

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: The Political Aspects of Ibn Khaldun's Study of Culture and History

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Dissertation Directed By: Professor Charles E. Butterworth
Department of Government and Politics

The fourteenth-century scholar 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldun proclaims in his *Muqaddima* the establishment of a new science called the science of culture ('ilm al-'umrān). The primary subject of investigation of this science is aspects of human social organization. The ostensible purpose of this science is to provide historians with new analytical tools to verify historical reports.

This dissertation provides a critical analysis of Ibn Khaldun's original introduction to his *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. Though my primary focus will be on the original introduction, my analysis will be informed and supported by the main text of the *Muqaddima*. The purpose of this analysis is to point out the political aspects of Ibn Khaldun's science of culture and hence to explain the political objectives behind his concern with the study of history.

THE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF IBN KHALDUN'S
STUDY OF CULTURE AND HISTORY

by

Waseem El-Rayes

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Charles Butterworth, Chair
Professor Douglas Grob
Professor Karol Soltan
Professor Shibley Telhami
Professor Madeline Zilfi

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PREFACE

Since this dissertation provides an examination of Ibn Khaldun's famous book, the *Muqaddima* (Arabic for *Introduction*)—which is part of a larger work entitled *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*¹—and provides a critical analysis of the introduction to this work, a statement about the character of each of these texts is in order.

Kitāb al-‘Ibar (or the *Book of ‘Ibar*) is a seven-volume work by Ibn Khaldun which includes, according to his own plan, “an introduction (*muqaddima*) and three books” (I.6: 9).² Volume I contains the Introduction and the First Book, Volumes II-V contain the Second Book, and Volumes VI-VII contain the Third Book.

The title of the *Introduction*—which contains an invocation and a preface—is “On the virtue of knowing history, verifying its approaches, and outlining the errors and fancies that befall the historians, as well as mentioning some of the reasons for these [errors and fancies]” (I.6: 9-10). The title of the First Book is “On culture (*‘umrān*), and mentioning what essential accidents happen in it: of kingship, authority, income, livelihood, arts, sciences, and their reasons and causes thereof” (I.6: 10-13). The title of the Second Book is “On the [historical] reports of the Arabs, their generations, and their dynasties, from the beginning of creation, to this time, and in it reference will be made to some of [the Arab’s] contemporaries from among the famous nations and their dynasties,

¹ In the second chapter I will provide a translation of this difficult title. It is important to note here, however, that *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, or the book of *‘Ibar*, is the conventional shortened version of an otherwise long title. The full title reads: *Kitāb al-‘Ibar wa dīwān al-mubtada’ wa al-khabar fī ayyām al-‘arab wa al-‘ajam wa al-barbar wa man ‘āṣarahum min dhawī al-ṣultān al-akbar*.

² Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn, Prolégomènes d’Ebn-Khaldoun, Texte Arabe Publié, D’Après les Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Impériale*, ed., M. Quatremère (Paris: Benjamin Duprat, 1858; reprint: Beirut: Maktaba Lubnān, 1970). All references are to the Quatremère edition. I indicate the volume by an upper-case Roman numeral; then, after a period, and Arabic numeral indicates the page; finally, following a colon, the lines are indicated by Arabic numerals. Thus, the reference here means vol. 1, p. 6, line 9

for example, the Nabataeans, the Syrians, the Persians, the Israelites, the Copts, the Greeks, the Turks, and the *Rūm* [i.e., the Byzantines]” (I.6: 13-16). The title of the Third Book is “On the reports of the Berbers...and mentioning their origins and their generations, and of what was [under] their [possession] in the habitats of the *Maghrib*; in Particular of kingships and dynasties” (I.6: 16-18).

Both the second and the third books have been given the common title *History* (*Tārīkh*) by scholars. This conventional designation was coined during Ibn Khaldun’s time.³ Considering the fact that both of these books contain mainly historical reports, the common title for them seems accurate.

It is in the first book that Ibn Khaldun presents a new science called *‘ilm al-‘umrān* (the science of culture).⁴ The Introduction, as Ibn Khaldun’s description indicates, provides a theoretical treatment of history as well as a critique of the works of previous historians. Traditionally, both the Introduction and Book One have been given the common title *Muqaddima*. Since this First Book, through its formulation of the science of culture, ostensibly presents the analytical tools by which scholars can authenticate historical reports, it seems reasonable to set it apart from—and to consider it as part of an extended introduction to—the remaining two books, known as *History*, which provide actual historical reports. Combining the Introduction and the First Book under the common title *Muqaddima* is also helpful since the First Book has not been provided with a proper title by Ibn Khaldun. The scholarly convention of combining the first two major parts of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* under one title originated with Ibn Khaldun

³ See, for example, ‘Abd al-Rahmān Badawī, *Mu‘alafāt ibn Khaldūn* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A‘lā li-al-Thaqāfa, 2006). pp. 271 and 284.

⁴ For an explanation of why I translate *‘ilm al-‘umrān* as “science of culture,” see below, Chapter 1.

himself. As Franz Rosenthal maintains,

[D]uring its author's lifetime the original introduction and the first book became an independent work known under the title of *Muqaddimah*. In the 1394 edition of his *Autobiography*, Ibn Khaldun speaks of the first book of his *History* in this way. At the same time, the table of contents prefixed to our oldest manuscripts of the *Muqaddimah* states that "this first book went by the name of the *Muqaddimah* until (that name) came to be a characteristic proper name for it." Thus, it is not surprising that, in a late addition to the *Muqaddimah* itself, Ibn Khaldun refers to it as the *Muqaddimah* and that he gave lectures exclusively devoted to it. To all later ages, *Muqaddimah* was the title almost universally used.⁵

In keeping with this convention, I use in this dissertation the title *Muqaddima* to designate the first two parts of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, i.e., the Introduction and the First Book. Moreover, I use the term "original introduction" to refer to the very first part of the *Muqaddima* and thus of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*; and I use the term *History* when referring to the last two parts of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, i.e., the Second Book and the Third Book.

An additional point of clarification is needed here regarding the "part" of the *Muqaddima* that is the First Book. Ibn Khaldun organizes this First Book into six sections, each one of which is given the designation *faṣl*, an Arabic term that may be understood to mean either "chapter" or "section." Most Western authors writing on Ibn Khaldun refer to these six divisions as "chapters." But things become more complicated as Ibn Khaldun goes on to divide each of these six chapters into smaller parts or sections. The first chapter is divided into six parts called *muqaddima* or "introduction." Now since *muqaddima* can also mean, as Rosenthal suggests, "prefatory discussion," this is the designation I use for these sub-divisions of Chapter One. In Chapters Two through Six, Ibn Khaldun uses the term *faṣl*, i.e., "chapter" or "section," for the further divisions he introduces in each chapter. To avoid confusion, I will use the designation "section" to indicate each of the divisions within these five chapters.

⁵ Franz Rosenthal, "Translator's Introduction" in *The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History*, translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, in three volumes (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967). p. lxviii.

DEDICATION

To the Memory of My Uncle, Zuhair Bashir El-Rayyes

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writing of a doctoral dissertation is often described as a solitary, if not lonely, enterprise. After writing this dissertation I can confirm that this description is indeed apt, but only to a certain extent. For though it is tempting to exaggerate one's independence, my doctoral experience has proven to be one of the most collective endeavors I have ever undertaken. And though I alone am responsible for the final thesis, this work never would have been possible without the help of family and friends.

My ever-patient and loving parents, Mustafa and Nuha El-Rayes, provided unconditional support and encouragement that sustained me throughout the long journey as a graduate student. My affectionate siblings Omar Shafi, Kareem and Reem El-Rayes were always available whenever I needed their help and advice, which was often. And the birth of my nephew Hadi Abdel-Latif was a great inspiration in the final stage of writing this dissertation as his blissful arrival nearly coincided with the submission of my doctoral work. My old classmate and long-time friend Anas Walid Abu-Muwais proved an invaluable guide on the approach I used to interpret Ibn Khaldun.

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Chapter 1

The Introduction

The fourteenth-century statesman, scholar, and judge ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn (henceforth Ibn Khaldun) proclaims in his *Muqaddima* the establishment of a new science called the science of culture (*‘ilm al-‘umrān*). The primary subject of investigation of this science is aspects of human social organization. The ostensible purpose of this science is to provide historians with new analytical tools to verify historical reports.

This dissertation provides a critical analysis of Ibn Khaldun’s original introduction to his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*. Though my primary focus will be on the original introduction, my analysis will be informed and supported by the main text of the *Muqaddima*. The purpose of this analysis is to point out the political aspects of Ibn Khaldun’s science of culture and hence to explain the political objectives behind his concern with the study of history.

Following Ibn Khaldun’s own method of study—which he lays bare in his original introduction—my interpretation looks not only at the surface (*al-ẓāhir*) of Ibn Khaldun’s argument, but also penetrates deeply into the hidden part (*al-bāṭin*) that reveals the intention (*al-maqṣid*) behind, or gives the meaning (*al-ma‘nā*) of, the surface of this argument.

Here at least two questions arise. Why should one focus on this part of the book? Why is a critical, textual analysis of Ibn Khaldun’s style of writing an appropriate way to proceed?

Why the Focus on the Original Introduction?

This dissertation focuses on the original introduction because this part, which is mostly neglected by Ibn Khaldun scholars, provides the best explanation of the overall political objective of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*. In this I follow Ibn Khaldun’s conception of the relationship between human thought and human action. Indeed, in the *Muqaddima*, Chapter Six, section 2, Ibn Khaldun gives an illustration of this relationship. Through this illustration we glean a hint as to the importance that he attaches to the introduction of his own work:

If a [man] thinks of bringing to existence (*ījād*) a roof that would shelter him, he will mentally move [from this roof] to the wall that will support the roof, then to the base (*al-asās*) on which the wall will stand. Now this is the last [part] of the thinking process. And this is the meaning of their saying “the first of the work is the end of thought, and the first of the thought is the end of the work.” For no external action of a human being would be complete except by thinking of these different ranks (*martabāt*), because each one depends on the other. Then, [once the thought is complete], he would commence acting upon it. And the first of this thought is the last cause (*musabib*), and it is the last with regard to the work, [while] what is first with regard to the work is the first cause (*musabib*), and it is last with regard to thought. (II.366: 11-20).¹

In seeking to understand a product of human action, Ibn Khaldun looks not only at the declared or explicit purpose for which the thing was produced but also at the relationship each distinct part has to the other parts of the work and, as such, to the role that part plays with respect to the larger purpose of the work. The base or foundation of a building, which represents the first part of the work, represents the culmination of the thinking process. The beginning of the work—i.e., the foundation—if it is to be done well, has to be commensurate with the larger purpose of the work.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the *Muqaddima* are my own.

However, because it is hidden from view, even though its existence is easily acknowledged, the importance of the foundation in serving the purpose of the building is largely overlooked. After all, the outward appearance of the building seems sufficient enough to supply observers with all they need to know about the building's purpose. A cottage, by its outward appearance, suggests that its main purpose is to offer shelter from the elements and from predatory animals. A mansion's outward appearance suggests that its purpose is not only to offer shelter, but also to provide the conditions for commodious living. The imposing size of a castle's walls suggests that its larger goal is to provide even greater ease of living as well, perhaps, as protection to the beleaguered inhabitants from those who might wish them harm. And the even more imposing size of city's walls suggest that their purpose reaches beyond commodious living to the protection of the political community from external enemies.

But since the foundation is the culmination of the thought process upon which the whole edifice is built, an understanding of the depth of its structure and the solidity of its material not only indicate the strength, stability, and durability of the edifice—and hence provide greater appreciation of its overall purpose—but also inform about the intelligence, experience, and skill of its designer (insofar as the ultimate purpose is concerned).

The same can be said about the intellectual edifice that is *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. Most commentators, impressed by its majestic appearance, neglect a careful examination of its original introduction, despite the fact that it is the foundation upon which the entire work is grounded. Yet this foundation is, to borrow Alexis de Tocqueville's description of his

own book, *Democracy in America*, the “mother thought that so to speak links all its parts.”²

Why the Analytical, Critical Focus on the Style of Writing?

Ibn Khaldun’s eloquent style of writing is acknowledged by almost all medieval and modern commentators on his work.³ The unique literary quality of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, which proved to be long lasting, is something that Ibn Khaldun proudly celebrated when, in the course of describing his book, he maintained in the preface: “In the division and organization of it, I followed a strange path, and from among the various ways, I invented for [this book] a wondrous approach, and an innovative method and style” (I.6: 3-4). But almost as soon as *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* became the subject of scholarly debate, the relationship between Ibn Khaldun’s style of writing and the substance of his thought became a matter of controversy. For example, the great Egyptian historian Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442) was impressed by both the style and substance of Ibn Khaldun’s work. He is reported to have said about his friend:

Anything similar to his *Muqaddima* has never been accomplished, and it is hard for any striver [for knowledge] (*mujtahid*) to attain what it has achieved; for it is the cream of cognition and learning, and the end-result of sound intellect and understanding. It [allows one to] behold the way things are. It provides awareness of (*tu‘arrif*) the truth of occurrences and reports. It gives expression to the condition of being and conveys the root of every existent with utterances more brilliant than well arranged pearls and finer than water fanned by the zephyr.⁴

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). p. 14.

³ Miriam Cooke, “Ibn Khaldun and Language: From Linguistic Habit to Philological Craft,” in *Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Ideology*, edited by Bruce B. Lawrence (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984). pp. 27-28.

⁴ Badawī, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

But Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 1449), another important Egyptian historian, was not impressed by the substance of his former teacher’s work. Recalling al-Maqrīzī’s praise of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Ḥajar retorts:

As for his description of [the *Muqaddima*] regarding its eloquent style and play with words in the Jāḥizian way, this is incontestable. But as for his praise of [Ibn Khaldun] beyond that, the case is not as he said—except in some things and not in others. The eloquent style, however, beautifies with its ornaments so that it makes what is not comely appear to be so.⁵

In these two statements we observe an agreement among significant scholars in Ibn Khaldun’s own time regarding the excellence of the *Muqaddima*’s literary style. But we also observe a disagreement regarding the relationship between the *Muqaddima*’s literary style and its substance. Are Ibn Khaldun “utterances” in this text, which apparently are “more brilliant than well-arranged pearls and finer than water fanned by the zephyr,” the result of a sound intellect and understanding, or do they simply beautify with their ornaments, so as to make “what is not comely appear to be so”?

I answer this question in relation to the dominant political thought that governs the substance of Ibn Khaldun’s *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*. In other words, I show how Ibn Khaldun’s concern with the study of history—which is presented as the ostensible concern of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*—is designed to encourage the rational examination of political reality in a politically salutary way, and explain how Ibn Khaldun’s style of writing reflects the politically sensitive nature of this project as well as illustrates Ibn Khaldun’s pedagogical method.

This dissertation is inspired by the work of Muhsin Mahdi’s very important *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science*

⁵ Ibid., p. 284.

of Culture.⁶ Mahdi is arguably the first modern scholar to address seriously Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima* on its own terms. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he resisted the all too powerful temptation of viewing Ibn Khaldun's work through purely modern lenses. An unfortunate consequence of this approach, to which Mahdi is an opponent, is that the value of Ibn Khaldun's work is reduced to what it contained of ideas supposedly anticipating modern ones—ideas the *Muqaddima* never intended to shape or influence. In his book, as well as in two later articles,⁷ Mahdi puts in relief the philosophical context against which Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima* is given coherence. And for that, his work gained much acclaim and also much critique.⁸

My approach to the study of Ibn Khaldun differs from that of Mahdi in two important respects. First, while Mahdi brings the history of Islamic philosophy to bear on the understanding of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*, I devote my analysis to the text itself. And so, as I address the central idea in *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* in general, and the *Muqaddima* in particular, I allow the reader to judge for himself the subtlety and coherence in Ibn Khaldun's argument. Second, I address the *fundamental* part of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*, i.e., the original introduction—something that, according to my research, all Ibn Khaldun scholars overlook, including Mahdi.

By seeing how Ibn Khaldun presents the unifying thought of his work in the introduction, the reader is better able to deal with those instances in the *Muqaddima*

⁶ Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

⁷ The two articles, each entitled "Ibn Khaldun," by Muhsin Mahdi are in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. M. M. Sharif (Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1963), pp. 888-904 and 961-984.

⁸ For an example of qualified praise, see W. Montgomery Watt's review in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 34 (Jan., 1959), 84-85. For a glowing praise, see Walter J. Fischel's review in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Oct. 1959), 285-286. For a weak, but typical, critique of Mahdi's "philosophic foundation" thesis, see Fuad Baali, *Society, State, and Urbanism: Ibn Khaldun's Sociological Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988) p. 7.

where he appears to contradict himself with respect to fundamental questions. For example, how can Ibn Khaldun be a serious student of philosophy—as Mahdi rightly shows—and then write, near the end of his *Muqaddima* what appears to be a scathing critique of philosophy (III.209-220: 17-15).⁹ A satisfactory answer to this question has to address first whether these contradictions with respect to the fundamental aspects of Ibn Khaldun’s thought are real or apparent, and if real whether they are by design or the product of careless thought. In other words, the answer to this question can only be reached by exploring the possibility that Ibn Khaldun’s writing communicates on multiple levels, by examining his competence to do so, by explaining the reasons behind any apparent paradoxical communication, and by demonstrating its actuality, i.e., that the communication is only apparently contradictory. All of these steps have to be shown first in Ibn Khaldun’s introductory arguments—for it is there that he is expected to make his first and most important impression on his careful reader—and then flesh out the rest of the *Muqaddima* from this initial interpretation.

Having explained the reasons why I focus on Ibn Khaldun’s original introduction and my analytical method, I now turn back to my general thesis: that Ibn Khaldun’s science of culture, which is ostensibly about the verification of historical reports, is intended to encourage the rational examination of political reality in a politically salutary way, i.e., in a manner that would not openly challenge the fundamental beliefs of the political community.¹⁰ I will address this in two steps. First, I will explain the appropriateness of using the term “culture” to translate Ibn Khaldun’s *‘umrān*. Second, I

⁹ For an interesting critique related to this point, see Muhamed Mzoughi, “Ibn Khaldūn and Philosophy: A Critical Approach,” in *Studies on Ibn Khaldun*, Edited by Massimo Campanini (Milan: International Scientific Publisher, 2005) pp. 145-179.

¹⁰ In other words, Ibn Khaldun’s politics encourage us to reflect on, but not to challenge conventional wisdom.

will evaluate the relationship between the study of culture and the study of history as presented by Ibn Khaldun. The purpose of this evaluation is to point out the limits Khaldun places upon the science of culture with respect to historical investigations. Through the examination of these limits, I point out how the ostensible purpose of this new science of culture is meant to be understood as only provisional. In exchange, I advance an argument that shows Ibn Khaldun's emphasis on the political over the historical, which provides a new outlook on the larger objective of the *Muqaddima*.

'Umrān as "Culture"

As stated, the main subject explored in the *Muqaddima* is the science (*'ilm*) of *'umrān* (cf. I.6: 9-10, I.56: 3-4, I.61: 14-17, I.66: 15-17, I.67-8: 18-11, III.433: 14-16). The length of the *Muqaddima* (which is about 1200 pages) reflects the importance Ibn Khaldun attaches to the knowledge of *'umrān* as a precursor to the study of history. The length of the *Muqaddima* also reflects the fact that *'ilm al-'umrān* is a new science, which, apparently, no one before Ibn Khaldun attempted to organize and establish (I.61-62: 16-15, I.66: 10-15). The two most common translations of *'umrān* are "culture" and "civilization." My main argument will show how "culture," despite certain limitations, is the term that best captures the meaning of *'umrān*.

But this argument is not about translations simply. Rather, I will attempt to show how the literal meaning of *'umrān* holds the key for those who wish to understand the *Muqaddima* on its own terms, i.e., in terms free from modern scholarly prejudices. With this purpose in mind, my cursory treatment of the scholarly culture-civilization debate will focus on that part of the discussion which bears on the literal understanding of the

word *‘umrān*. In other words, I will not deal with the different arguments from the *Muqaddima* that scholars use to support their particular choice of a translation. The fact that the culture-civilization debate is long-standing is indication enough that both translations can be supported by the *Muqaddima*.

The word “culture” is derived from the Latin *cultura* meaning “cultivation” or “tending” and refers primarily to the cultivation or tending of soil. Culture as such is contrary to waste. It is about improving on something that would otherwise remain stale. Thus the literal meaning of “cultivation,” as listed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “to bestow labour and attention upon (land) in order to the raising of crops; to till; to improve and render fertile by husbandry.” In addition to the “tilling of land, tillage, [and] husbandry,” cultivation also means “improvement (of land); increased fertility.”¹¹ As we will see shortly, it is in the literal meaning of culture, as the cultivation of the soil, that this word finds its strongest association with the Arabic *‘umrān*.

But the word “culture,” especially as it is used in modern and contemporary western scholarship, has figurative meanings that cannot be easily captured by *‘umrān*. One of the oldest and most persistent figurative meanings of culture is the one which makes an analogy between the cultivation of the soil and the cultivation of the human soul, i.e., which understands culture as “the culture of the mind” or “education.” Hence “to cultivate” is an act which figuratively means to “improve and develop by education or training (a person, his mind, manners, faculties); to refine, to culture”; and to “promote the growth of, devote oneself to the advancement or development of (an art, science, sentiment, etc.); to foster.” It also means to “devote one’s attention to, to prosecute, follow, practice, cherish (any art, science; sentiment, habit, or pursuit, esp. with the object

¹¹ *OED*, cultivation [*OED* = Oxford English Dictionary]

of acquiring it, or improving oneself in it).”¹² An extension of the figurative meaning of culture as the culture of the mind sees culture as the sum total of significant socio-political factors—such as language, religion, fine-arts, and social customs—which form and inform the collective identity of a social group or a people. This is an understanding of culture which allows discussions of the uniqueness of Christian, Muslim, or Hindu culture for example. It also permits scholars to speak of the Arab or Muslim mind as opposed to the European or Christian mind. Those familiar with Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* are aware that such a “comparative” approach to cultures, with its overemphasis on intellectual factors in forming group identity, has little to share with the science of *‘umrān*. The prevalent use of culture—in western academics as well as in the media—as an explanatory variable for the “uneven development” of different nations (of certain peoples’ “inability” to cope with modernity) is arguably one of the reasons that encourage a number of Ibn Khaldun scholars to reject the rendering of *‘umrān* as culture. However, there is another more forceful objection to this, which sees its figurative emphasis on the intellectual development of human beings as too limiting to capture the totality of Ibn Khaldun’s treatment of *‘umrān*. Johann P. Arnason and George Stauth, in their article *Civilization and State Formation in the Islamic Context: Re-Reading Ibn Khaldūn*, make the general case for *civilization* as a comprehensive term that captures Ibn Khaldun’s “scientific” treatment of *‘umrān*:

[A] closer look at Ibn Khaldūn’s analysis of *‘umran* will show that the use of the term “civilization” is justified by thematic affinities with the main currents of contemporary civilizational analysis. At the most elementary level, the emphasis on an integrated and unfolding totality of human life and activity is reminiscent

¹² *OED*, cultivation

of theorists who have proposed a broad civilizational perspective as an antidote to inbuilt reductionism of separate social sciences.¹³

The fact that the literal meaning of civilization shares little if anything with *‘umrān* is a problem that does not concern Arnason and Stauth. To the objection that the literal meaning of civilization “suggests a demarcation from barbarism or savagery,” Arnason and Stauth respond:

It is true that such dichotomies are alien to Ibn Khaldūn’s thought, but they are not taken for granted by modern civilizational analysts. Rather, the debate on their validity is internal to the tradition of the field, and some of its major figures... have applied the concept of civilization to primitive societies.

A further...indication of affinity is the central role which Ibn Khaldūn attributes to the dynamics of state formation.... Finally, the interpretation of *‘umran* as a discontinuous but unending development of human abilities—set out in detailed analyses of arts, crafts and sciences in the concluding books of the *Muqaddimah*—lends itself to comparison with Durkheim’s conception of the human being as a product of civilization (which was also his explicit reason for accepting Comte’s definition of sociology as a “science of civilization”).¹⁴

As we see in this brief outline of the culture-civilization debate, the main problem that arises in trying to translate *‘umrān* is one common to all scholarly attempts at translations of key words or terms. The scholar needs to translate the foreign word in a way that will make understandable the literal as well as the important figurative meanings (or scientific concepts) of that word. Of course, this is the ideal translation, but when—as is often the case in translations—both the literal and the important figurative meanings of a word cannot be fully captured, the scholar has to make a choice between the two (i.e., to privilege either the literal or figurative meaning of the foreign word). Those scholars who render *‘umrān* as civilization do not dispute the strong association between the

¹³ Johann P. Arnason and George Stauth, “Civilization and State Formation in the Islamic Context: Re-Reading Ibn Khaldun,” in *Thesis Eleven*, Number 76, February 2004: 29-47, SAGE Publication (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi). p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

literal meaning of *'umrān* and the literal meaning of culture. Indeed, that association is so strong it cannot be disputed. What these scholars do dispute, however, is the appropriateness of using culture to capture the meaning of *'umrān* as a subject of scientific inquiry by Ibn Khaldun. The ways in which culture is used in scholarly communities today has little to do with the way Ibn Khaldun used the word *'umrān*. Since, for scholars such as Arnason and Stauth, sociology is *the* “science of civilization,” and since Ibn Khaldun’s usage of the term *'umrān* portrays “thematic affinities with the main currents of contemporary civilizational analysis,” then it is more appropriate to translate *'umrān* as civilization than to translate it as culture.

If the main purpose of studying the *Muqaddima* is to compare modern sociology with Ibn Khaldun’s “sociology,” then rendering *'umrān* as civilization might very well be the proper choice. But this argument cannot stand uncontested, if in reading the *Muqaddima* we seek to understand Ibn Khaldun’s teaching on its own terms, i.e., in terms that are as free as possible from modern scholarly prejudices. It is indeed exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to free oneself completely from modern scientific concepts and ways of viewing and understanding the world. However, a defining quality of liberal education is the ability to question one’s own most cherished opinions, whether we regard them as “scientific” or otherwise. The liberal quality of this education is diminished when, in reading the works of past thinkers, we seek to identify what we believe is the historical progress of our own ideas. Such an historical approach to the reading of old books assumes the superiority of present thought to that of the past. It is an approach which denies the possibility that the thought of the past can challenge or truly inform our contemporary thought.

I do not mean to single out scholars who use civilization for *‘umrān*, or to suggest that their translation choices are motivated only by the desire to expose in Ibn Khaldun what is relevant to modern scholarship. Clearly not all those who render *‘umrān* as civilization wish to provide modern interpretations of Ibn Khaldun’s teaching, and not all those who render *‘umrān* as culture wish to address Ibn Khaldun on his own terms. The critique of using “civilization” for *‘umrān* that follows is limited to focusing on the importance of the literal translation of this term.

The argument for translating *‘umrān* according to its literal meaning gains new urgency when we take into consideration the novelty of the primary subject matter of the *Muqaddima*. As Ibn Khaldun informs us, no scholar before him ever attempted to give a treatment of the science of *‘umrān*. As such, the *Muqaddima* is our first source for understanding the science of *‘umrān*. Considering the fact that the *Muqaddima* is set forth as an introduction to history, a proper understanding of this science requires a comprehension of the relationship between the subject matter of this science, i.e., *‘umrān*, and history. To put it differently, understanding the science of *‘umrān* requires a comprehension of the core ideas, implicit in the literal meaning of *‘umrān*, which make this term suitable for the study of history.

The word *‘umrān* comes from the Arabic verb-root *‘-m-r*, which literally means “he aged,” “he grew old,” “he lived,” or “continued in life.”¹⁵ According to one of the most authoritative Arabic lexica, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, the substantives of *‘-m-r* (i.e., *al-‘amr*, *al-‘umur*, and *al-‘umr*) all signify one thing, namely, life (*al-ḥayāt*).¹⁶ But, as we will

¹⁵ Lane, *‘-m-r* [Lane = Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 8 vols. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1958) (London, 1863).]

¹⁶ *Lisān*, *‘-m-r* [*Lisān* = Muḥammad ibn Mukarram ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1955-56)]

soon discover, the most decisive idea contained in the verb-root, and animating most (if not all) of this root's derivatives, is the idea of growing up or of getting old. Substantives such as *al-'umur* (i.e., age) signify not only life but also the concept of advancing in years. The older one gets (*'amira*), the more aware one becomes of one's age, of one's inescapable mortality. Such "awareness" of mortality is reflected in the expression *'ammara nafsahu*, meaning "He determined for himself, *or* assigned to himself, a limited life."¹⁷ These "determinations" of one's limited life is based, in part, on one's observations of what the "normal" span of life—*madā al-ḥayāt* as Ibn Khaldun calls it (I.71: 1)—is for human beings. For those rare individuals who live beyond the normal expectations of human life, the verb-root *'-m-r* supplies us with the word *mu'ammir*, meaning "he lived (*'āsha*) and remained (*baqā*) for a very long time."¹⁸ Of course, the Quran informs us that, despite all of our calculations, "Nor is a man long-lived granted length of days, nor is a part cut off from his life, but is in a Book (ordained)" (*wa mā yu'ammuru min mu'ammirin wa lā yunqasu min 'umurihi illā fī kitāb*; Q.35: 11).¹⁹

Still, one need not be a Muslim, or even a monotheist, to come to the realization that one has little control over one's moment of death, barring suicide. One can only speculate about that moment. This speculation itself can open the door to spiritual reflection regarding the meaning of life and death. It is not surprising, therefore, that the verb-root *'-m-r*—which literally means "he aged" or "grew old"—has an added spiritual dimension when it is equated with the divine, as in *'amara rabbahu*, i.e., "He served, or worshipped, his Lord...he prayed and fasted."²⁰ We have already seen how the word

¹⁷ Lane, *'-m-r*, p. 2154.

¹⁸ *Lisān*, *'-m-r*, p. 602.

¹⁹ Lane, *'-m-r*, p. 2154.

²⁰ Lane, *'-m-r*, p. 2154.

‘ammara indicates a subject (the third person singular masculine *‘he’*) who is thinking or speculating about the life-span of an object. When that object is the thinking subject himself, i.e., when one is said to *‘ammara nafsahu*, this means that “He determined for himself, *or* assigned to himself, a limited life.” However, when the object of the thinking is the immortal Being Himself, i.e., when one is said to *‘ammara Allah*, this means that he “acknowledged the everlasting existence of God.”²¹ As a further indication of the spiritual aspect to the idea of growing old, *Lisān al-‘Arab* informs us, on the authority of Arabic grammarians, that the often used oath, *li-‘amruka*, which literally means “by your life,” also means “by your religion (*li-dīnika*).”²²

But in what way does the literal and “spiritual” components of the verb-root *‘m-r* infuse *‘umrān* with meaning and how does this meaning relate to the English word “culture”? To address these questions we have to start from the beginning, from the everyday understanding of this word, as opposed to its “scientific” conception. If we ask contemporary native Arabic speakers what the word *‘umrān* means the answer most always is something like “building” or perhaps “a place flourishing with human activity.” Classical Arabic lexical works support this contemporary understanding and expand on it as “a land, *or* house, inhabited, peopled, well peopled, well stocked with people and the like, in a flourishing state, in a state the contrary of desolate *or* waste *or* ruined; a land colonized, cultivated, *or* well cultivated; a house in a state of good repair.”²³ Like culture, *‘umrān* is a state that is contrary to waste (*al-kharāb*). When one is said to

²¹ Lane, *‘m-r*, p. 2154.

²² *Lisān*, *‘m-r*, p. 601. It is interesting to note here that the word for religion, *dīn*, comes from the verb root *d-y-n* the infinitive of which is *dāna* which means “to borrow” as to get a loan, or to be in debt. According to Muslim theology *dīn*, religion, is a word signifying that which we owe God. Since God is the ultimate life giver, it is perhaps easy to see how one’s *‘amr* (life-span or age) is itself equivalent to *dīn* (that which one owes).

²³ Lane, *‘m-r*, p. 2155.

‘ammara al-kharab it means that “He made the ruin, *or* waste, *or* the like, to become in a state of good repair, in a state the contrary of ruined or waste or desolate.”²⁴ It is important to note here that when we think of *‘umrān* versus *kharāb* (or culture vs. waste), the frame of reference is that which promotes the life and prosperity of human beings. Thus when one is said to *‘ammara al-arḍa* (the earth), this means “he peopled the land; stocked it well with people and camels and the like; colonized it, cultivated it, or cultivated it well; rendered it in a flourishing state, *or* in a state the contrary of waste.”²⁵ All of these actions are essential for human survival and human flourishing.

The literal meaning of *‘umrān* establishes a link between the individual’s awareness of his own mortality, his dependence on forces greater than himself, and the need to make the most out of his brief life. Thus the verb *‘ammara*, when applied to oneself or to the divine, signifies thought of mortality and worship, and when applied to an inanimate object signifies the act of cultivation for the purpose of making one’s life livable. The link between the act of worship and the secular act of cultivation, which we can recognize at the root of *‘umrān*, can also be discerned (with certain limits) in the root of the English word “culture.” After all, culture, which comes from the Latin root for “cult,” used to mean “worship [or] reverential homage”²⁶ (though now this meaning is considered obsolete). Since interpretation of the significance of this relationship between the sacred and secular in the usage of the word “culture” may vary, we need not exaggerate the significance of the correspondence between the meaning of “culture” and

²⁴ Lane, *‘m-r*, p. 2154.

²⁵ Lane, *‘m-r*, p. 2154

²⁶ *OED*, culture

‘umrān.²⁷ The important point here is that we can see enough correspondence between the literal meanings of these two words that justifies the translation of the one by means of the other.

Because *‘umrān* denotes human grouping, human flourishing, as well as an organizing standard that makes such flourishing possible, Ibn Khaldun at times uses this term as an equivalent to human society or human social organization (*al-ijtimā‘ al-insānī*; I.56: 6-7, I.61: 9, 17-18, I.68: 14-16). But in choosing *‘umrān* rather than the more abstract term *al-ijtimā‘ al-insānī* (human social organization), or the more politically substantial term, *madīna* (polity or city), as the subject of his new science, it is clear that Ibn Khaldun wishes to put the emphasis on certain aspects of this social phenomena— aspects which, only through the literal meaning of *‘umrān*, is it possible for us to appreciate.

In the opening lines of his first chapter of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun makes the case that the life of an individual human being is not possible without society (I.68-70: 14-16). He also argues that *‘umrān*, which is the result of human cooperation, is what makes it possible for an individual human being to live his natural life-span (*madā al-*

²⁷ See, for example, Thomas Hobbes’ discussion in his *Leviathan* (Part II, Chapter 31) of the meaning of the word “culture.” His interpretation of that word seems too utilitarian to allow for the spiritual aspect which I maintain is present in the word *‘umrān*. Hobbes argues: “Honor consists in the inward thought and opinion of the power and goodness of another; and therefore to honor God is to think as highly of his power and goodness as is possible. And of that opinion, the external signs appearing in the words and actions of men are called *worship*, which is one part of that which the Latins understand by the word *cultus*. For *cultus* signifies properly and constantly that labor which a man bestows on anything with a purpose to make benefit by it. Now those things whereof we make benefit are either subject to us, and the profit they yield follows the labor we bestow upon them as a natural effect, or they are not subject to us, but answer our labor according to their own wills. In the first sense the labor bestowed on the earth is called *culture*; and the education of children, a *culture* of their minds. In the second sense, where men’s wills are to be wrought to our purpose, not by force but by complaisance, it signifies as much as courting—that is, a winning of favor by good offices, as by praises, by acknowledging their power, and by whatsoever is pleasing to them from whom we look for any benefit. And this is properly *worship*, in which sense *Publicola* [Lit., a friend of the people] is understood for a worshiper of the people, and *cultus Dei* for the worship of God.”

ḥayat; I.71: 1). But religion and history teach us that *‘umrān*, however long it lasts, will eventually pass away. For *‘umrān*, like the life (*‘umur*) of an individual human being, has a beginning point and an ending point. This process of growth, maturity, and the eventual decline of human societies is the primary subject of Ibn Khaldun’s science of *‘umrān*.

Understanding the nature of *‘umrān*, and hence understanding the nature of human-living in societies, is the prerequisite for judging the truth and falsehood of historical reports. This is the explicit purpose which defines Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima*. In the first chapter of this book, Ibn Khaldun informs us that the science of culture is intended to provide “a sound gauge by which historians can make out the way of truthfulness and correctness with respect to that which they transmit” (I.61: 15-16). By looking at the stated purpose of the *Muqaddima*, it is possible to expose what is problematic about the translation of *‘umrān* as civilization without even the need for a linguistic analysis of the meaning of *‘umrān*. For in the quest for this “sound gauge,” Ibn Khaldun prepares himself to investigate a wide range of human cultural activities—as well as the explicit and the implicit motivations of these—that span societies as small and primitive as a nomadic tribe and as large and complex as a great dynastic metropolis. Although we can speak of the highest form of civilized culture (*‘umrān ḥaḍarī*) in terms of civilization (*ḥaḍāra*), it is clearly a mistake to reduce the totality of social activities, which the science of *‘umrān* studies, to that of civilization. This objection, of course, is based on the original meaning of civilization, which in its literal meaning makes a distinction between primitive and advanced cultures, and hence does not apply to primitive cultures, such as a nomadic tribe or a small village.²⁸ But since “major figures” among “modern civilization analysts,” as Arnason and Stauth note, apply the “concept of

²⁸ Mahdi (1964), *op.cit.*, p. 184.

civilization to primitive society”—and hence collapse this linguistic distinction—it is essential to recover the literal meaning of *‘umrān*, which plays an important part in Ibn Khaldun’s choice of this term as the subject of his new science. With this I turn to my next point, namely, the relationship between the science of culture and history as presented by Ibn Khaldun.

‘Ilm al-‘umrān and the Writing of History

Although there is much in the *Muqaddima* that is a matter of dispute among Ibn Khaldun scholars, there is at least sufficient agreement among them regarding the ostensible relationship between the *Muqaddima* and the *History* as seen through (an apparently) central goal of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*: the encouragement of the rational investigation of history. According to this view, Ibn Khaldun wishes to establish in the *Muqaddima* the principles of *‘ilm al-‘umrān*, a science whose primary end is to allow scholars to distinguish what is correct from what is false in historical reports. In the *History*, on the other hand, he presents the “fruits” of this science in the form of a detailed account of the history of the Arabs and Berbers in Northwest Africa as well as a general account of other historical nations. Whether or not Ibn Khaldun is ultimately successful regarding this apparent goal of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* is not an issue here, nor is whether or not either part accomplishes this goal an immediate issue. What is at issue here is that, according to this view, *‘ilm al-‘umrān*, the science of culture, is seen as an auxiliary science for history—that knowledge of *‘umrān* is primarily sought for the sake of history. Before discussing the wider implication of this problematic view, I need to explore the general grounds

upon which it is based. I will focus on two such grounds: the structure of *Kitāb al-'Ibar* and the statements by Ibn Khaldun himself that lend credence to this view.

Evidence Suggesting that 'ilm al-'umrān is an Auxiliary Science to History

The overall structure of *Kitāb al-'Ibar* leaves a powerful impression on the reader that, for Ibn Khaldun, the knowledge of culture is secondary to the knowledge of history. As has already been noted, Ibn Khaldun's original outline points out that this work will consist of an introduction and three books. The final outcome of this outline, as the fifteenth-century historian Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497) observes, is a work containing "a valuable *Introduction (Muqaddimah)* and consists of seven big volumes."²⁹ This is the exact number of volumes of the first full modern publication of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, produced in 1868 in Bulāq, Egypt.³⁰ Volume I contains the original introduction—which provides a brief discussion regarding the virtue of learning history and an overview of major errors committed by past historians—and the "first book" of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*—containing the working out of the new science of culture; Volumes II-V contain pre-Islamic history as well as the history of Muslim nations in the East (with the major focus on the Arabs); Volumes VI-VII deal with Muslim history in the West (with the major focus on the Berbers). Thus the *Muqaddima*, the first draft of which Ibn Khaldun himself reported to have finished in a period of five months (ending in November 1377),³¹ constitutes only 1/7th of the overall text of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. To put it differently, whereas according to the outline of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, the original introduction and Book One

²⁹ Al-Sakhāwī, "As-Sahāwī's *I'lān*" translated in *History of Islamic Historiography*, (Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 2nd revised ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968). p. 497.)

³⁰ See Walter J. Fischel, *Ibn Khaldūn and Tamerlane* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1952) 5.

