

## Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī I-Ḥusaynī I-Qāsimī I-Shāfi'ī

### Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī

Date of Birth 14 October 1801

Place of Birth Ṭaḥṭā, Upper Egypt

Date of Death 27 May 1873

Place of Death Cairo

## BIOGRAPHY

Rifā'a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī was born in Ṭaḥṭā, in Upper Egypt, to a well-respected family of 'ulamā', many of whom were educated and taught at al-Azhar. His father, al-Sayyid Badawī Rāfi', was a tax-farm administrator. In 1813, economic hardship caused by the abolition of the tax-farm system, drove the family out of their native town and into a wandering existence, which would last some three years. Shortly after their return to Ṭaḥṭā, his father died, and in 1817 Rifā'a and his mother moved to Cairo, where he enrolled in the mosque university of al-Azhar. His teachers included the scholar Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār (1766-1834), who would become Rifā'a's mentor and lifelong friend.

In 1824, al-ʿAṭṭār recommended his protégé as preacher (wāʿiẓ) in one of the new army (Nizām jadīd) regiments set up by the Egyptian viceroy Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha (r. 1805-48). When Muḥammad ʿAlī sent students to France for instruction in the modern sciences, it was again thanks to al-ʿAṭṭār that Rifā'a was included as the imam of the 44-strong mission. His stay in Paris (1826-31) meant he was able to acquire new academic disciplines and train as a translator of academic works, which would enable him to play a key role in the reform of the Egyptian educational system. He chronicled his experiences in *Takhliṣ al-ibriz ilā talkhiṣ Bārīz*, written at the request of al-ʿAṭṭār, who recommended it to Muḥammad ʿAlī.

After returning to Egypt, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī worked as a translator of student textbooks and teacher of French at the School of Medicine, before being appointed chief translator of the Military School (1833-5). During his time there he produced a geographical manual, *Al-taʿrībāt al-shāfiyya li-murīd al-jughrāfiyya* ('Healing translations for the student of geography', 1834), which included translations from the works of Alexander von Humboldt, Achille Maissas and Auguste Michelot. He also wrote the *Risāla fī jughrāfiyā bilād al-Shām* ('Treatise on the geography of Syria').

In 1835, he was put in charge of the newly founded Language School, to which was added a translation department in 1841 and meanwhile his reputation and responsibilities continued to grow. He was appointed director of the library at Qaṣr al-ʿAynī (1841) and editor-in-chief (1842) of the official Gazette, *Al-Waḳāʿiʿ al-Miṣriyya* ('Egyptian events').

Muḥammad ‘Alī’s successor, ‘Abbās I (r. 1848-54), closed down the Language School, while court intrigues resulted in Rifā‘a being exiled to the Sudan in 1850. It was here that he completed the translation of Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque* under the title *Mawāqī‘ al-aflāk fī waqā’i‘ Tilimāk* (‘The orbits of the celestial bodies in the adventures of Telemachus’), which was not published until 1867, and then only in Beirut.

When Muḥammad Sa‘īd (r. 1854-63) became ruler of Egypt in 1854, Rifā‘a returned to Cairo and was appointed deputy-head of the Military School. During the reign of Sa‘īd’s successor, Ismā‘īl (r. 1863-79), Rifā‘a’s career prospered and he was appointed head of a new Translation Office, as well as being a member of the Schools Council, which was responsible for the re-organisation of the Egyptian educational system. In 1870, he was entrusted with the editorship of the periodical *Rawḍat al-Madāris* (‘Garden of schools’), published by the Ministry for Education.

In addition to his many translations, Rifā‘a authored a number of works, among them an Arabic grammar for students (1869), a history of Egypt, *Anwār al-tawfīq al-jalīl fī akhbār Miṣr wa-tawthīq banī Ismā‘īl* (‘The lights of the great success in events in Egypt and the strengthening of the dynasty of Ismā‘īl’), of which only two volumes were completed, the social and political treatise *Manāhij al-albāb al-Miṣriyya fī mabāhij al-adab al-‘aṣriyya* (‘Ways for Egyptian hearts in the enjoyment of contemporary arts’, 1869), and a book outlining his philosophy on education, *Al-murshid al-amīn li-l-banāt wa-l-banīn* (‘The trustworthy guide for girls and boys’, 1872), in which he supported education for girls.

