

## Book Review

---

Al-Malik al-Afḍal al-‘Abbās b. ‘Alī b. Dāwūd al-Rasūlī,  
*Bughyat al-fallāḥīn fī al-ashjār al-muthmira wa-l-rayāḥīn*.  
Edited by Khālīd Khalfān b. Nāṣir al-Wahībī (Damascus:  
Dār al-Farqad, 2016), 2 vols., 1199 pp., 6 b/w images, map,  
indices. Price: \$30 (cloth).

Daniel Martin Varisco  
*Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton*

(dmvarisco@gmail.com)

One of the most important extant agricultural treatises from the middle Islamic era is *Bughyat al-fallāḥīn fī al-ashjār al-muthmira wa-l-rayāḥīn* by the sixth Yemeni Rasulid sultan, al-Malik al-Afḍal al-‘Abbās b. ‘Alī (d. 788/1376). There are five known extant copies of this text, although none from the Rasulid era itself, apart from an abridged version by the author.<sup>1</sup> Attention was first drawn to the treatise by Max Meyerhof in the *Bulletin de l’Institut d’Égypte* in 1943.<sup>2</sup> He translated the title as *L’objet des désirs des agriculteurs au sujet des arbres fruitiers et des plantes odoriférantes*. His description of the manuscript was based on a 1931 copy of an undated manuscript

(Zirā‘a 155) in Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya; at the time, the copy had been sent outside the library for its safety during the war. In 1953–54, R. B. Serjeant copied a manuscript of the text that was made available to him by a certain Shaykh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Shāṭirī in Tarim. The Tarim text, now not accounted for, had itself been copied in 1197/1782. Serjeant’s transcription is housed with his papers at the University of Edinburgh.<sup>3</sup> The oldest surviving manuscript is in the Ahmet III library (A. 2432, fols. 177v–225r) in Istanbul. There is also a copy in the Western library of the Great Mosque in Sanaa (Zirā‘a 1), which was copied in 1362/1943, although it wrongly

1. This is published in D. M. Varisco and G. R. Smith, eds., *The Manuscript of al-Malik al-Afḍal al-‘Abbās b. ‘Alī b. Dāwūd b. Yūsuf b. ‘Umar b. ‘Alī ibn Rasūl: A Medieval Arabic Anthology from the Yemen* (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips for the E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1989), 206–211.

2. Max Meyerhof, “Sur un traité d’agriculture composé par un sultan yéménite du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle.” *Bulletin de l’Institut d’Égypte* 25 (1943): 55–63; 26 (1944): 51–65.

3. <https://archives.collections.ed.ac.uk/repositories/2/resources/537>.

attributes the text to al-Malik Yaḥyā b. Ismāʿīl al-Ghassānī. None of these copies appears to be complete.

The editor of the present edition, Dr. Khālid al-Wahībī, is Omani and the son of a former minister in the Omani government. During 2005–6 he visited Dār al-Kutub in Cairo and examined two manuscript copies of the text as well as microfilms of the copy in the Western Library of the Great Mosque and of the earliest manuscript in the Ahmet III library. The edition of al-Wahībī is an important contribution to the study of Islamic-era agriculture for several reasons. This is the first publication of the *Bughyat al-fallāḥīn*, based on four manuscripts. Variations between the manuscripts are noted in the extensive footnotes. The editor provides a discussion of previous research by Meyerhof, Serjeant,<sup>4</sup> myself,<sup>5</sup> Yaḥyā al-ʿAnsī,<sup>6</sup> and ʿAbd al-Wāḥid al-Khāmīrī<sup>7</sup> (pp. 17–21). Drawing on al-Khāmīrī and the Yemeni chronicles, he provides a biography of

al-Afḍal, including the books ascribed to the sultan (pp. 24–36). He describes the four manuscripts he consulted in Cairo, with a summary of their contents (pp. 37–61), and he identifies the sources used or quoted by al-Afḍal in his treatise (pp. 62–95). The edition is followed by a bibliography of references (pp. 1119–34) and very useful indexes (pp. 1135–99) on a range of topics: names of tribes and peoples; place-names; plants and the diseases and pests that afflict them; animals and the diseases and pests that afflict them; stars and lunar stations (*anwāʿ*); seasons and almanac lore; soils and agricultural land; water sources; seeds, seedlings, and plantings; harvest, storage and ripening; pruning and grafting of trees; human diseases and cures; books mentioned in the text; cultural terms; agricultural tools; and terms of measure.