³¹ Rosenthal (1967), op.cit., p. cv.

constitute half of the work, in the final product they constitute about 14% of the work. Thus, the majority of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* (about 86% of the book) is concerned with the study of history as opposed to the systematic study of culture. It is not surprising, therefore, to find some scholars occasionally referring to the entirety of Ibn Khaldun's *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* with the alternative appellation, Ibn Khaldun's *History*.³²

The second argument for considering the science of culture as an auxiliary to history is statements to that effect by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddima*. We see this in the preface, for example, where Ibn Khaldun asserts that through knowledge of the nature of culture (*al-ʿumrān*), one can verify for oneself past historical reports (I.4:1-2). In the original introduction, he argues that knowledge of the nature of culture is an important factor in safeguarding the student of history from being morally led astray by historical reports (I.8-9). Also, in the introduction to Book One in the *Muqaddima*, he seems to affirm the same conclusion (I.57). But by far the clearest statement Ibn Khaldun makes regarding this relationship between the science of culture and history is found near the middle of the preface to Book One. There he informs us that if we carefully observe what is possible, impossible, essential, and accidental regarding the nature of culture:

Then this would be a rule (*qānūn*) through which we can distinguish in a demonstrative way, free from doubt, truth from falsehood, and truthfulness [from] lying with respect to [historical] reports. Then, if we hear about some particular condition occurring in culture, we would know (*ʿalimnā*) what ought to be judged acceptable and what ought to be judged spurious. This, then, would be a *sound gauge* through which historians can make-out the way of truthfulness and correctness with respect to that which they transmit. And this is the goal of this first book of our composition. (I.61: 11-17; emphasis added)

³² For modern scholars see, for example, Rosenthal, *Ibid.*, p. lxxviii; and Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn: An Essay in Reinterpretation*, (London and Totowa, N.J.: Frank Cass, 1982). p. 10; the Arnold Toynbee statement, quoted in Róbert Simon's *Ibn Khaldūn: History as Science and the Patrimonial Empire*, trans. By Klára Pogátsa (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2002) p. 14. For medieval scholars see, for example, Badawī, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

Not only the structure of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* but also explicit statements by our author seem to support the view that historical knowledge is Ibn Khaldun’s primary interest, and that knowledge of culture is only sought for the sake of history.

The Implications of This Reading for the Study of the *Muqaddima*

This view has serious implications regarding the study of the *Muqaddima* and the study of its primary subject, the science of culture. Aziz al-Azmeh, for example, argues that both the *Muqaddima* and the *History* treat the same subject, namely history, differing only in the manner in which they address it: the *Muqaddima* does so discursively, while the other part does so narratively. Indeed, al-Azmeh sees no fundamental difference between the science of culture (he translates *ʿumrān* as “organized habitation”) and history—a fact that might explain why he consistently refers to the entirety of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* as the *History*. According to al-Azmeh,

The identity of content between the two major textual components of the *History* is located precisely here: that they possess the same subject-matter, this being organized habitation, in two distinct modes. And since the *Muqaddima*...stands in a thematically subordinate position with respect to historical narrative, in that it serves to sharpen the investigative capacities of the historian by providing a gauge against which historical reports are measured—in view of this, the prolegomenon to history is really its instrument.³³

Al-Azmeh’s conclusion that the *Muqaddima* stands in a “thematically subordinate position” with respect to the *History*, is supported by the aforementioned, commonly accepted view regarding the relationship between culture and history. Ibn Khaldun does seem to assign history and its study a higher dignity than culture and its study. For history is what apparently justifies the study of culture and as such defines its scope and limits

³³ Al-Azmeh, op.cit., pp.10-11.

(I.63: 1-8). And yet, there is something strange about viewing his science of culture as a fundamentally instrumental science. Note that this is the science which Ibn Khaldun celebrates as “new,” of “great benefit,” and sees most likely as unprecedented (I.62-63). But the strange character of this view begins to really manifest itself when we consider Ibn Khaldun’s evaluation of instrumental sciences in general.

Problems with the View that *‘ilm al-‘umrān* is an Auxiliary to History

In Chapter 6, section 37, of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun discusses the difference between two kinds of science: sciences sought as ends (e.g., physics, metaphysics, as well as religious sciences) and sciences sought as auxiliary to something else (e.g., logic for philosophy, and grammar for the religious sciences). With respect to the latter kind of sciences, Ibn Khaldun observes:

As for the sciences that are instruments to other things—for example, the sciences of Arabic, logic, and the like—they ought not to be a subject of speculation except inasmuch as they are instruments to these things only. No expanded discussions and derivative questions are to be allowed with respect to them, because this would be a departure from what is intended; for what is intended by them is nothing more than to be that to which they are instruments; whenever they depart from this, they depart from what is intended, and the preoccupation becomes senseless-talk (*laghwan*)—[to say nothing of] the difficulty of attaining its aptitude being long-winded and of many derivatives. This might even be a hindrance to the attainment of those sciences sought as ends (*al-maqṣūda bi-al-dhāt*)—the means to which being long-winded, even though the ends are more important. A lifetime is too short to attain everything in this [thorough] form, so that such preoccupation with these instrumental sciences becomes life-wasting, a preoccupation with what is of no benefit. (III.258-259: 8-8)

Of course, this statement by itself does not challenge the view that the science of culture is an instrumental science. Clearly, auxiliary sciences have an indispensable role in the advancement of learning, as Ibn Khaldun readily admits. The fact that the science of culture might be an auxiliary science does not mean that it is not important. However, its

status as an auxiliary must necessarily restrict the scope of what it investigates. Put differently, with respect to each subject that the science of culture investigates, we have to begin with a question that can be formulated as follows: in what way is this particular subject beneficial to the study of history? And it is here that the characterization of the science of culture as an auxiliary becomes problematic. Glancing at the wide-range of subjects that the *Muqaddima* deals with, it is not immediately obvious how certain topics treated in detail—e.g., prophecy, dream interpretation, soothsaying, midwifery, magic, alchemy, and astrology—advance the study of history. Although failure to see the immediate relevance of these subjects to the study of history might in fact be a failure of imagination on our part, it does at least invite us to re-examine the ostensible relationship between the science of culture and history. And such re-examination indicates that this relationship is not as clear as widely presumed.

As noted, there are four places in the *Muqaddima* where Ibn Khaldun explicitly discusses the relationship between the science of culture and history: (i) in the preface, where he merely asserts that the knowledge of culture allows a scholar the ability to verify historical reports (I.4: 1-2); (ii) in the original introduction, where he maintains that the knowledge of culture safeguards the student of history from being morally led astray by historical reports (I.8-9); (iii) in the introductory part of the preface to Book One, where he re-affirms the moral benefit that the knowledge of culture brings to the study of history; and (iv) in the middle of the preface to Book One (I.61: 11-17). The clearest statement is the fourth one, in which he sets as the goal of the *Muqaddima* the establishment of “a sound gauge by which historians can make out the way of truthfulness and correctness with respect to that which they transmit” (I.61: 15-16). This

sound gauge, as Ibn Khaldun argues, is something we reach through the careful study of the nature of culture. Here, an objection can be made that making out the way of truthfulness and correctness with respect to transmitted historical reports is not the same as saying that these historical reports are true and correct. For example, the possibility that a particular event could happen does not mean that the report of its happening is necessarily true (I.18-20). Alternatively, a report that has been rejected as unlikely to have happened—on moral and religious grounds, for example—still might indeed have occurred as reported (cf. I.24 with I.19 and I. 29).³⁴

Ibn Khaldun’s definitive statement regarding the explicit relationship between the science of culture and history—and by implication the relationship between the *Muqaddima* and the *History*—is obviously an ambitious one. Taken at face value, it will ultimately frustrate the diligent reader of Ibn Khaldun’s *History*, for it turns out that this *History* does not measure up to the scientific standard demanded in the *Muqaddima*. Now, Ibn Khaldun is indeed a competent historian; his work on the history of the Berbers, for example, is considered as an authority on the subject. Yet, taken as a whole, Ibn Khaldun’s *History* largely fails to live up to the promise of “methodological rigor” laid out in his *Muqaddima*, and this not only by modern judgment, but also by the judgment of significant historians who were contemporaries and near contemporaries of Ibn Khaldun.³⁵

³⁴ As I will demonstrate in Chapters Two and Three, Ibn Khaldun is well aware of such preliminary observations. Suffice it to note here that in the preface to Book One, Ibn Khaldun lists seven reasons that explain the necessity of the fact that “the [historical] report, by its nature, is much frequented by lying” (I.56: 13).

³⁵ The disagreement, cited above between al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Ḥajjar, bears witness to this fact. Ibn Ḥajjar, was outspoken critic of Ibn Khaldun’s historical work, especially with respect to the history of *Mashriq* (or the Orient). His judgment with respect to the weak substance of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* was affected by his critical view of Ibn Khaldun’s *History*.

There is little doubt that Ibn Khaldun has actively presented himself to the reader of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* as a scholar who wishes to write the *Muqaddima* as a manual for the correct reading and writing of history—that his *History* provides the complete framework through which future historical works will be based (I.52-53). If we take this presentation at face value, and then judge the “manual,” i.e., the *Muqaddima*, on the basis of its final product, i.e., the *History*, we are likely to be tempted to conclude that the project of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* is ultimately a failure.³⁶

However, the fact that there is much that is truly unique and valuable in *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* in general, and the *Muqaddima* in particular, obliges us—we modern devotees of Ibn Khaldun’s work—to reject this bleak conclusion. Perhaps this might explain why many scholars, who acknowledge that Ibn Khaldun has failed regarding his ultimate objective, implicitly decouple the *Muqaddima* and the *History* from any unifying objective. In effect, they treat the two parts of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* as two separate books—i.e., Ibn Khaldun’s reflections on culture (and how it should affect our understanding of history) and his actual recording of history.

An important contention of my thesis is that one cannot fully grasp Ibn Khaldun’s teaching in the *Muqaddima* without full appreciation of its contribution to the overall goal of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*. But in acknowledging the importance of understanding the overall goal of this work, I challenge the view that Ibn Khaldun’s science of culture is intended to be subordinate to history, and as such I do not take his statement regarding culture and history at face value. For, considering the larger argument of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun does not view the writing and correction of historical reports as an end in itself.

³⁶ Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Naḥnu wa al-Turāth: Qirāʾāt Muʿāṣira fī Turāthinā al-falsafī*, (2nd Edition, Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1982). p. 409

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I will have occasion to provide support for this argument, its basis, and its implications. Here, however, a few preliminary remarks will have to suffice.

The Political in the Science of Culture

As suggested above, the extent to which Ibn Khaldun's teaching in *Kitāb al-'Ibar* is in harmony with, or in opposition to, the "tradition" of Islamic philosophy in general, and political philosophy in particular, is a matter of great debate among scholars. However, it is clear that this work of his is sufficiently informed by this tradition of Islamic philosophy to allow us to use it (i.e., the tradition) as the backdrop against which to put in relief Ibn Khaldun's teaching. Ibn Khaldun's starting point and guiding principle for establishing his new *science* of culture is firmly rooted in a scientific framework advanced by the Muslim philosophers, who, in turn, openly acknowledged their debt to *al-qudamā'* (the *ancients*)—i.e., the Greek philosophers headed by Aristotle, "the first teacher," as the Muslim philosophers called him.

Of course, the expression "philosophic tradition" should be understood as loosely as possible—for the philosophic activity in medieval Islam was very dynamic and lively—but there are certain points that major figures of Islamic philosophy seem to have agreed on. One such point of apparent agreement is that history is neither a science nor a subject worthy of systematic scientific inquiry. This position was argued by the first teacher Aristotle, who maintained that, when it comes to advancing our rational understanding of all things human, "*poiêsis* is more philosophic and of more stature than history. For poetry speaks rather of the general things while history speaks of the particular things. The general, that it falls to a certain sort of man to say or do certain

sorts of thing according to the likely or the necessary, is what poetry aims at in attaching names. But the particular is what Alcibiades did [*epraxen*] or what he suffered.”³⁷ As

Muhsin Mahdi explains:

History is concerned with individual events taking place in particular times and places, and as such it is the very opposite of science; for according to Aristotle’s theory of science, there is science only when a universal judgment is formed explaining the nature and causes of a class of objects. History is not theoretical science because its subject matter is mutable and changing.³⁸

Ibn Khaldun is well aware of this position. In his reflection on the uniqueness (and the possible revolutionary character) of his new science of culture, and why past philosophers—whom Ibn Khaldun calls “the Sages” (*al-ḥukamāʾ*)—did not concern themselves with it, he states:

If every intellected truth has a nature that is proper to investigate what accidents happen to it, then it becomes necessary, in considering each comprehensible and truth, that there be a certain science that is particular to it. But the sages, perhaps because they held in regard a concern for the fruits of such [investigations], and as you have seen, the fruit of this [science of culture]—through its questions are in themselves and with respect to their domains noble—is only concerned with [historical] reports and with the correction of [historical] reports, which is a weak fruit, and that is why they abandoned it. God knows best, “and you were given but little knowledge” [*Qurʾān*, 17: 85]. (I.63: 2-9)

Ibn Khaldun does not provide here an explicit response to this (possible) attitude of the philosophers toward the science of culture. This is strange, considering the fact that, less than two pages before, he set as the goal for his first book of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*—the book in which he presents to us his new science of culture—the establishment of a “sound gauge” for the verification of historical reports. Here, Ibn Khaldun suddenly switches the argument by discussing common subjects between the craft of history and other sciences,

³⁷ Aristotle, *On Poetics*, (1451a37-1451b12); Translation by Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002). p. 27.

³⁸ Mahdi, *op.cit.*, (1964) p. 139.

stating that, “We find in this craft, which we were *pressed* to speculate on, questions that turn-up accidentally for the people of the sciences in the demonstration of their sciences” (I.63: 9-11; emphasis mine). He goes on to provide a lengthy list of learned men: philosophers, jurists, religious authorities, wise men, judges, etc. What is interesting and telling about this list is that all the “sciences” which these learned men seek to demonstrate are political in nature: demonstrating prophecy (I.63: 11-13), demonstrating the necessity of rulers for human associations (I.63: 13-16), justifying religious rule for the good of the community (I.63-64: 16-4), the nature and importance of acting justly (I.64: 4-16), the essence of prudent political actions (I.64-65: 16-10), and so forth. As such, Ibn Khaldun substitutes a response to the philosophers’ possible critique of the science of culture with a strong reminder of the politically beneficial aspects to the study of history.

It is important to note in this context that when the philosophers rejected history as a theoretical science, they did not necessarily reject the possibility that a benefit can be derived from historical accounts of particular events.³⁹ What they rejected is the possibility that based on the study of individual events, universal rules can be derived. History can offer us instances of just and courageous individuals, for example, but it does not provide us with the principles of justice and courage. Most importantly, history can teach us about the different customs and ideas of other nations that would compel us to think about the validity of our own customs and ideas, but it does not provide the standard upon which to judge those customs and ideas. So to the extent that the philosophers were interested in history, this interest can only be seen as instrumental.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 138-140.

Like the philosophers, Ibn Khaldun's interest in history is instrumental: he is not interested in history for its own sake, but for the sake of what it can provide as an aid to politics. But Ibn Khaldun's estimate of the benefit of this aid is greater than the estimate of any previous philosopher of weight (I.2: 17-19).

That history is part of an education in politics—and especially important in furthering one's understanding of the rise and fall of dynasties—is the chief reason emphasized by Ibn Khaldun for reading historical reports (I.4-5: 13-16). He again reminds us of the politically beneficial role of history in the original introduction (I.8: 11-15) as well as in the prefatory discussion of the science of culture (I.56: 6-13).

Ibn Khaldun's interest in politics is focused on understanding the conditions that make for strong and stable political regimes—a theme that runs through chapters two, three, and four of the *Muqaddima*. He is also keen on presenting the reader with the end product—both good and bad—of such regimes. Ibn Khaldun's focus on the moral decline that necessarily comes with *ḥaḍāra*—the highest form of culture achieved by a dynasty (II.255: 5)—as well as on the inevitable decline of all sorts of regimes, does not mean that he is indifferent to regimes and their good cultural products—that he presents a “value-free” social science. On the contrary, his account provides both a description of the health and disease of culture as well as a prescription for healing its illnesses. This is evident in his enthusiastic presentation, in chapters 5 and 6 of the *Muqaddima*, of the kinds of arts and sciences that a dynasty's *ḥaḍāra* produces. Ibn Khaldun is clear to note that the decline and inevitable collapse of a dynasty, though it does affect a decline in culture, does not necessarily lead to the collapse of culture. The outcome, however, depends on the strength of the foundations the culture has in cities (II. 207-8, 235-9, 250-

5), and on the new rulers' ability to appreciate its benefit (I. 270-3). Ibn Khaldun, in acknowledgement that one cannot control the character of foreign rulers—at least not initially—focuses his attention in *Kitāb al-'Ibar* on how to make possible the strengthening of the foundations of culture. This is *the* primary intention of *Kitab al-'Ibar*.

To begin to see how the study of history fits into this purpose, we need to consider the intended audience of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. In the preface to this book Ibn Khaldun informs us that his primary addressees are the “learned and the elite” (I.6: 2-3). Judging by the wide range of subjects that the *Muqaddima* discusses, the category of “the learned and the elite” is potentially a broad one that presumably includes not only potential historians, but also religious scholars, educators, as well as potential rulers. Perhaps what is common among all of these “the learned and the elite” is that they all have an interest in understanding the nature of the political (I.6: 5-9, cf. I.63-65); this, regardless whether what they seek is of an immediate political concern. What Ibn Khaldun offers in the *Muqaddima* for his addressees is an examination of political life by means of the rational sciences. In this, he shares something of the objective of the philosophers, who bring logic, physics, metaphysics, and political science to bear on the understanding of political life; but for reasons that I shall discuss in Chapter Three and Four, he is careful to impose certain limits on such examination (cf. III.209-220). Precisely because of the similarity of objective between his approach and that of the philosophers, Ibn Khaldun is well aware of the considerable risk of guilt by association.

By tying his new science of culture to the mostly (but not completely) innocuous craft of history, Ibn Khaldun aims to lessen this risk; and this at the same time that he

encourages the readers to use some of the ways of the philosophers—especially logic, physics, and political science—to understand the nature of political life. Ibn Khaldun's critique of past historians leads him to introduce new requirements for the historian of the future:

Therefore, the companion of this fine-art requires knowledge of the foundations of politics, the natures of beings, and the difference among nations, regions, and epochs with respect to the ways of life, morals, customs, sects, schools, as well as the rest of [these] conditions; to encompass what is present in these and to show the agreement in likeness between it and that which is absent, or to clarify what is different between them, and to explain the causes for the agreement and the difference in this; as well as to uphold the roots of dynasties, religions, the principles of their manifestation, the reasons for their occurrence, the motives for their coming to be, the conditions and reports of those who sustain them, so that he would comprehend the reasons for each occurrence and would behold the root of each report. (I.43: 10-13)

The study of history, seen through the lens of the science of culture, forces the serious student to focus on the rational examination of the here and now, even as he is looking at the past. For, as Ibn Khaldun argues, the biggest error committed by past historians is their inability to appreciate change from one generation to another (I.44-45: 7-10).

It is perhaps clear by now why Ibn Khaldun intentionally gives the impression that the science of culture is subordinate to history: the success of Ibn Khaldun's objective of encouraging the rational examination of political life is contingent on the student's initial belief that it is possible to achieve certainty with respect to historical truths.

What we have discussed thus far should not be interpreted to mean that Ibn Khaldun sees no true value in studying history; or that his interest in history is nothing more than to set it forth as a decoy for an ulterior motive. This introductory chapter provides a preliminary argument for the salient political character of the science of

culture, an argument that challenges the prevailing view that sees the verification of historical reports as the primary object of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*. More than any philosopher before him, Ibn Khaldun valued the political role that history plays in the political community. In the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun provides examples of how history is used as a weapon among political adversaries (I.29-34, 34-38, and 40-42); how it promotes fantastical and absurd accounts of political life (I.9-13, 13-16, 58-60); as well as how it encourages morally reprehensible actions (I.19-29). Subjecting history to rational inquiry—by means of the science of culture, which determines the scope and limits of such inquiry—can lessen what is politically harmful and promote what is politically salutary.

Chapter Divisions of This Dissertation

Along with the introduction, this dissertation is divided into four chapters. In what follows, I provide a summary of the three chapters that constitute the body of this thesis.

Chapter 2, “Ibn Khaldun’s Invitation to the Reader: An Analysis of the Title and Invocation of Kitāb al-‘Ibar.”

The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how Ibn Khaldun’s emphasis on the political over the historical is not as inconspicuous as might first appear. Through a new translation and analysis of the title and invocation I explore in this chapter the important first clues Ibn Khaldun provides to his readers regarding the nature of his work.

A book’s title, ideally conceived, is a condensed statement that expresses what the work is about and to whom it is addressed. However, Ibn Khaldun’s twenty-one word

title, written in rhyme-prose, says different things to different people, which partly explains the wide disagreement among scholars regarding its translation. Disagreement regarding what the title says leads to disagreement regarding what the book as a whole is intended to be. By providing a discussion that explains my translation of the title, I aim to explore the different interpretive possibilities the title presents as well as to identify the significance of key words and terms used to define the nature of Ibn Khaldun's work.

The invocation, at times, can be used by an author to express more than simply a public profession of faith. As Rosenthal maintains, in his translation of the *Muqaddima*, the "purpose of the *khutbah* 'invocation' of Arabic works is to summarize the main theme of the work."⁴⁰ My translation and analysis of this short invocation aims not only to show what this part of *Kitāb al-'Ibar* says about the theme(s) of the work, but also to show the way Ibn Khaldun presents himself to his reader (both as a writer and as a man of faith). With this analysis, I begin to display important elements of Ibn Khaldun's writing style—a task that will be completed in the third chapter.

Understanding the nature of Ibn Khaldun's writing style is part and parcel of understanding the deeper purpose behind his *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. As my examination of the later parts of the *Muqaddima* will show, the politically sensitive subjects that Ibn Khaldun deals with necessitates that he write esoterically, i.e., in a way that invites the critical examination of established political opinion, while at the same time what appears unobjectionable to those in authority. In order to establish the character of Ibn Khaldun's teaching, we need to begin by understanding the way in which he presents this teaching, namely, to establish that he does indeed write esoterically and to identify the way in which this esotericism can be understood.

⁴⁰ Rosenthal (1967), op.cit., pp 3-4, footnote #3.

Chapter 3, “An Ambiguous Beginning: al-zāhir wa al-bātin in Ibn Khaldun’s Preface to Kitāb al-‘Ibar.”

Having explored, in Chapter 2, the clues Ibn Khaldun provides in his title and invocation regarding the nature of his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, and having identified the major elements of his writing style, Chapter 3 expands on and completes the interpretive analysis of Ibn Khaldun’s writing. Through a translation and analysis of the preface to *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, the reader will be able to experience the complete first argument Ibn Khaldun makes for his work as well as be able to judge for him/herself the strengths of my own approach.

In this chapter, I expose the studied ambiguity in Ibn Khaldun’s text and will illustrate how he uses such ambiguity to force the reader to consider and reconsider the apparent sense of his argument. Through this approach, the reader discovers how Ibn Khaldun puts much more emphasis on the political consequences of the study of history than he does on the truth of historical reporting.

Chapter 4, “The Science of Culture and the Limitations of the Fine-Art of History.”

Having examined Ibn Khaldun’s style of writing in Chapters 2 and 3, I focus in Chapter 4 on the substance of Ibn Khaldun’s teaching. I begin with a detailed outline of the work that puts in relief the overall argument of the original introduction. I then proceed to examine Ibn Khaldun’s opening statement in this introduction. Though brief, the opening statement provides the most explicit argument Ibn Khaldun makes with respect to the political and moral significance of the fine-art of history. Through the

discussion of this statement we are able to judge how Ibn Khaldun intends, through the science of culture, to transform the fine-art of history.

With this background understanding, I turn to the introduction's longest part, in which Ibn Khaldun discusses errors committed by previous historians. Through the examination of this part we see how Ibn Khaldun's encourages the rational examination of history. We also see how concern for the moral and political welfare of the community compels Ibn Khaldun to limit the scope his rational examination.

I conclude the chapter with Ibn Khaldun's discussion of a "deeply hidden ailment" in the study of history: the inability of people to understand how time changes the conditions and customs of nations and generations. As I demonstrate, it is this ailment that *Kitāb al-'Ibar* in general, and the *Muqaddima* in particular are designed to address.

CHAPTER 2

Ibn Khaldun's Invitation to the Reader: An Analysis of the Title and the Invocation of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*

This chapter and the next provide a translation and interpretation of the title, the invocation, and the preface of Ibn Khaldun's *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. There are two reasons that call for such in-depth interpretation. The first is central to the importance of these parts of the book as introductory materials to the work as a whole, i.e., to the two main components that constitute *Kitāb al-'Ibar*: the *Muqaddima* and the *History*. The title, the invocation, and the preface constitute Ibn Khaldun's critical invitation for reading his massive work. They provide important clues regarding the character of *Kitāb al-'Ibar* by outlining its subject matter, by identifying its primary addressees, and by setting the limits for the type of questions the work as whole investigates. With these clues Ibn Khaldun enables his reader to establish the proper relationship between the *Muqaddima* and the *History* and, hence, to judge the distinctive scholarly approaches each of these two parts requires by way of study.

The purpose of chapter 2 and 3, therefore, is to establish the *what* and the *how* of Ibn Khaldun's teaching. Chapter 2, which discusses the title and the invocation, focuses on the initial argument which Ibn Khaldun presents as an invitation for the careful reading of his text. Chapter 3, which discusses the preface, focuses on the basic outline of Ibn Khaldun's teaching.

A careful examination of these parts of *Kitāb al-'Ibar* will reveal that there is more to this book, and especially to the main theme of the *Muqaddima*, than the

ostensible goal as an introduction to the correct writing of history. In the title and the invocation—the parts of the book discussed in this chapter—Ibn Khaldun provides unmistakable clues which indicate that, for him, the study of history is not an end in itself. Since the rational investigation of historical reports, as Ibn Khaldun envisions it, is part and parcel of the rational investigation of present social and political reality, the study of history becomes, for him, the means to encourage sound philosophical reflection on the present and establishes the principles upon which prudential planning for the future is based.

As further investigation of the *Muqaddima* will reveal, *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* is first and foremost a political book, which means that it concerns itself with what is good for the political community—it encourages sound philosophical reflection and prudent political action for the benefit of understanding and promoting such a good. The study of history is placed in a secondary, or subservient, role to this overall goal. There is a prominent place for the giving of factual accounts of history in Ibn Khaldun’s book, but there is also a limit to what should be investigated in history. Sacred opinion, for example, must not be openly questioned. The study of history is intended to serve the good of the political community by reviving interest in the rational examination of political life, while preserving the foundations that make this common life possible.

As for the analysis of Ibn Khaldun’s style of writing, my working premise is that he has chosen his words carefully and deliberately, and that my task is to explain—as well as is humanly possible—these deliberate choices, to observe what problems they raise, and to reflect on questions they open for further consideration. Key to this approach is to avoid the danger—ever present in these types of analyses—of relating foreign ideas

to the author, i.e., Ibn Khaldun. The danger can be alleviated by keeping to a close reading of the text so that any interpretation that cannot be supported by textual evidence will have to be considered as tentative.

As will soon become evident, the success of this interpretive analysis will depend, in no small part, on careful attention to Ibn Khaldun's subtle use of language. We will occasionally encounter an intentional use of words, terms, and sentences that can be open to a variety of interpretations. To better navigate through these different meanings and hence assess their hermeneutical implications, I will generally abide by the following rules. First, I will outline the conventional meaning of these words or scholarly terms as defined by classical Arabic lexicons, especially, but not limited to, *Lisān al-'Arab* (compiled by Muḥammad Ibn Mukarram Ibn Manẓūr, who was born in North Africa a century before Ibn Khaldun). In this same context, Quranic usage of important words and terms will often be consulted by virtue of the place this sacred text has in the Muslim community. Second, the conventional understanding of these words or scholarly terms will be compared, where appropriate, with Ibn Khaldun's own multiple usage of these words and terms in the rest of the *Muqaddima*. It is always a possibility—which needs to be covered—that a competent scholar might find it important to use a conventional word in a wholly innovative way, and hence alter its traditional meaning. Third, my discussion of Ibn Khaldun's arguments will occasionally make reference to external texts—e.g., other studies on Ibn Khaldun, books that deal with Islamic history, literary studies on language—all of these are intended to complement, and not to supplement, my textual interpretation of the *Muqaddima*.

This chapter will be divided into two parts. In the first part, I discuss the title and explore the major ideas it promises the reader of the book. In the second part, I offer an examination of the opening invocation of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*. Besides using the invocation as an introduction to Ibn Khaldun’s writing style, I explore how this invocation speaks to the two main themes of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, history and culture, as well as discuss the manner and implication of the way Ibn Khaldun presents himself as a man of faith.

I. The Title

A title is perhaps the most imaginative and challenging part of a book. The author is expected to capture the substance of his work in one word, a phrase, or—as occasionally is the case with medieval Arabic authors—a sentence. A well constructed title supposedly informs the passerby what the book is about and why it should be read. Such titles could be straightforward in their announcement—clearly stating their subject and to whom the book is primarily addressed—or they could be intriguing or mysterious enough to attract the curiosity of general and particular readers. An example of the first kind of title is al-Farabi’s *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine, and Aristotle*. Though intriguing, this title seems straightforward enough. It is especially inviting to those who are philosophically inclined, and who, moreover, possess enough learning regarding the work of Plato and Aristotle to conclude that these “two sages” are not completely in “harmony.” Al-Farabi seems to promise these readers a different conclusion. Al-Ghazali’s *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, on the other hand, seems to be aimed at a wider audience: not only those readers who are philosophically inclined, but also those suspicious of philosophy. The book could also be

attractive to religious scholars, who are looking for arguments to refute the philosophers. Ibn Rushd's *Incoherence of the "Incoherence"* is more or less interested in the same audience as that of al-Ghazali, and presumably those who have read the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, and who would be open to hear a counter argument to al-Ghazali's. Of course, not all titles are as straightforward as these, other titles can heighten the curiosity of the readers through the usage of rich metaphorical or allegorical images. An example of this kind is Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mas'ūdī's title, *The Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems*, which adorns a book that deals, among other things, with the history of various cultures and religious communities.¹

How does Ibn Khaldun's long title, *kitāb al-'ibar wa dīwān al-mubtada' wa al-khabar fī ayyām al-'arab wa al-'ajam wa al-barbar wa man 'āṣarahum min dhawī al-ṣultān al-akbar*, inform its potential reader about the book's subject matter and why it should be read? To answer this question we need to have as accurate a translation of the title as possible. Since there is no clear agreement among Ibn Khaldun scholars regarding a satisfactory translation, I will begin this task with three different translations of the title by three scholars, Franz Rosenthal, Muhsin Mahdi, and Nathaniel Schmidt. From these translations, we will point out three 'curious' features about this title, discuss the possible literary significance of these features, and attempt to provide, based on that discussion, an acceptable English translation of the title.

Rosenthal translates the title in the following way: "Book of Lessons [*kitāb al-'ibar*] and Archive of Early and subsequent History [*dīwān al-mubtada' wa al-khabar*], Dealing with the Political Events [*ayyām*] concerning the Arabs, Non-Arabs [*al-'ajam*],

¹ For a brief discussion of the title of this book by al-Mas'ūdī, see Tarif Khalidi, *Islamic Historiography: The Histories of al-Mas'ūdī*, note #2, p. 2.

and Berbers, and the Supreme Rulers [*dhawī al-sulṭān al-akbar*] Who Were Contemporary with Them.”² Mahdi offers an alternative translation: “The Book of the *Ibar* [*kitāb al-‘ibar*], the Record of the Origins and Events [*dīwān al-mubtada’ wa al-khabar*] of the Days [*ayyām*] of the Arabs, Persians [*al-‘ajam*] and Berbers, and of those of their Contemporaries who were Possessors of Great Power [*dhawī al-sulṭān al-akbar*].”³ A third alternative translation is advanced by Nathaniel Schmidt: “A book of instructive examples [*kitāb al-‘ibar*] and a collection relating to the subject and the attribute [*dīwān al-mubtada’ wa al-khabar*] in the Days [*ayyām*] of the Arabs, Persians [*al-‘ajam*] and the Berbers, and the great rulers [*dhawī al-sulṭān al-akbar*] who were their contemporaries.”⁴

The different translations we have of this title should not be surprising. Ibn Khaldun’s writing is notoriously difficult to translate. This is partly because he often uses rich vocabulary and a complex writing style, which is characteristic of authors who possess an extraordinary command of their own language. But there is more to this problem than the usual challenges faced by translators of works with high literary value. As my examination will show, those passages in the text that are especially difficult to translate, usually reflect a studied ambiguity in the original, which makes them (or should make them) resistant to cursory readings. Textual ambiguity is a literary device used by Ibn Khaldun to lull the careless reader who would be satisfied with the gist of Ibn Khaldun’s argument, and to awaken the curiosity of the critical reader. We see evidence of this in the very first sentence of *Kitab al-‘Ibar*, namely, the title.

² Rosenthal, *op.cit.*, (1967) p. 13; all transliterated words in square brackets are mine.

³ Mahdi, *op.cit.*, p. 63; all transliterated words in square brackets are mine.

⁴ Nathaniel Schmidt, *Ibn Khaldun: Historian, Sociologist, and Philosopher*, (NY: AMS Press, Inc., 1967) p. 10; all transliterated words in square brackets are mine.

There are three curious things about Ibn Khaldun's title, two of which are immediately present for the first time reader while the third becomes obvious as we get more familiar with the book as a whole. First, Ibn Khaldun refers to his work as not only a *kitāb*, i.e., a book, but also as a *dīwān*, i.e., as a register, an archive, or a collection. This seems to suggest a dual function for the book of *Ibar*, but it is unclear what these functions might be. As we will see shortly, the division of the book into a *kitāb* and a *dīwān* is all the more curious when one reflects on the contrast between *ibar* as the defining quality of the *kitāb* and *al-mubtada' wa al-khabar* as the defining quality of the *dīwān*.

Second, Ibn Khaldun informs us in the title that both the *kitāb* and the *dīwān* derive their material from *ayyām al-'arab wa al-'ajam wa al-barbar wa man 'āṣarahum min dhawī al-ṣultān al-akbar*. Since the word *'ajam* literally means non-Arabs, there seems to be a redundancy in paring the word *'ajam* with *barbar*. If we translate *'ajam* according to its conventional meaning, i.e., Persians, we discover that this is only a temporary solution.⁵ For quickly we find out in the preface that Ibn Khaldun singles out only the Arabs and Berbers for comprehensive treatment in *Kitāb al-Ibar*, whereas the Persians along with other nations are given secondary treatment. We should also note that Ibn Khaldun could have easily chosen for Persians the precise Arabic word *furs*, had he intended their explicit mention in the title.

⁵ The word *'ajam* is primarily a collective noun that means 'non-Arabs.' Here, the basis of the distinction between Arabs and non-Arabs is a linguistic one, i.e., a non-Arab is someone who cannot speak Arabic, or whose native tongue is not Arabic; for example, the Berbers, the Greeks, the Jews, the Persians, the Romans, and the Turks, among others. Perhaps for reasons of geographic and cultural proximity to Arabia, however, the paradigmatic example of the non-Arab has traditionally been understood as the Persian. This is why both Mahdi and Schmidt—in an attempt to avoid the apparent redundancy in the title—choose this alternative translation for the word *'ajam*.

The third curious thing about the title is that Ibn Khaldun does not make an explicit mention of that subject matter with which his book came to be identified, namely history. Is this intentional or accidental? This is the problem I will start with first.

Instead of history Ibn Khaldun uses *ayyām*. Used in conjunction with the word “Arabs”—i.e., *ayyām al-‘arab*—the expression immediately calls attention to a certain kind of ‘historical’ literature, which largely predates Islam, called the “Battle Days of the Arabs.” According to conventional usage, the term is limited in its historical coverage and partial regarding its ethnic affiliation.⁶ Since Ibn Khaldun does not limit the application of the term *ayyām* to the Arabs, but also extends it to include the *‘ajam* as well as the *barbar*, then it is clear that—while calling attention to its literary character—he is not using this term according to its strict conventional usage. In order to understand the significance of the *ayyām*’s literary character—and thus understand something about the material Ibn Khaldun’s work examines—we need to recall this word’s literal meaning, from which *ayyām* as a term derives its figurative significance.

Ayyām is the plural of *yawm*, which means “day.” As in English, the word *yawm* can either refer to the time of sunlight (i.e., the time between sunrise and sunset), or it could also refer to the time it takes the sun—in keeping with medieval astronomy—to

⁶ As ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dūrī observes: “The Arabs of ... North [Arabia] had oral accounts about their social affairs and their great exploits. The principal part of these accounts is concerned with raiding expeditions and battles (*ayyām*) and their genealogies. These accounts are intimately related to the organization, views, and customs of society, as is reflected most prominently by the ideas of *muruwwa*, the totality of the Bedouin virtues, of *nasab*, noble family origin, and the *ḥasab*, the distinction of great deeds and exploits, since individuals were expected to know their ancestors and the noble deeds which they had performed. As the *ayyām* were thus the subject of special concern in tribal society, the tribes had tales and narratives of their past deeds. These accounts circulated both orally and in the form of prose.” Abd al-Azīz al-Dūrī. *Baḥṡ fī nash’at ‘ilm al-t’rīkh ‘inda al-‘arab* (Beirut: Al-Maṭba‘a al-Kāthūlikīya, 1960). Part I trans. Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) p. 18.

complete one revolution around the earth (i.e., a solar day). Whether we understand *yawm* in the first or second sense is perhaps not as significant as the fact that this word immediately conjures in our minds a contrast between day and night, light and darkness.

The contrast between day and night is significant. The light of the sun, as that which makes things visible, is an apt metaphor for those momentous events in history that are supposedly most visible in the memory of individuals and/or in the collective memory of a people. It is then easy to understand how, for the pre-Islamic Arabs, their most visible moments of the past, their most celebrated *days*, are their battles or whatever events are of comparable value. The historian ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dūrī, in the context of explaining the origin of the “Battle-day” literature of the pre-Islamic Arabs, notes: “Tribal life is characterized by its adherence to tradition, and has only a confused and limited notion of time. This is because time, from the tribal point of view, is punctuated by great events, which tribesmen customarily take as starting points for dating events or fixing matters of chronology. When an important event occurs, whatever preceded it is disregarded and subsequent events are dated according to it.”⁷ Thus understood, the term is problematic, especially concerning its value for sound historical investigations. For as there are *days*, there must be nights, i.e., dark moments in the past that are never recollected—to say nothing here of the veracity of that which is indeed recollected. Does it not then seem a bad word choice that Ibn Khaldun would use the term *ayyām*—with its attendant association with “confused and limited notion of time” to quote al-Dūrī again—as a term that describes the material upon which the work as a whole is based? There are two interconnected reasons here that guard against such hasty conclusions.

⁷ Al-Dūrī, *op.cit.*, 20

First, the observation that the character of *ayyām* is “confused,” and by implication suspect, is not something that necessarily escapes Ibn Khaldun’s attention. This is at least apparent in the placement of the *ayyām* as the material for both the “book” and the “register”. The fact that it is seen as material points at once to its importance—as a starting point for the investigation—as well as to its deficiency—as something which is in need of inquiry. This perhaps begins to explain why Ibn Khaldun found it appropriate to choose this word instead of history: history itself is supposed to be a final account.

Second, the fact that we need to maintain a certain level of healthy skepticism regarding the veracity of the *ayyām*, does not mean that we should be dismissive regarding their possible value. The “confused and limited notion of time”, which al-Dūrī sees as so characteristic of the pre-Islamic Arabs and exhibited in their *ayyām*, is not something that is necessarily limited to them or their times. Though arguably unschooled, it represents, to a certain extent, a natural human way of taking stock of what is historically relevant. Until perhaps recently, a people’s account of their past consisted in what for them were significant moments that either affirmed the nobility of their character (especially for those who have what we moderns call an ahistorical view of life) or explained the development of this noble character (especially for those who take a more progressive view of history). Such accounts are potentially valuable, if for no other reason than the most obvious one, that it tells us how a group of people estimates itself. Through such accounts, one can discern a representation of a people’s highest ideals. This, at least, suggests that the *ayyām*—which we will here occasionally refer to as ‘people’s accounts of their past’ or simply ‘narratives’—are not a flawed starting point. But rather than emphasize the final product of his investigation, Ibn Khaldun has chosen

in his title to emphasize the type of material upon which his search is based. The significance of this move will become clear as we investigate the preface, in which Ibn Khaldun provides a brief discussion of the title.