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**Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīs Bārīz, aw Al-dīwān al-nafīs bi-īwān Bārīs**

*'The extraction of pure gold in a short report about Paris, or The precious divan in a sitting room in Paris'*

**Date:** 1834

**Original Language:** Arabic

**Description**

The first edition of this work was printed in Būlāq in 1250 AH (1834). It is 210 pages long. The text was revised by al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's mentor, the Azharī shaykh Ḥasan al-'Aṭṭār, who also wrote a prefatory encomium (*taqrīz*). The front matter, table of contents and preface have the now usual title of *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīs Bārīz* ('The extraction of pure gold in a short report about Paris'), but this appears as *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz ilā talkhīs Bārīz* ('The extraction of pure gold *towards* a short report about Paris') in the *taqrīz*.

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī completed a first draft not long before his departure from Paris. The outline of this version (included in the *Takhlīṣ*) shows that the core of the book was then expanded by about a third, as it originally contained only four Essays, which now grew to six, each comprising a number of Sections. The single most important addition was the Fifth Essay on the French Revolution, made up of seven Sections, which al-Ṭaḥṭāwī included at the behest of one of his Parisian friends. He also inserted a new Fourth Essay devoted to the day-to-day

running of his study activities (including the books he read and a full report on the final examination), the regulations governing the mission of which he was part, etc. This new Fourth Essay also contains a number of letters from leading French scholars, including Caussin de Perceval, Silvestre de Sacy and Edme-François Jomard, the editor of the *Description d'Égypte*, in praise of the author and his book. The final addition is the translation of a medical treatise, which appears as an appendix to the Third Essay, Ninth Section, on the medical sciences in Paris. It is not clear when this was written, but one may speculate that its purpose was to serve as a textbook for the Abū Zaʿbal medical school. There are some clues that the last revisions were made in 1832. They include historical references such as a poem on Akka, presumably inserted to honour Muḥammad ʿAlī's capture of the town in 1832. There is also the mention in a letter by the Orientalist Joseph-Toussaint Reinaud of a revised edition of Malte-Brun's *Géographie universelle* (which al-Ṭaḥṭāwī had started translating in Paris), the first volume of which was published only in 1832.

There are also known omissions. The first is a passage relating to the devoutness of a fellow student, Ḥasan al-Iskandarānī, which originally rounded off the Introduction, ch. 4 (the Introduction comprises chapters, while the six Essays comprise sections). The second emendation is of more interest as it involves a passage on the turning of the earth (Sixth Essay, Section 7), which was more than likely omitted to avoid accusations of unreligiousness. Fortunately, it was preserved by Caussin de Perceval in his review of a draft of the book ('Relation d'un voyage en France par le Cheikh Réfaa', *Journal Asiatique*, 2ème série 11 [1833] p. 250). The third and final known omission – a lengthy philosophical discussion on the virtues of round shapes – was apparently decided for reasons of readability, at the suggestion of the Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy.

The *Takhṭīṣ* in its final form is divided into two broad parts: an introductory section comprising a Preface (*khuṭba*) and Introduction (*muqaddima*), which comprises four chapters, and the 'core' (*maqṣid*), which comprises the six Essays (*maqālāt*), each subdivided into sections (*fuṣūḥ*). The Introduction sets out the aims of the visit, providing some details on the leaders of the mission and a geographical overview of the modern world, with special emphasis on Europe. Following this, the First Essay involves the sea journey from Alexandria to Marseilles, while the second deals with the stay in Marseilles and journey to Paris. The Third Essay offers a detailed survey of various aspects of life in the French capital, in which the comprehensive account of the organisation of the French state, education and entertainments are key components. The Fourth Essay is devoted entirely to the author's studies, the mission, etc., while the Fifth Essay focuses on the 1830 revolution, which al-Ṭaḥṭāwī witnessed at first-hand, and includes details on the background of the events as well as the final outcome with the ousting of the king. In the final Sixth Essay there is a discussion

of various sciences, though it deals mostly with language (including an account of French), arithmetic and logic.

