

## **The *Milh al-Malâha* of al-Malik al-Ashraf ‘Umar (d. 696/1296): Situating the Ur-Text of the Rasulid Agricultural Corpus**

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Of the rich corpus of texts now available for piecing together the history of agriculture during Yemen’s Rasulid era (13th-15th centuries), none is more crucial than the *Milh al-Malâha* of the third Rasulid sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf ‘Umar. Along with his agricultural almanac, written for 670/1271, this treatise looks at all aspects of crop production in Yemen, including types of land, water sources and manure. Only two known copies exist, one from the Glaser collection in Vienna and the other in a private library in Yemen. Much of al-Ashraf’s text is quoted in the later *Bughyat al-fallâhîn* of al-Malik al-Afdal, but the latter also includes information derived from non-Yemeni sources. In this essay I describe the range of information in al-Ashraf’s treatise and its significance for tracing the documentary history of Yemeni agriculture during the Rasulid period. This is prolegomenon to a planned systematic study of al-Ashraf’s treatise for a comprehensive analysis of Yemen’s agriculture during the Rasulid era.

### **The Author**

Al-Malik al-Ashraf ‘Umar was the third Rasulid sultan, reigning for only a brief span of 21 months in 1295-96 C.E. after the extraordinary dynastic build-up of his father, al-Malik al-Muzaffar Yûsuf, over 46 years (Varisco 1993). Although no birth date for al-Ashraf has yet been found in the Rasulid corpus, I believe he was born sometime after 1242 before his father came to power. By the year 1266 he was mature enough to take charge of a military raid on Hajja; later he was made governor of al-Mahjam along Wadi Surdud and at one point was in charge of the highland city of San‘â’. Details about his personal life are limited. We know he had six sons who lived to maturity and at least two daughters, both of whom married sons of his younger brother Dâwûd, the man who succeeded him in office. As a scholar he excelled in the more secular sciences of astronomy, agriculture, veterinary science and medicine. His most important astronomical treatise is

*al-Tabsira fî ‘ilm al-nujûm*, which contains the earliest Rasulid agricultural almanac (edited and translated in Varisco 1994).

### **The Text**

Two major agricultural treatises have thus far come to light from Rasulid Yemen. One of these, the *Bughyat al-fallâhîn* of al-Malik al-Afdal al-‘Abbâs (died 1376 C.E.) has survived in four copies, the most useful of which is located in the Egyptian National Library in Cairo. The late R.B. Serjeant (1974) translated the chapter on cereals from this. Al-Afdal quotes extensively from a work of his own father and also his great uncle al-Ashraf, but mixes information specifically on Yemen with lore from Andalusia (Ibn Bassâl) and the well-traveled *Kitab al-Filâha al-Nabatîya* from Iraq.

The earliest of the Rasulid agricultural treatises is al-Ashraf’s *Milh al-malâha fî ma‘rifat al-filâha*, which exists in two known copies (see Varisco 1989). There is some controversy about the exact title. I follow the vocalization of Serjeant, although the Yemeni historian Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahîm Jâzim (1985:165) prefers *mulah* rather than *milh* in the title.<sup>1</sup> Since there is no vowelizing indicated, either reading is possible. As defined by the Yemeni lexicographer Nashwân ibn Sa‘îd al-Himyarî (1999:9:6364), *mulâh* is the plural of *mulha*, a term which refers to a pleasant saying or *bon mot*; *milh* has several possibilities apart from the obvious sense of salt. It can also be used in the sense of a witty saying, which I take to be the main sense in the title, but it has an added semantic flavor for those who appreciate puns. In *Lisân al-‘Arab* there is a connotation of *milh* as *baraka*, surely a fit desire for the often unpredictable art of agriculture, and also a sense of *milh* as science (‘ilm); the latter would play off the *ma‘rifa* nicely in the title. *Lisân* also records *milh* as meaning the most beautifully elegant (*al-husn min al-malâha*). In the absence of vowels (and those in a late copy would be suspect at any rate), I would argue that *milh* is a more elegant choice, but of course this is *post hoc* “if I were a Rasulid horse” reasoning. As for the original intent of al-Ashraf, the most *bon mot* I can think of is *Allâhu a‘lama*.