I turn now to the second ‘curious’ point about this title, namely, the word *‘ajam*. I have already pointed out the apparent problem with the translation of this word as “non-Arabs” as well as with its alternative translation as “Persians.”

I suggest here a third, though admittedly unconventional, translation of this word. Since *‘ajam* is a collective noun designating that which is unfamiliar for a people, primarily on linguistic grounds, then a suitable alternative to it could be the word ‘foreigners’. Thus the phrase, *fī ayyām al-‘arab wa al-‘ajam wa al-barbar* could read as “Regarding the Days of the Arabs, the Foreigners, and the Berbers.”

Understanding (and thus translating) the word *‘ajam* as foreigners not only avoids the apparent redundancy in the title but also shows, in two different ways, how this title communicates important aspects of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*. First, it anticipates major features of the overall plan of this book. As Ibn Khaldun informs us in the preface, *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* is divided into an introduction and three books. The second book is going to focus on the history of the Arabs (i.e., the first group explicitly mentioned in the title), and the third book is going to focus on the history of the Berbers (i.e., the second group explicitly mentioned in the title). The history of other nations (what Ibn Khaldun refers to in the title as *‘ajam*)—such as the Greeks, the Israelites, the Persians, and the Turks—will be given secondary treatment as part of the history of the Arabs in the second book of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*.

Second, it is clear from both the title and the preface that Ibn Khaldun treats the Berbers as a distinct group of people whose accounts of their own past, *ayyām*, are given equal treatment in *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* to that given of the Arabs. However, the usage of the word *ʿajam*, understood as foreigners, suggests certain affinity between the Arabs and the Berbers. In other words, the word “foreign” here is not understood in contradistinction to the Arabs only, but also to the Berbers. The preface informs us that the Arabs and the Berbers do indeed share something in common: since time that *appears* immemorial, the Arabs and the Berbers inhabited northwest Africa. And it is to this history of that region of the world that Ibn Khaldun is most attentive. As Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* argues, there is more to the distinctive character of a people than linguistic difference. There is something more natural, and as such more basic, that plays an important part in forming the peculiar character of the social organization of a people, and that is their physical environment.

But our problem with this phrase, *fī ayyām al-ʿarab wa al-ʿajam wa al-barbar, wa man ʿāṣarahum min dhawī al-ṣulṭān al-akbar*, does not end here. If the phrase *ayyām al-ʿarab wa al-ʿajam wa al-barbar* represents the narratives of all the peoples of the world, then we have to ask who are “their contemporaries who possessed the greater authority.”

Many scholars implicitly or explicitly assume—relying on Ibn Khaldun’s partial explanation of this title in the preface—that the expression “their contemporaries” refers back to all those groups of people who are neither Arab nor Berber and who possessed great dynasties throughout the long history of the Arabs and the Berbers. And yet, as we have already seen, the term *ʿajam* has already anticipated Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of

groups other than the Arabs and the Berbers. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun uses the plural form *'āṣarahum* rather than the dual form *'āṣarahumā*, which would have been necessary had Ibn Khaldun intended the contemporaries to be understood in contradistinction to the Arabs and the Berbers only.

The distinction intended here is not between the Arabs and Berbers on the one hand, and every other ethnic group on the other; rather it is between groups of people who, while ethnically distinct, share something fundamentally common—especially in the way they interact with their natural and social environment—and groups from among these different ethnicities that manage to achieve the ultimate political power: the kingship that each group-feeling (or *aṣabiyā*) naturally seeks but few successfully accomplish.

I now turn to the last ‘curious’ point about Ibn Khaldun’s title, that which deals with the dual aspects of his book, namely the *kitāb* and the *dīwān*.

As Ibn Khaldun illustrates, the word *dīwān* has a noteworthy history. In the course of his discussion of various governmental offices, Ibn Khaldun recounts two different stories that deal with the first known usage of this word (cf. II.15-17). It seems that the understanding of this word, as it first came to be used in the Arabic language, was so revolutionary that its most likely etymological origin, *dawana* (root *d.w.n*, bringing (something) near, collecting it, compiling it, as well as writing it down, registering it, etc.) apparently fails to explain its most elementary meaning. This, perhaps more than the disagreement among Arab grammarians regarding problems with its etymological roots, drove many to believe that the word is of Persian origin, supposedly

from the Persian word *dev* for “mad.”⁸ According to Ibn Khaldun, the word *dīwān* was first used by the Arabs to indicate a governmental register.

The original governmental *dīwān* was viewed as an impartial record that keeps in check the administrators of the dynasty and is, when the need arises, a means to adjudicate disputes. The decline, defeat, or collapse of the dynasty, however, did not necessarily mean that its *dīwāns* would cease to be useful.⁹ Indeed, many such *dīwāns* continued, under new conditions, as means to adjudicate disputes, but for entirely different reasons. Due to the great amount of documented information included in governmental registers, the *dīwān* became a trustworthy historical record (I.12, 29). Through such records, claims could be checked and verified concerning, among other things, the lineage of noble persons, the outcome of important battles, or the details of significant events.¹⁰ And for those particularly observant historians, a great amount of information can be discerned regarding the nature of a once great regime (II.296). By extension, therefore, the word *dīwān* came to partially designate a type of collected material that can lend itself to different kinds of treatment at different times. When it is applied to scientific works, the word *dīwān* would then mean a reservoir of knowledge that is open to different kinds of scholarly interest in the present as well as the future.

⁸ See *Lisān al-‘arab*, as well as Lane’s entry *dawana*

⁹ As Ibn Khaldun argues, the governmental *dīwān* of a defeated empire contained administrative information that is of use to the new victorious party (II.18).

¹⁰ Al-Dūrī observes: “Genealogical studies rendered service to historical writing in both content and compositional format. Interest in genealogies revived in Islam, and establishment of the *dīwān* system introduced a new incentive for interest in them. The Umayyads, beginning with Mu‘āwiya, encouraged such studies as these, and it is reported that Walid II (d. 126/744) commanded that a complete register of the genealogies of the tribes be made. Administrative exigencies, such as the organization of a system for paying stipends (‘*aṭā*’) and the allotment of residential quarters and lands to the tribes in the *amsār*, further contributed to the recording of genealogical registers and intensified interest in them. Added to this were tribal disputes, the effect of political circumstances on the status of the tribes, the appearance of a new aristocracy in Islam, and various social factors, all of which spurred the study of tribal genealogies. Finally, disputations with the Shu‘ūbiya and the attacks by partisans of the movement on Arab genealogies led to a new Arab emphasis on genealogical studies” (Dūrī, *op.cit.*, p. 50).

In addition to referencing governmental registers, the word *dīwān* is widely applied to special collections of material that are of scientific and/or literary character. These can either designate actual registers, ones that exist in book form, or figurative ones (either designating a tradition thought to be unified or a list of separate works thought to have a common theme/character). But whether scientific or literary, figurative or literal, the *dīwān* almost always refers to a comprehensive type of collected material. This comprehensiveness can be understood as a complete list of something important, e.g., a large collection of a poet's work or a great display of historical information; as an in depth treatment of a particular subject/topic; and/or as an enumeration of a group of subjects/topics that share something in common.

An argument can be made here that the *dīwān* Ibn Khaldun intends is a register of historical information. This is strongly implied by the type of material this register treats: the “days of the Arabs, the foreigners, and the Berbers, and those of their contemporaries who possessed the greatest authority.” Ibn Khaldun further specifies the character of this register by indicating that it is the *dīwān* of *al-mubtada'* and *al-khabar*. *Mubtada'* is a word that could mean, among other things: an origin, a beginning, a first, or a premise. *Khabar* is a word that could mean, among other things: an end, a conclusion, a report, or an attribute. What the *mubtada'* and *khabar* seem to specify in this context, therefore, is a register that is concerned with a sequential, a chronological, or an orderly narration of history. Consistent with the spirit of this reading is the translation of the end of this phrase by Rosenthal—who renders *al-mubtada'* and *al-khabar* as “early and subsequent history,” and Mahdi—who translates these words as “the origins and events.” This reading is also consistent with both Ibn Khaldun's plan for *Kitāb al-'Ibar*—a major part

of which gives a chronological account of history—as well as his own discussion of the title in the preface (I.7).

Be that as it may, the words *al-mubatada'* and *al-khabar* permit at least a second reading of the character of this *dīwān*. Placed next to each other these words would immediately call to mind—at least to an Arabic speaker with basic knowledge of Arabic grammar—the ‘subject’ and ‘predicate’ of a nominal sentence. A nominal sentence usually begins with a noun, namely the subject, and is said to be completed when a report or *khabar* (i.e., the predicate) is given about this subject. The subject and predicate are, therefore, the essential components of a complete sentence. But translating these two words according to their grammatical expression seems to scholars—with few notable exceptions like Schmidt—an awkward translation. A choice which, moreover, appears unnecessary when considering the availability of alternative translations—like the above mentioned ones—that are consonant with how historical information is arranged in Ibn Khaldun’s book.

On the other hand, thinking of *al-mubtada'* and *al-khabar* as the subject and predicate of a sentence—strange sounding as it may be—does not violate the sense of sequential arrangement of historical material in the *dīwān*. Moreover, such a translation of these two words seems to offer a deeper meaning to their *dīwān*. One could safely presume that, like the function of the subject and predicate in a sentence, *al-mubtada'* and *al-khabar* give in the register a meaningful account of history. Indeed, from what has been discussed so far about the title, Ibn Khaldun seems to provide a hint as to what a meaningful account of history consists of.

As noted, there are two groupings of *ayyām* (“days-literature”) that Ibn Khaldun’s work examines/documents: the general history of peoples and the history of those who were able to achieve great political power. I have further argued that, as indicated by the wording of the prepositional phrase, Ibn Khaldun is mainly interested in the general history of the Arabs and Berbers, as well as in the particular history of those, from among them, who were able to achieve, at different times, great political power. A meaningful account of these *ayyām*, therefore, would be one that is capable of articulating both their subject, people’s accounts of their past, and their predicate, those who achieved great power, into one coherent account.

We reach here the most important word in the title, *‘ibar* from which Ibn Khaldun’s magnum opus has come to be identified. *‘Ibar* is the plural of *‘ibra*, the verb-root of which is *‘b.r* meaning “he crossed.” When a man is said to have *‘abara*, this means that he ‘crossed it, went across it, passed over or through it.’ The basic idea here is the movement from one point, station, or side to another by crossing a certain barrier (most often understood as a natural barrier) such as a river, a valley, a chasm, or a gap. *‘Abara* also means he died, as if to say he moved or crossed over from the world of the living to that of the dead. The word thus symbolizes the journey one takes in life. It is here, as a metaphor for life, that the manner of crossing (i.e., *‘ubūr*) becomes of fundamental importance.

Note the Arab saying or rather invocation “*Allāhuma ij‘alnā min man ya‘bar al-dunyā wa lā ya‘burhā*,” (“O God! Make us from among those who learns from the world

and not from among those who pass over it”).¹¹ It conveys two ways in which such a life-journey (*‘ubūr*) is taken. The first by learning, considering, or being admonished (the sense in which *ya‘bar* is used). The second by passing by or through life (the sense in which *ya‘burhā* is used). The word can then convey either a passive or active engagement with life. We all cross (*na‘bur*) this world, but some of us are more aware of this journey or crossing (*‘ubūr*) than others.

The basic sense in which people can become aware or considerate of this journey is by learning from the example of others. Indeed learning by example is the most common of extended meanings for the word *‘ibra*. Thus it is often translated as instruction, lesson, admonition, warning, reprimand, etc. Understanding what is involved in attaining such awareness is, of course, no small matter. For Muslims, the choice seems obvious: one becomes best equipped for this life journey by accepting, heart and soul, God’s revealed message to His Prophet Muhammad—“The Truth is from thy Lord so be not of those who doubt” (*Quran*, 3: 60). But for those who might be plagued with doubt, the *Quran* provides, among other types of instruction, a teaching that we may call teaching by *‘ibra*. There are at least two kinds of *‘ibra*-teaching in the *Quran*. The first kind is one through which the *Quran* calls on human beings to reflect on the example of other human beings; and the second kind is one through which the *Quran* calls on human beings to reflect on nature, i.e., the miracle of creation. The second kind of teaching is one that can be loosely characterized as positive *‘ibar*, for by this kind of instruction the *Quran* enjoins people to contemplate the world in which they live and by so doing they are supposed to see the infinite examples of God’s grace toward human beings. The first kind of teaching is one that can be characterized as “negative” *‘ibar*, for by these *‘ibar*

¹¹ Lane, *‘b-r*, p. 1937.

the emphasis is on what people should *not* do. What they should not do is follow the example of those who had been made an example of. Hence, the saying, “The fortunate is he who takes warning (*i‘tibara*) by others, and the unfortunate is he by whom others take warning (*i‘tabara bi-hi ghayyrahu*).”¹²

Considering this understanding of the word *‘ibra*, it is not surprising that the usual way of translating *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* is “Book of Lessons” or “Book of Instructive Examples.” But, as we will soon see, these translations capture only a part of the conventional sense, i.e., the sense of everyday speech, in which the word *‘ibra* is understood. As conventionally understood, an *‘ibra* is a lesson that is of a unique kind regarding both the object and the subject of its lesson. The object of the lesson is primarily understood in moral and religious terms. The subject of the lesson is usually taken from, or can easily be related to, everyday experience. A defining quality of the *‘ibra* is that it is supposed to create a powerful mental image in the listener or the observer so that the meaning of the lesson is never hard to understand, and not easily forgotten. History, insofar as it relates to us the details and consequences of the deeds (both good and bad) of important individuals and nations, is a particularly rich source of *‘ibar*. As Chase F. Robinson asserts, “so many historians presented their work as a record of human choices, from which their readers were to draw the appropriate lessons. History taught these lessons (or ‘admonitions’, Ar. *‘ibra*, pl. *‘ibar*), a word that appears frequently in titles, such as those of Usāma b. Munqidh, Ibn Khaldun and al-Dhahabī, and an idea that appears even more frequently in introductions to historical works.”¹³ Insofar as the conventional understanding of the word *‘ibar* is concerned, translating the title

¹² Lane, *‘b-r*, p. 1937.

¹³ Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). p. 130.

Kitāb al-ʿIbar as “Book of Instructive Examples” would be, though not sufficiently nuanced, an appropriate choice.

This conventional understanding, however, seems to reduce Ibn Khaldun’s massive work on culture and history to an essentially ahistorical moralization. What we learn from the days of the Arabs, foreigners, and Berbers is qualitatively no different from what past generations learned from those who preceded them. Though as I will show, the conventional understanding of the word *ʿibra* as lesson will prove inadequate in communicating the meaning Ibn Khaldun intends by his usage, we must admit the possibility that the title (considered in isolation of the rest of the work) might lead the first time reader to conclude that *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* is nothing more than a large collection of moral lessons. And this can in fact be considered a major selling point for the book, for those who are “morally-certain” never tire from hearing accounts that essentially remind them of why they are morally-certain.

Yet, even when considered in isolation of the larger context of the book, the word *ʿibar* can allow for different interpretations and deeper expression.¹⁴ Indeed the words interpretation (*ʿibāra*) and expression (*taʿbīr*), like *ʿibar*, comes from *ʿibra* and indicate

¹⁴ As Mahdi observes: “The ambivalence, inherent in the manifest meanings of the word *ʿibra* rendered it of great use for writers of popular-wisdom literature, philosophy, mysticism and history. Muslim philosophers found the word, with its many conventional usages and its suggestion of what is beyond convention, of particular use when writing for the initiates. They employed it as a rhetorical tool to attract the potential philosopher to their ‘way’: to lead him toward reflecting upon the external events of the universe of nature and the acts of man, and upon the equivocal expressions of the Koran, and to guide him to the knowledge of the rational principles beyond them. Mystics made a similar use of the word. *ʿIbra*, like the rest of their technical terms was gradually transformed from its traditional meanings to become a tool in their inner journey. In fact, they used *ʿibra* to describe the spiritual function of all other mystical terms, i.e., to awaken and lead the disciple through the conventional and external world of ‘words’ to the world beyond. All significant writings and deeds, the Koran and Tradition included, are *ʿibar* or compressed allusions. The mystic does not, like the legist, stop at the apparent, conventional and rational meanings, but penetrates beyond them. Without this, these writings and deeds remain mere expressions severed from the veiled truth behind them. In adopting *ʿibra* as a technical term, mystics concentrated on deepening and exploring the already subtle associations of the word in relation to the ineffable world which they sought in their practice and meditations, and relating it to another technical term, internality or inwardness (*bāṭin*), which they contrasted with outwardness (*ẓāhir*).” (Mahdi, op.cit., pp. 66-7).

bridging the gap between what is known and what is unknown: “He took, or regarded, what he witnesses, or saw, or beheld, as an indication, or evidence, of what was concealed from him.... [He] compared what was unapparent with what was apparent.... [Or] he considered the essential properties of things, and their modes of indication, in order that, by the consideration thereof, another thing, of their kind, might become known.”¹⁵ When someone is said to *‘abara al-kitāb* it means “he meditated upon, endeavoring to understand it, or he considered, examined, or studied, or he read mentally, the book, or writing, not raising his voice in doing so, i.e., in reading it.”¹⁶

There is a basic idea that runs through the various ways in which the word *‘ibra* can be understood: an *‘ibra* is supposed to provide guidance regarding the way one ought to lead one’s life. Ibn Khaldun informs us in the title that the source of his *‘ibar* will be accounts regarding groups of peoples, chiefly the Arabs and the Berbers, with particular emphasis on their great political accomplishments. The usage of the word *‘ibar*—however it is understood—is the first important indication that Ibn Khaldun’s study of history is not born of antiquarian interest, but rather it is intended to provide practical guidance, most likely regarding political things.

The issue of finding an appropriate translation for the word *‘ibar* becomes more urgent as we try to determine the manner in which this practical guidance is to be approached or attained. We are confronted with two basic understandings; the conventional sense, in which the *‘ibra* is seen as a straightforward example that intends to warn, admonish, or remind; and the more considered understanding which treats the *‘ibra* as an outward manifestation of something deeply significant. The difference is between

¹⁵ Lane, *‘b-r*, p. 1937.

¹⁶ Lane, *‘b-r*, p. 1936.

an example, especially one that is related to human beings that can be used as a pattern of life that ought to be imitated or avoided, and an allusion that needs to be studied and reflected upon. The allusion requires the active participation of the student in order to understand to what the lesson truly alludes; to make a connection, a bridge (*'ibra*) between how one ought to live and the principles that give this *ought* meaning.

The contrast between the “Book” and the “Register”—as the two characteristic elements of Ibn Khaldun’s magnum opus—and correspondingly between the *'ibar* and the *al-mubtada' wa al-khabar*—as the defining qualities of these two elements—provide clear hints regarding the general sense Ibn Khaldun intends the word *'ibar* to mean. On the one hand, the “Book” looks for the glory days of the Arabs and the Berbers as a source of lessons from which one can find guidance, most likely, regarding political things. The “Register,” on the other hand, looks to make an orderly collection of these same *Days*, and by so doing, create a document that attempts to solve disputes regarding them. This orderly collection, according to one translation of the *al-mubtada' wa al-khabar*, is likened to a grammatically correct, i.e., complete and meaningful, sentence. It is as if Ibn Khaldun here is contrasting the hidden wisdom—a wisdom that is perhaps ineffable—that is implicit in the more considered understanding of the word *'ibar*, with the explicit statement that is needed for the *dīwān* to fulfill its primary goal as an arbiter of disputes. Understanding the lessons that the *kitāb* presents in terms of allusions, i.e., in terms of something that needs to be reflected upon and considered, stands in stark contrast to the explicit statement—complete with its subject and predicate—that other elements of Ibn Khaldun’s work, i.e., the *dīwān*, seeks to present.

With this discussion of the title I am able to provide a literal, though admittedly awkward, English translation of the title: *Book of Allusions and Register of the Subject and Predicate Regarding the Days of the Arabs, the Foreigners, and the Berbers, and those of Their Contemporaries who Possessed the Greatest Authority*. This translation preserves some of what I believe to be the important elements of the title as a first invitation to read it. It describes a work that has two primary functions: a book that promises to provide guidance and impact on how one lives and a register that intends to make an orderly presentation of historical materials. The primary subject of the book and the register are accounts of the glory days of the Arabs and Berbers along with certain unidentified groups, with a special interest regarding matters relating to political authority.

II. The Invocation

One of the most striking things about both the invocation and the preface to Ibn Khaldun's *Kitāb al-'Ibar* is the beautiful rhymed prose in which these two parts are composed. It is true that there is nothing unusual about the use of this style. Many medieval Arabic authors utilized it, but it is equally true that very few mastered it. If this style is done correctly—if the words used are carefully weighed and measured, as Ibn Khaldun does—then a text is transformed into an evocative poem, full of intriguing imagery and metaphors. And just like a poem, a well-crafted rhymed composition is open to multilayered interpretations. No wonder, then, that rhymed prose was the preferred mode of speech for soothsayers (I.182-3: 11-16). Of course, the level of difficulty in interpreting a text of this style depends on the frequency and intensity of the images used.

With respect to this point, there is a difference between the style of the invocation and that of the preface. The images in the former, appropriately enough, are more ornate than they are in the latter. Thus the general meaning of the preface seems more accessible than that of the invocation.

Another appealing aspect about a carefully thought-out text in rhymed prose is the fact that this style can be used to demarcate the structure of an argument. In this case, each group of sentences, unified by a single rhyme, will communicate a general idea that links all these sentences together. With respect to the text in hand, this single rhyme capturing a general idea is more apparent in the invocation (which thus appears to be more structured) than it is in the preface.

The following translation and general overview of Ibn Khaldun's invocation is intended to give an idea of how he opens his "book of allusions." Through brief analysis of the structure of this preliminary part, this overview will uncover some of the themes and ideas which Ibn Khaldun foreshadows for subsequent treatment in his book. Limited by this purpose, I will not offer a detailed analysis of the style and substance of the invocation. With this caveat in mind, we turn to Ibn Khaldun's opening remarks.

After the familiar appeal to God—the Merciful, the Compassionate—and the customary offering of prayer for prophet Muhammad, as well as his family and companions, Ibn Khaldun—in an open display of humility and gratitude—declares (in the third-person singular):

The Servant—who is in need of his Lord's mercy, [but] rich with his Lord's kindness—'Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn al-Ḥādrāmī, may God grant him success, says: Praise be to God, He is the One who has glory and invincibility, in His hand is the kingdom and the dominion, and to Him are the Noble Names and Attributes; the Knower, for nothing of what confidential-speech makes apparent, or of what silence conceals, slips [His Knowledge]; the Able-One, for nothing in heaven and earth incapacitates or escapes Him. Out of

the earth, He engendered us as a breath of air; He made us settle it as groups and nations; and out of it He facilitated for us sustenance and assigned portions. Wombs and houses shelter us, sustenance and nourishments maintain us, days and moments afflict us, and the destined-terms—whose timed book is set on us—expose us. To Him is everlastingness and immutability, and He is the Living that does not die. And prayer and peace be upon our master Muḥammad, the Arab prophet who is written about and described in the Torah and the Gospels, and to whose weaning the universe gave birth before the Sundays followed the Saturdays and before Saturn and Behemoth became distinct, and to whose truthfulness doves and spiders gave witness. And [prayer and peace] on the prophet's family and companions, who, in loving and following him had acquired the widest effect and renown, and, in backing him, acquired total union while their enemies [acquired] utter disunity. God's prayer and manifold peace be on him and them for as long as the serious fortune of Islam continues and the frayed rope of unbelief remains cut. (I.1-2: 3-9)

The invocation can be divided into six parts that correspond with six groups of rhymed sentences. The first part begins with Ibn Khaldun's profession of gratitude to God who is: the Great and Mighty, the Ruler of heaven and earth, and the possessor of *the* noble names and *the* attributes. Of God's attributes, two are singled out by Ibn Khaldun: *the* Knower, for nothing escapes His knowledge, and *the Able-One*, for nothing is beyond His might. In the second part, Ibn Khaldun lists instances of God's grace towards mankind: our creation, our settlement of the earth, and our sustenance. And yet something seems missing in this life, for, in the third part, Ibn Khaldun chooses to emphasize the helplessness of human beings. It seems that a human being in his house is no more in command of his destiny, than a fetus in its mother's womb: no matter how much we try, the days and years will wear us out, and in an assigned time we will die. It is only God, the everlasting, who never changes. Having accentuated the wretched condition of human beings, Ibn Khaldun opens the fourth part by offering a prayer to God's messenger, the Arab prophet Muhammad: The Torah and the Gospels talk about him; for his coming, the world was prepared before time and space; and for his truthfulness, signs (by way of miracles) were given. In the fifth part, Ibn Khaldun offers a

second prayer. This time it is for the family and the companions of the prophet, especially those who, in loving and following him, left the deepest mark and gained the greatest fame. In supporting him, the family and companions of the prophet found unity, while their enemies found dispersion. In the sixth part, Ibn Khaldun offers a concluding prayer to the prophet, his family, his companions, and for Islam to remain glorious.

As seen through this division, there is a logical sequence to the invocation. The first sections is dedicated, appropriately enough, to praising God as the ultimate King (*lahu al-mulk*), the Possessor of *the dominion* (*al-malakūt*), *the* Knower (*al-‘ālim*), as well as *the* Able-One (*al-qādir*). The second section moves to recount instances of God’s omniscience, omnipotence, and benevolence with respect to human beings. The third section picks on the theme of humanity by making reflections on the human condition. But with this section—which marks the end of the first half of the invocation—we encounter a problem in whose solution we see (more easily) the flow of ideas from the third to the fourth section—which marks the beginning of the second half of the invocation.

The third section’s emphasis on the life of the human being as short and toilsome seems to strike a discordant note with the preceding section’s emphasis on God’s free gifts to humanity. We should note, however, that Ibn Khaldun’s word-choice, which on one level seems to echo despair, appears to offer, on another level, a glimmer of hope. Take for example the word *buyūt*, which is translated, according to its literal meaning, as houses. This word can also be used as a euphemism for graves, as in ‘the houses of the dead’ (*buyūt al-amwāt*). At first look, this metaphorical expression of *buyūt* seems to reinforce the futility of human life; for the grave, as the place in which a lifeless body is

‘housed,’ can correctly be viewed as the antithesis of the womb, the place in which a new life is formed. Accordingly, this seems as a simple reiteration of the fact that human beings are never in control of their own destiny. And yet, the parallelism, which Ibn Khaldun establishes in likening the grave’s “sheltering”/“embracing” (*takanufu*) the corps with the womb’s “sheltering”/“embracing” the fetus, seems to hold the key for a hopeful destiny. The word *raḥim* (Arabic for womb, pl. *arḥām*) has the verb-root *r.ḥ.m* (lit. he was merciful) from which two of God’s Noble Names are derived: *the Merciful* (*al-raḥmān*) and *the Compassionate* (*al-raḥīm*). In sheltering, protecting, and/or embracing the unborn, the womb (*al-raḥim*) can be seen then as a place of mercy and compassion (*raḥma*). Could the grave’s ‘embracing’ of the corpse offer the promise of a new life in the other world, as the womb’s embracing of the fetus holds the promise of a new life in this world? Ibn Khaldun has already reminded us that God is “*the Able-One*, for nothing in heaven and earth incapacitates or escapes Him.” He “engendered us out of the earth” by breathing in us life, and He surely can do the same in the future. It is here that the fourth section comes in logical sequence to the theme of the third section.

The prayer offered in the fourth section is for the man who came as an offer of hope to all human beings. The Arab prophet Muhammad, as Ibn Khaldun alludes, is part of the immutable divine plan for all of humanity. A plan that was set long before the miraculous act of creation. A plan whose unfolding was witnessed in the works of God’s other prophets and messengers, and which finally culminated in the *Seal of the prophets and messengers*, Muhammad *raṣūl Allāh* (*the Messenger of God*). And though God’s Message does not release human beings from a life of toil and trouble, it redirects their gaze to something higher, giving purpose to existence. And so, Ibn Khaldun offers, in the

fifth section, a second prayer for the family and companions of the prophet, who “in loving and following him,” accomplished great deeds and acquired well-deserved honor. Their selflessness serves as an example around which the community of Islam is unified. The concluding prayer, which comes in the sixth and final section, carries within it a gentle admonition: the promise of God’s Message, symbolized in the invocation of blessing on the prophet, his family, and companions, is incumbent on the believers’ willingness to work in accordance with it. So Ibn Khaldun concludes with reminding his readers of the pious view that correct worship is enforced by correct deeds.

We see in this brief invocation an expression of faith that is true to the essential elements of the Islamic account of what is sacred. What is sacred is God, the Creator; then, by way of analogy, His prophet, who delivered His Word to humanity; and then the prophet’s family and companions who rallied behind the Word of God.¹⁷ And we see in the author of this invocation a man who is in command of his language, a masterful weaver of words, and someone who is in tune with his Islamic articles of faith. But this, in and of itself, does not provide us grounds to ascertain how Ibn Khaldun’s faith affects his questioning—and as such his teaching—of matters relating to religious dogma.

Certainly, the question of the faith of a philosopher is not an insignificant issue for the student of philosophy. But this is a *question* of the philosopher’s faith and not a *test* of his faith. In other words, this is not a matter of a student combing a text for evidence that would determine for him if the author is truly a philosopher or not. Such a

¹⁷ Various forms of the conventional appeal “In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate/ And God’s prayer on our master Muḥammad, his family and his companions”—which almost always used by traditional Muslim authors to preface their written compositions—are different ways of invoking these three articles of Muslim faith. We could see in Ibn Khaldun’s invocation an unpacking of what this conventional appeal encapsulates: the individual seeking refuge in God (which takes half of Ibn Khaldun’s invocation), and his praising of the prophet, his family and companions (which takes the other half of the invocation).

student has already found his answer. Nor is the serious student of philosophy the one who looks to this question in order to find a comforting answer in what he perceives the philosopher to be. The recognition that the philosopher's faith is a question, ultimately means, for a certain student of philosophy, the recognition of, and engagement with, his own faith. It is the recognition, on the part of such a student, of the limitation of his reason in finding the truth about God, miracles, prophecy, and immortality (subjects raised in this invocation). Unaided human reason, as Ibn Khaldun will later indicate, can question, even refute, accounts about these things, but it cannot not refute the existence of these things (cf. I.12-13: 13-10).

The subjects recalled in the invocation, i.e., God, miracles, prophecy, and immortality, are all fundamental questions; for the extent to which one reflects on these questions affects the way-of-life one leads. Ibn Khaldun's creative engagement with these theological/philosophical themes can be seen as an invitation to reflect on the questions they pose. However, limited by the common function of the invocation as an affirmation of faith, we are compelled, for now, to think of these themes in less theoretical terms. Looking beyond their literary function as expressions of faith, we examine next how these themes prepare the reader for the main subjects Ibn Khaldun raises in his preface.

As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, and as Ibn Khaldun will make clear in the preface, there are two main subjects for his *Kitāb al-'Ibar*: history and culture. History is not explicitly mentioned in the invocation. As for culture, the closest we come to a reference is in Ibn Khaldun's usage of the term *ista'amarnā* to describe human settlement of the Earth. The word *ista'amarnā*—which can mean either “we settled,” or “we were settled”—comes from the same verb-root as the word “culture”

(*‘umrān*, v.r. *‘m.r*), so that the act of cultivation (*ta‘mīr*) is always implicit in the act of settlement (*isti‘mār*).¹⁸ Settling the earth “as groups and nations” is noted by Ibn Khaldun as the first significant act done by *us* human beings. Concerning this account, and its place in the invocation, we need to emphasize two important points. First, Ibn Khaldun enumerates the act of settling/cultivating the Earth among God’s gifts to humanity. As such he does not conceive of the settlement/cultivation of the Earth as a punishment; as the wages of an original sin.¹⁹ Second, while settlement/cultivation is an act of grace, its precondition is communal unity in the form of groups (*ajyālan*) and/or nations (*umaman*). From the first point, we see how, in thinking of the Divine, the understanding of the human condition is transformed. We saw this before with respect to human mortality, and we see this here with respect to human settlement/cultivation of the earth. The same also applies when thinking about the basis of communal unity in relation to God’s grace. What unifies people into communities—according to the religiously oriented invocation—is not natural necessity, but a work that partakes in the divine act of creation. This is clearly seen in the image which Ibn Khaldun gives in the second section of his invocation: in creating us, God breathed life in the inanimate substance that is earth; and through our collective actions of settlement/cultivation we, in turn, breathe renewed life

¹⁸ In modern Arabic usage, the word *isti‘mār*—used to translated the concept ‘colonization’—has clear negative connotations that were not present in Medieval times.

¹⁹ Ibn Khaldun’s interpretation here is consistent with the Qu’ānic account of the fall of man. For according to this account, God forgave Adam his disobedience, and He gave him a second chance: “But his Lord chose him (for His Grace): He turned to him, and gave him guidance. / He said: ‘Get ye down, both of you, all together, from the Garden, with enmity one to another: but if, as is sure, there comes to you guidance from Me, whosoever follows My guidance, will not lose his way, nor fall into misery. / But whosoever turns away from My Message, verily for him is a life narrowed down, and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Judgment.’” (*Quran*, 20: 122-124). The Biblical story of the fall of man, by contrast, conceives of human settlement of the Earth as a long-lasting punishment: “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.... And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast harkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.... In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3: 16-19).

in this same substance (out of which we receive God's bounty). But what informs Ibn Khaldun's poetic image of the relationship among creation, settlement/cultivation, and communal unity?

The entirety of the invocation is obviously informed by a cosmology, or a theological worldview, which places the individual human being within a group, and the group within a religion established by a prophet sent by God—the Benevolent and Merciful Being who provides for His creatures—as part of an immutable divine plan. The invocation limits the sources of this religious worldview to what has been sanctioned by the Islamic tradition. The Islamic tradition is based, first and foremost, on the *Quran* and the Sunna (the Prophets' sayings and deeds). But this tradition allows, within limits, for inquiry that goes beyond the texts of the *Quran* and the Sunna—e.g., the Torah, the Gospels, or even tales by the storytellers (*quṣṣāṣ*)²⁰—in order to clarify, explain, or complete some ambiguous report or reference mentioned in these two revered sources of Islamic theology. The individual reports scattered throughout these external sources are called *akhbār* (sing. *khabar*, historical report). Of course, the *akhbār* are not used exclusively as material supplementary to reports mentioned in the *Quran* and the prophetic tradition, but also cover material not included in these two sources—e.g., historical details relating to the life of the Arabs before Islam, peculiar events in the life of the Prophet, as well as what came after the death of the prophet. So historical reports play an important role in giving a more detailed picture of what came before Islam, of the

²⁰ For example, when the *Quran* speaks of the account of creation, the first human household, or earlier religious communities, it does so in terms that general and aphoristic in character. If the prophet's Sunna, as often is the case, does not provide more information to the narrative of the Quranic account, then external sources derived from the Torah, the Gospels, or the tales of storytellers can be consulted. On the work of the 'storytellers,' their Biblical sources, and their relation to the early Muslim historians see al-Dūrī, *op.cit.*, 30-52.

establishment of Islam, and—since the Islamic history did not stop with the prophet’s family and companions—how this religion spread throughout the world. For the larger Muslim community, as opposed to the religious scholars, history serves as witness to the truth of the primordial message of Islam; and it also serves to provide instructive allusions, *‘ibar*, for how Muslims, as individuals and as a group, should act in accordance with this message. Though history is not explicitly mentioned in the invocation, we cannot avoid thinking about it when considering the sources that help shape the Muslims’ worldview, and that serve as important ground for their unity. It is not a surprise, therefore, that this is the subject with which Ibn Khaldun opens his preface to the Book of Allusions.

As seen, the purpose of translating and interpreting *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*’s title and invocation was to explore the ways in which Ibn Khaldun announces or alludes to the relationship between the two main subjects of his book, i.e., history and culture. Though the title and the invocation introduce important terms and ideas that are associated with history and culture, neither part makes any explicit mention of these two subjects. Of course, the title implies the theme of history through usage of terms that has, among other meanings, strong historical content, e.g., *‘ibar* (allusions or instructive lessons), *dīwān* (register or historical record), *mubtada’* (principle or beginning), *khavar* (historical report), and *ayyām* (days or ‘battle days’). Instead of culture, the title focuses our attention on specific *groups* or *nations* (Arabs and Berbers, among others) whose *ayyām* are of special interest. The link between culture on the one hand, and human association through “groups and nations,” on the other, is something that is hinted at in the

invocation. It is as “groups and nations” that we apparently settle/cultivate the Earth. By contrast, while the invocation touches on the theme of *‘umrān*, history is absent from this part of the book. And yet, by thinking about the sources Ibn Khaldun draws upon to construct his meaningful invocation, we are led to think back on history as an important element in forming a people’s idea of themselves. But beyond mere hints and allusions, one thing is clear in the title and invocation to *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*: neither history nor culture is given prominence over the other in these preliminary parts of the book. To explore the relationship between these two subjects, we turn next to the preface.

CHAPTER 3

An Ambiguous Beginning: *al-ẓāhir wa al-bātin* in Ibn Khaldun's Preface

It was argued in Chapter One that Ibn Khaldun's science of culture, far from being an auxiliary to historical studies, is intended (in part) to define and limit the scope of history and historical studies. It has also been maintained that this argument, going as it does against some explicit statements to the contrary by Ibn Khaldun, is in need of rigorous defense. The focus of this defense is Ibn Khaldun's style of writing, and its aim is to reveal the multilayered aspects of his teaching, to explain the necessity of such teaching, and hence to ground interpretive claims regarding *Kitāb al-'Ibar*'s essential teachings. For to make claims of an author's less obvious (or "esoteric") teachings it is not only necessary to show evidence that the author writes on more than one level, but also to provide textual evidence that shows the necessity of this writing style with respect to the main subjects addressed. It was also stated in Chapter One that the most obvious place to explore possible "hidden" teachings is in the introductory parts of an author's work, for these are the places in which the author is expected to make the case for reading his work. Chapter Two began this interpretive task with a translation and an analysis of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*'s title and invocation. Through a translation and analysis of this book's preface, the current chapter will complete this interpretive task.

A literal translation of the preface is needed to facilitate the readers' evaluation of the soundness of my analysis. Moreover, since the translation will be of the preface as a whole, the reader will also experience Ibn Khaldun's first and most complete argument regarding the intended purpose of his *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. The close analysis of Ibn Khaldun's

preface will draw on many terms and themes that have been explored in the analysis of the title and the invocation; but since the preface deals directly with the main subjects of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* (history and culture) the analysis of this part will prove more substantial and will have greater support from the text of the *Muqaddima* than the one presented in Chapter Two.

In order to better manage the discussion of the preface, I will divide its text into three main parts (each part in turn subdivided into a number of paragraphs): Ibn Khaldun’s general introduction (I.2-3: 9-10), his overview of previous works on history (I.3-5: 10-12), and his outline of the purpose and content of his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* (I.5-8: 12-9). It goes without saying that this three-part division of the text is not Ibn Khaldun’s. Indeed the text of the preface, as is typical of all ancient and medieval manuscripts, reads as one undivided and unpunctuated argument. However, there is one explicit transition, marked by the declarative *hādhā* (“this,” meaning ‘having said this’), separating what I describe as the general introduction (I.2-3: 9-10) from the rest of the preface (I.3-8: 10-9). We will soon learn that this apparent transition in the argument is no mere accident; for the content of this brief part sets the tone for the rest of the discussion in the preface, hence justifying its treatment as a general introduction.

I. The General Introduction (I.2-3: 9-10)

The general introduction to the preface will be divided into two paragraphs. In the first paragraph (I.2: 9-19), Ibn Khaldun raises the relationship between history and wisdom as a question that will turn out to be the general question for his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*. As for the second paragraph (I.2-3: 19-10), Ibn Khaldun will define the problem that

encapsulates his general question by suggesting how the study of history influences the pursuit of truth. I begin by examining the first paragraph.