A second edition, 236 pages long, was published on 14 Şafar 1265 AH/9 January 1849. It contains a number of omissions, as well as additions, such as further poetry praising the Egyptian ruler, Muḥammad ‘Alī, and eulogies on the author by teachers at the language school. Some changes are minor (for instance, tense changes), others are more substantial. As a result, the second edition can easily be considered a revised one, rather than a mere reprint. The most substantial changes appear in the Second Essay, Section 2, 'On the people of Paris', where al-Ṭaḥṭāwī adds details about the construction of houses and roads, and about divorce and the legal proceedings that ensue from it, as well as a three-page discussion comparing Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) and the Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 950), based on the fact that both were all-round scholars as well as formidable linguists, the latter being 'fully conversant with 70 languages'. In Section 10, 'On charity in the city of Paris', al-Ṭaḥṭāwī expands the discussion of newspapers, and also includes a passage on the role of poetry and poets among the ancient Arabs.

As an Azharī shaykh and imam of the student mission, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's reputation preceded him, and from the start he seeks to pre-empt criticisms about residing among Christians, saying in the Preface: 'I shall express a favourable judgement of the many things and customs of that country when circumstances require it. Naturally, I shall approve only that which does not run counter to the prescriptions of Muḥammadan law' (Newman, *An imam in Paris*, pp. 105-6; references here are to this translation).

The fact of living in a non-Muslim country raised some significant challenges, both legally and practically, for instance in the accessibility of *ḥalāl* food. The book contains a number of interesting comments about Christians and Christianity. First and foremost, there was the issue that would become increasingly important, of 'Christian' advances over Muslim nations. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī addresses this by pointing out that this is due to the human qualities and sciences of the Europeans, not because they are Christians (p. 114). Elsewhere, the superiority of the Christian West is set against the moral superiority of the Muslim East. Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī makes a clear distinction between European Christians and the Copts of Egypt, comparing the religious feasts and contrasting the former's intelligence and love of cleanliness with the latter's ignorance and uncleanness (pp. 144, 176-7).

He speaks admiringly of the fact that people in Paris are tolerant of those who are not of their religion, explaining that this is because most of them are Christians in name only (p. 131). Criticism of European Christians comes in a number of guises, whether it is the indecency of women or the fact that they scoff at the precepts of their religion, while priests are considered the enemies of light and wisdom. It was during al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's stay in Paris that the French

occupied Algeria, and he reports that the archbishop praised God for granting the Christian nation a huge victory over a Muslim nation. His own view, however, is that it had nothing to do with religion but was 'purely a question of politics and of quarrels related to trade, money and disputes springing from arrogance and pride' (p. 331).

### Significance

As the first printed work of its kind, the *Takhlīs* had a huge impact from the time it was published. It introduced the author's native readership to all aspects of European culture, politics and society, and rather than a mere travelogue, it was viewed as a manual of modernity. Besides the introduction of new concepts, the pioneering features of the book include the use of European sources, a novel Western-inspired literary style, and the introduction of a number of lexical innovations influenced by Western conventions of the day. Many of these have endured to the present. As a result, it received the official imprimatur of the Viceroy, Muḥammad 'Alī Pasha, who distributed it to both his officials and students at the new European-style schools he had founded. The work was also translated into Turkish and sent to Constantinople, where it received a very favourable response at the sultan's court.

The book not only served as a model for subsequent authors writing on their experiences in Europe, but it was also an essential point of reference for political reformers. It was quoted by a number of authors across the Arab world, such as the Tunisian statesman Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī and the Lebanese Christian writer Fāris al-Shidyāq. The importance of the work was also recognised outside the Islamic world, and received attention by a number of European scholars of the time.

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