardens that descend almost to the seashore. I entered an edifice built in most exquisite style, and the host took me up to a room on the top floor, with two windows that faced the west. The day was coming to its end and the sun was setting. The light of the setting sun does not usually blind the looker any more, and so I could look straight in front of me. I was enchanted — the place in which I found myself, the time of the day and the host with whom we exchanged reminiscences — all that contributed towards my impression. Then I recited the following poem (in *al-kāmil* metre):

If you want to delight in happiness, follow a straight road...

Immediately, I heard from him a similar one:

He who follows a straight road, satisfied are his desires...

He was very talkative, he recited poems, and quoted great examples that are worth following. What a magnificent gift is the gift of oratory! Later, he came to see me every day during my stay in the town, he helped me to carry my plans into effect, he did things for me that a man would not do for his brother nor a son for his father. When I was leaving, he bade me farewell and saw me off as far as the district where travellers stop on their way. May Allāh the Supreme reward him with all good and protect him from evil. When I returned to Damascus, I sent him

one of my poems, which ends in a well-rounded manner (in *at-tawīl* metre):

Peace to Tripoli and to him who lives there...

During my stay in Tripoli I also participated in a meeting that took place in a garden full of roses, daffodils and fragrant plants — a gathering of people who met by chance in order to listen to pieces of poetry and to expositions of various topics. Among the members of that gathering there was a man from Egypt, who told us about various countries and their historical monuments. He praised Egypt and its palaces, and made fun of other countries, complaining about their climate, water and inhabitants. Appointed by the assembly, I was to refute his charges. I improvised by reciting the following poem (in *al-kāmīl* metre):

*My heart is burning like a fire, and from that fire
My breath is becoming hot...*

The Great Mosque in Tripoli is a magnificent structure, admitting ample light and an inflow of fresh air. Water is in abundance there. Outside the mosque there is a water reservoir with a building erected in the middle of it; one reaches it by walking along a beautiful platform. The building is crowned with a dome strengthened with stone. It is a house for muezzins who live there except on winter days. On the eastern and western sides of the mosque there are groves of old lemon-trees, which make a most beautiful sight.

In Tripoli there is also another mosque, called *al-Bartāsiyya*. The floor from the door up to the *mihrāb*, is covered with marble of all sorts; it is really enchanting, and the walls of the mosque match its floor. In the wall on the western side there are windows that face the river which runs through the town. The rood is strengthened with stones, among which pieces of coloured glass are fixed, seeming to resemble stars and celestial constellations. The rays of the rising sun, reflected by the bright glimmer of the glass, fall on the coloured marble, making a truly unique and magnificent sight. There is also a water reservoir there, adorned with marble of many colours. It was this mosque that I visited most frequently, because of its beauty.

There is also a mosque called *at-Tūba Mosque* in Tripoli. Its shape is similar to that of the Great Mosque. At its eastern side there is situated a beautiful edifice called *al-Mahmūdiyya*. It is a gallery built over the dam on the previously mentioned river that flows from the east to the west. People frequently visit that place. There is running water there; through a stonework lined channel it is conveyed to the reservoir from which it flows again back to the river. During my stay in the town I often came there, spending my time in solitude; my eyes and my heart were filled with joy.

The *Ṭailūn Mosque* is situated on the western outskirts of the town, at the seaside. It is an important meeting place. It is spacious and well adapted to the purposes of holiday prayers and for all kinds of assemblies — those of primary importance, as well as others.

Not far beyond the town the endless stretches of red sand spread out. People say that in the past the sand was at a greater distance from the town, and that it keeps coming nearer and nearer. They say that it will bring about the destruction of the town. It is Allāh alone who knows best. In general — and in particular — Tripoli is a magnificent town. May Allāh protect it and preserve it for the followers of Islam.

Praise be to Allāh, the Master of the worlds. Thus the description of the journey is completed; its author is the hanafite faqīr, Ramaḍān Ibn Mūsā al-ʿUṭaifi. It was made after he left the above mentioned town, towards the end of the month of Ṣafar, 1044 (August 1634). May Allāh's blessing reach our Master Muḥammad, his family and his companions".