I. i. The Relationship of History and Wisdom

After concluding his invocation, Ibn Khaldun marks out the beginning of the preface by declaring, “As for that which is next” (*ammā ba ‘d*; I.2: 9). What comes next is a discussion of history. He opens this discussion by making five observations regarding the “fine-art” of history, he offers an explanation for these observations, and then suggests a new way of looking at this subject (I.2: 9-19). Ibn Khaldun begins:

The fine-art of history is one of those fine-arts that are in constant-circulation among nations and generations; caravans and [individual] travelers set toward it; the vulgar and the dim-witted aspire to its cognizance; kings and lords compete after it; and the knowledgeable and the ignorant are equal in their understanding of it. For on its surface, it is no more than reports on days¹ and dynasties, and on what came to pass in the early centuries. Elegant speeches are made for these reports; through them proverbs are exchanged; and by means of them the gatherings of celebrants are enlivened; and they bring down to us the [entire] affair of the created: how their conditions have been altered, how through these [altered conditions] dynasties expanded, and how they cultivated the earth until they were called for their departing-journey, and the coming forth of their moment of extinction. And in its inner [aspect] there is precise reflection, verification, and explanation-of-causes for things-that-come-to-be and their principles; and deep knowledge of the how of events and their reasons. Thus it is a venerable root in wisdom, and it deserves, and is worthy, of being counted among its sciences. (I.2: 9-19)

In his opening remarks, Ibn Khaldun characterizes the historical discipline, or the art of writing history, as a “fine-art” (*fann*). But if his observations about this *fann* are intended as praise, the actual image they draw is one of mixed blessings. On the one hand, this is a fine-art that is widely popular, for it is in “constant circulation among nations and generations” (I.2: 9-10); and it is a subject that is in high demand, for which

¹ As noted in Chapter Two above, the word *ayyam* can either refer to “days,” “times,” or bean expression that refers to the “battle days of the Arabs” (*ayyam al-‘arab*).

“caravans and [individual] travelers set toward it” (I.2: 10). On the other hand, this fine-art is something which inspires the “vulgar and dim-witted” (I.2: 10-11)—as opposed, perhaps, to “the learned and the elite” (I.6: 2-3); it is a cause for competition, rather than harmony, among “kings and lords” (I.2: 11); and, when it comes to the understanding of what this fine-art produces, there is equality among the “knowledgeable and the ignorant” (I.2: 11-12). Ibn Khaldun explains these observations by referring to the “outward part,” the “external aspect,” or the “surface” (*al-zāhir*) of history. Or, perhaps more accurately put, of history as a product of art.

The surface of history consists of “no more than reports” (*akhbār*) about particular events, battles, or dynasties that occurred, happened, or existed in the past. Individually, these ‘elegantly’ packaged reports serve as sources for enduring lessons in the form of proverbs (*amthāl*) and as sources for entertainment at public gatherings (*al-andiya*). Collectively, however, these surface reports bring to us the “affair of the created” (*sha’na al-khalīqa*; I.2: 14-15). They supposedly explain change in human conditions, the rise and fall of dynasties, as well as the means by which human beings “cultivated the earth” (*amarū al-arḍa*; I.2: 16). But since this general account of the “affair of the created” is based ‘only’ on surface reports that inspire the “vulgar and dim-witted,” and are equally accessible to the “knowledgeable and the ignorant,” then we might be tempted to conclude that the fine-art of history is of doubtful value. At this point, however, Ibn Khaldun introduces the “internal part,” the “hidden facet,” or the “inner aspect” (*al-bātin*) to history.

Apparently, the true value of history is something which is hidden deep within its own recesses. By means of its *bātin*, the fine-art of history supposedly occupies a rightful

place among the other sciences of wisdom (i.e., among the philosophical sciences; cf. II.385: 5). However, in following Ibn Khaldun's description, we note two points that communicate a vast gap between the internal and external aspects to history. First, while the external aspect to history provides "no more" than surface reports of an event, battle, or dynasty, its internal aspect seeks *precise* "reflection" on, "verification" of, and "explanation-of-causes" for "things that come-to-be" (*al-kā'ināt*) and "their principles" (*mabādi'ihā*). Second, whereas the external aspect of history, through the collective surface reports, "bring down to us (*tu'addī ilayynā*) the [entire] affair of the created," the internal aspect of history has "*deep* knowledge of the events and their reasons" (I.2: 17-18). The existence of this gap between the external and internal aspects to history suggests that history's *bātin* cannot elucidate the near-universal appeal of the fine-art of history. Unlike the description of history's *zāhir*, the statement of history's *bātin* explains little, if anything, regarding Ibn Khaldun's five opening observations about this fine-art. If this is clearly so, then what is the purpose of this somewhat abrupt statement regarding the internal aspect to history?

A partial answer to this question has already been suggested: Ibn Khaldun's statement regarding history's *bātin* is intended to assure certain segments of his readers that, literally, there is more to history than meets the eye. It is perhaps easy to see how knowledge that could be grasped equally by the learned and the ignorant has little to recommend beyond its surface, and as such is most likely *superficial*. The particular reports which history brings to the surface are so clear and obvious, Ibn Khaldun suggests, that they can with great ease entertain and inform large numbers of people. This explains the persistent near-universal appeal of this *fine-art*, but, in and of itself, does *not*

make this appeal universal. While observing that the “learned and ignorant” are equal in their understanding of history, Ibn Khaldun notes only the “vulgar and dim-witted” as the type of people who “aspire to its cognizance” (*tasmū ilā ma‘rifatihi*; I.2: 10-12). By proposing a two-part division of the fine-art of history—an external part that is grasped in common, and an internal part that inspires (because it can only be grasped by) the few—Ibn Khaldun seems intent to affect a view of this fine-art that has true common appeal. But this is only a partial answer, because Ibn Khaldun’s concluding statement regarding the relationship between history and wisdom—and, by implication, regarding the type of inner rewards promised—is not quite clear.

Having indicated what intellectual activities are involved in the *bāṭin* of history, Ibn Khaldun concludes that history is thus “a venerable root in wisdom and it deserves, and is worthy, of being counted among its sciences” (I.2: 18-19). But, considering the rhyme-prose, it is not immediately obvious whether this statement should be read to mean (1) history is “in wisdom a venerable root” (*aṣl ‘arīq fī al-ḥikma*); or (2) history is “a root, in wisdom, venerable” (*aṣl, fī al-ḥikma, ‘arīq*). The difference between these two readings is substantial. On the one hand, to affirm, as in the first reading, that history in wisdom is “a venerable root,” is to suggest that it is one of wisdom’s most essential roots. What is “venerable” in this case is that which makes wisdom possible. Accordingly, to consider history as part of the “sciences” of wisdom, means that it is one of the sciences that contributes *to* the attainment of wisdom. On the other hand, to affirm, as in the second reading, that history is a root “in wisdom, venerable” is to suggest that it (i.e., history) is well-placed or well-rooted *in* wisdom. What is “venerable” in this case is the root (the *bāṭin* of history) which is nourished by wisdom. Accordingly, to consider

history as part of the “sciences” of wisdom means that it is one of the sciences that have their origin *in* wisdom.

There is evidence to suggest that this ambiguity in Ibn Khaldun’s concluding statement is by design, not by accident. For behind the two ways in which history can be considered “venerable,” we discover two opinions at once captured in Ibn Khaldun’s concluding statement: first, an opinion which sees in the ‘awareness’ or ‘cognizance’ (*al-ma‘rifa*) of history an essential component of wisdom; second, an opinion which affirms the worthiness of employing, in the study of history, the tools of wisdom—e.g., theoretical reflection (*naẓar*), verification (*taḥqīq*), and the explanation-of-causes (*ta‘līl*). The first opinion is shared by those who see in the *general* conception of the “affair of the created,” brought “down to us” by the *particular* historical reports, a wisdom that is venerable. Though it is not immediately obvious who shares the second opinion, it is clear that the statement of this opinion is designed to provoke the attention of those who are not impressed by history’s near universal appeal, i.e., those “learned” individuals (*al-‘ulamā’*) who—as I have indicated in Chapter One—agree with Aristotle that “poetry is more philosophical than history.” As we will soon have occasion to see, the entirety of the preface is designed as a movement away from the first opinion toward the articulation of the argument of the second opinion.

I. ii. The Argument for Examining History

What value could the “learned” individual obtain from subjecting history to philosophical inquiry? An answer to this question is offered in outline in the second paragraph of this introductory part of the preface (I.2-3: 19-10). In exploring this answer,

we need to begin with the overall argument that contextualizes it. Like the first, this paragraph begins with some observations regarding the fine-art of history, but more precisely regarding those men who concern themselves with the pursuit of historical studies. The whole discussion can be divided into three sections. In the first, Ibn Khaldun lists three qualitatively different types of history ‘scholars’—pioneers, innovators, and imitators—whose works, apparently, chart the high and low points of the fine-art of history (I.2-3: 19-5). In the second, he explains the reasons for, and the implication of, the corruption of the pioneering historians’ records (I.3: 5-8). And, in the third, he seems to suggest a way to recover the genuine historical record (I.3: 9-10). Ibn Khaldun observes:²

The most outstanding of historians in Islam comprehended and compiled the reports of the days; they wrote them down in pages of notebooks and safeguarded them; intruders mixed these reports with insertions of falsehood, which they fancied and innovated, and with adornments of weak narratives, which they fabricated and established [as true]; these footsteps were tracked and followed by many who came after them; and they brought down to us these reports as they had heard it; they did not take note of, or care for, the reasons of events and conditions; and they did not reject or refute the foolish accounts. For verification is seldom done; the side of scrutiny is, in general, a dreary one; error and fancy are close companions³ to reports; imitation, for the descendants-of-Adam, is venerable and highborn; intrusion on the fine-arts is long and wide; and the pasture of ignorance, among which mankind (*al-ānām*) dwells, is noxious. And the truth, its authority, is not resistible; and reflection’s flame overwhelms the wickedness of falsehood.⁴ And the transmitter [of reports] is someone who merely carries and transports; [while] insightfulness critically-captures, upon inspection, that which is sound; and science discloses and polishes for it the correct pages [of history]. (I.2-3: 19-10)

In this passage Ibn Khaldun makes clear that Muslim historiography, far from being a source of wisdom, has fallen victim to malicious intruders (*mutaṭaffilūn*) and mindless

² The punctuation of this quotation will follow the rhyme of the sentences. I use a semicolon to punctuate sentences sharing the same rhyme. A period is used to separate sentences with different rhyme.

³ This literally means “error and fancy are kinsmen to reports and companions” (*wa al-ghalaṭu wa al-wahmu nasībun li-al-akhbārī wa khalīl*).

⁴ This literal translation of these two sentences is admittedly awkward. A less literal translation could read as follows: “and the authority of truth is irresistible; and the flame of reflection overwhelms the wickedness of falsehood.” As we soon have occasion to see, however, the more literal translation is required for interpretive reasons.

transmitters of reports. At certain times, most likely early in Islamic history,⁵ the “most-outstanding of historians in Islam” (*fuḥūl al-mu’arikhūn fī al-islām*)⁶ were able to ‘comprehend’ (*istaw‘abū*), ‘collect’ (*jama‘ū*), and ‘write-down’ (*saṭṭarū*) the “reports of the [early] days” (*akhbār al-ayyām*; I.2: 20; cf. with I.2: 12). Their apparent objective was to ‘safeguard’ (*awda‘ūha*) the memory of these occurrences for future generations. Despite their best efforts, their genuine reports were soon tampered with by certain intruders.⁷ These intruders were apparently endowed with rich imaginations that not only played tricks of ‘fancy’ on their minds (*wahamū*), but also enabled them to ‘innovate’ (*abda‘ū*), ‘adorn’ (*zakhrafū*), and ‘fabricate’ (*laffaqū*) the early record, and hence establish (*waḍa‘ūhā*) their embellished reports as true.⁸ These corrupted reports were given legitimacy by a third group of ‘scholars’ who concerned themselves with the “reports of the days,” namely, by those “many” (*al-kathīr*) gullible transmitters who “brought down to us these reports as they had heard it” (*addūhā ilayynā kamā sami‘ūhā*; I.3: 3, cf. with I.2: 14-15).

⁵ Though it is not clear from this passage who these “most-outstanding historians in Islam” are Ibn Khaldun’s next discussion will make it obvious that these historians are *not* the leading scholars who are credited, through their large compilations of historical information—vs. the ‘booklet-sized’ compilations of the *fuḥūl*—with the establishment of this discipline (cf. I.3: 11-16, and 18-19). If the “most outstanding of the historians in Islam” are not the ones who are credited with establishing the historical tradition, then they might quite possibly be those individuals who reported—perhaps as eyewitnesses or perhaps through contact with eyewitnesses—on events that later shaped the Muslims’ view of their past and informed their worldview.

⁶ The word *fuḥūl* (sing. *fahl*) means “manly,” or more accurately “virile” or “potent.” It is a word commonly associated with the most outstanding of Arab poets (*fuḥūl al-shu‘arā*), usually in reference to the preeminent poets of the pre-Islamic era, but it can also refer to some early post-Islamic poets.

⁷ Though no explicit reason is given for the intruders’ malfeasance, partisan motivations might have played a part considering the earlier remark that history is a source of competition among “kings and lords” (I.2: 11; cf. I.57: 10-15)

⁸ Ibn Khaldun here contrasts the original historians “safeguarding” (*awda‘ūhā*) historical reports with the intruders’ establishing (*waḍa‘ūhā*) the fabricated version of these reports as true. The word *waḍa‘ūhā*, which I have translated “they established,” shares the same verb root as the word *mawḍū‘*. The latter word denotes, among other things, ‘convention,’ the term Ibn Khaldun uses to distinguish traditional sciences (i.e., *al-‘ulūm al-naqliyya al-waḍ‘iyya*, “the *conventional* sciences of transmission”; II.385: 9-10) from the philosophical sciences (i.e., *al-‘ulūm al-ḥakīma al-falsafiyya*, “the *wise* sciences of philosophy”; II.385: 5).

Ibn Khaldun provides next, in six short sentences, three main reasons that supposedly explain how it became possible that the genuine historical record was lost.⁹ The first and most obvious reason has to do with the scholarly ineptitude of the transmitters, who do little verification (*tahqīq*) of reports. This reason is paired with the observation that the path of “scrutiny” (*al-tanqīh*) is not only difficult, but also “dreary” (*kalīl*; I.3: 5-6). The second reason has to do with the nature of historical reporting which always includes, according to Ibn Khaldun, elements of “error and fancy” (I.3: 6; cf. I.2: 12-13). This reason is paired with the human habit of imitation (*taqlīd*) which people embrace as “venerable and highborn” (*‘arīqun wa salīl*; cf. I.56-57: 13-2). The third reason has to do with the fact that the fine-art of history, like all fine-arts, is widely exposed to the destructive works of unqualified individuals who involve themselves with its work. This final reason is paired with what Ibn Khaldun observes as the noxious environment created by “the pasture of ignorance among which mankind dwells” (I.3: 7-8).

On its surface, the argument in this paragraph appears to be most concerned with those readers who are well disposed toward the study of history. This is not surprising, considering that Ibn Khaldun is calling for this discipline’s reform and that he is challenging the authority of its salient scholarly symbols, namely, the transmitters of reports. Since readers already partial to the study of history are protective regarding the treatment of their *fine-art*, Ibn Khaldun’s initial argument for reform has to be made

⁹ The structure of these six short sentences is such that they can be better read as three longer pairs of combined sentences. Thus the re-punctuation of this argument, as well as a minor emendation of the text will produce the following: “verification is seldom done, [for] the side of scrutiny is, in general, a dreary one. Error and fancy are close companions to report, [for] imitation, to the descendants-of-Adam, is venerable and highborn. Intrusion on the fine-arts is long and wide, [for] the pasture of ignorance among which mankind dwell, is noxious” (I.3: 5-8).

palatable to them. Before outlining and explaining the present crisis in this discipline, Ibn Khaldun begins, respectfully enough, with affirming the supposed glorious past of this art, a past which belongs to the “most outstanding of historians in Islam.” Reforming the fine-art of history is not presented here as an innovation, but rather as a long overdue *return* to the “correct pages” of history. For traditionalists who are by nature antagonistic to innovations, Ibn Khaldun informs them that the status quo of this discipline is itself nothing more than an earlier innovation, albeit a long standing one, which covers over the genuine historical record. Continuing with the status quo or embracing reform is presented as a choice between the way of the mindless transmitters—whose ultimate sources are the intruders on this fine-art—or the way of the old outstanding historians, who relied on their own independent judgment when they “comprehended” and “collected” the reports of the days. The right choice should be clear, Ibn Khaldun suggests, for the truth has an awe-inspiring power, and reflection (or theoretical reflection, *nazar*) overwhelms any falsehood no matter how ‘innovative’ and ‘fanciful’ it might be. In this passage, Ibn Khaldun leaves unchallenged the opinion of those who might view history as a source of wisdom, and instead argues, apparently for the sake of this fine-art, to scrutinize the historical record using the probing tools of wisdom. Considering this type of partisan audience, Ibn Khaldun’s call for reforming the fine-art of history is presented in a rhetorically sound way.

And yet, as rhetorically effective as this discussion might be for one group of readers—i.e., those who are already well disposed toward the study of history—it does not appear to be as effective for another group of readers, namely, those who are skeptical of the value of historical studies. For beside the fact that Ibn Khaldun does not

address the value of such study, he undermines the “well-established” sources for historical knowledge. The well-established sources are those of the anonymous intruders and the “many” mindless transmitters who “brought down to us these reports” (I.3: 3). If it is true that “error and fancy are close companions to reports” (I.3: 6), then this could be grounds for suspecting even the works of the equally anonymous “most outstanding of historians in Islam” (I.2: 19).¹⁰ But if Ibn Khaldun does not openly acknowledge the value of studying history, he does provide hints as to the consequences of neglecting this study.

As noted, Ibn Khaldun lists several reasons that ostensibly explain why the ‘established’ historical record is ridden with errors and fancy. While some of these reasons point to problems peculiar to the fine-art of history—like the scholarly incompetence of the transmitters of reports—other reasons point to problems which history shares with all the fine-arts. Of this latter kind of problem, the most serious, it seems, is the fine-arts’ vulnerability to wide-spread tampering by determined intruders. Ibn Khaldun couples this problem with what he describes as the “pasture of ignorance among which mankind dwells” (I.3: 7-8). It would seem from this coupling that the well-being of the intellectual activities of the few—a manifestation of which would at least be the ability to protect their fine-arts from intruders—is somehow dependent on the relative intellectual health of the overall political community.¹¹ But in order to demonstrate that this is indeed Ibn Khaldun’s view and assess its implication for the study of history, we need to answer first the following questions: What does Ibn Khaldun allude to when

¹⁰ That even eyewitnesses can even confuse or misjudge an event which they observe is a problem which Ibn Khaldun will raise and attempt to explain in both the introduction and the first book of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*.

¹¹ The effects of bad scholarship in general, and historical scholarship in particular, on the health of the political community is a problem which Ibn Khaldun frequently comes back to (e.g., I.34, I.40-41, I.43, I.46-48, I.50-52).

speaking of “the pasture”? Why is it called the “pasture of ignorance”? How does this pasture influence the practice of the fine-arts?

A pasture, *al-mar‘ā*, is an open field or a grazing land that provides common sustenance for social beings. But whatever common sustenance Ibn Khaldun is alluding to here—considering his reference to truth vs. falsehood, reports vs. tales, correctness vs. error, and soundness vs. fancy—it has to do with what sustains the mind as opposed to the body. Accordingly, “the pasture” is an allusion to the source(s) of common knowledge or common sense. In view of the essential role that common sense plays in sustaining life in a society, Ibn Khaldun is doubtless harsh in characterizing whatever contributes to it as “the pasture of ignorance.”¹² But common sense that is genuinely *common* is little more than the appearance (*al-zāhir*) of knowledge as opposed to true knowledge that requires (among other things) verification and scrutiny of the *apparent* truth. The general public, as a collective body, is moved by the imagination, as opposed to the strict dictates of logic, and as such is moved by poetry, rhetoric, and oratory. This is something to which Ibn Khaldun has alluded in the opening lines of his preface when he emphasized the “elegant speeches” (I.2: 12) used to ‘spice-up’ the surface reports of history, which makes effective their use in public entertainment and straightforward instruction. Moreover, Ibn Khaldun’s account of the original intruders gives the impression that their ‘creative imagination’ played no small part in making possible the establishment of the false historical record. What these intruders ‘innovated,’ ‘adorned,’ and ‘fabricated’ of reports must have made a greater impression on those “many,” who

¹² Consider, for example, Aristotle’s argument that “it is peculiar to man as compared to the other animals that he alone has a perception of good and bad and just and unjust and other things [of that sort]; and partnership in these things is what makes a household and a city” (Aristotle’s *Politics*, Book I, 1253a15-19, *The Politics*, translated and with an introduction, Notes, and Glossary by Carnes Lord (Chicago and London: The university of Chicago Press, 1984)).

actively “tracked and followed” their “footsteps” (I.3:2-3) than the apparently unvarnished truth of the earlier “most outstanding of historians in Islam” (I.2-3: 19-1). It is not difficult to see, therefore, why Ibn Khaldun characterizes the intellectual condition of the general public as a condition of ignorance (*al-jahl*) which is to say a condition that is permanently marked by the lack of genuine knowledge.

Ibn Khaldun’s argument suggests that the common condition of ignorance characterizing the intellectual state of the general public is not, in and of itself, what causes deterioration in the fine-arts. The lack of genuine knowledge, being the permanent condition of *common* sense, is something which we as human beings have to live with. It is, after all, the natural condition of that ethical and moral ‘knowledge’ which, for the sake of common living, needs to be grasped in common, and as such is not entirely unwholesome. However, when this condition of ignorance turns noxious (*wabīl*), the deterioration of the fine-arts commences. But what causes it to turn noxious and how does it impact the fine-arts?

From what Ibn Khaldun has already discussed, we can surmise the following. The “learned” few, being seekers after wisdom (*al-ḥikma*), are the ones who hold the view that theoretical “reflection, verification, and the explanation-of-causes” are “venerable” and “worthy” (I.2: 17-19). By contrast, the general public—being unable to verify or to scrutinize “errors and fancy” masquerading as truth—embraces tradition, by means of imitation (*taqlīd*), as wisdom that has withstood the test of time: after all, “the descendants-of-Adam,” like all ‘good’ descendants, hold *taqlīd* as “venerable and highborn” (I.3: 6-7). So we end up here with two ‘visions’ of what is venerable (*‘arīq*): one vision, that of the many, embraces what is apparent (*ẓāhir*) to all, and the other

version, that of the few, unsatisfied with the many's vision, seeks to discover what lies hidden (*bātin*) behind the apparent. These two visions need not be antagonistic as long as the activity of the few is seen as a deeper (*'amīq*; I.2: 18) affirmation of what has already been established by common sense. But when, for whatever reason, this is no longer the case—e.g., when the activity of the few is suspected of challenging the common sense understanding of things—we can easily see how “the pasture of ignorance among which mankind dwells” turns toxic to the fine-arts. The most obvious symptom of the noxious environment generated by this pasture is the “long and wide” intrusion on the fine-arts by parasites (*mutaṭaffilūn*) pandering to the public taste for ‘innovations and fancy’—to say nothing here of the harm done by those “many” who reinforce, through transmission, what falsehood has already been established.

Following Ibn Khaldun's argument, the fine-art of history's share of corruptors is part of the problem associated with the larger intellectual environment that enables or emboldens the intruders on the fine-arts. History, however, is not only prone to this general problem, but also an important source or root of this problem, since history is an important and popular source of public knowledge or common sense. As the very first sentence of the preface emphasizes, history is one of those few fine-arts that “are in *constant circulation* among nations and generations” (I.2: 9-10). This popularity, as argued, is a function of history's claim to accessible ‘knowledge’ of particular events of the past. What makes it a fundamental source for common sense, however, is its claim to a comprehensive ‘knowledge’ regarding the entire “affair of the created” (I.2: 14-15). A ‘universal knowledge’ filled with “foolish accounts” (I.3: 4-5) that purports to explain change in human conditions as well as the rise and fall of dynasties and cultures (I.2: 15-

16) is potentially a great rival to the genuine pursuit of wisdom, a pursuit characteristic of fine-arts that demands “precise reflection, verification, and explanations-of-causes for things that come-to-be and their principles,” and demands as well “deep knowledge of the how of events and their reasons” (I.2: 17-18). Here we begin to see why Ibn Khaldun is seeking to encourage the “learned” to pay attention to the study of history and to challenge the authority of those who ‘intrude’ on this fine-art; for those who intrude on the fine-art of history are, by virtue of their influence on the larger public, in a way intruders on all the fine-arts. So to take interest in what reports the general public consume is an important step towards caring about the well-being of one’s own intellectual activities.

The issue of how deeply the “pasture of ignorance” can influence the activity of the few is beautifully illustrated by the two sentences that allude to the link between the power of truth (*al-ḥaqq*) and reflection or theoretical reflection (*al-naẓar*)—i.e., in the two sentences which were translated above as “the truth, its authority, is not resistible; and reflection’s flame overwhelms the wickedness of falsehood” (I.3: 8-9). There are two unique things about these complementary sentences. First, their rhyme-prose sets them apart from the preceding six sentences that explain the loss of the outstanding historians’ reports (I.3: 5-8); and it also sets them apart from the subsequent three sentences that apparently call for addressing this loss by distinguishing between the mere transmitter of reports and the genuine scholar (I.3: 9-10). Suspended by their unique rhyme in-between the framing of the problem and the suggested solution, these two sentences can be seen as partaking in both the problem *and* the solution. The above translation reflects their inclusion as part of the solution, by seemingly calling on scholars to join the rightful and

ultimately triumphant cause of the truth. But as we soon discover, this is not the only possible reading. Second, these sentences' syntax allows for two (radically different) overall meanings, i.e., this syntax allows for an additional reading to the first one translated above.¹³ The first reading is produced under the assumption that Ibn Khaldun is speaking about truth's authority—i.e., under the assumption that truth is the antecedent to the singular masculine possessive pronoun *its* (“*hu*”). This choice of antecedent determines the meter of the rhyme in both sentences, requiring us in turn to read the adjoining sentence as “reflection’s flame *overwhelms* the wickedness of falsehood.” However, if we assume that the singular masculine possessive pronoun refers instead to the aforementioned “pasture of ignorance”—which in turn changes the meter of the rhyme—then a second syntactically acceptable reading is: “and the truth *does not* resist its [i.e., the pasture of ignorance’s] authority; and reflection’s flame is *overwhelmed* by the wickedness of falsehood.”¹⁴ As we will see, the ambiguity in these two sentences is by design, for they echo the two views regarding the relationship between history and wisdom, which Ibn Khaldun presented at the end of the first paragraph of the preface: the

¹³ As a rule, Arabic manuscripts do not include the diacritical marks which would determine the intended conjugation of verbs. This rule is mostly unproblematic for learned speakers of Arabic, who can easily supply the intended marks based on the context of the sentences (cf. I.3: 14 and cf. III.255-56: 15-2). The two sentences under consideration, however, are clear exceptions to this rule.

¹⁴ The following transliteration reflects the two possible readings of these sentences: *wa al-ḥaqqu lā yuqāwamu/yuqāwimu ṣulṭānahu/ṣulṭānuhu wa al-bāṭilu yuqdhafu/yadhifu bi-shihābi al-naẓar shayṭānahu/shayṭānuhu*. The conjugation of the verb *to resist* (*yuqāwamu/yuqāwimu*) depends on the choice we make in identifying the antecedent for the singular masculine pronoun *hu* (“it”) in the first sentence—i.e., in determining whether the “truth” or the “pasture of ignorance” is the subject that possesses “authority” (*ṣulṭān*). This in turn determines, in keeping with the meter of the rhyme-prose, the conjugation of the verb *to overwhelm* (*yuqdhafu/yadhifu*) in the second sentence. Finally, in determining the conjugation of the verbs *to resist* and *to overwhelm*, one is able to identify the grammatical objects in both sentences.

view which sees history as a source of wisdom and the view which demands subjecting history to the tools of wisdom, i.e., to scientific inquiry.¹⁵

The first reading, as an echo of the view that history is a source of wisdom, puts little demand on reflection or theoretical reflection (*al-naẓar*). History as a source of wisdom means that all we need in order to comprehend the universal “affair of the created” is to observe the particular “reports on days and dynasties, and on what came to pass in the early centuries” (I.2: 11-15). Of course, between the particular reports and universal judgment there are “elegant speeches,” “proverbs,” and entertaining stories (I.2: 13-14) that mask the “falsehood” and the “weak narratives,” which are “fabricated and established” as true (I.3: 1-2).¹⁶ The second reading, as an echo of the demand that we

¹⁵ Now in making out the intended meaning of the syntactically ambiguous sentence, learned speakers of Arabic rely on their common sense regarding likely and unlikely readings. With respect to the two sentences under consideration, the first translation might appear as the most likely one. After all, common sense dictates that truth, not ignorance, is what possesses authority, and that reflection (or theoretical reflection) can overwhelm any falsehood however crafty in appearance. This primary impression is something that is reflected, as far as I am aware, in all readings and translations of these two sentences. But we have already seen that common sense—or rather its source(s)—far from being infallible, is prone to be noxious.

¹⁶ The primary sense of the word *sulṭān* is power, authority, or “absolute dominion,” but it can also indicate an authoritative “proof, evidence, [or] argument” (see *Lane, s.l.t.*). The literal meaning of the word *naẓar* is to “perceive with the eyes, see, view, eye, regard” as well as to “watch, observe, notice” someone or something (see *Hans Wehr, n.ẓ.r.*). In philosophical discourse, this literal meaning of *naẓar* is given the deeper sense of contemplation or theoretical reflection (an equivalent to the Greek term *theōria*). But whether *naẓar* is used to capture the act of a spectator (who, in witnessing an event, identifies its particulars) or whether it is used to capture the more active engagement of a reflective person (who seeks, in the observed event, to identify its deeper meaning), *naẓar* is almost always conceived of as an indispensable tool for discovering the truth; for besides the truth’s moral authority—to which all would eagerly profess—it can only be manifest to those who have eyes *to see*. And yet, the scope and measure to which one is willing to engage *naẓar* as the path to the truth, is intimately related to one’s prior expectation regarding the extent and reach of the truth’s *sulṭān* (absolute dominion). It is with respect to these ‘prior expectations’ that we can locate the points of difference and agreements between the “learned and ignorant” with respect to what qualifies for both as the dominant truth. Though the many might not reject the notion of a hidden, or mysterious, aspect to the truth, they associate its fundamental aspect with that which is apparent. For a truth that compels all, is one that has to be accessible to all, the “learned” together with the “ignorant” (I.2: 11-12). The learned, as a result of their learning, tend to associate the dominant truth with that which lays beyond what is apparent. Ibn Khaldun, however, suggests throughout this introductory part of his preface that the difference between the “learned” and the “ignorant” is not as incommensurable as first might appear. For one thing, the learned, like the ignorant, is susceptible to embrace imitation (*taqlīd*). Of course the learned does not acknowledge *taqlīd* per se as “venerable and highborn” (I.3: 6-7), but, being part of the “descendants-of-Adam,” does hold certain things as worthy of honor because it has been long established, i.e., the learned too hold certain things as “venerable” (I.2: 18).

subject history to scientific inquiry, communicates what happens when such inquiry is not followed, namely, the truth falling under the dominion of the pasture of ignorance—a condition through which theoretical reflection becomes overwhelmed by the wickedness of falsehood (I.3: 9).

The conclusion of Ibn Khaldun’s argument here, and with it the conclusion of the general introduction of the preface, presents two important points: (1) It reminds us of the weakness of the historical tradition—a tradition that is uncritically transmitted from one generation to another—and yet, (2) it also demands that we do not uncritically dismiss this tradition. In other words, Ibn Khaldun demands that we subject this tradition to the scholar’s “insightfulness” (*al-baṣīra*) and to scientific inquiry which guides scholarly insight. Having made this general point, Ibn Khaldun begins his preface anew.

II. The New Beginning (I.3-5: 10-12)

Ibn Khaldun marks the new beginning of his preface with the declarative article *hādhā*, “this,” meaning “having said this.” This new beginning is intended to prepare the reader for Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of his book’s contribution to the study of history. It does so by defining the problems with current practices of the fine-art of history and by noting the negative consequences of these practices. I divide this argument into four sections: (i) a list of leading scholars of history, along with a reminder of the religiously controversial aspect to the works of these scholars (I.3-4: 10-2); (ii) an outline of the two main types of historical scholarship, one general in character, the other particular (I.4: 2-

This is most obvious in the case of those ‘learned’ scholars of history who brought down to us, through transmission, the fabricated reports of the intruders on the fine-art of history. This is less obvious, but no less harmful, in those learned scholars who reject the study of history because in the established tradition of the “sages” that study was neglected (cf. I.62: 10-13, I.63: 2-8).

10); (iii) a general discussion of bad types of historical scholarship and the consequences of such works (I.4-5: 10-6); iv) a brief mention of a type of ‘scholarship’ that is apparently so appalling it has nothing to do with the fine-art of history (I.5: 6-7).

II. i. The Question of the Notable Scholars of History

Unlike his general introduction, which is shrouded in abstraction, Ibn Khaldun begins the second part of his preface by providing concrete examples of the most notable scholars of history. He also singles out particular scholars as religiously controversial, and points out tangible ways of dealing with such controversy. Ibn Khaldun begins:

People have recorded many [historical] reports; they collected the histories of the nations and the dynasties of the world, and wrote them down. Those who, by virtue of fame and considered headship (*al-imāma al-mu‘tabara*), replaced the records of their predecessors with their own later compilations, are few in number (they barely exceed the number of [one’s] fingers, or the marks of vowels); like Ibn Ishāq, al-Ṭabarī, [Ibn] al-Kalbī, Muḥammad Ibn ‘Umar al-Wāqidi, Sayf Ibn ‘Umar al-Asadī, al-Mas‘ūdī, and others among the famous, those who are distinguished from the crowds. And though there is in the books of al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Wāqidi that which is discredited and objectionable—as is recognized when confirmed and is famed among the custodians [of religion] and the reliable [transmitters]—nonetheless, the totality has distinguished all of them in accepting their reports, in emulating¹⁷ their methods of composition, and in following their footsteps. And the clear-sighted critic is his own judge in falsifying or considering them with respect to what they include in their transmissions [of reports]. For culture has a nature, through its conditions reports can be related, and accounts and historical materials can be predicated. (I.3-4: 10-2)

After an apparent moment of hesitation on whether the number of the notable historians barely exceeds ten—i.e., the number of one’s fingers—or, lowering his estimation, barely exceeds the number three—the number of vowel-markers in the Arabic language—Ibn Khaldun finally settles on a list that consists of six names. This almost chronological

¹⁷ Literally, “tracking” (*iqtifā’*).

list¹⁸ covers about two hundred years of historical scholarship, beginning with Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq (d. 761) and ending with Abū Ḥasan al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956). If ever there was an official list of “outstanding historians of Islam” (*fuḥūl al-mu‘arikhūn fī al-islām*; I.2: 20), then the names which Ibn Khaldun includes here would be on this list. However, it is not immediately obvious if Ibn Khaldun does indeed think of these scholars as the original “outstanding historians of Islam.” According to his earlier description of the anonymous “outstanding historians,” he hinted that their records have been tampered with and that their authority has been superseded by others. Neither of these conditions applies to the works of the above-mentioned historians. Indeed, as Ibn Khaldun maintains here, a defining quality of the works of these notable historians is the fact that they were able to replace “the records of their predecessors with their own later compilations.” Accordingly, Ibn Khaldun makes clear that the authority of the notable historian has, by the acknowledgement of many, superseded the authority of those scholars who came before them. But if Ibn Khaldun does not unequivocally declare the above-mentioned historians “outstanding,” he also does not declare them “intruders on the fine-art.” This reserve that we observe in Ibn Khaldun’s judgment is for a very good reason: the works of these scholars are the only authoritative sources for historical knowledge regarding pre- and early Islamic history, i.e., they are the scholars that define this fine-art. Nonetheless, Ibn Khaldun makes it clear to his careful readers that these notable historians are *not* above reproach, and this despite their “fame and considered headship” (*al-imāma al-mu‘tabara*).

¹⁸ The correct chronological order would require that al-Ṭabarī (which is listed second) and al-Asadī (listed fifth) to exchange places.

Of the six scholars mentioned, Ibn Khaldun singles out two as being especially problematic: al-Mas‘ūdī and Muḥammad Ibn ‘Umar al-Wāqidī (d. 823). Without elaboration, Ibn Khaldun asserts that the books of these two scholars include discredited (*muṭ‘an*) and objectionable (*mughmaz*) materials. To those who wish to discover the nature and implication of these suspect materials, Ibn Khaldun suggests one of two approaches. First, they can examine these books and discover for themselves what is discredited and objectionable in them, i.e., to cognize such things after they consider them (*ma‘rūfun ‘inda al-ithbāt*); or, second, they can consult the custodians of religion and those who are trustworthy regarding religious affairs, among whom these problems are well-known (*mashhūrun bayna al-ḥafāzati wa al-thiqāt*). Of course, these two approaches will not necessarily lead to the same conclusion. On the one hand, consulting the trusted authorities reveals that, according to the most orthodox Sunni scholars, what is discredited and objectionable in the books of al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Wāqidī are subjects which touch upon religious matters.¹⁹ On the other hand, this might not be the same conclusion reached by someone who investigates these books for oneself.²⁰

¹⁹ According to Rosenthal, “Ibn Hajar is a good witness as to the partisan objections of theologians against the historians mentioned. Al-Mas‘ūdī’s works are out of circulation (*tafiḥah*), because he was a Shi‘ah and Mu‘tazilah, and the Spaniard Ibn Dihyah...thought very little of him.... Al-Wāqidī is often considered an untruthful transmitter of historical traditions and ignorant of pre-Islamic history. [Al-Shāfi‘ī] declared all his writing to be lies.” (Franz Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*; p.8).

²⁰ For example, Ibn Khaldun also finds things that are discredited and objectionable in the works of al-Mas‘ūdī. (In comparison with other scholars mentioned in the list of distinguished historians, Ibn Khaldun offers little mention of the works of al-Wāqidī in the *Muqaddima*). However, with one notable exception (II.229; but cf. I.196 & I.319), all of Ibn Khaldun’s objections focus on whether or not certain accounts al-Mas‘ūdī transmitted did in fact occur (I.11, 14, 58, 59, and 60). In other words, the religious controversy associated with the books of al-Mas‘ūdī almost never enters in Ibn Khaldun’s estimation of this historian’s work. Thus, in the main text of the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun follows his own advice here to the “insightful critic,” who has to be “his own judge as to what part of that which [these historians] transmit is false, and which part is worthy of consideration.” In contrast to the ‘trusted authorities,’ Ibn Khaldun does not simply reject the totality of a text because of what one might find in it of religiously discredited or objectionable arguments. And in contrast to the totality of historians, he does not simply accept all the reports that a historian might transmit simply because such a historian is famous.

History, as Ibn Khaldun has already informed us (I.2: 11) and as he will occasionally remind us, is a highly politicized and religiously sensitive subject. Now, what is considered partisan according to one group of scholars belonging to a particular tradition in Islam is considered true by an opposing group of scholars and vice versa. Accordingly, none of the above-mentioned prominent historians is completely free from the accusation of being in some way partisan. Of course, it would not be prudent for Ibn Khaldun—a Mālikī scholar belonging to the Sunni tradition of Islam—to appear to be defending perceived Shi‘ī historians (like al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Wāqidī), or to appear to be impugning the reputation of perceived Sunni historians (like al-Ṭabarī). Nonetheless, he indirectly suggests that things “discredited and objectionable” can also be found in the works of the other famous historians. As we will see next, this suggestion is better appreciated in the Arabic text than in the English translation.

After singling out the problematic aspect of the works of al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Wāqidī, Ibn Khaldun begins a new sentence with the conjunction *ghayyra anna*, “nonetheless.” This is preceded by the plural form of the objective pronoun *hum* (them), rather than the dual form of the objective pronoun *humā* (both of them), the grammatically correct choice in Arabic had Ibn Khaldun meant to speak of only al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Wāqidī. Admittedly, this transition is both sudden and awkward, but it does communicate in a subtle way Ibn Khaldun’s point. Without naming the four remaining, scholars Ibn Khaldun implies, in a way that would escape the mind of the careless reader, that despite the fact that these remaining scholars also have things “discredited and objectionable” in their books, the totality of historians follow their methods, along with the methods of al-Mas‘ūdī and al-Wāqidī.

Ibn Khaldun ends this section of the preface by reminding us, once again, of the need to reject imitation (*taqlīd*) and to exercise independent judgment when examining the historical record. Like the conclusion of his general introduction, Ibn Khaldun cautions against the wholesale rejection of the historical tradition. However, whereas in the conclusion he spoke in the abstract of how science can guide the judgment of a scholar, in this section of the preface, Ibn Khaldun reveals the character of the science by suggesting that the scholar's judgment should be anchored in certain knowledge of the nature of culture (*'umrān*): "And the clear-sighted critic (*al-nāqīd al-baṣīr*) is his own judge with respect to what *they* falsify in their transmission [of reports] or with respect to what [in these reports] is worthy-of-consideration. For culture has nature, through its conditions reports can be related, and accounts and historical materials can be carried over" (I.3-4: 20-2). But rather than discuss the science which defines his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun focuses instead on what is worth examining in the historical tradition. This brings us to the second section of this part of the preface.

