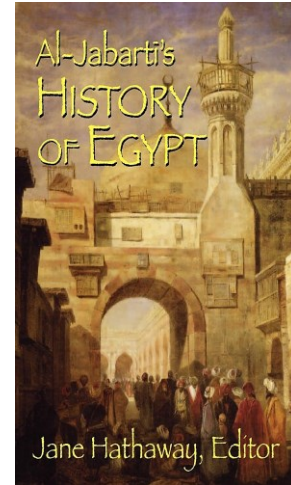


## Al-Jabarti

### *A History of Egypt and Napoleon*

Markus Wiener Publishers 2009

Whoever teaches [Mideastern](#) history, sociology, politics or global studies, will like to use this book. For Jane Hathaway of the Ohio State University presents here in [64](#) very brief chapters highlights of Egypt's history written by historian Abd ar-Rahman al-Jabarti, عبد الرحمن الجبرتي (1753-1825). She, well known by her related research and especially [her](#) seminal [book](#) on "The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule 1516-1800," gives each chapter a short introduction. Occasionally she writes "As I have explained elsewhere..." and equips the reader there and in the part "suggested reading" with tips for further literature research. The significance of her book comes not only from the Egyptian al-Jabarti's work, but from the time he shows in his chronicle 'Aja'b al-Athar fi at-Tarajim wa al-Akhbar, عجائب الآثار في التراجم والخبار. This "Marvelous Remnants of Biographies and Reports," illuminates also Napoleon's invasion into the Egyptian and Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire and marks the dawn of the Mideastern modernity since [1798](#). About that campagin Robert L. Tignor edited al-Jabarti's excerpts in "Al-Jabarti's Chronicle Of The French Occupation 1798: Napoleon In Egypt" translated by Shmuel Moreh (Wiener [1993](#), [2004](#)).



Living in Cairo, shaikh al-Jabarti witnessed not only this French campaign against the British, but this Muslim scholar reports also how the new Egyptian ruler Muhammad Ali (1769-1849) fought the old Mamluk regime and took over finally in 1805. Since the shaikh was critical to both, to the "infidel" Napoleon (1769-1821) and to Muhammad Ali as the founder of an Ottoman dynasty (ousted by the [1952](#) coup of Muhammad Najib and Abd an-Nasir), his chronicle remained "unpopular" for about two decades among local rulers.

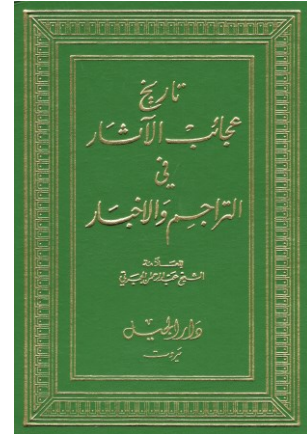
However, with the [new](#) printing press in Bulaq, it was first edited in Arabic in 1879. Then a first full translation appeared in nine volumes in Cairo until 1896. Often translated again, available in an Arabic three volume edition of Bairut in 1972 too, and since [1994](#) in a multi-volume English version edited by Thomas Philipp [and](#) Moshe Perlmann, it is still a key document of Muslim scholarship, [منحة دراسية](#), and of Egypt's Ottoman history since 1517.

German readers may be also referred to Arnold Hottinger's good compilation in one vol. (Artemis [1983](#)). Jane Hathaway's work abridged Philipp's and Perlmann's edition. She added her introduction and commentaries. Many views changed also for other chronicles available like those of Ahmad Çelebi and Ahmad Kathkuda. M. Şükrü Hanioglu presented a much needed history of a late Ottoman Empire (Princeton University Press [2008](#)). Thus, the reader can put al-Jabarti [into](#) broader context. Usually scholars discuss the chronicle on three levels: main tendencies on how the Muslim al-Jabarti evaluated Napoleon's Christian armies and jihad against them, schools of thought about this chronicle in Mideastern studies and what does it tell us about mutual points of acuties in Mideastern [and](#) Western cultures.

## Glimpses

The historian Jane Hathaway touches in her helpful introduction all the three points. She explains Egypt under Ottoman rule, the French invasion and the rise of Muhammad Ali. Then she introduces the reader to al-Jabarti's life and his chronicle. Finally she describes his own sources, the publication history and altering perceptions of Abd ar-Rahman al-Jabarti. The perception of al-Jabarti changed deeply as Hathaway opines: "No longer does he impress us as an isolated scholar attempting single-handedly to resurrect a long-abandoned tradition of Arabophone history-writing; instead, he seems a skilled but a rather insecure historian who takes pains to minimize his debt to his predecessors in the field – and who, perhaps, never quite lived up to the illustrious, indeed almost legendary, example of his father." (XXXIII) Does she like to destroy an old legend just to build an older one, like his father's Hasan, *حسن الجبرتي*, a known scholar? That the son did not write out of the blue was clear. Also that he did not acknowledge to the fullest some of his key sources and predecessors, is not unheard of in scholarship. Those earlier historians cultivated quarrels too, their antipathies and sympathies of colleagues.

Al-Jabarti - 3 vols. ed. Bairut 1972



Just take al-Jabarti's following words as an example about Muhammad Ali's attempt to modernize Egypt. The chronicler says that the pasha became convinced that Egyptians have a superior aptitude for sciences. Then he noted about Muhammad Ali (327): "He ordered that a school be built in the courtyard of his palace in which a group of natives and the pasha's Mamluks were enrolled under the teacher Hasan Efendi, known as ad-Darwish al-Mausili. With the collaboration of a Turk named Ruh ad-Din Efendi and several Europeans the principles of accounting and engineering were taught, as well as arithmetic, geometry, trigonometry, and algebra. Various technical instruments of English manufacture were provided, with which the students could measure distance, elevation, and area. He provided monthly stipends and yearly clothing allowances. They met regularly in this school, which was called School of Engineering, every morning of the week until shortly past noon, when they returned to their homes. Some days they made field trips to the open country to study surveying. In fact, knowledge of surveying was the pasha's main goal."

It appears that mechanisms to found and run a school were not too different to our time. The ruler felt the need to know more about the property sizes and citizens. It was satisfied with the help of foreign teachers, a Turk and an Iraqi – dubbed the Darwish from Mosul, *ad-Darwish al-Mausili*, *الدرويش الموصلية* – and European advisors. Add to this the usage of English hardware and some paid students until high noon, and the first School of Engineering emerged right in that palace. The surveying reveals properties and taxes to the pasha's benefit. What a typical interplay of domestic and foreign factors. Does it not sound all too familiar if we think of 2008 attempts to get a census going in America? Jane Hathaway's compilation of excerpts, however, is a much appreciated selection of al-Jabarti's key primary sources on Egypt's rulers, peasants, scholars, servants, merchants, and students. It offers multiple glimpses on many aspects of the social life at the banks of the Nile and can well be advised for the use as a textbook in higher education.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz

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