The primary value of *Bughyat al-fallāḥīn* lies in the information it yields on agriculture in Yemen. Al-Afḍal provides some details of his own but mainly

4. R. B. Serjeant, “The Cultivation of Cereals in Medieval Yemen,” *Arabian Studies* 1 (1974): 25–74; idem, “Agriculture and Horticulture: Some Cultural Interchanges of the Medieval Arabs and Europe,” in *Oriente e Occidente nel medioevo, Filosofia e Scienze*, 535–548 (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1971).

5. D. M. Varisco, *Medieval Folk Astronomy and Agriculture in Arabia and the Yemen* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1997); idem, “Water Sources and Traditional Irrigation in Yemen,” *New Arabian Studies* 3 (1996): 238–83; idem, “An Anonymous 14th Century Almanac from Rasulid Yemen,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Arabisch-Islamischen Wissenschaften* 9 (1994): 195–228; idem, *Medieval Agriculture and Islamic Science: The Almanac of a Yemeni Sultan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); idem, “A Royal Crop Register from Rasulid Yemen,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 34 (1991): 1–22; idem, “Medieval Agricultural Texts from Rasulid Yemen,” *Manuscripts of the Middle East* 4 (1989): 150–154; idem, “The Production of Sorghum (Dhurah) in Highland Yemen,” *Arabian Studies* 7 (1985): 53–88; idem, “Sayl and Ghayl: The Ecology of Water Allocation in Yemen,” *Human Ecology* 11 (1983): 365–383.

6. Yaḥyā al-ʿAnsī, *al-Turāth al-zirāʿī wa-maʿārifuhu fī al-Yaman* (Sanaa: American Institute for Yemeni Studies, 2008); *al-Mawāqīt al-zirāʿīyya fī al-Yaman* (Sanaa: American Institute for Yemeni Studies, 2006); *al-Maʿālim al-zirāʿīyya fī al-Yaman* (Sanaa: American Institute for Yemeni Studies and Centre français d’archéologie et de sciences sociales, 2004). Al-ʿAnsī discusses contemporary knowledge of agriculture in Yemen, but not that of the Rasulid era.

7. ʿAbd al-Wāḥid al-Khāmīrī edited a biographical text of al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās: *al-ʿAṭāyā al-saniyya wa-l-mawāhib al-haniyya fī al-manāqib al-Yamaniyya* (Sanaa: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wa-l-Siyāḥa, 2004).

relies on two earlier Yemeni sources: *Milḥ al-malāḥa fī ma‘rifat al-filāḥa*<sup>8</sup> of al-Malik al-Ashraf ‘Umar (d. 696/1296) and *al-Ishāra fī al-‘imāra* of his father, al-Malik al-Mujāhid ‘Alī (d. 764/1362). Two known copies of *Milḥ al-malāḥa* exist: one published by Muḥammad Jāzim and the other acquired by Eduard Glaser in the late nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Mixed in with details on Yemen is information taken from three well-known texts that have received previous attention. These are the tenth-century *al-Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya* attributed to Ibn Waḥshiyya and translated from the Syriac, the Arabic translation of the Byzantine *al-Filāḥa al-Rūmiyya* of Qusṭūs (Cassiano Basso Scolastico) of the sixth–seventh century, and the eleventh-century *al-Filāḥa* of the Andalusian Ibn Baṣṣāl. A few other non-Yemeni sources are also used. Given that these non-Yemeni sources exist and have been published, the principal contribution of *Bughyat al-fallāḥīn* is the Yemeni material. There exist a number of other Yemeni sources with relevant information on Yemeni agriculture, but these have largely been ignored by the editor.<sup>10</sup>