II.ii. Exemplary Types of Historical Scholarship

After somewhat casually mentioning the importance of understanding the nature of culture for judging historical accounts, Ibn Khaldun turns back to the argument calling for the study of the most distinguished scholars of history. He continues:

And, furthermore, most of the histories of these [scholars] are general (*'āmmat*) in their undertakings and approaches; because the [first] two dynasties in the advent of Islam had general-management (*'umūm al-dawlatayyin*) over boundaries and kingships; and because these [histories] dealt, [both] directly and indirectly, with far reaching ends. From among these [scholars] are the ones who grasped what came before *the religion*—of dynasties, nations, and common affairs—such as al-Mas'ūdī and whoever followed his way. After them came the one[s] who turned from the absolute to the specific, and who held-back, with respect to generalization and encompassing [subjects], from that which is far

reaching. Thus one tied the loose ends of one's eras, comprehended the reports of one's borders and regions, and dealt only with the accounts of one's dynasties and metropolises; as was done by Ibn Ḥayyān, the historian of Andalusia and of the Umayyad dynasty there; and was done by Ibn al-Raḳīq, the historian of *Ifriqīya* and of the dynasty that was in Kairouan. (I.4: 2-10)

Here Ibn Khaldun presents two kinds of historical scholarship which he finds worthwhile to study and examine. The first kind provides general coverage of Islamic history—one dealing with the early history of Islam and of the development of its first two imperial dynasties, the Umayyad and the Abbasid—whereas the second provides coverage of the history of local dynasties and particular regions. And although “most of the histories of those” six scholars are examples of the first kind of historical scholarship, al-Mas‘ūdī’s work is its latest and best representative. Besides providing a general history of Islam, al-Mas‘ūdī, according to Ibn Khaldun, “grasped” (*aw‘aba*) what came before Islam (*qabla al-milla*) “of dynasties, nations, and common affairs (*al-amr al-‘amam*).” As for the second type of historical scholarship, it is best represented by the works of historians, such as Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Raḳīq (d. 1028) and Abū Marawān Ḥayyān Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 1078).

Although the historical works of Ibn al-Raḳīq and Ibn Ḥayyān are qualitatively different from the works of al-Mas‘ūdī and “whoever followed his way,” Ibn Khaldun subtly suggests that the former type of historical works is not completely independent of the latter type. The way Ibn Khaldun depicts the works of Ibn al-Raḳīq and Ibn Ḥayyān suggests that these two historians were fully aware, when they composed their accounts, of the works of the general historians. Ibn al-Raḳīq and Ibn Ḥayyān, coming “after” scholars like al-Mas‘ūdī, understood well the general character of their predecessors’ histories, and grasped what needed to be done in order to tie the “loose ends of [their]

eras,” and to comprehend the “reports of [their] borders and regions” dealing “only with the accounts of [their] dynasties and metropolises.” The dependence of historical works regarding particular dynasties and regions on more general works of histories, like that of the al-Mas‘ūdī’s, is a point which Ibn Khaldun will make explicit in his introduction to the *Muqaddima* (I.50-51: 19-10). There he will define a proper historical work as that which deals with the “mentioning of specific [historical] reports that relate to a time-period (‘*aṣr*) or a generation (*jīl*)” (I.50: 19-20). Ibn Khaldun will also insist there that such ‘particular histories’ have their foundation in the works of ‘general histories,’ such as that of al-Mas‘ūdī, who “became an *imām* to historians, to which they come back, and a foundation they use to verify much of their own reports” (I.51: 6-7).²¹ Through this description, which we will have occasion to revisit in the next chapter, we discover an important point that is of relevance to our discussion of the preface.

According to Ibn Khaldun, a historian properly so called, is someone who writes the history of a particular time-period, a group of people, a city, and/or a dynasty. Those scholars who write general histories of “dynasties, nations, and common affairs,” (I.4: 4-

²¹ To better understand how general histories form the bases for the writing of particular histories we need to reflect once again on the importance of the work of the six notable scholars of history that Ibn Khaldun mentioned in the beginning of this part of the preface. The collective work of these men equals about two hundred years of historical studies (*ca.* 761-*ca.* 956). Of course, each one of those six scholars had his own unique approach for recording history, and each differed from the rest with respect to his own partisan views or political sympathies, to say nothing here of each one’s degree of intellectual competence. What is noteworthy is that they all dealt with core subjects that are of paramount importance for Islamic historiography. Collectively, they provide an authoritative and comprehensive view of the early history of Islam. The centrality of this comprehensive account for writing the histories of later Islamic periods can be appreciated when considering the content of this early history: the life of the prophet Muḥammad, the problem of political succession after his death, the political circumstances surrounding the reign of the four rightly-guided caliphs, the religious fallout from the first and second *fitna*, the rise and fall of the Umayyad dynasty, the emergence and decline of the Abbasid dynasty, the ascendancy of non-Arab rulers, and so forth. No account of the political and social history of later dynasties can be complete without reference (both chronological and logical) to how that history fits within the larger context of Islamic history; and no proper evaluation of the legitimacy and power of such dynasties can be done without referring back to the most legitimate or to the most powerful form of government in early Islamic history. Through their ‘universal histories,’ and in their differing degrees of competence, these six scholars (among others) helped situate the writing of the local histories of later dynasties, regions, and groups of people.

5) are not historians in the full sense of the word. But the fact that such scholars are not defined as historians is not meant to diminish the invaluable contribution they make for the study of history. After all, the works of these scholars provide the general context that allows the properly named historian to write their particular accounts. This point, made in the introduction, regarding the proper work of the historian is already anticipated in the preface. The only scholars who are explicitly named and identified in the preface as historians are Ibn al-Raḳīq and Ibn Ḥayyān. None of the six scholars, who “by virtue of fame and considered headship, replaced the records of their predecessors with their own later compilations” (I.3: 12-13), are explicitly referred to as *historians*.

With the mention of the names of Ibn al-Raḳīq and Ibn Ḥayyān, Ibn Khaldun concludes his discussion of the types of historical works that are worthy of examination. What remains is the discussion of the type of historical works that ought to be disregarded. This is the subject of the third section of the second part of the preface.

II. iii. The Inferior Type of Historical Works and its Effects

Ibn Khaldun begins his discussion of the inferior historians by making observations regarding their intellectual abilities:

After these ones no one came except the imitator, one who is dull in nature and mind, or who embraced dullness—weaving on that same loom, and following that same example; and who is oblivious as to how the passing of days changes conditions and how it transforms the customs of nations and generations. Thus, [such] ones bring reports on dynasties, and tales of events in the first eras, as forms abstracted from their matter, blades without scabbard, and kinds of cognizance that altogether must be renounced due to ignorance of what in them is derivative and what is inherent. For these are occurrences, the roots of which are unknown; and they are species, the genera of which have not been considered, nor have their particulars been verified. They repeat, with respect to the subjects of these occurrences, the exact same circulated reports, in adherence (*itibā'an*) to those of the ancients who concerned themselves with [the investigation of] these matters. They lack awareness of the affairs of the nascent generations, because of their inability to interpret their records (*dīwānihā*), and thus the explanation of

such affairs is a foreign matter in their texts. Then, if they set themselves to mention a dynasty, they would [certainly] arrange its reports well, being watchful to transmit them regardless of whether these are fanciful or truthful. [But] they would not set themselves to give [account] of its origin, and neither mention the reason which led to the unfurling of its banner and made apparent its signs, nor what caused it to stop at the limit it reached. Thus the reflective-person would be left still looking for the principles and ranks of [these] conditions; probing the reasons for their bearing upon each other or for their sequence; inquiring for the persuasive [explanation] regarding their divergence or harmony—as we shall mention all of this in the book’s introduction (*muqaddimatu al-kitāb*). (I.4-5: 10-6)

In discussing the inferior type of historiography, Ibn Khaldun speaks in abstraction: he provides no concrete examples of bad historians, a task that is left for the readers to determine for themselves. He informs us here that these so-called historians are men of inferior mental capacities who are either naturally dull, or too lazy not to be dull. They are, simply speaking, imitators who “weave on that same loom, and follow that same example.” But what loom (i.e., model) do they imitate and what example do they blindly follow? It is safe to assume that Ibn Khaldun is referring to the model and example set forth by the works of the six scholars he listed above. After all, Ibn Khaldun has already hinted at the importance of general histories for writing historical accounts of particular dynasties and regions. He also explicitly stated that when it comes to these six major figures of Islamic historiography, the “totality” (I.3: 18), which includes both good historians—such as Ibn al-Raḳīq and Ibn Ḥayyān—and bad ones, “have distinguished all of them in accepting their reports, in emulating their methods of composition, and in following their footsteps” (I.3: 19). But it does not appear to matter for Ibn Khaldun which particular example these inferior historians follow—i.e., whether it is that of the exceptional al-Mas‘ūdī or the example of one of the other five scholars—for they (the

inferior historians) do not, in the first place, know how to apply these models and examples to the peculiar times and conditions of their subjects.

Now, in order to understand and properly evaluate the political conditions of a particular nation or generation in relation to early ones, the scholar needs to be aware of how “the passing of days changes conditions and how it transforms the customs of nations and generations” (I.5). This, according to Ibn Khaldun, is what is lacking in the research of the inferior historians. They uncritically accepted, repeated, and patterned their own studies on the earlier accounts of history, but they understood little of its content and they did not appreciate the uniqueness of the methods of the universal historians. Ibn Khaldun lists, as a direct result of this flaw, four major gaps in the understanding of the dull historians with respect to earlier history: (1) they had no knowledge of the roots of political events; (2) they did not realize the need for analyzing and classifying subjects under study; (3) they did not appreciate the importance of investigating the social conditions of nascent generations, i.e., those generations responsible for the founding of dynasties; and (4) they lack comprehension of how to explain the extent and power of dynasties once established. These gaps in knowledge, Ibn Khaldun maintains, are carried over when the dull historians attempt to give their own accounts of later dynasties. Having failed to properly understand and situate accounts of earlier histories, they showed similar thoughtlessness with respect to the reports of later dynasties. They would simply become ‘good’ transmitters of these reports “whether these are fanciful or truthful” (I.5). Moreover, having no knowledge of the roots of political events, and being unaware of the importance of studying nascent generations, they would

avoid dealing with the origin of such dynasties or give a logical account for their rise and decline.

Ibn Khaldun concludes his discussion of the dull historians with a remark on something else that is lost in their works, namely, its ability to satisfy the needs of the reflective-person. The Arabic word for the “reflective-person” is *al-nāẓir*, which comes from the same verb-root as *al-naẓar*, the word for theoretical reflection. What, then, are these needs that would move the theoretically inclined to examine the particular accounts of the historians? Ibn Khaldun maintains that these needs—which have an unmistakable political orientation—are concerned with finding out the principles (*mabādiʿ*) and their ranks (*marātib*) of certain conditions (*aḥwāl*) that relate to the rise and fall of dynasties; with discovering the reasons (*asbāb*) under which these principles follow their logical sequence (*tatābuʿ*), and the reasons under which they don’t follow such logical sequence (*tazāḥum*); and with seeking persuasive explanations with respect to the way these principles complement or diverge from each other. But immediately after making this observation, he asks for his reader’s patience, declaring that “we shall mention *all of this* in the book’s introduction” (I.5). Nonetheless, as we will see shortly, raising this problem here in the preface is significant.

II. iv. The Pseudo-Historians

At this point, it would seem that Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of the good and bad in historical scholarship has been concluded. After all, he has already taken stock of the types of historical scholarship available, distinguished the superior type of history scholars from the inferior ones, and *concluded* that more on this subject will be discussed

later. He goes on, however, to introduce another type of historical studies that, according to him, has little to do with proper historical scholarship. Ibn Khaldun observes:

Others then came with summations of excessive brevity. They went so far as to be satisfied with [recording] little else than kings' names, severed from genealogies and [historical] reports, covered over, in dust letters, with the numbers of their days; as was done by Ibn Rashīq in [his] *Mīzān al-'Amal*, and whoever else, from among the heedless, who followed his footsteps. None of their treatises are subject of consideration, and neither trust nor authority-of-transmission is given to them; for they have abandoned what is useful, and they have breached the recognized approaches and customs of the historians. (I.5: 6-12)

Ibn Khaldun, in contrast with his previous discussion of the dull historians, provides here the name of an author (and the title of his book) to represent this peculiar type of inferior scholars. And yet his choice of a representative is strange. The author, Abū 'Alī Ḥasan Ibn Rashīq (d. 1064 or 1071), is more celebrated as an able poet and as an outstanding literary critic, than he is as a historian.²² His principal work on literary criticism, *al-'Umda*, is highly praised by Ibn Khaldun himself, who describes it as an exceptional book (III.337: 13-15; cf. 293: 12). What is also strange about Ibn Khaldun's discussion here is his insistence that this type of scholarship is so mediocre that no weight is given to it. But if such scholarship is discredited, why would Ibn Khaldun bother to consider it in the first place? One suspects that Ibn Khaldun intends to convey more in this presentation than simply a critique of a discredited type of scholarship. This suspicion is strengthened when reflecting on Ibn Khaldun's explanation why the books of these historians are given no weight. He lists two reasons: first, these pseudo-historians "abandoned what is

²² According to Ch. Bouyahia, Ibn Rashīq "is regarded by all his biographers, both ancient and modern, as an historian. But nothing is less certain; the only historical work that they attribute to him with any precision, *Mīzān al-'Amal*... in reality belongs to an Andalusian homonym of his, Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn Ibn 'Atīq Ibn al-Ḥusayn Ibn Rashīq al-Taghlabī, d. after 674/1275.... The same must be true of the Commentary on the *Muwatta'* which is attributed to him, the homonyms of this author in both East and West, with writings on various subjects." (Ch. Bouyahia, "Ibn Rashīk" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed., P.J. Bearman, (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 1954) p. 904).

useful,” and second, they “breached the recognized approaches and customs of the historians” (I.5). Now, it is clear that supposed scholars of history who produce little more than chronological lists of political leaders are not worthy of the name historians. As such, neglect of books like *Mizān al-‘Amal* is justified. Recall, however, that Ibn Khaldun is attempting to embark upon reforming the fine-art of history. And as with every process of reform, there is considerable risk in opposing those who speak for traditional authority. Ibn Khaldun is well aware of these risks. We have already seen three different instances in which he tries to delay such direct confrontation. First, when speaking of historians that are highly regarded, Ibn Khaldun names them and explicitly praises them, but hints, indirectly, that they are not above reproach. Second, before pointing out the unique approach to the study of history by al-Mas‘ūdī—a suspect individual in the eyes of religious authorities—Ibn Khaldun appears to affirm the orthodox view that al-Mas‘ūdī’s books have things “discredited and objectionable” (I.3: 17). Not until close to the end of his introduction does Ibn Khaldun openly praise al-Mas‘ūdī as an exceptional scholar. And, finally, when he harshly criticizes certain scholars of history as dull—a group that potentially includes every historian who came after Ibn al-Raḳīq and Ibn Ḥayyān (cf. I.4: 10)—Ibn Khaldun is careful to provide no specific examples. By appearing here to lend his voice of support to established tradition, Ibn Khaldun avoids offending the sensibilities of those who might be influenced by religious authorities, at least until such time as he is able to make the case for his alternative approach to the study of history. It should not escape our attention, however, that the only time Ibn Khaldun praises unequivocally established methods and customs of the historians is when he contrasts these with a worthless type of scholarship.

With this tongue-in-cheek praise of the “recognized approaches and customs of the historians,” Ibn Khaldun prepares the way for the final part of his preface, the part in which he outlines his own approach to the study of history and explain the purpose of his book.

III. On *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*

Finally concluding his evaluation of the fine-art of history, and arguing its current state of disrepair, Ibn Khaldun turns to the discussion of his book and its subject matter. This final part of the preface (I.5-8: 12-10) may be divided into four sections: (i) Ibn Khaldun’s broad description of the substance of his book (I.5-6: 12-9); (ii) the discussion of the book’s overall table of contents (I.6: 9-8); (iii) a general discussion of the subjects that will be treated systematically and the subjects that will be treated in a summary fashion (I.6-7: 18-14); and, (iv) the conclusion of the preface (I.7-8: 15-10).

III. i. The Content and Purpose of the Book

Ibn Khaldun begins his discussion of the character of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* by describing what gave him the motivation to write this book:

When I looked over the folks’ books, and sounded the recesses of yesterday and today, I awakened the creative eye from the habit of drowsiness and sleep, and by myself, though without resource, I aspired for the best possible way of composition. Thus I produced a book on history; in it, I unveiled conditions of nascent generations (*al-ajyāl*); each chapter I detailed with reports and [weighty] considerations; and I showed in it causes and reasons for the origins of dynasties and cultures. I based it on the [historical] reports of the two groups (*al-jīlaiyn*), who cultivated the *Maghrib* through the times,²³ filling the flanks of its regions and metropolises; on [reports of] what they had of long- and short-lasting dynasties; and on [reports of] who they had of kings and allies. These two are the Arabs and the Berbers; for they are the two groups to which the *Maghrib* was recognized as their refuge, an abode for them lasting through the ages, so that it

²³ Literally, “in these times” (*fī hādhihi al-a‘ṣār*).

is almost impossible to conceive that any other group [of people] lived there. Beyond [these two groups], from among the descendants of Adam, none is recognized as *the* people of the [*Maghrib*]. Thus I refined, in the best way, its inquiries, and I brought it very close to the understanding of the learned and the elite. In the division and organization of it, I followed a strange path, and from among the various ways, I invented for it a wondrous approach, and an innovative method and style. And in it I explained—from among the conditions of culture and city-formation, and of what essential accidents happen in human social organization—that which will entertain you with the causes and reasons of generated things, and makes you cognizant how through these [principles] *the* people of dynasties issue forth, so that you would tear your grip away from the [habit of] imitation (*al-taqlīd*), and would behold conditions of days and groups that were before your time and that will be after it. (I.5-6: 12-9)

Following the manner of a theoretically-minded person, Ibn Khaldun provides here what could loosely be termed the four ‘causes’ or ‘explanatory principles’ for his book: the efficient, formal, material, and final ones. First, there is the efficient cause. The idea for his book, Ibn Khaldun informs us, came in part after he “looked-over” the books of the historians. The verb “looked-over” (*tāla‘a*) shares the same verb-root as the word “looking-for” (something or someone; *taṭallu‘*), i.e., with the word Ibn Khaldun earlier used to describe the after-effect of reading the books of the dull historians. Recall that, after examining these books, the hypothetical reflective-person was left “still looking for the principles and their ranks” (I.5: 4) of conditions relating to the rise and fall of dynasties.²⁴ By contrast, Ibn Khaldun not only “looked-over” the books of history, but he also made some kind of exploration of the difference between “the recesses of yesterday and today” (I.5: 12). In other words, he seems to have realized and accomplished something of which the dull historians, as he earlier informed us, had no awareness: “how the passing of days change conditions and how it transforms the customs of nations and generations” (I.4: 12-13). Ibn Khaldun maintains that through such reflections and explorations, he was able to rouse his creative-self out of its comfortable sleep. In

²⁴ “*fa yabqā al-nāziru mutaṭali‘un ba‘d*” (I.5: 4).

describing the genesis of his work, he depicts an impressive act of ingenuity and intellectual independence. It seems that *nothing* of what he read and explored prepared him fully for what he was about to embark upon. Nonetheless, as a result of his awakened creativity, Ibn Khaldun was dedicated to explore uncharted territories and to compose something the like of which no one before him could imagine.

Ibn Khaldun describes next the form his composition took, namely, “a book on history” (I.5: 14). According to his description, this book seems to address all the shortfalls existing in the works of the dull historians. Whereas the books of these historians cannot explain the “affairs of nascent generations” (I.4: 18), Ibn Khaldun’s book “*unveils* conditions of nascent generations” (I.5: 14-15). While his predecessors’ reports consist of historical “occurrences, the roots of which are unknown, and... species [of knowledge], the genera of which have not been considered, nor have their particulars been verified” (I.4: 16-17), Ibn Khaldun details his book with carefully organized “reports and [weighty] considerations” (I.5: 15-16). Finally, whereas the dull historians avoid, when reporting on a particular dynasty, giving account “of its origin, and neither mention the reason which led to the unfurling of its banner and made apparent its signs” (I.5: 2-3), he provides “causes and reasons,” not only “for the beginning of dynasties,” but also for “cultures” (I.5: 16).

The third point that Ibn Khaldun discusses in this section deals with the material upon which the book is based. This material consists of the historical reports regarding two groups of people, the Arabs and the Berbers. These two groups, according to his description, are native to northwest Africa, i.e., the *Maghrib*. The Arabic word which I have translated alternatively as ‘group’ and ‘generation’ is *jīl*. This word, as will become

evident in our examination of the *Muqaddima*, is a central term in Ibn Khaldun's analysis. He uses it in at least three different ways: to differentiate among groups of people sharing common linguistic and ethnic identity (e.g., Arabs, Berbers, or Turks); to differentiate among the many "groups" or "generations" within a particular group of people (e.g., nomadic vs. settled Arabs); and as a term indicating a particular 'generation' within a family. The word *jīl* comes from the same verb-root as the word *ajal*, which signifies a thing's "assigned, appointed, or specified, term or period."²⁵ In using this word as a general term that can be applied to various types of human 'groupings,' Ibn Khaldun emphasizes the temporal aspect of all forms of group identity.

The usage of the word *jīl*, coupled with Ibn Khaldun's description of what he finds unique about the peoples he studied, provide insight into which type of history scholars, those who write general histories or those who write particular histories, Ibn Khaldun wishes to be included. The fact that the Arabs and Berbers are both 'natives' to one and the same geographical region, i.e., the *Maghrib*, might suggest that *Kitāb al-'Ibar* should be included among works on particular histories. After all, by focusing on the *Maghrib*, Ibn Khaldun seems to share the objective of historians like Ibn Ḥayyān, "who turned from the absolute to the specific, and who held-back, with respect to generalization and encompassing [subjects], from that which is far-reaching," and thus "comprehended the reports of [his own] borders and regions" (I.4: 6-7, cf. I.52: 14-18). However, this assumption has to be rejected when considering the fact that the Arabs and the Berbers constitute two distinct groups of people (*jīl*), and that each group in its turn consists of many sub-groups (*ajyāl*) separated by time, and informed by distinct social and political factors. Considering this fact, the study of the historical reports of one group

²⁵ Lane, *'j-l* p.25.

of people is a massive undertaking. It means surveying an expansive material that covers many centuries and includes a variety of political, social, and religious conditions. Ibn Khaldun's book seems to resemble more the work of al-Mas'ūdī, who grasped the general conditions of religions, "dynasties, nations, and common affairs" (I.4: 5; cf. I.51-52), than it does the work of Ibn Ḥayyān.

Ibn Khaldun informs us that—through the form his composition took and the material upon which it is based—he accomplished something significant: "Thus I refined, in the best way, its inquiries, and I brought it very close to the understanding of the learned and the elite" (I.6: 2-3). The "it" which Ibn Khaldun uses here refers primarily to his book. However, since this book is a "book *on* history," and not simply a *history book*, Ibn Khaldun is suggesting that he has, by implication, refined the "inquiries" of history. Recall that at the opening of his preface, Ibn Khaldun pointed to the crude nature of the "fine-art" of history, by claiming that it is a source of inspiration for the "vulgar and the dimwitted" (I.2: 10-11). This did not come as a surprise considering the fact, as he states it, that the "ignorant" had as much claim to understand history as the "learned" (I.2: 11-12). Now that Ibn Khaldun—acting on his 'aspiration' to compose something better (I.5: 13-14)—"produced a book on history,"²⁶ this fine-art was brought "very close to the understanding of the learned and the elite" (I.6: 2-3). However, in order to achieve this great accomplishment, Ibn Khaldun informs us that he had to transform the traditional "path" (*maslak*), the familiar ways (*manāḥil*), as well as the "method" (*ṭarīqa*) and "style" (*uslūb*) of historical studies (I.6: 3-4).

In further describing his unique accomplishments, Ibn Khaldun briefly interrupts the flow of his formal style of writing. He does so by speaking directly to what seems to

²⁶ Literally "generated a book on history" (*ansha'atu fī al-tārīkhi kitāban*; I.5: 14)

be a particular reader he has in mind. In addressing this reader, Ibn Khaldun states: “I have explained...that which will entertain *you* with the causes and reasons of what comes-to-be, and makes *you* cognizant how, through these [principles], the people of dynasties issue forth....” (I.6: 5-9). This is the first time in the preface where Ibn Khaldun abruptly switches to the second person singular pronoun, but it will not be the last, for Ibn Khaldun will frequently invite this reader in the *Muqaddima* to reflect (*unẓur*), know (*i’lam*), understand (*ifham*), contemplate (*ta’ammal*), consider (*i’tabir*), manage (*taḍabbar*), or to cognize (*i’raf*) an important subject or subjects of study. This personal tone, which Ibn Khaldun adopts selectively, suggests his addressee is more than simply the general “reader,”²⁷ i.e., anyone who belongs to the class of the “learned and the elite.” But in the absence of any textual evidence to suggest that this addressee is a real historical personality, we are left with a third possibility: Ibn Khaldun is addressing a particular type of reader with whom he shares intellectual affinity. In other words, it is possible that Ibn Khaldun has in mind, not one, but two types of reader to whom he is addressing the book. The first type includes anyone who belongs to the “learned and the elite,” i.e., the educated class and those who are in positions of influence. The second type includes those individuals who are willing and able to engage Ibn Khaldun’s book on a deeper level.²⁸

²⁷ This is the way that Rosenthal understands the intention behind Ibn Khaldun’s abrupt usage of the second-person singular “you.” Accordingly he translates the aforementioned quote as: “In the work, I commented on civilization, on urbanization, and on the essential characteristics of human social organization, in a way that explains to *the reader* how and why things are as they are....” (Rosenthal, *op.cit.*, 11).

²⁸ This possibility is not as problematic as might first appear. Ibn Khaldun’s own title seems to offer further support to this possibility. Recall that this title suggests a dual function for the book: it is first a *Book of Allusions* (*Kitāb al-‘Ibar*)—something which requires careful study, examination, and reflection—and, second, a *Register of the Subject and Predicate*—explicit, complete, and hence well argued and arranged statements. The latter case demands less with respect to the engagement with text than the first one.

For the first type of reader, Ibn Khaldun promises a new and improved fine-art of history; a kind of historical discipline that, supposedly, does not shy away from examining and giving account of the principles of conditions for the rise and fall of dynasties. For the second type of reader, Ibn Khaldun promises a grander reward: liberation from old ways of thinking and comprehension of the principles of change in human conditions. But this reward, apparently, can only be achieved through certain active engagement with the text; for Ibn Khaldun alludes to several steps that will have to be taken, by him and the reader, in order to acquire this reward. First, Ibn Khaldun will explain certain conditions that relate to culture and city-formation (or politics; *tamaddun*), as well as explain certain “essential accidents” that relate to human social organization. Second, such explanations, if understood by the reader, will impart learning that will bring joy (*yumatti’uka*) and cognizance (*yu’arrifuka*) with respect to the principles of change in general, and political order in particular. Third, the reader, through this learning and awareness, will slowly come to the realization of the extent of his attachment to old ways of thinking. It is only then that this reader will be able to liberate himself from habit of imitation (*taqlīd*) and, in the process, comprehend actual and potential conditions in human social organization. Note how Ibn Khaldun—who had to awaken his creativity out of its comfortable “habit of drowsiness and sleep” (I.5: 12-13)—is not promising that such an act of liberation will be easy. The special reader might not be averse to think low of tradition and imitation. He could easily, for example, nod in agreement with Ibn Khaldun that “imitation, for the descendants-of-Adam, is venerable and high” (I.3: 6-7). But despite himself, as Ibn Khaldun suggests, he is not aware of the extent of his own attachment to what is venerable. Ibn Khaldun likens this attachment to

someone holding tight to an object believed to be of great value. The only way to convince such a person to let go is to show him by example the great joy that accompanies braving the hazards of the unfamiliar. This, it seems, is the deeper objective, the final end of Ibn Khaldun's composition.

III. ii. The Table of Contents

Having described the idea for his book, the form it took, the material upon which it is based, and having alluded to the end to which it aims, Ibn Khaldun turns to a more schematic description of his book (I.6: 9-8). He informs us that this work consists of four parts, namely, "an introduction and three books" (I.6: 9). He lists the content of each part as follows:

The Introduction, "On the Virtue of Knowing History, Verifying its Approaches, and Outlining the Errors of Historians."

The First Book, "On Culture, and mentioning what Essential Accidents Happen in it: of Kingship, Authority, Income, Livelihood, Arts, Sciences, and their Reasons and Causes Thereof."

The Second Book, "On the Reports of the Arabs, their Generations, and their Dynasties, from the Beginning of Creation, to this Time;" In [this Book] reference will be made to Some of [the Arab's] contemporaries from among the famous nations and their dynasties, for example, the Nabataeans, the Syrians, the Persians, the Israelites, the Copts, the Greeks, the Turks, and the *Rūm* [i.e., Byzantines].

The Third Book, "On the Reports of the Berbers and of Zanāta who belong to them, and Mentioning their Origins and their Generations, and of what was for them in the Habitats of the *Maghrib*; In Particular of Kingships and Dynasties." (I.6)

Though not unconventional, this division of the "book on history" (I.5: 14) into "three books" (I.6: 9) is significant. Through this book-division, Ibn Khaldun indicates the possibility of treating each major part of his book as a distinct and complete subject. The history of the two groups who "cultivated the *Maghrib*" (I.5: 17), the Arabs and the Berbers, will be told in the second and third books. Through the titles of these two books,

we notice Ibn Khaldun's intention to follow different patterns in discussing the reports of each group. Of these two peoples, the Arabs are presented as the 'older' group with vastly larger generations.²⁹ Their story somehow starts with the beginning of creation and is more tied with the history of the other famous nations of the world than that of the more regionally isolated Berbers. But if the history of the Arabs will be given greater breadth than that of the Berbers, the history of the latter will be given more depth. As seen in the titles listed, Ibn Khaldun is going to speak, in the second book, about the Arabs, their generations, and their dynasties. In the third book, he is going to speak of the Berbers, one of their most dominant tribes, their generations, kingdoms, and dynasties, as well as their unique relation to the *Maghrib*. Though the history of the *Maghrib*, as Ibn Khaldun explicitly states, is not complete without the historical reports of the Arabs (I.5-6: 17-2), it properly begins, he implicitly indicates, with the history of the Berbers (I.6: 17-18; cf. I.51: 10-15).

Another interesting aspect of this division of the work has to do with the introduction and the first book. Out of the seven volumes that constitute the final product that is *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*, the contents of the introduction and the first book will take-up only one volume, namely, the first—which is later dubbed, by Ibn Khaldun, the *Muqaddima* (*Introduction*). The fact that both the original introduction and the first book constitute half of the plan of the work speaks to their conceptual importance for *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*. The content of each of these two parts, viewed in the context of what has been discussed in the preface, reveals their fundamental significance for Ibn Khaldun's project.

²⁹ As mentioned in the first chapter, Ibn Khaldun's second book consists of four volumes (vols. II-V). By contrast the third book, which contains the reports of the Berbers, consists of two volumes (vols. VI-VII). It is also worth remembering that Ibn Khaldun's claim to fame as a historian primarily derives from his treatment of the history of the Berbers in particular and *al-Maghrib* in general.

The title of the first book indicates that Ibn Khaldun's historical study of the *Maghrib* will be preceded by the examination of culture and certain "essential accidents" that happen in culture: kingship, authority, income, livelihood, arts, and sciences. According to Aristotelian logic an "essential accident" of a subject is that which does not define the subject but is an attribute of that subject alone.³⁰ As such, Ibn Khaldun's usage of this term is suggestive of the type of examination he will engage with: it is a philosophic (or theoretical) analysis that seeks to identify the logical connection between the nature of culture and the political, economic, and intellectual production that comes to be as a result of culture.³¹ The importance of understanding this logical connection before the study of history is something which Ibn Khaldun has already alluded to in the preface. For in explaining how it is within the ability of the clear-sighted critic to judge and evaluate the works of past historians, Ibn Khaldun notes that "culture has nature, through its conditions reports can be related, and accounts and historical materials can be predicated" (I.4: 1-2).

If we accept the assertion that the study of culture has to precede the study of history, then we need to reconsider an earlier part of Ibn Khaldun's discussion in the preface, namely, the one which superimposes the objectives of the "reflective-person" against the reports provided in the books of the historians (I.5: 4-5). Broadly speaking, the reflective-person (*al-nāẓir*), being theoretically oriented (from the word for theory, *nāẓar*), is someone who, in studying the particulars of a certain subject of knowledge, seeks the general principles that governs these particulars. The books of the historians, as Ibn Khaldun informs us, by and large deal with the particular accounts of past dynasties

³⁰ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I.10: 76b11-22.

³¹ Following Aristotelian logic, what is accidental in culture is that which is extrinsic to the nature of culture; what is essential in the accidents of culture, is that which can only exist as a result of culture.

(I.2: 13; I.4: 3, 13; I.5: 1, 18; I.6: 7, 13, 15, 18), i.e., they provide us with accounts of the most dominant form of political rule in history. Therefore, the primary reason why a reflective-person would study the books of the historians is to find out the “principals and ranks” (I.5: 4) of the conditions that govern the rise and fall of dynasties. But the books of the historians, as Ibn Khaldun claims, fail to provide such information. The implied reason for this failure is the intellectual ineptitude of the authors of these books (I.4-5: 10-3).³² However, the larger context of Ibn Khaldun’s prefatory discussion, along with the plan of his work, suggests a deeper problem: dynastic rule, like any other form of political rule in history, is an essential accident of culture. And if this is so, then one cannot be expected to find the principles governing an essential accident like dynastic rule, without first understanding the nature of the thing to which dynastic rule is an accident, i.e., without first understanding the nature of culture. Through the title of his first book, Ibn Khaldun suggests that he will address this problem before proceeding to give his own historical account.

I turn now to the title of the introduction. The first four Arabic words in this title are “*fī faḍl ‘ilm al-tārīkh*,” which could be translated as “On the Virtue of *Knowing* History”—i.e., the way I chose to translated above—or it could have the alternative translation, “On the Virtue of the Science of History.” Having gone through the discussion of the preface, and explained how Ibn Khaldun wishes to encourage subjecting history to scientific examination—rather than believing, as many do, that history is part

³² The ineptness of these historians can partly be explained by the fact they did not understand the nature of culture, and hence their reports lacked logical coherence. It is telling however, that Ibn Khaldun himself did not explicitly mention ignorance of the nature of culture as one of the reasons for the deficiency in the reports of these historians.

of wisdom—the reasons for my choice of translation is clear.³³ Now for those readers who might not have been satisfied with Ibn Khaldun’s general argument regarding the need for the rational examination of history, he promises them a more substantial discussion in the introduction. The title of the introduction also promises those readers partial to the fine-art of history, who might not be convinced of the need to reform this fine-art, that he will provide a substantial discussion that will verify history’s “approaches” and outline “the errors of historians.” The fact that Ibn Khaldun’s argument for the virtue of knowing history will be presented against the background of “Verifying its Approaches and Outlining the Errors of Historians,” suggests his intention is not only to reform, but also to transform the understanding of historical inquiry.

III. iii. The Scope and Limits of the Book

Before presenting the outline of his work, Ibn Khaldun informed us that his book will cover the historical reports of the Arabs and the Berbers, which are “the two groups who cultivated the *Maghrib* through the times” (I.5: 17). However, his outline shows that, in addition to the histories of the Arabs and the Berbers in the *Maghrib*, he is going to discuss the histories of other nations and dynasties that are neither Arab nor Berber. Ibn Khaldun’s next discussion explains, among other things, the reasons for this addition. He begins this explanation with what seems to be a digression:

Then, when the journey to the East came to pass—in order to observe its illuminations, to fulfill the religious duty and custom in its places of

³³ Although, as I argued in the first chapter, Ibn Khaldun has some interest in giving the impression that history can be science, the choice of *knowing* over *science* in translating *‘ilm* is still justifiable. Since a careful examination of the *Muqaddima* reveals that Ibn Khaldun does not conceive of the “fine-art” of history as a science, the best translation of *‘ilm* has to be the one that preserves the ambiguity in Ibn Khaldun’s usage of the term. “Knowing” is the best choice here since to “know something,” has a range of meaning that extends from the simple act of being acquainted with that thing to “knowing” that thing in a scientific way.

circumambulation and [sacred] visitation, and to behold its relics that are in its records and scriptures—I so gathered reports I lacked regarding the foreign kings in those localities, and the Turkish dynasties in regions they possessed. I joined these [new reports] to what I have already written down. I inserted it in the mention of those generations’ contemporaries, from among the areas’ nations and the kings of metropolises and districts who came from them. [In this] I followed the way of abridgment and summary, substituting the abstruse for that which can be easily obtained, and proceeding through general reasons to report on the particular. Thus, this [book] well comprehends³⁴ the reports of the created, assuages difficulties in dispersed wise-maxims (*al-ḥikam*), and gives causes and reasons for occurrences in dynasties, and has become a depository for wisdom and a receptacle for history. (I.6-7: 18-10)³⁵

Ibn Khaldun contrasts here two types of historical studies provided in his book: a relatively detailed history of the Arabs and the Berbers in the *Maghrib*, and an abridged history of the non-Arab/non-Berber nations and dynasties which ruled lands east of the *Maghrib*. He indirectly cautions the reader not to expect exhaustive historical accounts of Eastern nations, since his reports follow “the way of abridgment and summary, and [substitute] the abstruse for that which can be easily obtained” (I.7: 6-7). The way he treats the new material, which he discovered through his “journey to the East,” reinforces this cautionary note: since he never intended to give a comprehensive account of the East, he uses from the newly found material only the most elementary information to fill historical gaps in his account.

But what is the purpose of these abridged histories? If we understand the term “general reasons” as a reference to the abridged histories of Eastern nations—which is,

³⁴ The phrase “well comprehends” is a loose rendition of the more literal translation “comprehensively comprehend the reports of the created.”

³⁵ Ibn Khaldun’s passing reference to the “spiritual aspect” of his journey to the East provides a practical reminder of how “the passing of days changes conditions and how it transforms the customs of nations and generations” (I.4: 12-13). The East, which is the seat of the two holiest sights in Islam and is the origin of the two most powerful Arab dynasties (the Umayyad and the Abbasid) has long ceased to be under Arab control. The memory of those other “foreign kings” and “Turkish dynasties” who replaced the dynastic rule of the Arabs is far removed from the present—or at least from the present memory of the people of the *Maghrib*—that Ibn Khaldun had to go to great lengths, geographically speaking, in order to recover some of their historical accounts. This passing reference also communicates how, with the declining power of the Arabs in the East, the *Maghrib* has become a more isolated region.

loosely speaking, ‘world history’ minus the history of the Arabs and the Berbers³⁶—and if we understand the term “particular” as a reference to the histories of the Arabs and the Berbers in the *Maghrib*, then we can answer the question as follows: the abridged histories of Eastern nations are supposed to provide the larger historical context (the general reasons) which would allow Ibn Khaldun to locate, chart, and report on the “particular” histories of the Arabs and the Berbers. By showing how the histories of Eastern nations fulfill a role in writing the histories of the *Maghrib*, Ibn Khaldun affirms in this passage the overall textual unity of his historiographic project.

However, after noting that his historical work is somewhat deficient with respect to the history of Eastern nations, Ibn Khaldun follows his statement with what appears to be a non-sequitur declaring “*Thus* this [book] *well comprehends* the reports of the created, assuages difficulties in dispersed wise-maxims, and gives causes and reasons for happenings in dynasties” (I.7: 8-9). The word *istaw‘aba*, for “comprehend,” is derived from the verb-root *w-‘b*, which literally means “to take the whole.” To say of an object that it ‘comprehends’ (*istaw‘abat*) something means that that object “was large enough to contain the thing; it held the thing, or received it into its capacity.”³⁷ How, then, would a work that disproportionately focuses on the histories of two groups of people (living in a relatively isolated region of the world) be said to comprehend “the reports of the created”?

An adequate answer to this question begins with considering the purpose of Ibn Khaldun’s history of the *Maghrib*. After all, it is this history that occupies the bulk of Ibn Khaldun’s historiographic project. Since Ibn Khaldun did not explicitly state a purpose

³⁶ I use the expression “loosely speaking,” because Ibn Khaldun’s ‘world history,’ omits the history of two important nations, namely, the Indians and the Chinese.