The major extant copy of the treatise, which is unfortunately missing the first chapter, is in the

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<sup>1</sup> The edition of Jâzim (1985) in *al-Iklîl* has a number of printing errors. However, it is still superior to a pirated version of Jâzim’s hand-written copy published as a book by ‘Abd Allâh al-Mujâhid (1987), a modern agricultural engineer;

Glaser collection in Vienna and consists of 242 pages (with only 9 lines to a page). It is in fact much shorter in length than the later treatise of al-Afdal, although it is possible to reconstruct the missing chapter from the copy discovered in Yemen by Jâzim and from excerpts in al-Afdal's treatise. There are seven chapters, as follows:

1. What is required in agriculture based on the knowledge of times for planting, transplanting, working the land and improving it;
2. Cereals (*zar'*) and what are connected to this;
3. Pulses (*qatânî*), which are seed crops (*hubûb*);
4. Flowering plants (*al-ashjâr al-muthmira*);
5. Aromatic plants (*rayâhîn*);
6. Vegetable greens (*khadrâwât* and *buqûlât*);
7. That which controls pests (*âfât*) on cereals and grapevines and seedlings and what protects grain and flour from pests, if God the Sublime and Most High so wills.

Taken as a whole, al-Ashraf's text provides a learned account of the science of agriculture in Yemen during the latter half of the 13th century. Much of the information is specific to Yemen, but clearly the author had access to other written texts from outside Yemen. Unlike the later al-Afdal, however, there are no references to other texts or earlier authorities cited. However, al-Ashraf's observation that the best dung is from pigeons is clearly derived from the classical tradition, e.g. Varro (died 27 B.C.E.), probably through the widely traveled *Kitâb al-filâha al-Rûmiya*.<sup>2</sup> There were never any pigeon towers in Yemen, nor is there any evidence that such avian droppings were applied by Yemeni farmers to their fields. If you will forgive my vulgar conclusion: this is borrowed shit. Al-Ashraf also notes some plants, such as pistachio and olive, that he admits were not planted in Yemen. It is possible that he had access to both the *Kitâb al-Filâha al-Rûmiya* and the *Kitâb al-Filâha al-Nabatîya*, as the later al-Afdal did, but determining the possible sources will require much more effort as I have only begun systematic analysis of the treatise.

In praiseworthy Yemeni fashion, al-Ashraf begins his treatise with a poetic quatrain:

*Fa-hâdhâ kitâb jama'tuhu bi-hasab al-tâqa wa-al-ijtihâd*

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this latter is without merit.

<sup>2</sup> Varro 1979, p. 263.

*wa-ista'tab 'alâ dhâlik bi-rabb al-'ibâd.*

*Wada'tuhu 'alâ hukm istilâh ahl al-ma'rifa fî al-Yaman*

*ba'd al-bahth ma'ahum fî kulli mâ fîhi min sanf wa-fann.*

“I compiled this book according to diligence and capability and solicit for proof of this the Lord of all humanity.

I recorded it from the wise practice of those Yemenis who know

only after research among them for all that is within their classifying and artful show.”

The intent of the author, at least in verse, is to act as a conduit for the customary knowledge of Yemeni farmers. In a similar vein al-Ashraf recorded local Yemeni star names and lore in his main astronomical treatise (e.g. Varisco 1994:104). It is tempting to consider our author an incipient ethnographer rather than an armchair Ibn Khaldunian historian, but he provides no information about his informants. The information provided covers all parts of Yemen, the main division being between the coastal wadis and the mountains; the chronicles indicate that he had traveled widely in Yemen so he certainly had the opportunity to survey these regions. The Rasulids also oversaw extensive holdings at the time, including the rich flood-irrigated land near al-Mahjam, where al-Ashraf served for awhile as governor. At times his description of planting methods mirror what I observed in 1978 during ethnographic fieldwork in the irrigated highland valley of al-Ahjur. Indeed, as I argued in the introduction to my study of al-Ashraf's agricultural almanac, my ethnographic experience has allowed me to make much better sense of the agricultural and seasonal information than I could only from the texts themselves.