The editor has chosen to compare the two texts in Dār al-Kutub, the earliest one in the Ahmet III library and the very late copy in Sanaa. It is clear from his footnotes that the most trustworthy witness is Cairo’s Zirā‘a 155. There is no colophon

and the writing does not look Rasulid, but there is a marginal note in this manuscript with the date 1131 AH (1718–19 CE). This note appears to have been added by a later hand, given that it refers to a group of scholars from Mocha who came to Shaykh Aḥmad b. ‘Isā al-Walīdī, referred to as a father in the note, regarding seeds for the clove (*qaranful*) plant. Al-Wahībī (p. 39) assumes this is the approximate date of the manuscript, but the note appears to have been made by someone who owned the manuscript rather than at the time of its copying. There are relatively few comments in the margins. Some appear to be corrections to the text, but others add information, often about the Tihāma region. Regardless of the date of the manuscript’s copying, it is the second-oldest manuscript surviving thus far. The copy made of this text in 1931 is useless, since we have the original from which it was copied. Similarly, the very late Sanaa manuscript is of little value because it is poorly written and contains numerous errors, extending even to the name of the author.

Although al-Wahībī suggests that the manuscript preserved in the Ahmet III library in Istanbul was copied by ‘Alī b. ‘Amr al-Qādirī in 868 AH (1463–64 CE), I am not sure where he found this very early date. When I examined the manuscript in Istanbul in 1983, I noted

8. Meyerhof transliterated the first word as *milḥ*, which I follow. Jāzim prefers *mulaḥ*, but both have similar meanings. Lacking an original text, it is difficult to determine which term al-Ashraf used.

9. Muḥammad Jāzim, “Kitāb Mulāḥ al-malāḥa fī ma‘rifat al-filāḥa,” *al-Iklīl* 3, no. 1 (1985): 170–207. Jāzim copied an incomplete text copied in Yemen after 1172/1758. The edition by ‘Abd Allāh al-Mujāhid, *Milḥ al-milāḥa fī ma‘rifat al-filāḥa* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1987), was copied from Jāzim’s handwritten transcription and should be avoided. The Glaser manuscript (no. 247) is in Vienna. I am preparing a translation of this text based on the two extant copies and quoted excerpts in *Bughyat al-fallāḥīn*.

10. See the list in my “Medieval Agricultural Texts,” updated online at [http://filaha.org/medieval\\_agricultural.html](http://filaha.org/medieval_agricultural.html).

that it was copied by a Kurd in 1001/1592. Regardless of the date, it remains the oldest copy known, although the author's name and the book's title are missing. It is not clear how a Yemeni manuscript could have been copied in Istanbul in the fifteenth century, since the Rasulid dynasty ended in 1454 and the earliest invasion of Yemen by the Ottomans took place in 1538. Thus far no original Yemeni copy of the text has been found in Turkey. Ahmet III lived at the start of the eighteenth century, when the Cairo copy was made. It is bound with a copy of the Byzantine *al-Filāḥa al-Rūmiyya*. Unfortunately, the text is full of errors and was clearly copied by someone who had little knowledge of Yemen. It is interesting to note that both the Ahmet III copy and the main Cairo copy are incomplete and end at almost the same point. The Ahmet III copy ends with a discussion of the seven climes, about three lines longer than the Cairo copy. The two later copies also do not go beyond this point. This suggests that the original text may in fact not have been finished. It is also possible that the agricultural text of sixteen chapters was completed, since the last section on the seven climes is not listed in the contents and is referred to in the text as a *fā'ida*.