³⁷ Lane, *w-‘b*

for his history, we are compelled to look for clues as to this purpose in what he has already stated. In discussing the content of his book, and in outlining its plan, Ibn Khaldun shows his intention to write a general history of the *Maghrib*, i.e., not a particular history of a particular Arab/Berber generation or dynasty. In this, as I have already argued, Ibn Khaldun follows the pattern set in the general histories of “al-Mas‘ūdī and whoever followed his way” (I.4: 2-5). In following this pattern, Ibn Khaldun seems to share something of his (al-Mas‘ūdī’s) objective. Part of al-Mas‘ūdī’s objection—as Ibn Khaldun hints in the preface (I.4: 2-10) and later makes explicit in the introduction (I.50-51: 18-7)—is practical in character, namely, to provide through his general history the historical context that is necessary to facilitate the growth of historical knowledge about the particular events of the past. At the very least, therefore, Ibn Khaldun intends his general history of the *Maghrib* to provide the necessary historical background allowing future historians of this region to write particular historical reports.

We see here two parallel movements from the “general reasons” to the “report on the particular.” First, the procedure which Ibn Khaldun follows in his book by using the general history of Eastern nations and dynasties to report on the more particular histories of the Arabs and Berbers in the *Maghrib*; and, second, the general history of the *Maghrib* which Ibn Khaldun sets as the guide for future historians of this region to report on particular events. This parallelism suggests that the limitations which Ibn Khaldun exposes in the first relationship also applies to the second, i.e., that the general history of the *Maghrib* should be seen as an ‘abridgement’ or a ‘summary’ that functions as the “general reasons” facilitating the “report on the particular.” This should not come as a surprise, for by its very nature, a general historical account cannot say everything about

its subject, compelled as it is to follow “the way of abridgment and summary, substituting the abstruse for that which can be easily obtained” (I.7: 6-7).³⁸

It is important to note here that, for scholars like al-Mas‘ūdī and Ibn Khaldun, the practical intention—i.e., the intention to make possible the writing of particular historical reports—is not the only objective that underlie their writing of general histories. In introducing the subject of the fine-art of history, Ibn Khaldun points at a theoretical concern that seems to inform his interest in history. The individual reports, which the surface of history presents—which serve as elegant sources for instruction and entertainment (I.2: 13-14)—collectively “bring down to us the affairs of the created: how their conditions have been altered, how through [these altered conditions] dynasties expanded, and how they cultivated the Earth until they were called for their departing journey and the coming forth of their moment of extinction” (I.2: 14-16). So when someone like al-Mas‘ūdī writes a general history of the world, he not only aims to assist future historians to write particular histories, but also seeks to paint a general picture of the “affairs of the created”: a theoretical picture that makes out of the diverse and continuously changing human conditions a comprehensible whole. It is through general accounts of history like these that one is able to form judgments on particular historical events. But Ibn Khaldun—while accepting the practical necessity of general histories as gateways for the pursuit of historical knowledge of particular events—appears to reject the notion that history, in and of itself, can serve as the medium for constructing a proper theory about history. We saw evidence for this view in Ibn Khaldun’s remark that the

³⁸ This is a problem which al-Mas‘ūdī faced when he wrote his own general history (I.52-53: 14-3) and this is what Ibn Khaldun himself faced when he wrote his own general history (I.7: 2-4, I.52: 17-18). Of course, there is an obvious reason why Ibn Khaldun did not make explicit this point about the limitation of his general history of the *Maghrib*: to avoid compromising the authoritative character of his historical account in this prefatory discussion.

unsatisfactory works of many a historian can be traced back to their failure in understanding how “the passing of days change conditions and...transforms the customs of nations and generations” (I.4: 12-13). What Ibn Khaldun criticized here, was not these historians’ failure to properly chronicle their particular accounts. Rather, what he disparaged is their failure to appreciate the qualitative difference between, on the one hand, the conditions of events earlier described by the general historians, and, on the other, the conditions of the events that these historians concern themselves with recording. Later in his introduction, Ibn Khaldun will make this point even clearer by arguing, for example, how “obliviousness regarding the changing conditions of nations and generations—which is the consequence of the change in times and the passing of days—is a hidden [reason] for committing errors with respect to history. It is a strong ailment and deeply hidden; for it does not take place until long periods of time have passed, so that almost no individual, from among the created, is able to wise-up to it” (I.44: 7-11). It is not possible, according to Ibn Khaldun, to form a theoretical conception of history based on, or based mostly on, historical reports (whether these are general or particular). The reliance on (or the exclusive reliance on) historical reports to form a theoretical conception of history, means the eventual failure of this theory to withstand the test of time. It is safe to assume, therefore, that Ibn Khaldun’s general history is not intended to serve as a general theory of history.

We end up here with two important observations about Ibn Khaldun’s general history. First, despite its comparatively detailed picture of the histories of the Arabs and the Berbers in the *Maghrib*, this history is not intended to provide an exhaustive historical account. Second, despite its abridgment and summary (i.e., abstraction from actual

historical events) it is not intended to be a theoretical account of history. How can we then explain Ibn Khaldun's claim that his book "well comprehends the reports of the created"? Or to put it differently, in what way does this book "take the whole" (*yastaw'ib*) of the reports of the created? Ibn Khaldun clues us in on the answer in the conclusion of this passage; for after listing the accomplishments of his book, he declares that this composition has consequently become "a depository for wisdom and a receptacle for history" (I.7: 10). Here, Ibn Khaldun reminds us once again that despite the wide range of historical information that this book covers, it is not only concerned with history, but also concerned with wisdom.

Wisdom (*al-ḥikma*) is, of course, the object of philosophy and the antagonist of imitation (*taqlīd*). A declared objective of Ibn Khaldun's book is to liberate his special readers from the habit of imitation, making it possible for them "to behold conditions of times and groups that were before [their] time and that will be after it" (I.6: 8-9). It almost goes without saying that to behold the conditions of past and future events is not the same thing as having a detailed knowledge of the facts regarding past events and/or the ability to predict future events. For one thing, since the "passing of days change conditions and...transforms the customs of nations and generations" (I.4: 12-13), then no amount of detailed knowledge of past events could allow one to predict the *conditions* of future events, let alone to predict events in the future. To behold (*al-wuqūf*) the conditions of past and future events, like the knowledge (*al-ʿilm*) of the origins (*al-uṣūl*) of occurrences (I.4: 16), the consideration (*al-iʿtibār*) of species in relation to its genera (I.4: 16), the search for the principles (*al-mabādiʿ*) and ranks (*al-marātib*) of conditions,

and the explanation of the essential accidents (*al-‘awāriḍ al-dhātiyya*) of culture (I.6: 11), are all elements of philosophical inquiry as opposed to historical inquiry.

Historical inquiry, as Ibn Khaldun conceives of it, is concerned with answers to what-questions: what happened in certain battles, in dynasties, and in nations (I.2: 12-13). But these answers, even if they were once given by trustworthy eyewitnesses (I.2-3: 19-1), are heavily dependent on the reliability and competence of those who later transmitted them (I.3: 3-8), and are easily vulnerable to the manipulations of the capricious (I.3: 1-2). The instructive value of these answers, as Ibn Khaldun informs us, does not go far beyond the significance of the occasional proverbs (I.2: 13-14). For, in light of the fact that the “passing of days changes conditions...and transforms the customs of nations and generations,” what lessons can we possibly learn from answers that are time bound? Philosophical inquiry, in contrast, seeks answers to why-questions, i.e., it inquires after the causes, reasons, principles, and conditions for the event. In doing so, philosophical inquiry seeks what lies beneath the surface of reports to find answers that can be generalized and that can withstand the test of time.

It is not that Ibn Khaldun is indifferent to historical inquiry, or that he is not concerned with the truth of answers to what-questions. However, through his general history, Ibn Khaldun casts his historical net wide enough that he becomes less reliant on the truth of each reported event, on the trustworthiness of each eyewitness to an event, or on the competence of each transmitter of a report about an event. This is consistent with Ibn Khaldun’s advice to the reader on how to deal with those historians whose authority has been questioned on religious ground: “The clear-sighted critic is his own judge in falsifying or considering them with respect to what they include in their transmission [of

reports]. For culture has nature, through its conditions reports can be related, and accounts and historical materials can be predicated” (I.3-4: 20-2). This advice by Ibn Khaldun indicates that knowledge of the nature of culture can falsify a report or deem it worthy of rational consideration, but it does not necessarily prove the truth of the report. Of course, the ability to falsify a report means that there is some standard, the nature of culture, which would allow one to judge the likelihood of an event; and it is in discerning the likelihood of events that the insightful-critic is able to consider (*i’tibār*) that which is valuable in an event. This is the method Ibn Khaldun followed, and this is the subject of his first book. And it is largely because of this first book, i.e., the *Muqaddima*, that Ibn Khaldun is able to claim that his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* comprehends well—*istaw‘aba*, i.e., “to take the whole” or “receive it into its capacity”—“the reports of the created,” assuages difficulties “in dispersed wise-maxims,” and provides “causes and reasons for occurrences in dynasties.”³⁹

Ibn Khaldun concludes this part of his discussion by reemphasizing the uniqueness of his composition. He likens his book to a *ṣiwān* (depository) for wisdom and to a *jirāb* (receptacle) for history. Both the *ṣiwān* and the *jirāb* are types of containers whose respective forms are determined by their respective functions. The *ṣiwān* is a chest, a closet, a safe, or a depository in which an object of value is “preserved, kept, laid up, taken care of, or reserved.”⁴⁰ The *jirāb*, on the other hand, is primarily “a bag or

³⁹ There is a clear contrast between this passage coming near the conclusion of the preface (I.7) and the preface’s introduction (I.2). The contrast exposes some of the ways in which Ibn Khaldun’s procedure in his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* differs from the hitherto practiced fine-art of history. If, as the beginning of the preface indicates, the fine-art of history “bring down to us the affairs of the created: how their conditions have been altered, how through [these altered conditions] dynasties expanded, and how they cultivated the earth until they were called for their departing-journey, and the coming forth of their moment of extinction” (I.2: 14-16). Ibn Khaldun’s *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*, in contrast, “comprehends well the reports of the created, assuages difficulties in dispersed wise maxims, and gives causes and reasons for occurrences in dynasties.”

⁴⁰ Lane, *s-w-n*

receptacle for traveling-provisions and for goods and utensils.”⁴¹ In containing the provisions necessary for surviving long journeys, the *jirāb* is an indispensable tool for travelers. Now, the figurative association between traveling and historical research is the first image Ibn Khaldun makes in his preface, namely, when he likened the great time and effort spent in pursuing historical information to “caravans and [individual] travelers” (I.2: 10-11) seeking a faraway objective. He alludes to this figurative association in different parts of the preface, as when, for example, he likens the uncritical transmitter of reports to a porter whose defining role is that he “carries and transports” historical reports (I.3: 9); or when he described how knowledge of the nature of culture allows the historical tales and artifacts to be “carried over” (*tuḥmal*; I.4: 1-2)⁴², i.e., to allow these tales and artifacts to be judged according to a firm standard. Of course, Ibn Khaldun took this association between traveling and historical research beyond abstract allusions, when he informed us how, during his spiritually motivated journey to the East, he was able to gather historical reports not available in his homeland in the West, i.e., the *Maghrib*. So it is in keeping with this theme of travel and history that Ibn Khaldun likens his own book to a contraption which—besides containing valuable historical reports—makes possible the continued pursuit of historical knowledge. Like the *jirāb* for travel, Ibn Khaldun sees his book as an indispensable practical tool for historical research.

The image of Ibn Khaldun’s book as a *jirāb*—a contraption often associated with transportation and travel, and which is supposed to contain common but necessary

⁴¹ Lane, *j-r-b*

⁴² The word *tuḥmal*, from the substantive *h-m-l*, literally means “to be carried,” is also a logical term that means “to be predicated.” In my discussion of the notable scholars of history (Part I, Section ii, in this chapter) I translated *tuḥmal* according to its usage as a logical term. Had I translated it according to its common everyday usage, the sentence would read: “For culture has nature, through its conditions reports can be related, and accounts and historical materials can be carried over” (I.4: 1-2).

goods—is in sharp contrast to the book’s other image as a *ṣiwān*—a contraption often associated with long term storage and preservation, and which usually contains goods of rare value. The fact that *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* places history in a *jirāb* and wisdom in a *ṣiwān* speaks to how Ibn Khaldun intends by his book to place each subject (i.e., history and wisdom) within its proper context, so that wisdom would be protected from those who confuse it with historical knowledge.

III. iv. The Conclusion

In concluding his preface, Ibn Khaldun provides a brief explanation for the title of his book,⁴³ offers final remarks on the defining qualities of this book, and ends with a direct appeal to the scholarly community. He begins:

And since it comprises the [historical] reports of the Arabs and the Berbers, both urban and tent-dwellers, making reference to the great dynasties that were contemporary with them, and eloquently-expressing, with narrations and allusions, the principles of conditions and their subsequent attributes, I called it *Book of Allusions, and Register of the Subject and the Predicate, Regarding the Days of the Arabs, the Foreigners, and the Berbers, and those of their Contemporaries who Possessed the Greatest Authority*. And I did not leave a thing with respect to the origins of generations and dynasties, the synchronism of the earliest nations, the reasons for the change and transformation in past centuries and [within] religions, or of what accidents happen in culture—[such as] a dynasty and a religion, a city and an encampment, glory and humiliation, abundance and scarcity, science and art, income and loss, revolving conditions that are prevalent, primitiveness and civilization, a matter-of-fact or [something] to be expected—until I comprehended its totality, and clarified its demonstratives and causes. Hence this book has become unique, with respect to what it contains of strange sciences and proximate veiled wise-maxims. After this, I am certain of my deficiency among the [distinguished] people of the times, confessing my powerlessness to continue with such affairs, wishing from people with benevolent hands and wide-spread cognizance (*al-ma‘ārif al-mutasi‘at al-faḍā’*) to look (*al-naẓar*) with a critical eye, a non-compliant one, and with resolution fix and recover whatever [errors] they find; for trade among the people of knowledge is rewarding, confession [of shortcomings] is a rescuer from blame, and brotherly goodwill is something hoped for. I ask God to make our deeds pure in His sight. He suffices me, and He is the best of protectors. (I.7-8: 10-9).

⁴³ Since in chapter 2 I have already discussed the title in detail, my discussion of it here will be succinct.

Ibn Khaldun's discussion of the title—in which he indicates that this single composition is both a book and a register—coming right after his depiction of it as both a *jirāb* and a *ṣiwān*, reemphasizes what we have already discussed regarding the dual aspects to *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. Here, however, Ibn Khaldun spells out a unity of purpose in both aspects, namely, to eloquently-express (*ufṣiḥ*), “with narrations (*dhikrā*) and allusions (*'ibar*), the principles of conditions and whatever predicate subsequently comes.” But this supposed unity of purpose—taken at face value—is somewhat misleading, for it suggests that *Kitāb al-'Ibar* says the same thing in two different modes. As I argued, this is a suggestion that Ibn Khaldun wishes to promote in order to encourage the rational examination of history. But this suggestion would be an accurate expression of Ibn Khaldun's full intention if his only aim was the pursuit of historical knowledge for its own sake, i.e., if he was not concerned with the larger objective of protecting the pursuit of wisdom.

Having given an explanation for the choice of his title, Ibn Khaldun goes on to inform the reader, one last time, of what is truly unique about his book. This information, coming on the heels of explaining the title, indicates that this explanation is not yet adequate to capture the fullness of Ibn Khaldun's intention. Besides the “narrations and allusions” regarding the “principles of conditions and whatever predicate subsequently comes, Ibn Khaldun adds four more items that his book comprehends as well as clarifies their demonstratives and causes: (1) the beginning of groups and dynasties; (2) the synchronism of the earliest nations; (3) the reasons for change and transformation through time and within religious communities; and, most importantly, (4) the accidents that happen in culture. These items—rationally comprehended, demonstrated, and explained—are what make *Kitāb al-'Ibar* truly unique (*fadhḍhan*). These items, as we

have seen in the table of contents, are the subject of Ibn Khaldun's first book, i.e., the *Muqaddima*. Accordingly, it is the *Muqaddima*, and not *History* that contains "strange sciences" and "proximate veiled wise-maxims." What comes after the *Muqaddima* is the two books on the Arabs and the Berbers, and those of their "*Contemporaries who Possessed the Greatest Authority*. And it is in relation to his *History* that Ibn Khaldun is "certain of [his] deficiency," and for which he asks "*the* people of knowledge and wide-spread cognizance" to "fix and *re*-cover whatever [errors] they find." With this veiled request Ibn Khaldun brings his preface to a conclusion.

Chapter 4

The Science of Culture and the Limitations of the Fine-Art of History

In this chapter, I provide an analysis of Ibn Khaldun's original introduction, which, as argued in Chapter One, contains the mother thought that gives structural unity to the rest of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*. This chapter will be divided into four parts: In the first part, I present an outline of the original introduction. In the second part, I explore the ideas presented in Ibn Khaldun's opening statement. In the third part, I discuss in detail three major historical reports Ibn Khaldun uses as examples of substandard scholarship. Finally, in the fourth part, I examine Ibn Khaldun's concluding arguments.

I. The Outline of the Original Introduction to *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*

Ibn Khaldun's original introduction consists of forty-seven pages. The general structure of this introduction seems to follow the three parts division set forth in its title: "*On the Virtue of Knowing History, Verifying its Approaches¹ and Outlining the Errors and Fancies that Befall the Historians, as well as Mentioning some of the Reasons for these [Errors and Fancies].*" However, the conclusion to the original introduction adds a fourth part not mentioned in its title. That is, the outline of Ibn Khaldun's introduction contains four parts, which can be outlined as follows:

¹ The word *madhāhib*, which I have translated here as "approaches," is usually translated as "schools," "methods," or "doctrines." As will become obvious in my analysis of the introduction, Ibn Khaldun does not provide here, or anywhere else in the *Muqaddima*, a systematic analysis of the historians' "schools," "methods," or "doctrines." What he provides instead is a general discussion of the political aims and objectives that historians supposedly pursue when they record historical events. The word "approach" thus seems to be the more applicable term regarding Ibn Khaldun's treatment of the works of historians.

- I. The Opening Statement: On the Virtue of Knowing History (I.8-9: 10-9)
- II. Verifying History's Orientations and Outlining the Errors and Fancies that Befall the Historians (I.9-50: 10-18)
 - A. On the enumeration of figures, wealth, and troops (I.9-18: 9-17):
 - 1. On the troops of the Israelites (I.9-13: 9-10)
 - 2. On the military campaigns of the Tubba, the ancient kings of Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula (I.13-16: 10-19)
 - 3. On the interpretation of *Surat al-Fajr* in the Quran (I.16-18: 19-17)
 - B. On narratives regarding moral and political conduct (I.18-29: 17-16)
 - 1. On al-Rashīd's destruction of the Barmakids (I.18-26: 17-12)
 - 2. On the relationship between al-Ma'mūn and Judge Yahyā Ibn Aktham (I.26-28: 12-12)
 - 3. On al-Ma'mūn's marriage to Burān, the daughter of Ḥassan Ibn Sahal (I.28-29: 2-16)
 - C. On stories regarding the lineage of significant political personalities (I.29-43: 16-4)
 - 1. On the lineage of the Ubaydid, the Shī'a caliphs in al-Qayrawān and Cairo (I.29-34: 16-10)
 - 2. On the lineage of the Idrisids (I.34-40: 10-16)
 - 3. On the vilification of Imām al-Mahdī, the founder of the Almohad dynasty (I.40-43: 7-4)
- III. Mentioning Some of the Reasons for the Errors and Fancies that Befall the Historians (I.43-50: 40-18)
- IV. Conclusion: A Definition of History, A statement regarding an Important Goal of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, and A Note to the Reader (I.50-55: 18-15)

In this outline, we distinguish the four parts of Ibn Khaldun's original introduction, while subdividing the lengthier parts into their separate discussion. The first part contains an opening statement regarding the importance of history as well as a discussion regarding the need to subject history to rational examination. Although this statement is brief (barely a page in length), it presents the first explicit argument regarding the political and moral significance of studying history, and, as such, I will give it careful scrutiny. The second part of the introduction contains Ibn Khaldun's discussion of the errors of previous historians. It provides three groups of historical reports, each providing three examples of unsound historical reporting. My analysis of this second part of the introduction looks mainly at the first example in each of the three groups of reports that

set forth the moral and political theme(s) Ibn Khaldun wishes to feature in each of these groups. The third part of the introduction provides a discussion of a major error that both historians and those who read historical works fall into while making analogies between the past and the present, namely, the failure to appreciate how, with time, the conditions and customs of people change. As we will see in our examination of the third part, it is in order to address this problem that Ibn Khaldun develops the all-important science of culture. The fourth and final part contrasts two types of historical studies, one particular and the other general. The particular type of historical study is inspired by the technical understanding of history as reports about particular events occurring in a specific time and place; the general serves as some kind of a broad theoretical foundation underlying the historian's work.

II. The Opening Statement

As noted in the outline above of Ibn Khaldun's introduction, he begins with a brief discussion of the virtue of knowing history, proceeds with a much longer discussion that outlines errors committed by previous historians, and concludes with what appears to be a definition of his subject matter. In this way, Ibn Khaldun allows the reader to think through the practical limits of the fine-art of history before considering the limits imposed by his final technical definition.

True to the opening of his title, "On the virtue of *knowing* history...", Ibn Khaldun begins the opening statement to his introduction as follows:

Know that the fine-art of history is a fine-art whose approach is dear, whose benefit is plentiful, and whose goal is noble; for it allows us to behold the conditions of those who passed—of nations with respect to their morals, of prophets with respect to their ways of life, and of kings with respect to their dynasties and politics—until the benefit of role-modeling in these (*al-iqtidā' fī*

dhālik) is complete for the one who seeks it in religious and worldly conditions. Thus it requires² numerous undertakings and various [types of] cognizance, as well as good reflection and steadfastness, which would lead their companion to the truth and would prevent him from slips and errors. For if nothing more than the transmission were considered in [historical] reports—[by] not judging the roots of custom, the foundations of politics, the nature of culture and the conditions in human social organization, and [by] not reasoning-by-analogy of what is hidden and remote in these [reports] with what is witnessed and at hand [for us]—then it is possible not to safeguard, with respect to these [reports], against stumbling, falling, and swaying from genuine truthfulness. Historians, commentators, and the *imāms* of transmission have often fallen into errors regarding narratives of [past] events because, with respect to these [narratives], they relied exclusively on the [validity of] transmission, regardless of quality—they did not display them against their roots, make analogies with what is similar to them, or sound their depths with the gauge of wisdom, and [while] beholding the nature of generated things, and adjudicating reflection and insightfulness regarding the reports—thus they strayed and got lost in the wilderness of fancy and error. (I.8-9: 12-7)

Ibn Khaldun begins his introduction by impressing upon his reader to “know” (*i’lam*) something he assumes the reader either does not know or knows insufficiently, namely, the great moral and political value of history as a product of fine-art. According to him, this fine-art provides us with a unique opportunity to stop and behold (*yuqifunā*) the conditions (*aḥwāl*) of past nations, prophets, and kings. This ability to reflect on past human actions, we are told, is a necessary final step for those individuals who wish to find the proper model for actions regarding religious and worldly affairs. The fact that Ibn Khaldun is careful to indicate that the historical report brings moral and political guidance to completion (*ḥattā tatim fā’idat al-iqtidā’*) is a good indication that the historical information it conveys is not the sufficient condition for the sought-after political and moral benefit. Besides historical reports, we need additional types of cognizance or knowledge (*ma’ārif mutanawwi’a*). But it is not immediately clear if these *ma’ārif* are needed primarily for the investigation and authentication of the historical

² The phrase “*fa-huwa muhtāj ilā*” can be translated as either “thus *it* requires,” or “thus *he* requires.” As I will argue shortly, these alternative translations lead to two different interpretations.

report, or if they are needed to draw out the contemporary moral and political significance—the *‘ibra* or allusion—of the historical report. As I have noted in the translation above, the phrase “*fa-huwa muḥtāj ilā*” can be translated as “thus *it* requires” or “thus *he* requires.” The first translation suggests that it is the fine-art of history which needs additional types of cognizance. And considering that the primary objective of this fine-art is to produce correct historical reports, it seems safe to assume that the primary need for these additional types of cognizance is to authenticate the truth of the report.

The second translation, by contrast, suggests that it is the one who seeks “the benefit of role-modeling...in religious and worldly affairs” who needs the help of these types of cognizance, in addition to historical reports.³ According to this reading, the primary objective of these additional types of cognizance is to draw out the relevant moral and political lessons from of the historically contingent moral and political events. More importantly, however, this reading suggests that these additional types of cognizance are in effect the primary sources for moral and political conduct, and history is the additional “knowledge” needed by those individuals, and only those individuals, who seek to model themselves after noteworthy historical examples.⁴

Of course, the ambiguity in the phrase “thus *it* requires” or “thus *he* requires” need not lead to choosing one reading and excluding the other—that either it is the fine-art of history—and by implication it is the practitioner of this fine-art—who requires additional types of cognizance, or it is the one who seeks moral and political guidance in

³ This reading reaffirms an earlier argument made in the preface that historical “knowledge,” in and of itself, cannot serve as a proper model for moral and political action.

⁴ It will become evident through the study of the “errors of the historians” that additional knowledge is needed for both the production—i.e., the verification and the recording—of the historical report as well as for its evaluation. It will also become clear that both processes will be informed by the politically salutary objectives that constitute the initial impetus for examining history—i.e., finding the proper models for moral and political conduct.

history who requires these types of cognizance. Indeed, Ibn Khaldun seems to communicate by this ambiguity a shared interest in these types of cognizance by both the practitioner and the student of history. Since there are those who, in studying history, seek moral and political guidance, the practitioner of the fine-art of history requires certain types of cognizance that would make it possible for him to address these moral and political needs. The explanation of this point is what the introduction is supposed to provide, and what Ibn Khaldun's ambiguous readership is encouraged to "know."

But what are the types of cognizance Ibn Khaldun is referring to? By way of an answer, I shall consider first the relationship between the primary type of 'knowledge' that history provides and the kinds of knowledge that the other types of cognizance are supposed to provide.

It is clear from Ibn Khaldun's statement, that through the study of history we come to know the customs of different nations and the conditions of "kings with respect to their dynasties and politics" (I.8). The objective of this study is moral and political. It is also clear that, according to Ibn Khaldun, history is not enough to bring about sought-after political and moral guidance. What is needed besides, or in addition to, the "knowledge" of history, are other types of cognizance that seek—beyond awareness of particular customs, politics, and dynasties—knowledge of the "roots of customs," the "foundations of politics," as well as the "nature of culture and human social organization" (I.8). Here we can grasp two sciences whose function it is to bring about such knowledge. The first is political science. This is an old and well-established discipline, whose purpose is to investigate, among other things, the "roots of customs" and the "foundations of politics." The second is a new science, the science of culture, which, following Ibn

Khaldun's argument in the preface, is the science that investigates the *nature* of "culture and the conditions of human social organization."

The fact that a new science is needed in order to draw out the political benefit of the study of history seems to suggest one of two possibilities. First, before Ibn Khaldun's science of culture, attempts to seek political guidance from history were never safe from "stumbling, falling, and swaying from genuine truthfulness" (I.9). Second, there was a time when it was possible—through the assistance of political science alone—for individuals to seek guidance from history without the help of the science of culture, and now this is no longer the case. Put differently, the latter possibility suggests that the need for a science of culture is the consequence of new realities on account of which knowledge of political science alone cannot bring about the desired benefit of the study of history. Though it is not clear from Ibn Khaldun's opening statement which of these two possibilities he is thinking of, the final parts of his introduction—as well as the beginning of Book One of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*—suggests that he favors the second possibility.⁵

In addition to knowledge of the "roots of customs" and the "foundations of politics" belonging to the domain of political science, and the knowledge of the "nature of culture and human social organization" belonging to the domain of the science of culture, Ibn Khaldun adds the ability to reason by analogy (*al-qiyyās*) as a third requisite element in bringing about the political benefit of studying history. If we compare this part of Ibn Khaldun's opening statement in the introduction, with his description of the overall objective of *Kitāb al-'Ibar* in the preface, we discover that the ability to make correct analogies between past events and present realities is an important byproduct of the study

⁵ This is a point that I will turn to in the third part of this chapter.

of culture. In the preface, Ibn Khaldun summed up the accomplishments of his major work as follows:

I refined, in the best way, [this book's] inquires, and I brought it very close to the understanding of the learned and the elite.... In it I explained—from among the conditions of culture and city-formation, and of what essential accidents happen in human social organization—that which will entertain you with the causes and reasons for the generated things, and makes you cognizant how through these [principles] the people of dynasties issue forth, so that you would tear your grip away from the [habit of] imitation, and would behold conditions of times and groups that were before your time and that will be after it. (I.6)

The *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, has, as I outlined in Chapter Three, two equally important components: the *Muqaddima*, with its treatment of the science of culture, and the *Ta'rīkh*, with its comprehensive coverage of the history of northwest Africa. The *virtue* of “knowing history,” as the opening statement in the introduction informs us, is associated with the fact that this subject allows us to “behold” (*yuqifunā*) the particular “conditions of those who passed.” One’s ability to “behold conditions of days and groups that were before [one’s] time and will be after it” requires much more than “knowing history.” In order for one to rise above blind imitation of historical tradition and hence to engage this tradition critically, one needs universal knowledge that explains the “causes and reasons” for the particular events of the past and that can properly gauge its relevance to present and future actions. This universal knowledge, according to Ibn Khaldun, is the science of culture, which allows one to reason by analogy between “what is hidden and remote” in history and “what is witnessed and at hand” for us.

Before we turn to the next part of Ibn Khaldun’s introduction—the part in which he skillfully navigates through the “wilderness of fancy and error”—it would help to re-emphasize an earlier point with respect to his opening statement first. Ibn Khaldun’s argument regarding the need to subject history to rational examination does not fix a

precise goal for this need. As such, he leaves the limits of this rational examination undetermined. His opening statement allows us to give equal weight to two possible goals for this rational examination: (a) the verification of historical reports; or (b) bringing out the *'ibra* or allusion of these reports. One can argue that we cannot bring out the *'ibra* of a historical report without being certain of the accuracy of this report and, as such, Ibn Khaldun does not need to give explicit priority to one of these goals. However, we can also foresee occasions on which we need to give such priority. As Ibn Khaldun suggests, the *'ibra* is most useful from a political and moral view to the one who looks in history for role models to guide him in “worldly and religious” affairs.⁶ What makes history’s moral lessons effective is that they are supposedly based on real life examples of human conduct. But the moral and political lessons of the report—i.e., the reason why one reads history—and the truth of the report—i.e., the element which gives credibility to the moral lesson—are not always in harmony. In emphasizing the truth of a historical report, there are conceivably no limits to what can be questioned by the historian, no matter how sacred, moral, or politically salutary that report might be. But if the primary objective of the historian is to bring out the moral and political lessons that a historical report offers, then his examination of history will be circumscribed by what is conducive to such moral and political guidance.

This problem of the balance between the moral lessons of historical reports and the truth of these reports is something Ibn Khaldun deals gracefully with in the next part of the introduction. On the surface, Ibn Khaldun presents the verification of historical reports as the first priority of the historian. However, closer scrutiny of this argument will

⁶ This is especially so if the *'ibra* is understood as a straightforward “moral lesson” and not as an “allusion” that requires careful study and evaluation.

reveal many instances where Ibn Khaldun is willing to bend facts for the sake of what is morally and politically salutary. This should not be taken to mean that Ibn Khaldun sees no political or moral value in the very act of verifying historical reports. Consistent with his argument, the verification of historical reports can itself be politically salutary insofar as a serious rational examination of past events is conducive to a serious rational examination of present realities.

III. On the Errors and Fancies of Historians

Ibn Khaldun's discussion of the errors and fancies of historians occupies the lion's share of this part of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. The ostensible objective of this discussion is to encourage the verification of historical reports by means of rational reflection. In constructing his argument, Ibn Khaldun divides this part of the introduction into three sections.

In the first section, Ibn Khaldun discusses historical reports that deal with quantifiable facts, such as historians' "enumeration of figures, wealth, and troops" (I.9). He uses three main examples to illustrate his critique with respect to these kinds of reports. The first example scrutinizes reports regarding the number of Israelites at the time of their exodus out of Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. The second example deals with reports regarding the military campaigns of the Tubbas, the ancient kings of Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. The third and final example deals with reports regarding the existence of a hidden city, *Iram*, which is allude in the *Quran*. In addressing the errors of historians with respect to these reports, Ibn Khaldun appeals to knowledge of physical and political geography, to a basic understanding of demography and normal

population growth, to clear facts regarding military strategy and the requirements of warfare, and to common-sense expectations regarding the nature of war and peace among nations. Ibn Khaldun also applies such knowledge to anticipate what the historical record should have included had these reports by the historians been true, and he uses the absence of such additional records as further proof of the historians' errors.

Although in this section Ibn Khaldun shows himself to be concerned exclusively with the likelihood that certain historical events occurred as reported by historians, the subject matter of these reports indicates that his concern with the moral and political is not far beneath the surface. The first example of erroneous historical reports deals with biblical accounts pivotal to the Muslim view of the history of monotheism. The second example deals with reports regarding the military campaigns of ancient Arab kings, reports which reinforce the Arabs' self-image of their past glory. The third example deals with historical reports regarding a mysterious city the existence or the absence of which carries implications regarding commonly accepted interpretations of the Quran.

The second section of Ibn Khaldun's treatment of the errors of past historians discusses reports, which, according to him, impugn the moral character of some of the most distinguished Arab rulers. As in the previous section, Ibn Khaldun here uses three main examples to illustrate his point. However, all three examples, in addition to minor ones, revolve around the moral conduct of al-Rashīd and his son al-Ma'mūn, whose respective reigns as heads of the Abbasid dynasty, represent both the height of the political and cultural power of the Arabs and the beginning of their precipitous decline as an effective force on the world stage. In refuting these "interpolated narratives of the historians" (I.28), Ibn Khaldun presents counter reports that speak of the moral

uprightness and piety of the Abbasid rulers. And to substantiate his own counter reports, Ibn Khaldun appeals to common-sense arguments regarding the nature of imperial rule, the traditional customs and morals of the Abbasids, and the solid religious background of the Abbasids.

The third section of this part of the introduction discusses reports dealing with the lineage of founders of three different dynasties: ‘Ubyad Allah al-Mahdi, the reputed founder of the Fatimid dynasty, which, at the height of its power covered North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and al-Hijāz; Idrīs Ibn Abdallah (d. 791), the founder of the Idrisids dynasty in northwest Africa; and al-Mahdī Ibn Tumart (d. 1130), the founder of the Almohad dynasty. As in the previous section, Ibn Khaldun here extracts from the available historical record reports that challenge the accounts impugning the character and lineage of these three founders. And like the previous section, Ibn Khaldun appeals to a common-sense understanding of the nature of political authority in order to give weight to the authenticity of his counter reports.

In the second and third section on the errors and fancies of the historians, we witness an increased interest on the part of Ibn Khaldun in questions regarding the moral conduct of rulers and major figures of history. The treatment of these questions are intended to make us aware of how and to what extent issues of moral conduct inform as well as distort our understanding of the nature of political order. In contrast with the first section, in which Ibn Khaldun deals with matters of physical reality, we clearly see in the last two sections the difficulty, if not the near impossibility, of achieving scientific certainty regarding issues of moral behavior. With respect to the “reality” of reports dealing with the moral conduct of historical individuals, the most we can hope for are

likely accounts. This, of course, does not stop Ibn Khaldun from issuing guidelines, informed by his understanding of the nature of culture and human social organization, through which these issues can be treated in such a way as to assist the student who seeks guidance in history, as well as to encourage a wider interest in rational examination of past and present political realities.

In what follows, I focus my analysis on the first example in each of the three sections that deal with the errors of the historians: the number of the Israelite troops at the time of their exodus (presented in the first section), the reasons for al-Rashīd's destruction of the Barmakids (presented in the second section), and the lineage of 'Ubyad Allah al-Mahdi (presented in the third section).

III. A. On the Number of the Israelite Troops

At the conclusion of his opening statement, Ibn Khaldun warns against relying on traditional methods of historical scholarship to judge the truth of a report by verifying the soundness of its chain of transmission. Many distinguished historians and respected religious scholars, he tells us, have failed to “sound the depths” (*wa la-sabarūhā*) of historical reports “with the gauge of wisdom” (*mi'yār al-ḥikma*), to behold “the nature of generated things” (*al-wuqūf 'alā ṭabā'i' al-kā'ināt*), or to adjudicate the rational power of reflection (*naẓar*) and insightfulness (*al-baṣīra*). Hence, “they strayed and got lost in the wilderness of fancy and error.”

According to Ibn Khaldun, nothing illustrates this point more clearly than the historians' “enumeration of figures, wealth, and troops when it is displayed in narratives, for this is the likely-place for lying and the implement of absurdity, and it must be

referred back to the roots [of custom] and displayed against the foundations [of politics]” (I.9: 7-9). The example Ibn Khaldun uses to frame this part of his discussion deals with the number of Israelites who were led by Moses out of Egypt:

An instance of this [kind of hyperbole] is what al-Mas‘ūdī and many among the historians have transmitted regarding the soldiers of the Israelites. That Moses (peace be upon him) tallied these in the desert—after approving those capable of carrying arms, especially the ones who were twenty years and older—and so they were six hundred thousand or more. (I.9: 9-12).

There are two interesting things about this example. First, the reports with which Ibn Khaldun begins his critique of traditional historical methods within Islam deals with accounts derived from another religious tradition, i.e., the Jewish tradition. But instead of critiquing the Jewish sources from which these reports are derived, Ibn Khaldun focuses on the Muslim historians—especially on al-Mas‘ūdī, according to him the most distinguished among these historians—who presumably transmitted these reports to the Muslim community uncritically. Second, the subject of these reports, i.e., the number of Israelites at the time of the Exodus seems too minor a point to justify a detailed critique of the work of historians. However, as we will soon discover, the rational examination of these seemingly innocuous reports leads to the question of divine intervention in human affairs, a fundamental question in Islamic theology.

Ibn Khaldun uses five main counter-arguments based on common sense to refute this account. These common sense arguments are intended to build a clear case for applying rational tools in the examination of history. They all point to branches of knowledge that will be utilized by the science of culture in order to develop a much more “systematic” approach to the study and recording of history—part of what Ibn Khaldun calls in his title the “verification of history’s approaches.”

Ibn Khaldun's first argument is built on what, according to him, "known customs (*al-'awā'id al-ma'rūfa*) and familiar conditions (*al-aḥwāl al-ma'lūfa*) bear witness to" (I.9). These are the types of customs and conditions the knowledge of which any person in tune with present political realities could use to see the inflated character of accounts regarding "the realities" of past conditions. When speaking about the number of troops belonging to a particular nation in the past, the historian must realize that these numbers refer to actual human beings who need a support structure—such as land, animals to feed the troops, as well as workers to cloth and equip the army—that is proportionate to the size of the military. This alone should indicate that the number of the Israelite army has been inflated, for, according to Ibn Khaldun, neither Egypt nor Syria has the "capacity to contain such a number of soldiers" (I.9). If we observe the present "customs and familiar conditions," Ibn Khaldun maintains, then we can understand how "each particular kingdom has a limited portion (*ḥiṣṣa*) of guardians, of which it has the capacity to contain as well as to support its functions, and beyond which it has difficulty maintaining" (I.9).

Continuing with his counter-arguments based on common sense, Ibn Khaldun presents a second point which deals with the practical possibility of such an army: "It is unlikely for marching or fighting to occur among armies that have such extreme numbers like this one, because the battleground is too narrow for them, extending, if they were in battle-formation, twice, thrice, or more beyond the range of sight" (I.9). And just in case his readers are skeptical about the soundness of this point, Ibn Khaldun asks a rhetorical question that aims to expose the logistical impossibility of making such an army fight as a unit: "How, then, would two [opposing] parties fight, or for one battle formation to overcome another, when one flank does not know what the other flank is doing?" (I.9).

Ibn Khaldun suggests that if his readers observe the present conditions of military warfare, then they will undoubtedly be able to confirm the soundness of his argument, affirming that “*what was* resembles *what will be* more than one drop of water resembles another” (I.9). It is important to keep in mind this point, because, fundamental to the science of culture, is the ability to distinguish between things that constantly change with time, and things that, for the most part, remain the same. What does not change with time, according to Ibn Khaldun, are the modes by which human beings deal with physical reality. What does change with time is moral and political reality.