### **The Ur-Text**

I have described the range of information in the treatise elsewhere (Varisco 2006), so my aim here is to discuss al-Ashraf's *Milh* as the Ur-Text of Rasulid agricultural knowledge. I assume the text was written after the agricultural almanac al-Ashraf compiled for the year 670/1271, perhaps while he was governor at al-Mahjam, where he no doubt was responsible for the royal holdings there. A century later al-Afdal quotes extensively from *Milh*. Besides these two texts, the only other known agricultural treatise from the pen of a Rasulid sultan is *al-Ishâra fî al-'imâra*, attributed to al-Malik al-Mujâhid 'Alî ibn Dâwûd, the father of al-Afdal and the nephew of al-Ashraf. This is also quoted

extensively by al-Afdal, but no copy of the actual text has yet surfaced. Similarly, al-Ashraf's almanac is the first recorded in the Rasulid genre. While later Rasulid almanacs record much of the same information, the variations in timings and local plants covered demonstrate that these were not simple textual clones. The same cannot be said for some of the more recent Yemeni almanacs, which at times misread varietal names no longer in common use; e.g. the Rasulid planting of Qusaybî wheat is copied in some later almanacs as qaydî (i.e. summer), but the latter designation is totally inappropriate.

*Milh* amplifies the information provided in the almanac. For example, al-Ashraf mentions the wheat variety called Qusaybî in reference to the southern highland area of al-Qusayba, where the Rasulids owned land. In his almanac he records that this is sown between X:1 and XI:18, with X:10-25 as the best time. In *Milh*, however, the sowing of Qusaybî wheat is given as the month between X:15 and XI:15. The later almanac of Abû al-'Uqûl, written during the reign of al-Ashraf's successor, cites the times as between X:1 and X:25, with X:10 as the best time. The almanacs I have designated Salwa and Taymûr give the dates between X:10 and X:31. While sowing times in almanacs are generally approximate, these minor variations suggest different ways of looking at the length of the sowing season, depending on what is considered the optimum time for planting. It is interesting to note that the much older almanac of Abû Hanîfa al-Dînawarî (died 282/895) gives X:10 as the generic time for planting wheat in Yemen. Is this a coincidence, did the Rasulids know the earlier almanac (by almost four centuries!), or was this really the local planting time relatively unchanged for centuries?

### **The Effort**

There are texts and there are texts; indeed there are far more Arabic texts out there than can be sampled by even the most ardent historian. This is especially true for Rasulid Yemen, which has yet to be put on the medievalist map in any way comparable to studies on Mamluk Egypt. In this paper I have outlined why I think a particular agricultural text is a priority, not just for the nascent field of Rasulid Studies (I may be the first to even suggest such a parochial moniker), but for the broader study of agriculture in Arab Islamic societies stretching from Andalusia to Iraq. Exploring the *Milh* (or perhaps the *Mulah*) of al-Ashraf is microcosmic of my own interloping (as

anthropologist and historian) among Arabic texts. First, it is not entirely clear what the exact title was, let alone why the author carefully or carelessly chose the exact title. Second, the text has to be reconstructed from relatively recent copies, the best of which is incomplete, while the oldest known copy is *de facto* the quotes embedded in the treatise of al-Afdal. Third, this appears to be the Ur-Text, the first of a rich genre that I would argue gives the most detailed account of an agricultural system for a premodern Arab society anywhere. Finally, the Yemen that I lived in over thirty years ago served as a kind of ethnographic laboratory for many of the activities (and certainly some of the dialect terminology) mentioned some eight centuries earlier. Were I not so entrenched in my academic stupor, it would make a good novel. And I even have a possible title for such a trivial pursuit: The Sultan's Green Thumb, anyone?

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