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Treasure Trove of Benefits and Variety at the Table : A Fourteenth-Century Egyptian Cookbook [Book review]

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Nawal Nasrallah: *Treasure Trove of Benefits and Variety at the Table: a fourteenth-century Egyptian cookbook*. English translation, with an introduction and glossary. (Islamic History and Civilization vol. 148) xix, 704 pp., incl. 117 fc. Illus. Leiden & Boston. Brill [2018]. €149/US\$172. ISBN 978-90-04-34729-8 (hardback); ISBN 978-90-04-34991-9 (e-book).

Tracing the historiography of Arab cuisine Nawal Nasrallah wrote in 2012: “It is unfortunate that most of the medieval Arabic culinary sources, both books and manuscripts, remain an asset only to food historians with Arabic language skills.” (In Kyri W. Claflin and Peter Scholliers (eds), *Writing Food History: a global perspective*, London and New York, 2012, p. 145). To remedy this disadvantage she had already in 2007 published her award winning translation of Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq’s 10th-century *Kitāb al-ṭabīkh* as *Annals of the Caliphs’ Kitchens* (Brill 2007/2010) and now, ten years later continued with the anonymous 14th-century book *Kanz al-fawā’id fī tanwī’ al-mawā’id*, (edited in 1993 by Manuela Marín and David Waines) and translated as *Treasure Trove of Benefits and Variety at the Table, a fourteenth-century Egyptian cookbook*, also already an award winning translation.

Nawal Nasrallah’s translation is in fact much more than a mere translation of the edited text from 1993. She managed to have access to all the five manuscripts known to exist, including the one housed at Gotha Research Library in Erfurt not made available to the editors in the late 1980s. It proved to be valuable amending and clarifying the edited text and filling a folio missing from the other manuscripts. Unfortunately it contains the first ten chapters only. The translator really left no stone unturned trying to find further mediaeval source material to amend, corroborate and clarify the text translated. Furthermore, her expertise in matters of the culinary art has saved her from plain dictionary renderings quite often not exact enough or corresponding to the intentions of the chef/compiler.

The structure of *Treasure Trove* follows the example of the *Annals* beginning with an exemplary Introduction with a thorough discussion of the different manuscripts available for the text; an overview and material history of daily life in the pre-modern Egypt and its food culture; the translation in 23 chapters with 830 recipes (pp. 59-454); encyclopaedic glossaries covering everything between classes of food to weights and measures; and, in conclusion, an Appendix of modern adaptations by the translator of twenty-two recipes with delicious illustrations.

Why 14th century? Why Egyptian? An anonymous text as *Treasure Trove* without dates for writing or copying demands close internal reading for evidence. Among the personal names mentioned is, in recipe 507, Aḥmad al-Tifāshī (1184-1253) from Tunisia but he died in Cairo. The book could not have been written before his lifetime. Nawal Nasrallah has further shown that Ibn Mubārak Shāh’s (1403-1458) short booklet *Zahr al-ḥadīqa fī al-aṭ’ima al-anīqa* (38 folios) is in fact a case of abridged borrowing. His lifetime gives us the limit after which the *Treasure Trove* could not have been written. That leaves us with the 14th century, grosso modo.

The editors Manuela Marín and David Waines believed there was good reason for holding that *Treasure Trove* was compiled in Egypt, probably at some time during Mamluk rule. Nawal Nasrallah agrees and considers it presenting an comprehensive coverage of the Egyptian cuisine of the time. According to her the text is replete with Egyptian colloquialism, quite natural for a text pertaining to daily life. Further denominators involving ingredients and particular dishes abound. Taking all this into consideration puts the Egyptian provenance beyond reasonable doubt. But

culinary art is syncretism per se and *Treasure Trove* is the sum of the cuisines documented in *Annals* plus the “flotsam” found on the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Nile on the way from Baghdad to Cairo.

Nawal Nasrallah’s culinary itinerary is now taking her further West, to North Africa and al-Andalus, the Near West in Allen James Fromherz’s apposite phrase. Her translation of Ibn Razīn al-Tujībī’s (ca. 625-692/1227-1293) *Fuḍālat al-khiwān fī ṭayyibāt al-ṭa’ām wal-alwān* is ongoing. (Personal communication 22.5.2019) Ibn Razīn was born in Murcia but the Christian progress in the peninsula forced him into exile in 645/1247-48 to North Africa, first to Ceuta and later to Tunis where he died. It was in exile that he wrote his *Fuḍāla* (see Peter Heine, “Kochen im Exil – Zur Geschichte der arabischen Küche”, *ZDMG* 139(1989)318-327), combining North African influences with those of his beloved al-Andalus and, what is somewhat surprising, also keeping a constant dialogue with the Middle Eastern (*mashriqī*) tradition as known to him. In fact, according to Manuela Marín we can define the Andalusian cuisine as a regional variant of the imported Oriental. (“Cuisine d’Orient, Cuisine d’Occident”, *Médiévales* 33(1997)9-21; see also María Martínez, *La Murcia andalusí (711-1243). Vida cotidiana*, Helsinki 2015, pp. 95-107). Once having translated *Fuḍāla* Nawal Nasrallah will, arguably, have translated the three sociohistorically most rewarding cookbooks of the Arabic speaking world.

While Nawal Nasrallah’s trail from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to the Atlantic might end with *Fuḍāla*, the culinary tradition she has followed continued seaborne its way further to the West, the Far West?, from the Canary Islands to the New World. The syncretization continued but that is another story. Anyway, already now after her two finished superb translations we can say that lacking Arabic language skills is no more a valid excuse for not knowing about the culinary art of the Arab-Islamic culture.