Ibn Khaldun’s third counter-argument contrasts what al-Mas‘ūdī and other historians report about the size of the military force of the Israelites with what the available historical record says about the size of the military forces of other nations. He chooses for his point of comparison a relatively more recent nation than the Israelites, namely, the Sassanid Persians, with whose empire the Muslim historians were much more familiar. The Sassanid Persians controlled a larger territory, had greater power, and were much wealthier than the Israelites, but were never reported to have had such a large number of soldiers. As Ibn Khaldun reminds his readers, in the decisive battle between the Arabs and the Persians of al-Qādisiyya—the battle in which the Persian forces were soundly defeated, paving the way for the empire’s unraveling—the reported number of military forces and all their support structure ranged between sixty thousand and two hundred thousand.

The fourth counter-argument Ibn Khaldun presents as evidence of the inflated troop number of the Israelites calls attention to the purposes for which military power exists. The two main purposes for which a community requires military force—or a

“guardianship” (*hāmiyya*), as Ibn Khaldun calls it—is to protect itself from foreign enemies as well as to keep the peace within. The size of such a guardianship, as Ibn Khaldun has already maintained, must be proportionate to the size of the territory under the control of the community. The bigger the military force, the larger the territory that needs to sustain it. The bigger the military force, the greater the temptations to take over more territory. A military force of over six hundred thousand men has to engage in offensive war. As Ibn Khaldun states, “Had the Israelites reached that number, the range of their kingdom would have been wide and the extent of their dynasty great” (I.10; cf. II.65-66). Instead of a wide kingdom and a great dynasty, the Israelites spent forty years in the Sinai Desert (*al-Ṭīh*; I.9), during which time they did not engage in military campaigns (I.13: 5). And even when the Israelites were able much later to muster enough forces to acquire large territorial areas, these territories did not far exceed “the Jordan and Palestine in Syria, and Yathrib and Khaybar in al-Ḥijāz” (I.10).

The fifth and final counter-argument points out an internal contradiction in the historical record on which al-Mas‘ūdī based his account regarding the number of the Israelites. According to this record, there were three fathers between Moses and Jacob: “Moses son of Amram son of Kohath son of Levi son of Jacob, who is Isrā’īlu Allah” (I.10-11: 17-1). Ibn Khaldun maintains that al-Mas‘ūdī himself reported that the period of time between Moses and Israel was 220 years. When Israel, his sons, and his people joined Joseph in Egypt, their numbers were “seventy souls” (I.11). Ibn Khaldun insists that it is impossible for the Israelites to have exponentially increased in numbers from 70 people to more than 600,000 male soldiers in 220 years.⁷ Ibn Khaldun raises another

⁷ Recall that the number 600,000 thousand refers only to the men of fighting age, i.e., this number does not include women, children, the sick, and the elderly.

doubt that the Israelites could have reached this number at the time of their most powerful king, King Solomon. According to the Torah, between Solomon and Israel (that is, Jacob) there are eleven generations, and, Ibn Khaldun insists, the “male lineage does not branch out to that number which they claimed in eleven generations. God knows they may extend to the hundreds and thousands, as for the number to extend beyond these [figures] to multiples of ten, it is unlikely” (I.11).

Judging by these five counter-arguments, we can safely conclude that Ibn Khaldun managed to expose, with a high degree of certainty, the unsoundness of the accounts regarding the number of the Israelites. But what else do we learn from this critique? There are at least three major points that Ibn Khaldun communicates in his discussion. First, Ibn Khaldun’s “common sense” arguments are not all that “common.” And this stands to reason, for if these arguments were “common,” then we would not need the science of culture, in addition to other sciences, in order to judge the soundness of historical reports.

For example, it seems sensible to agree with Ibn Khaldun’s rhetorical assertion that “each particular kingdom has a limited portion of guardians. [A portion] which it has the capacity to contain as well as to support its functions, and beyond which it has difficulty maintaining” (I.9). But how can we measure these proportions? Why can Egypt or Syria not sustain hundreds of thousands of Israelites in addition to the indigenous populations in each country? About these and similar questions we need to know more about the geography, the nature of the soil, and the climate of these lands and to judge these facts against similar features in other lands, so that we can compare and contrast the environmental conditions through which human life flourishes or stagnates.

Understanding the necessary physical conditions for, and the limits of, human flourishing, or culture (*‘umrān*), will put us in a better position to judge the number of human beings that a land like Egypt or Syria can sustain. Such rational scrutiny is what the science of culture, as reflected in Ibn Khaldun’s discussion in the first chapter of his *Muqaddima*, is supposed to guide us to. This chapter contains six “prefatory discussions” (*muqadimāt*). In four of these prefatory discussion (i.e., the second, the third, the fourth, and fifth prefatory discussions) Ibn Khaldun provides a long summary of world geography and climate conditions,⁸ explores the possible effects of the environment on the moral and physical character of peoples,⁹ as well as how soil conditions affect the development of culture and how, in turn, this affects the physical and moral characteristics of peoples.¹⁰

The second major point that Ibn Khaldun communicates through his discussion of the number of Israelites has to do with the need to keep an eye firmly fixed on the present as we reflect on the past. This is a point that Ibn Khaldun will bring up again and again in his introduction. In the next section, for example, he will call for a comparison between past and present when critiquing historical reports on the reasons for al-Rashīd’s destruction of the Barmakids (I.19). When making these types of comparisons, we need to keep in mind the difference among historical “conditions” that do not change with time, historical “conditions” that constantly change, and even historical “conditions” that lie in-between. In the example about the Israelites, as well as the examples of the Tubba and the *Surat al-Fajr* (that is, *Sura 89*)—i.e., the other two examples that constitute the

⁸ This is discussed in the “prefatory discussion” (I.73-148: 6-11).

⁹ This is discussed in the third “prefatory discussion” (I.148-155: 12-6), and the fourth “prefatory discussion” (I.155-157: 7-10)

¹⁰ This is discussed in the “prefatory discussion” (I.157 -165: 11-3)

first section of the discussion of the errors and fancies of historians—Ibn Khaldun addresses physical and human conditions that do not change with time, including physical geography, climate zones, the limits of human growth and flourishing, and the nature of war and peace. By understanding these conditions as they exist in the present, we will be able to judge what was possible and what was impossible in historical reports dealing with “occurrences” governed by such conditions. With respect to this point, we see how the value of the rational comparison between past and present extends far beyond the ability to determine likely historical accounts—such as the number of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus—to encourage investigation of the physical realities that surround them. Near the conclusion of his discussion on the Israelites, Ibn Khaldun draws a comparison between reports on the wealth and power of contemporary kingdoms and wealthy individuals and reports about the wealth and power of historical kingdoms and wealthy individuals. Ibn Khaldun states:

We find the totality of contemporary people, when elaborating on tales regarding the dynastic troops of their own or recent time, and exchanging reports about the Muslim and the Christian armies, or [when they] take to figuring out the tax revenues, the expenditures of the ruler (*al-ṣulṭān*), the expenses of the extravagant, and the goods of the very rich, [that they] exaggerate the count, exceed the limits of [recognized] customs, and succumb to the temptations of what is strange; and so, if the record keepers were to uncover the number of their troops, and [if] the conditions of the wealthy with respect to their goods and assets were to be disclosed, and [if] the customs of the extravagant with respect to their expenditures were brought forth, then you will not find a tenth of what they have numbered. This is not more than the soul’s passion for the strange, the tongue’s ease with the excessive and the obliviousness about what has been reviewed and criticized, so that one does not admonish himself for a mistake or a willful [action], nor bring himself back to investigation and search, and, there he gives himself free reign and allows his tongue to roam in the pasture of lies, and [thus] “he purchases idle talk in order to lead [others] astray from the path...”¹¹ of truth. [May] you be spared such a losing bargain. (I.11-12: 20-12)

¹¹ *Quran*, 31:6

The intention of this comparison is to indicate how contemporary reporters like to exaggerate the material conditions of their dynasties and wealthy individuals just as past reporters liked to exaggerate their own accounts. Ultimately, however, the skills we acquire to counter hyperbole in past accounts can be effectively used to counter hyperbole in the present, and thus encourage a much more rationally grounded view of the present.

This brings us to the third point that Ibn Khaldun raises in this critique of the reports of historians. When discussing the “virtue of knowing history,” Ibn Khaldun describes the “work” of history as follows: “It allows us to behold the conditions of those who passed—of nations with respect to their morals, of prophets with respect to their ways of life, and of kings with respect to their dynasties and politics—until the benefit of role-modeling in these is completed for the one who seeks it in religious and worldly conditions” (I.6). In other words, the study of history is morally and politically advantageous. But this moral and political advantage is not immediately obvious in the example of the number of the Israelites. From the second point, we see how the comparison between past and present can be politically advantageous in that it compels us to form more grounded views of physical and political reality. As we will see shortly, however, not all rational examinations of history can be characterized as politically advantageous or salutary. In those cases in which the investigation is not salutary, one must impose limits. And this is the point that Ibn Khaldun hints at in the conclusion of his treatment of the reports on the Israelites.

On the surface, the historical example with which Ibn Khaldun opens his discussion seems innocuous. It comes from a different religious tradition, and it deals

with what appears to be an insignificant issue, i.e., troop numbers. And yet the whole story of the Jewish exodus from Egypt is not only pivotal to the Jewish tradition, but also forms an important part of sacred Muslim history. It is one of those stories that the *Quran* uses as a lesson or *'ibra* for Muslims. It speaks of God's grace and infinite power. The story as told in the *Quran* presupposes awareness of the story as told in the Torah. And though the *Quran* does not speak of the Israelite troops, let alone their numbers, to raise doubts about the soundness of some parts of the story as told in the Torah, compromises the reliability of the Torah as a supplementary source for the *Quran*. Add to this the fact that the story of the flight from Egypt depicts one miracle after another. If we accept the miraculous parts of this story, as a faithful Muslim is told to do, why should we subject any part of it to rational investigation and thus raise doubts about its veracity?

Ibn Khaldun deals with this issue in a somewhat convoluted way, whereby his conclusion seems clear, but the arguments upon which this conclusion are based require analysis. Here is how Ibn Khaldun concludes his discussion of the reports on the Israelites:

It is possible to say that what is customary (*al-'awā'id*) precludes the growth of descendants to that number in [people] other than the Israelites, because this [growth] was a miracle, according to what was transmitted: that among what was revealed to the prophets, their forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Godly prayer be upon them)—is God multiplying their descendants so that they will be more numerous than the stars of the sky and the pebbles of the earth; and God has fulfilled this promise as a bounty to them and [so their increase is] a miracle that breaks custom. Thus what is customary does not oppose this [incident] and no one discredits it. And this is so even if someone opposes this [incident] by discrediting its report—that it was cited only in the Torah, which the Jews, as is recognized, have altered; for the statement (*fa-al-qawl*) regarding this alteration [of the Torah] is, according to the investigators, conjectured and is not manifest, because, as was mentioned by al-Burkhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, custom precludes religious peoples (*ahl al-adyān*) from intentionally doing such a thing to their divine books. Thus, this great growth of the Israelites would be a miracle, a breaking of custom; and [thus] custom—upon judgment of its indicators—[continues to] prevent [such a growth] in others" (I.12-13: 13-5).

In this paragraph, Ibn Khaldun presents two opinions. The first opinion is that the extraordinary or supernatural growth of the Israelite population was a miraculous act, a fulfillment of an earlier promise God made to the forefathers of the Israelites, the prophets “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” In this case, we have to accept the Biblical account on faith. The second opinion is that the Jews altered the genuine text of the Torah. In this case, rejecting on rational grounds this Biblical account would be a justifiable act. Ibn Khaldun shows himself to be of the first opinion, i.e., he seems to accept, on the authority of the Biblical account, the extraordinary growth of the Israelite population as a miraculous act. He raises doubts regarding the opinion that the Jews have altered their sacred text, by pointing out the status of the second “statement” as a mere conjecture that has not been proven—that is not absolutely true. Furthermore, he implies that, according to the prophetic tradition in Islam, as reported in al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “custom precludes religious peoples from intentionally” altering “their divine books.”¹² But if this is indeed Ibn Khaldun’s position regarding the population growth of the Israelites, why did he raise the question in the first place? Why did he open his critique of the historians by dealing with a subject that can be explained away as a miracle, in which rational examination has no final authority? Based on the discussion above, as well as on evidence from other parts of the *Muqaddima*, we address these objections as follows.

Ibn Khaldun illustrates by means of his opening example the risks entailed in the rational investigation of history. The example he chooses for his investigation might seem harmless for someone who does not share in the religious tradition from which the example is taken, but it is very serious for those who faithfully partake in that tradition.

¹² As Rosenthal indicates, it is not clear where in Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ* this interpretation can be found. (Franz Rosenthal, *The Muqaddimah*; p. 21).

Moreover, Ibn Khaldun clearly shows how the rational critique of other religious traditions can have negative consequences on one's own religious tradition if applying the same rational principles. Concern with the sanctity of religious beliefs and for the health of the political community, therefore, requires the acknowledgment of limits on the rational investigation of history. But, clearly, these limits must be balanced in such a way as not to impede the vibrancy of rational activity. Later, in the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun attempts to address this issue by establishing clear limits for the natural, the supernatural, and whatever gray area that might lie in-between these. Thus we find there discussions of geography, climate zones, the social structure of nomadic tribes and cities, the politics and economics of dynasties, as well as the crafts, arts, and sciences that flourish in civilizations. These are all subjects that follow rules and patterns that can be rationally identified and investigated. These kinds of rational subjects, the discussion of which occupy the lion's share of the book, are presented in sharp contrast to "super-natural" subjects, such as soothsaying, fortunetelling, astrology, numerology, and prophecy, covered in the same part of the book. Though the discussions of these latter subjects are given less space in the *Muqaddima* than their "rational" counterparts, they nonetheless provide balanced coverage of the totality of human reality. In the discussion of some of these subjects, Ibn Khaldun clearly rejects the rationale of some like astrology and numerology, asserts the truth of others like prophecy, and he keeps the veracity of others like soothsaying an open question. Here, in the introduction, Ibn Khaldun anticipates the later demarcation in the *Muqaddima* between the natural that is subject to rational investigation and the super-natural that is a matter of faith. By asserting the sanctity of the source for the reported number of Israelites, Ibn Khaldun concludes:

“Thus, this great growth of the Israelites would be a miracle, a breaking of custom; and [thus] custom remains—upon judgment of its indicators—a preclusion [to such growth] in others” (I.13). Miracles are supernatural. Nonetheless, we cannot fully appreciate their supernatural force unless we are fully aware of the force of nature. In this way, Ibn Khaldun’s rational discussion of the Biblical account ends up reinforcing the appreciation by men of faith of the miraculous aspect of this account, rather than compromising their faith.

Ibn Khaldun’s use of the word custom (‘*awā’id*) is highly significant. This term is favored by the theologians (*al-mutakalimūn*) over that of nature (*ṭabī’a*), the central concept that makes philosophic investigation possible. Although Ibn Khaldun is not averse to discussing nature in other parts of the *Muqaddima*, he sometimes uses “custom” as though it were interchangeable with “nature.” This is clearly the way he is using this term here, since he defines a miracle as “the breaking of custom.” What is also significant here is the seamless parallel Ibn Khaldun makes between “the customary course of nature,” and “human custom.” The sanctity of one’s faith has a power over the individual that is comparable to the unalterable natural rules that govern human growth.

As I indicated earlier, Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of the number of Israelites at the time of the Exodus illustrates the main idea of the first section of his critique of past historians: reports that depend on what is and is not physically possible. The second report that Ibn Khaldun deals with in this section concerns the military campaigns of the Tubbas, the ancient kings of Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. The third deals with the existence of the mysterious city, *Iram*, to which the *Quran* alludes. In critiquing these reports, Ibn Khaldun uses almost the same type of reasoning as with the first example,

i.e., judging what is or is not possible according to nature. With each of these two examples, Ibn Khaldun anticipates or emphasizes a particular method or subject that he will treat later in the *Muqaddima*, as well as in the rest of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. For example, when critiquing the reports regarding the Tubbas, Ibn Khaldun focuses attention on the importance of studying geography (I.14-15: 16-10), something which he emphasizes in the first part of the *Muqaddima*, as well as awareness of the geopolitical realities of the times in which the Tubbas' existed (I. 15: 10-13), which he discusses later in the *Ta'rīkh*. With respect to the reports regarding *Iram*, Ibn Khaldun emphasizes the need not only to question the logical possibility of a report, but also to anticipate what the historical record should show had these reports been true.

With the reports regarding *Iram*, Ibn Khaldun concludes the first section of his critique of the historians. He turns next to reports regarding the moral conduct of famous Arab rulers.

III. B. Hārūn Al-Rashīd's Destruction of the Barmakids

As noted, this section of the second part of the introduction provides three main examples of reports dealing with the moral character and moral conduct of famous rulers. The first example, which deals with the reasons for Hārūn al-Rashīd's destruction of the Barmakids, not only frames the moral theme of this section, but also determines the subject matter of the other two examples, namely, the Abbasid dynasty at the apex of its power and the beginning of its precipitous decline.

Al-Rashīd's destruction of the Barmakids is arguably one of the most sensational stories in Muslim history. The shroud of mystery surrounding the true facts of this story

seems to give the imagination of many a historian license to construct details as they see fit. The end result is always an account that includes the basic ingredients of a perennial melodrama: drinking parties, lust, intrigues, betrayal, illicit sex, and gratuitous violence.

We shall begin first with some of the details that historians, medieval as well as modern, seem to agree on. The Barmakids were Persian clients of the Abbasids, whose association goes back to the early manifestation of the Abbasids' power. The first Barmakid of note was Khālīd Ibn Barmak, a skilled administrator, secretary, and bureaucrat to the first Abbasid Caliph, Abū al-‘Abbās ‘Abd Allāh al-Saffāh (reigned 749-754). While the relationship between the Abbasids and the Barmakids had its ups and downs, it was clearly more than a simple master-servant relationship. It is reported, for example, that Khālīd Ibn Barmak “had the honor of seeing his own daughter suckled by al-Saffāh’s wife whilst his own wife acted as foster-mother to his sovereign’s daughter.”¹³ Khālīd’s son Yaḥyā was—in addition to other important administrative offices he undertook at different periods of his career—the “secretary tutor to Prince Hārūn [al-Rashīd],”¹⁴ The latter’s bond with Yaḥyā was so strong, according to Ibn Khaldun, that he (i.e., al-Rashīd) used to call him “father” (I.20: 16). One of Yaḥyā’s two sons, al-Faḍl, was “the ‘foster-brother’ of Hārūn [al-Rashīd].”¹⁵ Al-Faḍl was also the tutor for al-Rashīd’s son al-Amīn, while al-Faḍl’s brother Ja‘far was the tutor of al-Rashīd’s other son, al-Ma’mūn.

After the mysterious death of his brother al-Hādī, the fourth Abbasid caliph, al-Rashīd became the dynasty’s new ruler. As soon as he became caliph, al-Rashīd “hastened to summon Yaḥyā and entrusted him with the direction of affairs, investing

¹³ D. Sourdel, “Al-Barāmika,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954-) p. I: 1033a.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. I: 1034a

¹⁵ Ibid., p. I: 1033b

him, according to tradition, with a general delegation of authority.... Yaḥyā remained in office for seventeen years, from 170/786 to 187/803, this period being referred to by some authors as ‘the reign of the Barmakids (*sulṭān Āl Barmak*).’¹⁶

Although historians disagree on the extent of the Barmakids’ power, evidence suggests that this family was indeed very influential. They staffed the dynasty’s highest offices and the governorships of important territories with family members, clients, and allies. During their period of control, the Abbasid dynasty witnessed its greatest surge of cultural growth and maturity. They were loved by many for their patronage of the sciences and arts as well as charitable works. And though they were apparently firm in their alliance with the Abbasids against the claim to power by the ‘Alid Shi‘a, there is evidence that they harbored sympathies and support for these claims. The Barmakids’ influence came to a sudden end when al-Rashīd ordered the killing of Ja‘far and the imprisonment of al-Faḍl along with his father Yaḥyā. With one notable exception, the Barmakids’ property was confiscated, and the rest of their family, clients, and allies were either imprisoned or removed from positions of power.

So what caused the sudden and violent destruction of the Barmakids? The attempt to give a coherent answer in the midst of few hard facts was the objective of many a sensationalist account. Let us turn to these stories and to Ibn Khaldun’s analysis of them.

This is how Ibn Khaldun summarizes the accounts transmitted by historians regarding the destruction of the Barmakids:

Among the interpolated (*al-madkhūla*) narratives of the historians is the one they all transmit about the reason for al-Rashīd’s destruction (*nakba*) of the Barmakids, which pertains to the story of his sister, al-‘Abbāsah, and his client, Ja‘far Ibn Yaḥyā Ibn Khālid: that out of al-Rashīd’s obsession with the presence of both when he is imbibing wine with them, he permitted them—as a safeguard

¹⁶ Ibid., I: 1034a

in their association in his company—to draw a marriage contract not to be consummated. And that al-‘Abbāsah, out of ardent love for Ja‘far, tricked him, when he was in a condition of drunkenness, into being alone with her, and so he had intercourse with her, and thus she became pregnant. All of this was conveyed to al-Rashīd who became enraged. (I.18-19: 17-4)

Ibn Khaldun shows his displeasure with this sensationalist account by summarizing, as austere as possible, its main elements, briefly pointing out details which he will immediately dispute. But in order to understand Ibn Khaldun’s critique better, we need to expand a little on the details of this story. According to historians, al-Rashīd used to enjoy drinking wine (*khamr*) and used to enjoy private drinking parties, in which his favorite companions were, apparently, his sister al-‘Abbāsah and his client, Ja‘far Ibn Yahyā. So according to these reports, al-Rashīd, who as head of the Muslim community is expected to uphold the Law, privately participated in an activity that runs contrary to the explicit text of the Law, i.e., the consumption of wine. The presence of al-‘Abbāsah in close company with the “stranger” Ja‘far might also be considered yet another infraction against the Law, which frowns upon private associations between men and women who are not close relatives. According to Islamic tradition, such an association is permissible if it was supervised by a close male relative to the female (*maḥram*), such as a father, a son, or a brother. This apparently was not enough for al-Rashīd, who decided to allow his sister to draw a marriage contract with his client Ja‘far. Again, considering the private nature of these drinking parties, the only obvious reason why al-Rashīd would make such a move is to guarantee that the Law is not infringed upon. As such, if the historical reports are to be believed, al-Rashīd was more than willing to break the Law with respect to drinking wine, and to exceed what is required by the Law to safeguard the permissibility of the company with which he enjoys breaking the Law.

Ibn Khaldun's brief summary of the reports regarding al-Rashīd's destruction of the Barmakids points out how Ja'far is presented by the historians as a sympathetic figure. Al-Rashīd desires his company on par with that of his sister. It is al-'Abbāsah who falls in "ardent love" with him (*li-shaghafihā min ḥubbiḥ*). Sober, Ja'far apparently will not entertain consummating his marriage with al-'Abbāsah. She had to devise a trick to be alone with him and to intoxicate him before she is able to satisfy her uncontrollable passion. Al-'Abbāsah gets pregnant, her "secret affair" becomes known, and though Ja'far did not do anything illicit—she is after all his lawful wife—al-Rashīd orders his execution and the destruction of his family.

Ibn Khaldun begins his refutation by pointing out how far "off the mark" this story is "from al-'Abbāsah's position with respect to her religiosity, her parentage, and her majesty." Lest his readers forget, Ibn Khaldun reminds them of al-'Abbāsah's honorable family, "for she *is* the descendant of 'Abd Allāh Ibn al-'Abbās"—a first cousin of the prophet Muḥammad—"separated from him by only four men, who, after him, were the nobles of the creed and the greats of the religion" (I.19: 6-7). And if this not enough of a reminder, Ibn Khaldun finds it necessary to spell out this pedigree in detail: "She is al-'Abbāsah the daughter of Muḥammad al-Mahdī, the son of 'Abd Allāh Abī Ja'far al-Manṣūr, the son of Muḥammad al-Sajjād, the son of 'Abd Allāh, the Quran interpreter, the son of al-'Abbās, the uncle of the prophet (Godly prayer and peace be upon him)" (I.19: 7-10). According to Ibn Khaldun, it is impossible for a woman of such an honorable background to behave as disgracefully as the historians suggest. And again he reminds us:

She is the daughter of a caliph, the sister of a caliph, surrounded by great kingly possessions and the prophetic caliphate. Whichever side she would turn her head, there she would find [the legacy of] the companionship of the Messenger

and his uncles, the *imāmit* of the religious community, the light of Revelation, and the descending place of the Angels. She is close to the nomadic Arab times, the simplicity of the creed, and far from the customs of luxury and the pastures of licentiousness. Where would chastity and modesty be sought then, if she herself lacked them? And where would sanctity and purity be found, if they did not exist in her house? (I.19: 10-15)

But it is not only the deep religious background that would preclude al-‘Abbāsah from being associated with such a disreputable affair, but also her grand royal status, which would not allow her to mix her “Arab nobility with a client of the foreign type” (I.19: 16-17). The same argument goes for al-Rashīd, as Ibn Khaldun insists:

And how would al-Rashīd, consistent with his high merit and the greatness of his fathers, stomach being related in marriage to foreign clients. And if the contemplative person (*al-muta’mil*) reflected (*naẓara*), with the reflection of the fair minded (*naẓar al-munṣif*), on this issue and made an analogy between al-‘Abbāsah and a daughter of one of the greatest kings in his own time, he would then disdain, scorn, and persist in refuting as a lie such a [deed] with a mere client of her dynasty, and who is subject to the authority (*sulṭān*) of her own folk. [The case is more so considering] the incomparable stature of al-‘Abbāsah in relation to the rest of the people. (I.19-20: 19-5)

Ibn Khaldun looks in the historical records for a more sober explanation of the execution of Ja‘far and the destruction of his family. He finds this explanation in the historical reports describing the political conditions of the Abbasid dynasty. These reports speak of the Barmakids’ control of the tax revenues, management of the bureaucracy, command of the military, and supervision of the royal chamber. In their presence, al-Rashīd appeared no more than as a figurehead. As such, Ibn Khaldun concludes:

What led to the catastrophic destruction of the Barmakids is their independent control of the dynasty and their concealment of tax revenues.... Thus they overpowered [al-Rashīd] and shared in his authority. In their presence he had no way to discharge the affairs of his kingly realm. And their influence became great, their renown widely spread, and they cultivated the ranks and offices of the dynasty with their own boys and patronage, blocking all others from the ministry, the secretariat, the military leadership, the chamberlain, and [whatever position concerns] the sword and the pen. It has been said that in al-Rashīd’s home there were twenty five chiefs, in between a military officer and a secretarial official, all children of Yahyā Ibn Khālīd. They crowded, with respect to these positions, the

people of the dynasty from all sides, and they vigorously pushed them away.
(I.20: 5-14)

What is interesting here is that Ibn Khaldun, when speaking about the power of the Barmakids, does not openly entertain the possibility that the historical reports upon which he relies might contain exaggerations. It is as if to counter these accounts regarding al-‘Abbāsah and Ja‘far, which paint the Barmakids as victims of a ruthless tyrant, that Ibn Khaldun finds it necessary to give free reign to accounts painting the Barmakids as usurpers of power. And just as he repeatedly reminds us of al-‘Abbāsah’s and al-Rashīd’s royal lineage and their relation to the prophet’s family, Ibn Khaldun reminds us again and again of the Barmakids’ monopolization of the dynasty’s power:

Thus, they had exclusive control of authority (*al-sultān*), their boldness became great, and their glory enlarged. Heads turned in their direction alone, necks bowed in submission to them, and hopes, beyond them, dashed. The gifts of kings and the splendid offerings of princes would come to them from the furthest reaches [of the land]. In order to flatter them and gain their favor, the tax revenues snuck into their treasuries. They gave generously to the [Alid] Shī‘a men and to the great among those related [to the prophet’s family], and they surrounded them with favors. They provided for the destitute, from among the houses of the nobles, and relieved the one who suffers. Their praise surpassed the praise of their own caliph. To those who came asking relief, they gave abundant rewards and privileges. They rested control over the villages and the hamlets [around] districts and metropolises in every royal territory, so that they grieved the inner circle, they incited the resentment of the elite, and they irritated the [legitimate] rulers (*ahl al-wilāya*). (I.20-21: 14-9)

We see here Ibn Khaldun’s condemnation of the Barmakids for positioning themselves as the supreme authority of the lands, the controllers of the tax revenues, and the dispensers of the affairs of the dynasty. But we also see that such a condemnation is not unequivocal. The Barmakids did indeed grab power away from the Abbasids, the legitimate rulers of the dynasty, but, according to Ibn Khaldun’s summary, they seem to have used this power well. After all, they provided for the destitute, relieved the sufferers,

and rewarded supplicants. And if they caused the resentment of the Abbasids, whose source of legitimacy came from being descendants of the Hashemite tribe of the prophet, the Barmakids showed themselves sympathetic to the supporters of a much closer branch of the prophet's family, the Alid Shī'ā. As we will see shortly, it is the sympathy toward the Alid, the Abbasid's rivals, which finally pushed al-Rashīd to take drastic measures against the Barmakids.

Beyond the blame or praise of the Barmakids, Ibn Khaldun anticipates through this discussion an important theme which he will detail in the second, third, and fourth chapters of his *Muqaddima*: the origins and structure of dynastic power.¹⁷ Recall how in the preface, Ibn Khaldun argued that one of the major failings of the inferior historians is their inability to give an account of the "origin[s]" of dynasties, to explain the "reason[s]" which led to the unfurling of [their] banner[s] and made apparent [their] signs, nor what caused [them] to stop at the limits [they] reached" (I.5: 2-3). This is a problem that *Kitāb al-'Ibar* goes on to address by showing the "causes and reasons for the origins of dynasties and cultures" (I.5: 16). The discussion of the fall of the Barmakids shows us

¹⁷ The subject of the second chapter of the *Muqaddima* is "primitive culture (*al-'umrān al-badawī*), savage nations and tribes (*al-umam al-waḥshīyya*), and the accidental conditions that happen in these." In this chapter Ibn Khaldun draws a preliminary distinction between primitive or nomadic groups (*ajyāl al-badwū*) and civilized or settled groups (*ajyāl al-haḍar*). He then goes on to provide systematic analysis of primitive/nomadic groups, their material conditions, their moral character, and their familial structure. It is here that Ibn Khaldun introduces his famous concept of *'aṣabiyya* or group feeling, which informs the social structure of primitive/nomadic groups, and discusses its function in relation to advanced political associations.

The subject of the third chapter of the *Muqaddima* is the "general dynasty (*al-dawla al-'āma*), the kingship (*al-mulk*), the caliphate (*al-khilāfa*), the ranks of authority (*al-marātīb al-sultāniya*) and the accidental conditions that happen in all of these." In this chapter Ibn Khaldun discusses, among other relevant topics, different forms of government and governance in civilized/settled settings, the origins of dynastic and kingly authority, factors that contribute to the strengths and weaknesses of dynasties, the material conditions of dynasties, and the moral character of rulers and ruled.

The subject of the fourth chapter of the *Muqaddima* is "towns (*al-buldān*), metropolises (*amṣār*), and all [types of] cultivations (*sā'ir al-'umrān*), as well as the accidental conditions that happen in these." In this chapter Ibn Khaldun will explore the relationship between kingship and the city/metropolis. He will describe, among other relevant subjects, the political and material conditions that make cities possible, the conditions necessary for well-maintained cities, the difference between Muslim and non-Muslim cities, and the reasons for the decline of cities.

that not only historians, but also experienced politicians can, with grave consequences, fail to understand the fundamental realities of dynastic power. Ibn Khaldun's summary of accounts regarding the Barmakids' authority portrays a family that has become intoxicated with power. They might have been able to control the bureaucracy and to staff the ranks of the army, but they lacked the legitimacy and power base that are necessary for sustaining such high levels of control. As Ibn Khaldun reminds us on more than one occasion, the Barmakids were *foreign* clients of the Abbasids. The Abbasids' power came not only from the fact that they belonged to the prophet's tribe, but also from the fact that it is an Arab dynasty supported by powerful Arab tribes. Lacking a power base, the Barmakids were doomed to fail by the very fact that they could not protect themselves from the conspiracies and intrigues that the exercise of power inevitably engenders. Ibn Khaldun observes:

And thus the way of competition and envy were uncovered for them. To their soft beds crawled the slanderous scorpions of the dynasty, to the extent that Banū Qaḥṭabah, the maternal uncles of Ja'far, were some of the greatest slanderers against them. The envy that settled in their hearts against them was not softened by the kindness that comes with blood ties nor was it restrained by the dictates of family relations. (I.21: 7-11)

The more power the Barmakids acquired, the bolder in wielding it they became. Their Alid sympathies became more apparent, which could not have sat well with the highest authority in the land, Sultan al-Rashīd. The Caliph found common cause with the increasing number of the Barmakids' enemies. No matter how much good the Barmakids intended to do with their exercise of power, they failed to understand the fundamentals of political reality and thus they prepared the way for their own destruction.

Simultaneous with this, was the outgrowth in their master of jealousy, and the frustration with, and the scorn of, confinement as well as the rest of the resentments that began with the Barmakids' minor audacities and ended, through

their persistence in their ways, with major infringements. Like their story of Yaḥyā Ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Ḥassan Ibn al-Ḥussian Ibn ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, the brother of Muḥammad al-Mahdī, nicknamed the ‘pure Soul’, who revolted against al-Manṣūr [al-Rashīd’s grandfather]. This Yaḥyā is the one whom al-Faḍl Ibn Yaḥyā, from the country of Daylam, brought back under an immunity from punishment written by al-Rashīd. According to al-Ṭabarī, [al-Faḍl] spent a million dirham [in this affair]. Al-Rashīd handed Yaḥyā to Ja‘far in order to detain him in his house and to keep an eye on him. And so Ja‘far imprisoned Yaḥyā for a period of time. Afterwards audaciousness led Ja‘far to release him and, high-handedly, to allow him to escape—out of concern, as he claimed, for the blood of the Prophet’s family, and in a display of audacity with respect to the judgment of the sultan. When this was secretly conveyed to al-Rashīd, he asked Ja‘far about Yaḥyā. Ja‘far, who quickly understood [what was behind this question] answered, “I released him.” Al-Rashīd showed him an approving face, and kept his resentment to himself. Thus Ja‘far paved the way against himself and against his people, so that their throne was toppled, their skies came crashing down on them, and the ground sank underneath them and their household, and their [glory] days became a precedent and an example to others. Whoever contemplates their reports, explores the ways of dynasties and their ways of life, would find this [conclusion] effectively verified and the reasons for it [clearly] laid out. (I.21-22: 11-10)

It is clear that Ibn Khaldun has provided here a different account explaining the reasons for the downfall of the Barmakids and, in the course of this explanation, raises doubt regarding the sensationalist account about Ja‘far and al-‘Abbāsah described above. Considering the reports which describe Ja‘far’s bold use of the dynasty’s power, he is unlikely to have been a close drinking companion of al-Rashīd, let alone to have been his brother-in-law. Although the sensationalist story of Ja‘far and al-‘Abbāsah is the most popular among the accounts explaining the fall of the Barmakids (I.18: 17-18), Ibn Khaldun shows, by examining the totality of the historical record, how faulty this popular account is, and he advances a more likely interpretation for this event. But as he suggests at the conclusion of the above quotation, the examination of the totality of the historical record does not mean only the *reading* of this record. After all, those who read the reports of Ja‘far’s intoxication with wine before al-‘Abbāsah (I.19: 3-4), also read accounts that shows Ja‘far’s intoxication with power before al-Rashīd (I.22: 5). But readers are not

always able to judge how the one report contradicts the other. In order to effectively sift through the historical evidence, and to be able to distinguish likely from unlikely accounts pertaining to politically significant events, Ibn Khaldun suggests that scholars need general political knowledge informing their evaluation of historical evidence. This general political knowledge pertains to the “ways of dynasties” and “the ways of life” of those who constitute these dynasties, subjects which Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima* will discuss in detail.

Ibn Khaldun’s argument here seems to have reached its desired conclusion. He seemingly refutes the sensationalist account regarding Ja‘far and al-‘Abbāsah, presents a persuasive counter explanation regarding the downfall of the Barmakids, and by doing so, provides demonstration of another aspect to his rational examination of history. And yet, as the reader soon discovers, this does not mark the end of Ibn Khaldun’s treatment of al-Rashīd’s moral conduct. Apparently unsatisfied with his earlier argument regarding the royal lineage and the impeccable religious background of the Abbasids, Ibn Khaldun decides to visit this subject again. He devotes the rest of this section of the introduction to historical reports that communicate the morality and piety of al-Rashīd and his ancestors and that refute other historical reports that impugn the moral character of al-Rashīd’s son, al-Ma’mūn. To a certain extent, this apparent digression by Ibn Khaldun seems reasonable. The strength of his “refutation” of the sensationalist story regarding Ja‘far and al-‘Abbāsah was based on the strength of other historical reports better explaining the downfall of the Barmakids. In other words, the contrary accounts that Ibn Khaldun favors provide a good explanation for the destruction of the Barmakids, but these same accounts cannot be effectively used to prove the moral and religious uprightness of the Abbasids.

Reflecting on the reasons for Ibn Khaldun's defense of the Abbasids and on the manner of his defense reveals yet another aspect of the limits Ibn Khaldun imposes on the rational examination of history.

As indicated in Ibn Khaldun's opening statement, a major reason for people's interest in history is moral, namely, to find in the examples of previous nations and important models for proper moral conduct. For Arab and Muslim audiences, the Abbasid era—especially during the rule of al-Mansūr, al-Rashīd, and al-Ma'mūn—were one of most significant periods in Arab and Islamic history. As the formative period of Islam, viewed as the Golden Age of Islam by many among the faithful, the Abbasid era represents the height of Arab power, the last period during which the majority of Muslim lands were formally united under a central authority. This is the era when Muslims expanded widely in both the East and the West. With the translation of major intellectual works of ancient civilizations, and the conversion to Islam of many “foreign” peoples, Muslims became much more interested and aware of the world around them. Major works on philosophy, science, theology, linguistics, history, and literature, were written during this period, shaping the intellectual face of Islam and dominating the political-theological debates within it for centuries to come. Ibn Khaldun alluded to the intellectual importance of this period in the course of his general description in the preface of the development of historiography in Islam. He indicated there how the Abbasid period, along with the Umayyad period that preceded it, shaped the form and content of Islamic historiography and how that in turn influenced the approach of future historians—an influence that was positive at first, as in the case of the critical methods of Ibn Ḥayyān and Ibn al-Raḳīq, but then degenerated into the blind imitation of those who are “dull in

nature or who embraced dullness.” (I.4). To the importance of the theological, scientific, philosophic, and literary production of the Abbasid period, Ibn Khaldun devotes the bulk of the fifth and sixth parts of his *Muqaddima*, where he will discuss the origins and the development of arts and sciences in the course of Islamic history. So, contrary to his earlier claim, Ibn Khaldun is well aware that the Abbasid period, and especially the time of al-Rashīd and al-‘Abbāsah, was not that close to the “nomadic Arab times,” and the “simplicity of the creed” (*sadhājī al-dīn*; I.19).

It is not hard to see how the evaluation of this period and of its intellectual heritage can be greatly influenced, especially in the eyes of the general public, by the view of the moral conduct of the Abbasids, who were the highest political symbols of this period. Accounts that speak of the Abbasids’ love of drinking parties (I.19: 1; I.26: 13-17; I.28: 11), or that insinuate that their highest judges were inclined toward pedophilia (I.27: 8-9) serve, in the minds of the public, as definitive proofs that the Abbasids were deep into the “customs of luxury and the pastures of licentiousness” (I.19: 13-14). As a corollary to this moral judgment, it is easy to dismiss much of the scientific, philosophic, and literary production of that period as the manifestation of dangerous innovations. But there is another equally important objective behind Ibn Khaldun’s defense of the Abbasids, an objective which has to do with individuals who, impressed by the affluence of these times, see in the sensationalist reports regarding the Abbasids’ moral conduct a justification for their own morally questionable behavior. History, in this respect, ceases to be a guide “in religious and worldly conditions” (I.8) and degenerates into an excuse for abominable actions. As Ibn Khaldun argues:

The likenesses of these [sensationalist] tales are many, and, in the books of the historian, they are well known. Indulgence in prohibited pleasures and [the desire to] expose the shield of manliness, are what calls for the establishment of, and the

talk about, these [tales]. In what they [i.e., those who write these reports] do in obedience to their pleasures, they excuse through [the example of] notables (*al-qawm*). Thus you see them often infatuated with reports similar to these; plucking them as they sift through the pages of [historical] registries. Had they identified with their [role] models' other conditions—[with] the attributes of perfection that is suitable to, and famous about, them—that would have been better for them. (I.29: 3-10)

Ibn Khaldun's argument here comes as close as possible to a categorical declaration that the historical record regarding the moral conduct of *all* notable individuals—and not only those he is discussing in this section—*must* contain contradictory aspects. Strictly speaking, what Ibn Khaldun admonishes here is not the fact that there are reports that apparently impugn the character of notable individuals. Rather, he condemns the choice of selecting these disreputable reports over those that celebrate the moral “perfection” of these same individuals. As we will soon have occasion to judge, for Ibn Khaldun historians have a moral responsibility towards their readers, a responsibility requiring them to abandon “neutrality” when reporting about the moral character and conduct of distinguished individuals. However, as we will also see, Ibn Khaldun, as the originator of a new science wishes to portray to his “learned” (I.6) readers an accurate picture of the complex nature of human society and of the individuals who cultivate such a society. In order to better understand how Ibn Khaldun navigates between these two apparently contradictory objectives, we turn back to his treatment of the Abbasids' moral character.