We have no information on the original manuscript, but there must have been a very early copy, most probably a Rasulid one, that was taken to Istanbul for the copy made there. The Cairo copy was clearly written in Yemen, although it is not clear when it arrived in Cairo. The fact that there are more recent copies in Tarim and Sanaa indicates that there must be an earlier copy, or more than one in Yemen, unless it has been destroyed. Given that many manuscripts are still found in private Yemeni libraries, with some now

sold to wealthy individuals in neighboring states, other copies of *Bughyat al-fallāḥīn* may yet surface.

Given the effort put into this edition, it is unfortunate that the editor has a limited knowledge of Rasulid Yemen and the history of Yemeni agriculture in general. One of the glaring errors is misidentifying the author of *Milḥ al-malāḥa*, whom he elsewhere recognizes as al-Ashraf (p. 77), as al-Malik al-Muẓaffar in a footnote on p. 193, note 3. The problem is that al-Afḍal is using the term *jadd* here as an honorific for his father's uncle, not to denote his literal grandfather. In describing al-Ashraf's book, al-Afḍal calls the author his *jadd* (p. 100), but al-Afḍal's grandfather was al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad Dāwūd, the brother of al-Ashraf. In the passage on p. 193 the reference is to the *jadd* of his father, called the *khalīfa*, but the author of *Milḥ al-malāḥa* is not his father's grandfather. The same problem occurs on p. 194, note 7, where al-Wahībī assumes the quotation is from al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad when it is from al-Ashraf. I suspect that al-Afḍal is quoting his father about al-Ashraf here, since this is the usual formula used. On p. 199, note 16, al-Wahībī misidentifies the star called *kalb* in Egypt as the lunar station 'awwā', but the reference is to the summer rising of Sirius, a famous marker in ancient Egypt. The substitution of *qittā'* (p. 203) for the snake cucumber (*qiththā'*) is probably a printing error. The list of non-Arabic references has a number of errors and indicates that the editor did not have access to Western commentaries on the non-Yemeni texts quoted by al-Afḍal.

A comparison of this published edition to the Cairo manuscript reveals a few instances in which the latter has been

misread. On p. 185, line 1, al-Wahībī chooses Nayrūz rather than what is clearly *buzūr* in the Cairo manuscript. The word cannot be Nayrūz because it refers to summer rather than spring and other parts of the text note that this is the season when seeds appear. The Himyaritic month name for February is *Dhū Dithā’* and not *Dhū al-Dhayā* (p. 190), although none of the copies gives the proper spelling. On p. 192 the word *ayḍan* is left out. On p. 193 al-Wahībī misreads the Cairo manuscript, which I read as *taṭammu* rather than *yaḍummu*; the verb *taṭammu* is used in the text of Ibn al-Waḥshiyya.<sup>11</sup> I suspect that the reference on p. 198, line 4, is to grapevines in the village of al-Janāt, as in the Cairo manuscript, rather than *al-jibāl*. On p. 327, al-Wahībī misreads *sawāqī* (water channels) as *sawālif*. On p. 413, line 6, after the coastal plant name *al-‘rhf*

for *mulūkhiyya*, he drops from the Cairo manuscript the phrase *wa-fī al-Ṭarafāt/al-Ṭaraqāt* (?), which appears to be the term for a region.

In sum, this is a valuable resource on a very important fourteenth-century Yemeni text, although it has a number of annoying errors and misreadings. The only manuscript copies worth examining are the Cairo and Ahmet III ones, given the numerous errors in the two later copies, so it is not clear why the editor bothered with the latter. He also did not have access to Serjeant’s copy of the Tarim manuscript, although this is archived in Edinburgh. Since the two volumes were published in Damascus, they will be difficult to access for most scholars. However, anyone interested in agriculture during the Mamluk and Rasulid eras should secure a copy of them.

---

11. Ibn Waḥshiyya, *L’agriculture Nabatéenne = al-Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya*, ed. Toufic Fahd, 3 vols. (Damascus: Institut français d’études arabes de Damas, 1995), 2:944.