Not content with the general account that he gave at the beginning of this section regarding the nobility of the al-Rashīd's family, Ibn Khaldun recounts reports speaking of the piety and moral stature of al-Rashīd, of his grandfather (Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr), of his son (al-Ma'mūn), and even of his son's closest friend and judge (Yaḥyā Ibn Aktham). He begins by addressing the accusations that al-Rashīd used to drink wine and to enjoy

drinking parities (I.23). Ibn Khaldun argues forcefully that this description runs contrary to the apparently more credible reports which speak of al-Rashīd's fulfillment of his duties as caliph with respect to his guardianship of the creed and the dispensation of justice; of reports that speak of him keeping company with the learned and with saints; of his debates and communications with great religious figures; of his crying before sermons; of his excessive prayer every day; of the balance he maintained between his religious and military duties, so that he would engage in military campaigns in one year and perform the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in another (I.23)

Having asserted al-Rashīd's piety as a grown man, Ibn Khaldun moves on to argue how reports about this caliph's carousing are in direct contradiction with his family's legacy. As evidence, Ibn Khaldun brings up the example of Abū Ja'far al-Manṣūr, al-Rashīd's grandfather who died when the latter was a "young boy" (*innamā khalafahu ghulāman*; I.23: 18), which, apparently, must have had an impact on the character of his grandson. According to Ibn Khaldun, al-Manṣūr was well known for his deep knowledge and religiosity (I.24: 1). He was a close friend to the famous Muslim jurist, Imam Mālik Ibn Anas. As Ibn Khaldun reports,

It is [al-Manṣūr] who said to Mālik, when he advised him to compose the *Muwatta'*, "O Abū 'Abd Allāh, no one else has remained on the face of [this] Earth who is more learned than I and you. I am occupied by [the running of] the caliphate, and so you [have to] establish for the people a book by which they will benefit. Avoid in it the leniency of Ibn 'Abbās as well as the strictness of Ibn 'Umar, and make it very accessible to the people (*watṭi'hu li-al-nās tawṭi'a*)."

Mālik [later] said: "By God, on that day he taught me the [art of] composition. (I. 24: 2-6)

Beyond his knowledge and piety, and despite the fact that he was the head of a very powerful and wealthy dynasty, al-Manṣūr was apparently an ascetic in daily life. Ibn Khaldun recalls an account in which al-Rashīd's father, al-Mahdī, finds al-Manṣūr

supervising tailors who were patching the clothes of his children, because he did not want to spend public funds on his own family (I.24: 6-12).

And if intimate accounts of the integrity of al-Rashīd's immediate family are not enough to dispel the accusation that he frequented drinking parties, Ibn Khaldun argues how these accusations run contrary to the caliph's Bedouin Arab heritage and customs, to which "simple times" al-Rashīd was close in age. According to Ibn Khaldun, Arab nobility even before Islam avoided drinking wine, which they considered a reprehensible act (I.24: 15-19).

In addition to historical reports that speak to al-Rashīd's character, the character of his forefathers and of his Arab heritage—and thus that directly call into question those reports that speak of al-Rashīd's carousing—Ibn Khaldun presents a variety of reports, through the examination of which one can indirectly deduce al-Rashīd's aversion to drinking wine. He begins with an account detailing how a non-Muslim physician to al-Rashīd takes home without permission a dish that was prepared for his master. The reason for this apparently brazen act of theft is the fact that this food would have spoiled if it was not treated by wine, a liquid that the physician knew al-Rashīd would not consume (I.25: 10-14). Another report describes how al-Rashīd ordered the imprisonment of Abū al-Nawās—famous for his poems celebrating the hedonistic lifestyle of hard drinking, fornication, and homosexuality—when the poet's excessive drinking of wine "was brought to his [i.e., al-Rashīd's] attention" (I.25: 14-15). And as a parallel to his earlier defense, in which he addressed first al-Rashīd's own character and then referred back to the uprightness of his parentage and the customs of his Arab ancestors, Ibn Khaldun concludes with reports speaking of his Arab background. With respect to these

reports, Ibn Khaldun describes how historians such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Masʿūdī were in agreement that when earlier Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs would ride in public, they adorned their weapons and horses with simple silver jewelry. He concludes that just as these earlier caliphs, which include al-Rashīd, were modest in their dress, then they must have been moderate in their drinking. Ibn Khaldun takes this opportunity to point out to his readers that the question of how the primitive/nomadic origins of a dynasty influence its later development will be addressed in detail in the first book of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*, i.e., the *Muqaddima*.

Ibn Khaldun continues his valiant defense of the moral character of the Abbasids in the second and third examples of what he describes as the “interpolated narratives of the historians” (I.18: 17-18). In the second example, he discusses reports that claim that the caliph al-Maʿmūn and his judge, Ibn Aktham, were drinking companions (I.26: 12-17). And within this context, Ibn Khaldun takes the opportunity to refute accounts suggesting that Ibn Aktham was a lover of boys (I.27: 8-11). In the third example, Ibn Khaldun discusses yet more historical reports that speak of al-Maʿmūn’s love of drinking and of his walking the nights in Baghdad looking for some kind of wanton adventure (I.28: 2-13). In refuting these accounts, Ibn Khaldun follows the same method he used with respect to the reports regarding Jaʿfar and al-ʿAbbāsah, namely, countering these sensationalist accounts with others that speak of al-Maʿmūn and Ibn Aktham’s piety and moral probity. These morally-infused counter-narratives are given weight and credibility over the sensationalist accounts by what Ibn Khaldun deems the likely behavior and suitable companions of a ruling family like the Abbasids.

As I argued earlier, Ibn Khaldun aims at two potentially contradictory objectives. The first objective is to direct historians, through scientific-like arguments, to promote what is politically salutary for the community at large. This goal includes, among other things, emphasizing positive moral characteristics of historically significant figures and dynasties. The second is to encourage the rational examination of the predominant opinions of the political community by means of reflection on history. This goal requires, among other things, recognition of the human subjects under study, be that subject a ruler, an administrator, or a man of knowledge. This means recognition of the fact that all (or almost all) human beings contain within themselves contradictions, so that the same individual who performs acts judged highly or praise-worthy is capable of performing at the same time acts judged to be inferior or blame-worthy.

The detailed picture that I have provided of Ibn Khaldun's defense regarding the moral character of the Abbasids will help us better understand the intricate way in which he navigates between these two objectives. If we follow Ibn Khaldun's own advice, by looking not only at what the historical report wishes to communicate explicitly, but also reflecting on what we can deduce from it implicitly, we discover the following: with respect to almost every argument that Ibn Khaldun advances in defense of al-Rashīd, al-'Abbāsah, al-Ma'mūn, or Ibn Aktham, he provides details—whether in the immediate defense itself or later on in the introduction—that raise questions regarding the strength of each of these defensive arguments.¹⁸ As we will see shortly, these questions, in and of themselves, do not suggest the truth of the accusations against the Abbasids, but rather

¹⁸ It is because of the deliberate questions which Ibn Khaldun provides with respect to his defense, that I did not attempt to provide a comparison between his version of historical events and the sources, declared or not, from which Ibn Khaldun provides his evidence. Moreover, I declined to provide additional information regarding the reports Ibn Khaldun discussed beyond what is generally known by his immediate Arab audiences, as for example my note regarding the hedonistic character of Abī al-Nawās' poetry.

they reflect the uncertainty of answers regarding the moral conduct of historical figures and point toward a more nuanced treatment of morality in the *Muqaddima*.

We shall begin first with Ibn Khaldun's discussion of reports regarding the accusation of the Abbasids' illicit drinking of wine. What is interesting about this discussion is that Ibn Khaldun, while arguing the sobriety of the Abbasids, brings out the open not only the accusation that al-Rashīd, al-'Abbāsah, and their client Ja'far participated in drinking parties, but he also mentions reports that bring up the same accusation against al-Ma'mūn, al-Ma'mūn's wife Burān (I.28-29: 2-3), and al-Ma'mūn's friend and judge Ibn Aktham. One begins to wonder whether Ibn Khaldun is protesting too much. Moreover, in the midst of his spirited refutation of these "baseless accounts"—in which he goes back as far as pre-Islamic times (*al-jāhiliyya*; I.24) to argue that drinking wine was considered contrary to the customs of Arab nobility—Ibn Khaldun informs us that it was customary for the Abbasids to drink a type of alcoholic beverage called date wine (*nabīdh al-tamr*; I.25). He insists, however, that this type of drink was allowed by the 'Iraqī religious school (*'alā madhhab ahl al-'irāq*), since it is apparently much less potent than pure wine (*al-khamr al-ṣāfi*; I.25-26).

Ibn Khaldun refers us to reports that speak of al-Rashīd's fulfillment of his duties as caliph, of his guardianship of the creed, of his dispensation of justice, and of his extreme piety, reports which contradict the description of him as a night reveler. And yet, in the very reports in which he describes the power of the Barmakids, Ibn Khaldun alludes to great civil strife during al-Rashīd's reign, which is hardly the outcome of effective political leadership (I.21: 2-4; I.21-22: 15-3). In the next part of the introduction, in which Ibn Khaldun deals with three founders of dynasties—two of which

were rivals to the Abbasids—we see evidence that the cracks in the central authority of the Abbasids were clearly visible during the reign of al-Rashīd. As Ibn Khaldun argues, al-Rashīd was too weak to stop the political decline of his dynasty and at times he relied on deceit and conspiracy in order to get rid of his enemies (I.35-36: 16-14).

Of course, one can argue that al-Rashīd's effectiveness as a ruler bears little on the judgment of his moral character. He could have been a weak caliph, but remained upright with respect to his piety and the fulfillment of his religious duties. And yet, here again, Ibn Khaldun's account of al-Rashīd's piety and moral probity is problematic. There are first the reports that speak of al-Rashīd's excessive daily prayer as well as his habit of fighting one year and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca in another. Such reports seem akin to the ones in which reporters "exaggerate the count, exceed the limits of [recognized] customs, and succumb to the temptations of what is strange" (I.11: 4-5)—i.e., to those categories of historical reports that Ibn Khaldun criticized in the previous section. Moreover, these acts of excessive piety seem contrary to some aspects of al-Rashīd's character as reported by Ibn Khaldun himself. For example, al-Rashīd apparently had many spies and was easily given to the "slandorous scorpions of the dynasty" (I.21: 8-9; I.22-23: 14-2). Ibn Khaldun informs us that al-Rashīd had a famous court jester, Ibn Abī Maryam, who used to entertain him "at night" (I.23: 11-12). This seems strange considering that al-Rashīd was supposedly an early riser, who always performed the dawn prayer (I.23: 9), and it appears to be at odds with the supposedly simple lifestyle of the Abbasids (I.23-24: 16-14). But what is most telling in this report is the episode between al-Rashīd and Ibn Abī Maryam, which Ibn Khaldun provides as evidence of al-Rashīd's piety. He reports that, while al-Rashīd was performing his prayer,

Ibn Abī Maryam heard him recite the following verse from the *Quran*, “What is wrong with me that I don’t worship the one who created me?” (Q 36: 22). Ibn Abī Maryam quickly responds, “By God, I don’t know what is,” at which comment al-Rashīd “could not help but laugh,” before turning “angrily” toward the jester and declaring: “O Ibn Abī Maryam, [you dare to make fun] with respect to prayer also! Beware! Beware! Everything is open to you except the Quran and the creed” (I.23: 11-16). This episode is interesting for two reasons. First, there is the familiarity of the jester with his king—a familiarity that the supposedly pious al-Rashīd has clearly encouraged—which made it possible for Ibn Abī Maryam to interrupt al-Rashīd in his public prayer. Second, there is al-Rashīd’s sudden laughter with respect to a verse that speaks of a sincere quest for the true object of one’s worship. This immediate impulse to laughter seems to confirm the truth behind the jester’s jibe, i.e., al-Rashīd is not sincere in his own worship. Is the joke funny because it is true?

A universally recognized indicator of the uprightness of a man’s moral character has to do with how kindly he treats his own family and kin. Ibn Khaldun, for example, bemoans how the “envy that settled in [the] hearts” of the Barmakids’ own kin, Banū Qaḥṭṭabah, “was not softened by the kindness that comes with blood ties nor was it restrained by the dictates of family relations” (I.21: 10-11). And yet, despite his acknowledgment of this moral standard, Ibn Khaldun casually, in this and the next section, communicates to us the persecution by the Abbasids of their own family and kin (I.20-21; I.21-22; I.30-31; I.35-36). It was the Barmakids who “gave generously to the [Alid] Shī‘a men and to the great among those related [to the prophet’s family], and they surrounded them with favors” (I.21: 2-4). It was a Barmakid, Ja‘far Ibn Yaḥyā, who

showed “concern...for the blood of the prophet’s family” (I.22: 3). Whether or not this claim was a sincere expression of concern, one thing is clear we are not told that the pious and morally upright al-Rashīd expressed such concern.

Of course, almost all of the arguments that Ibn Khaldun advances in defense of the Abbasids are presented in the form of positive historical reports. The main purpose of these reports is to “expose” what the negative historical accounts contain of “errors and fancies” (I.8: 11). In giving weight to the positive history, Ibn Khaldun advances an argument showing the inconsistency between, on the one hand, the Abbasids alleged hedonistic lifestyle, and, on the other, the Abbasids closeness in age to their ancestors primitive/nomadic times, i.e., the times in which their ancestors lived in simple piety and “far from the customs of luxury and the pastures of licentiousness” (I.19: 13-14). This is the closest that Ibn Khaldun comes in this section of the introduction to a “scientific” or “demonstrative” argument. He uses different forms of this argument to support the positive reports regarding al-Abbāsah (I.19: 12-19), al-Rashīd (I.19-20: 19-1; I.23: 16-18; I.24: 14-19; and I.25-26: 19-3), and al-Ma’mūn (I.28-29: 13-3). Now, as Ibn Khaldun himself points out (I.26: 11-12), this argument, which looks at how the origins of a dynasty influence its later development, is treated in full in the main text of the *Muqaddima*. A brief comparison between this argument as it appears in the main text of the *Muqaddima* with Ibn Khaldun’s defense of the Abbasids in the introduction allows us to see how he balances his two aforementioned objectives: to encourage reflection on political life by means of a rational examination of history and, at the same time, to preserve and emphasize the politically salutary aspects of history.

In the third part of his *Muqaddima*, entitled “On the general dynasty, kingship, the caliphate, the ranks of authority, and the accidental conditions that happen in all of these,” (I.278) Ibn Khaldun provides, among other related themes, a treatment of the moral character of royal authority. A quick look at the titles of the chapters in which this theme is introduced, i.e., Sub-Chapters 10-12, gives us an idea of the type of conclusions reached by Ibn Khaldun through his rational study of human culture.

Section 10: “That it is in the nature of kingship to claim all the glory, to penetrate deeply into luxury, and to favor calmness and tranquility” (I.299-301)

Section 11: “That if the nature of kingship became firmly established by claiming all the glory and by the occurrence of luxury and calmness, then the dynasty would have approached senility.” (I.302-305)

Section 12: “That dynasties, like individual [human beings], have natural ages” (I.305-309)

In these chapters, Ibn Khaldun traces the natural aims, progress, and decline that a dynasty experiences after it is founded. However, he makes clear, as he does in other chapters, that one cannot understand the natural course of growth and decline a dynasty follows, without first understanding the origins out of which the dynasty came forth. In other words, we cannot understand why and how it is in the nature of the dynasty to claim all the glory for itself, unless we understand first the communal power which makes the ascendancy of this dynasty possible. This communal power is called “group feeling,” (*aṣabiyya*), which moves the related but distinct nomadic tribes to come together as one united group in pursuit of a single aim, which is kingship and glory (*al-majd*; I.252-254: 16-9, but cf. I.273-276: 3-5). However, as is the nature of politics (e.g., I.71-72: 11-7 and I.252: 11-15), only the most powerful branch of the *aṣabiyya*-linked tribes can form the dynasty, and only one individual can become its sole leader, i.e., to claim the glory all for

himself as king (I.235-236: 1-11, I.239-240: 12-10, I.252-253: 15-3, I.264: 9-13, and 299-300: 8-16). And so, the most powerful factor that made the formation of the dynasty possible, group feeling (*'aṣabiyya*), begins to lose its potency after the formation of the dynasty. According to Ibn Khaldun, the decline in the power of group feeling goes through several stages before it finally ceases to be effective in supporting the dynasty (I.305-309: 18-6, I.314-317: 14-8). Of course, it is not only the kingship's natural aspiration to claim all the glory for itself that leads to the ultimate demise of group feeling. As Ibn Khaldun argues, there are other important factors, such as the transformation of the founding generation from a primitive/nomadic setting to a civilized/settled setting. As the years go by, and as the founding group becomes, with each new generation, more at home in its new environment, a change in the moral character and the dynamics of the group begins to settle in. The group feeling, which was originally austere and warlike at the time of the founding of the dynasty, naturally becomes, with every passing generation, preoccupied with luxury, calmness, and tranquility (I.309-313: 8-7). So, according to Ibn Khaldun's treatment of the "natural ages" of dynasties (I.305-309) and his treatment of the different stages in a dynasty's development (I.314-317), each succeeding generation after the foundation of the dynasty loses touch with certain aspects of the way of life of the generation that preceded it. Change in the way of life continues from one generation to another until it reaches a stage where a later generation has little in common with respect to the way of life of the founding generation. According to Ibn Khaldun's formulation, this stage is usually reached by the fourth generation.

Now, by juxtaposing this brief summary of the development of dynasties on the one hand, with Ibn Khaldun's defense of the Abbasids in the introduction on the other, we can make the following observations. It is clear from Ibn Khaldun's discussion of the Abbasids—especially when this discussion is accompanied by the most elementary knowledge of the history of this dynasty—that by the time of al-Rashīd, al-‘Abbāsah, and al-Ma’mūn, the dynasty was far from being close to its nomadic ancestors' simple and austere way of life. When Ibn Khaldun discusses the noble lineage of al-‘Abbāsah, for example, he recalls that “only four fathers” separated her from ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-‘Abbās, the prophet's first cousin. And although “four fathers” might not at first seem to be a long period, it means that al-‘Abbāsah and her brother al-Rashīd were five generations removed from the way of life of the earliest Muslims. What is more, al-Rashīd and al-Ma’mūn were part of the third- and fourth-generation Abbasids. According to Ibn Khaldun's general scheme of the growth and decline of dynasties, then, these individuals were not only far from the simple times of the founders of the dynasty, but also were deep in luxury, calmness, and tranquility. The mention of the famous poet Abū al-Nawās in the introduction, who is notorious for his hedonistic poems, is a subtle clue as to the type of social environment that was encouraged during the reign of al-Rashīd and later his descendants. And if Abū al-Nawās was indeed imprisoned by al-Rashīd when, as it was reported, his “excessive drinking” came to the latter's “attention” (I.25), Ibn Khaldun shows us later in the *Muqaddima* that al-Ma’mūn was rather a fan of his poetry (I.311).

However, if this is not enough evidence to show Ibn Khaldun's awareness of how much removed al-Rashīd and al-Ma’mūn were from the nomadic ways of life he provides us with definitive proof later on in the *Muqaddima*. In the context of discussing the extent

of a dynasty's "transformation" from its primitive/nomadic stage to a "civilized" (*al-ḥadārah*) stage, Ibn Khaldun reports a lavish event in the history of the Abbasid dynasty: the wedding party of al-Ma'mūn and Būrān Bint al-Hasan Ibn Sahl. Based on the authority of several sources, such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Mas'ūdī, and "other historians," Ibn Khaldun recounts an event of incredible proportions. He describes, for example, extraordinary sums of money that al-Ḥasan gave as gifts to al-Ma'mūn's retinue; of al-Ma'mūn's precious wedding gift to Būrān of a thousand ruby stones; of festivities brightened by amber candles, each one weighing one hundred *mann* (i.e., each one weighing over two hundred and sixty pounds); of a path prepared for the bride to walk on covered by a carpet woven with gold threads and decked with pearls and sapphires; of a massive feast; of the wood needed to prepare the feast that required one hundred and forty mules to be loaded three times a day for a whole year (all of that wood was consumed that same night); and of preparing thirty thousand boats to transport the guests to the wedding place (I.310-311: 13-18). Of course, most, if not all, of these reports about al-Ma'mūn's extravagance contain much exaggeration, on the same order as those exaggerations contained in reports describing the Abbasids' piety and excessive austerity (e.g., I.23: 7-15, I.24: 6-12, I.25-26: 19-10, and I.28: 13-17). Considering the context of both types of exaggerated reports, we are tempted to conclude the following: those reports which apply hyperbole in describing the Abbasids' ostentatious use of power and wealth are more likely closer to the truth than those reports that apply hyperbole when describing the asceticism of the Abbasids; for the first type of reports contains overstatements of what is in accordance with the "ways of dynasties," whereas the second type of reports contains overstatements that seem to run contrary to the "ways of

dynasties.” It is clear, however, that Ibn Khaldun is willing to use both types of reports to support or prove his point. It is also clear that—once the student is familiar with the totality of Ibn Khaldun’s method of investigation and the different objectives that inform this investigation—the overstatements in both types of reports can easily be corrected or glossed over.

Before turning to the third section of Ibn Khaldun’s critique of the “errors and fancies” of historians, it is necessary to make two points to conclude the current section. First, by comparing the discussion in the original introduction with parallel discussions in the main text of the *Muqaddima*, it is now apparent how Ibn Khaldun addresses two different audiences at the same time. To those who read history in order to find models that would guide them in “religious and worldly” affairs, Ibn Khaldun addresses their needs by presenting proper models free from morally negative characterizations. These models representing key figures in Muslim history are dressed in purely pious, just, and austere garb. But to those who carefully follow Ibn Khaldun’s arguments to their ultimate conclusions, he offers new ways by which they can engage the past and at the same time enrich their understanding of present political realities.

Second, in this section, Ibn Khaldun introduces different techniques by which he “exposes” errors committed by previous historians. One technique is to counter “negative” historical reports with “positive” ones. Concomitant with this technique is to provide a “rational” argument that would give weight to the counter reports. Another technique is to examine reports, which on the surface do not seem to bear on the historical question under discussion, but, through a process of reasoning one can deduce relevant facts regarding the question at hand. This, for example, was the purpose of Ibn

Khaldun's presentation of the story of al-Rashīd and his physician with respect to the former consumption of wine (I.23). We have seen in the discussion of this section how, by applying the same technique to the historical reports which Ibn Khaldun presents approvingly—and while paying attention to the way and the context in which he presents such reports—we are better able to conclude when such reports are intended for their politically salutary effects, and when they are intended as statements of Ibn Khaldun's personal opinion. This analysis proves valuable both in the next section of the Introduction, as well as in the text of the *Muqaddima*.

III. C. On the Lineage of the Ubaydid

Ibn Khaldun's discussion of historical reports contesting the Alid lineage asserted by the Ubaydid—the founders of the Ismā'īli Fatimid dynasty—is the first (I.29-34: 16-10) of three discussions that share a common theme, namely, disputes regarding claims of political legitimacy by founders of new dynasties. The second discussion deals with historical reports contesting the Alid lineage of Idrīs Ibn 'Abdallah, the founder of the Idrisid dynasty in the Maghrib (I.34-40: 10-16). The third and final discussion deals with historical reports impugning the honor of al-Mahdī Ibn Tūmart, the founder of the Almohad dynasty in the Maghrib and southern Spain (I.40-43: 7-4).

In addition to the theme of political legitimacy, the three discussions in this section share a common geographic and ethnic focus. They all deal with dynasties whose power base originated in northwest Africa and whose fervent allies were fierce Berber tribes (see for example, I.33: 6-9, I.34-35: 15-11, and I.42: 8-16). In these discussions, Ibn Khaldun demonstrates the importance of the historical studies of this region and its

inhabitants for a comprehensive understanding of Muslim history (cf. I.52-53). Moreover, the historical reports in this section communicate the weakening and eventual collapse of the Abbasid dynasty. As such, these reports depict the shift in political power from the central authority of Arab dynasties, which once controlled most of the Muslim world, to the more diffused power of regional, mostly non-Arab dynasties. In this context, Ibn Khaldun traces the effects of the power shift on historical scholarship and points to the effects of political conflicts on intellectual and scholarly development.

The techniques which Ibn Khaldun uses to expose the historians' errors with respect to the political legitimacy of specific founders of dynasties are similar to those he used to expose the historians' errors with respect to the moral conduct of specific Abbasid rulers. As in the previous section, Ibn Khaldun starts by providing, from the available historical record, accounts that counter the negative reports by the historians. He then proceeds to give a rational argument that would substantiate his counter reports (see for example, I.30-32: 6-3 and I.31-32: 8-4; as well as I.34-35: 15-9 and I.35: 9-11). Accordingly, my analysis here will not focus on these techniques, but rather will focus on Ibn Khaldun's purpose in raising the theme of this section and will explore the reasons behind his explicit conclusions with respect to this theme.

I now turn to Ibn Khaldun's first discussion in this section. As noted, the Ubaydid are the founders of the Fatimid dynasty, for which they are better known today as the Fatimids (*al-fāṭimiyūn*). At the height of their power, the Ubaydid controlled the Maghrib, Egypt, Syria, and al-Ḥijāz and presented a clear and present military danger for the Abbasids in 'Irāq (I.33: 8-18). The founder of the dynasty was 'Ubayd Allāh al-

Mahdī, who supposedly was a descendant of Imam Ismā‘īl Ibn Ja‘far al-Šādiq, the seventh Imam according to Ismā‘īli Shī‘a. According to what is reported, Imam Ismā‘īl is a descendant of the prophet Muḥammad’s cousin, ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, and the prophet’s daughter, Fātimah. In claiming this lineage the Ubaydid dynasty acquired the designation of *Fatimid*. Now this genealogy was, as it is still today, highly disputed by partisan historians. As at the outset of all previous discussions in his introduction, Ibn Khaldun leaves no doubt at the beginning of this one which side of the “dispute” he is on:

And from among the *baseless reports* (*al-akhbār al-wāhiya*) are those ones concerning the Ubaydid...through which many historians go to lengths to deny their [i.e., the Ubaydid’s] relation to the People of the House (*ahl al-bayt*)—Godly prayer be upon them—and in discrediting their lineage with respect to the Imam Ismā‘īl Ibn Ja‘far al-Šādiq (I.29-30: 16-1).

Of course, in previous discussions, Ibn Khaldun delays explaining the reasons behind the “baseless reports” until he proves the very fact that these reports are indeed baseless. Here, however, Ibn Khaldun makes the intentions behind these reports his first concern:

In this, [the historians] rely on accounts invented for the sake of the downtrodden (*al-mustaḍ‘afīn*) of the Abbasid caliphs, in order to cajole them by defaming their rivals and to display artful ways of gloating over their enemies (I.30: 1-3).

Ibn Khaldun uses almost the same rhetorical device in his refutation of the reports regarding the lineage of the Idrisids (I.35: 9-12, I.38-39: 11-15), and again in his refutation of reports regarding the integrity of al-Mahdī Ibn Tūmart (I.40-41: 13-5). By so constructing his argument, Ibn Khaldun emphasizes the political intentions behind these historical reports. This political emphasis is in sharp contrast to the first section, in which the historians’ tendency for hyperbole is explained by the “soul’s passion for what is strange, the tongue’s ease with the excessive, and obliviousness about what has been reviewed and criticized” (I.12: 8-9). In the second section, the historians’ fondness for

sensationalist accounts is explained as their “indulgence in prohibited pleasures and [desire to] expose the shield of manliness” (I.29: 5).

Yet, the most intriguing aspect of this section is the unsatisfactory way in which Ibn Khaldun addresses its central question, namely, what the rational argument is by which we can verify the truthfulness of the claims made by the founders of these dynasties. Although Ibn Khaldun provides “evidence” in support of these claims, his fundamental argument can be boiled down to the following: the claims of these founders are true because their supporters believed them to be true and acted forcefully in accordance with this belief.

We see this clearly in the case of Ibn Khaldun’s treatment of the Ubaydids. After describing the persecution that ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Mahdī, his son Abū al-Qāsim, and their supporters all suffered under the Abbasids and their clients, and after expressing the great power that the Ubaydid achieved despite this persecution, so that they controlled at the height of their power the Maghrib, Egypt, Syria, and al-Ḥijāz, Ibn Khaldun rhetorically asks, “And how would all of this happen to someone whose lineage was suspect, and who is vulnerable to falsification with respect to his claims?” (I.31: 8-9). And just in case these accomplishments should escape the attention of his readers, Ibn Khaldun emphasizes the longevity of this dynasty as well as the religiously significant territories that were under their control:

Their dynasty has lasted for about two hundred and seventy years. They possessed the place where Abraham (peace be upon him) had stood and worshipped, the homeland and the burial place of the Messenger [of God], the station of pilgrims, and the descending place for Angels. (I.31: 14-16)

But it is the genuine belief of their supporters in the message of the Ubaydid—especially the “*Kutāmiyyēs* Barbars” (I.33: 8)—that constitute for Ibn Khaldun the definitive proof

that the Alid lineage claimed by the Ubaydid was true. After all, the belief in the truth of this message depends on the certainty that its messenger belongs to the family of the prophet. Without this certainty on the part of the followers, none of these great accomplishments by the Ubaydid would have been possible, and neither would it have been possible for the supporters to continue their advocacy long after the Ubaydid lost their territories and their material wealth. As Ibn Khaldun insists:

All the while, their partisans were as constant as ever in obedience to them, in loving them, and in believing in [the authenticity of] their descent from Imām Ismā‘īl, the son of Ja‘far al-Šādiq. Their partisans—after the Ubaydid dynasty disappeared and its traces wiped out—repeatedly committed insurrections, calling on the names of the boys who are of Ubaydid stock, claiming their right to the caliphate, and going so far as to declare them appointed to the succession by the preceding Imāms. (I.31-32: 16-1)

Ibn Khaldun uses the same argument—that the lineage of a dynasty is genuine because the followers believe it to be genuine—with respect to the Idrisid dynasty. The Idrisids, like the Ubaydids after them, also claimed Alid descent, i.e., that “Idrīs” *is* “the son of Idrīs Ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Ḥasan Ibn al-Ḥasan Ibn ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (peace be upon all of them)” (I.11-12). And as with his argument regarding the Ubaydids, Ibn Khaldun uses the loyalty the Berber tribes showed the Idrisids as the authenticity of the latter’s claims:

The totality of the Berbers in the extreme Maghrib agreed to give the oath of loyalty to the younger Idrīs as his father’s successor. They willingly and eagerly gave him their obedience. They swore to die for him. For his sake they exposed themselves to mortal dangers in fighting his wars and raids. If they were to entertain within themselves such suspicions [regarding Idrīs’s descent], or if they heard such clamor from [anyone] even [if] a sworn enemy or a suspicious hypocrite, then at least some of them would have declined to give this support. No, by God, these [defaming] words were made up by none other than the administrators and servants of the Abbasids who were in Afīrīqiya. (I.35: 6-12)

It is clear here that the first two discussions in this section share the same logic, but what about the third discussion?

At first look, Ibn Khaldun's argument in defense of al-Mahdī Ibn Tūmart and the Almohad dynasty appears different than his argument in defense of the Ubaydids and the Idrisids. Unlike the previous two cases, Ibn Khaldun maintains that the founder of the Almohad dynasty never claimed Alid lineage (I.42: 3-4), or at least never publicly claimed it (cf. I.42: 12-16). Accordingly, we should conclude that the dispute regarding Ibn Tūmart's alleged Alid lineage is not a real dispute, but a straw man argument made by malicious historians to further discredit the founder of the Almohad dynasty. However, Ibn Khaldun does not seem satisfied with this argument, for he quickly argues that if one were to establish the fact that Ibn Tūmart did indeed claim Alid lineage, then "no proof can be made to dispute this [lineage], because people are to be believed in the lineage [they proclaim]" (I.42: 4-5). In addressing this strange defense, we need to look first at the reason for Ibn Khaldun's initial confidence that Ibn Tūmart never claimed Alid descent. The answer which Ibn Khaldun immediately provides is that Ibn Tūmart, a Berber native, never needed to claim such a descent in order to unify the al-Maṣmūdiyya Berber tribes in their opposition to the established and corrupt Almoravid dynasty. The Hargha tribe, to which Ibn Tūmart belonged, constituted the most powerful Berber *'asabiya* (group feeling) at the time, putting them in the position of leadership with respect to the other Berber tribes (I.42: 7-12). By virtue of his own Berber lineage, Ibn Tūmart had in place the military powerbase needed to challenge the established political order. He was able to mobilize this base through his powerful religious rhetoric that was

reinforced by means of his own personal example of piety, asceticism, and perseverance (I.41-42: 5-2).

If we contrast the case of Ibn Tūmart with that of ‘Ubayd Allāh and Idrīs, we clearly see that Ibn Khaldun’s real concern lies not with verifying the historical question of whether particular people had Alid descent. Rather, he is much more concerned with focusing the attention of his readers on two essential elements through which founders of new dynasties are able to successfully challenge and replace old dynasties: the military powerbase needed to challenge the established order and the message that would allow for the mobilization of this base. What is at issue for Ibn Khaldun is not whether the claims to legitimacy upon which a new dynasty based itself were true, but rather the fact that people believed in, and were willing to fight and die for, the sake of these claims. As for ‘Ubayd Allāh and Idrīs—two Arab religious figures who were supported by Berber tribes—the basis of their legitimacy was taken to be their ascendancy from the family of the prophet, “for the claim to such a descent is a claim to great honor among nations and generations of all territories” (I.38: 13-14). With respect to Ibn Tūmart—a Berber religious leader from a powerful Berber tribe—the basis of his legitimacy was the clarity and purity of his message. As we have already seen, understanding the process of the rise and fall of dynasties, with all its complexity, is what occupies the attention of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima*. Disputes regarding particular historical details are nothing more than a distraction for him. What concern is it to us if the Ubaydid had a legitimate Alid lineage? What matters is that people believed in, and acted in accordance with, this belief, for here one is pointed toward fundamental political facts that are in need of careful study and analysis.

As Ibn Khaldun points toward elements that play an essential part in the forming of new dynasties, he also points toward signs that indicate the weakening of old dynasties and foretell their coming demise. The reports that Ibn Khaldun disputes in this section are all based, according to him, on accounts by sycophantic “scholars” who, in their disparate attempts to please their masters, have no regard for the truth. The ultimate fault for these accounts, however, lies with the masters themselves, the rulers of the dynasty who created, through their political weakness, the toxic intellectual environment. At the conclusion of his first discussion in this section, Ibn Khaldun maintains:

The dynasty and [political] authority are the marketplace for the world. To it are brought the goods of sciences and arts. In it are sought wayward maxims, and toward it caravans of tales and [historical] reports are urged on. What is consumed in this market is consumed by all. Hence, when a dynasty transcends insolence, crookedness, fatuousness, and deceitfulness, as well as follows the straightforward path, not swaying from the intended course, then fine gold and pure silver is consumed in this market. [But] when a dynasty moves along with double dealings and resentments, as well as swarming with the brokers of inequity and falsehood, then the dross and the counterfeit is consumed [in this market]. And the clear sighted critic [is the one who] judges his own reflection, and [provides his own] scales for what he searches for and seeks after. (I.34: 2-10)

In this statement, Ibn Khaldun echoes what he has already alluded to in the preface, namely, that the health and welfare of the arts and sciences are intimately tied with the health and welfare of the larger political community that consumes these arts and sciences, and that the welfare of the larger political community is determined, in turn, by the health of the political authority which rules and guides the community. And as in the preface, Ibn Khaldun singles out history as one of the most sought after subjects in the community, and points out how the quality of historical studies serves as an important indicator of the health of the political community. Now, the relationship between the health of the political authority and the health of the arts and sciences in general and the

health of historical studies in particular confirms once again Ibn Khaldun's larger political interest in reforming the fine-art of history. But as it is intimated in Ibn Khaldun's discussion of the errors of the historians—and as becomes clearer, as we saw, in the main text of the *Muqaddima*—the health of the political authority inevitably passes through periods of health and sickness, parallel to the natural course of the rise and fall of dynasties. These periods of health and sickness are beyond the control of the serious scholar. The real question for the scholar is what is to be done when a period of political sickness prevails.

A clue as to the answer given by Ibn Khaldun is at the conclusion of the above statement, where he maintains, somewhat cryptically, that “the clear sighted critic [is the one who] judges his own reflection, and [provides his own] scales for what he searches for and seeks after.” The terms “insightfulness” (*al-baṣīra*) and “clear-sighted critic” (*al-nāqid al-baṣīr*) are two that Ibn Khaldun uses in the preface to communicate the sense of a critical thinker who has the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. But, whenever Ibn Khaldun uses these terms, he is careful to indicate that the critical thinker needs some kind of assistance or a standard by which he can correctly form his judgment. And so, when Ibn Khaldun wishes to distinguish between the blind imitator and critical thinker, he argues that “the transmitter [of reports] is someone who merely carries and transports; [while] “insightfulness” (*al-baṣīra*) critically captures, upon inspection, that which is sound, and science discloses and polishes for it the correct pages [of history]” (I.3: 8-10). Insightfulness here requires the assistance of science. A few lines later, Ibn Khaldun gives us a hint as to the type of science needed for insightfulness to “critically capture...what is sound” in history. In discussing religiously problematic works by

prominent historians, Ibn Khaldun insists that “the *clear-sighted critic* (*al-nāqid al-baṣīr*) is his own judge in falsifying or considering [these historians] with respect to what they include in their transmissions [of reports]” (I.3: 20). But how can the clear-sighted critic become his own judge? Answer: Through the science of culture. “For culture has nature, through its conditions reports can be related, and accounts and historical materials can be predicated” (I.3-4: 20-2). Since the science of culture is *the* subject of the whole *Muqaddima*, it is not a stretch to assume that Ibn Khaldun’s work is intended to be *the* guide for the serious scholar even in times of political sickness. After all, in speaking to his preferred readership, Ibn Khaldun maintains that, through the careful study of the science of culture, the reader “would be able to tear [his] grip away from the [habit of] imitation, and would behold the conditions of times and groups that were before [his] time and that will be after it” (I.6: 7-9). He also indicates that this book of his “comprehends well the reports of the created, assuages difficulties in dispersed wise-maxims, and gives causes and reasons for occurrences in dynasties, and has become a depository of wisdom and a receptacle for history” (I.7: 8-10).

In the discussion of the errors of the historians Ibn Khaldun shows ways through which his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* as a whole serves as a receptacle of history. He also provides us with clues about how he planned his book, especially the *Muqaddima*, to serve as a depository of wisdom. He leaves the full explication of this final point to the next two parts of the introduction, to which we now turn.

IV. Conclusion of the Original Introduction

Having shown his readers the types of errors historians commit with respect to quantifiable facts, morality, and political legitimacy, Ibn Khaldun, somewhat apologetically, says:

We almost digressed from the goal of this book by going on regarding these errors, [but] the steadiness of many authoritative [persons] and attentive historians has fallen with respect to traditions and opinions similar to these ones, which got hold of their thoughts, inculcating the totality [of historians], who are of weak reflection and are oblivious regarding analogical reasoning—and they in turn inculcated them in others, without search and without deliberation, and were incorporated into their records—so that the fine art of history became feeble and confounded, confusing the one reflecting on it, and it was deemed among the common fields. (I.43: 4-10)

Ibn Khaldun indicates here near the conclusion of the introduction what he has already stated in the preface, that once upon a time the fine-art of history was in good repair, but then it declined. And as in the preface, Ibn Khaldun distinguishes between two general types of historians, the pioneers and the followers. He holds the followers responsible—those whom he called in the preface “dull in nature and mind or those who embraced dullness” (I.4: 10-11)—for the decline of this fine-art, because of their inability to engage in analogical reasoning. However, unlike in the preface, Ibn Khaldun makes it explicit here that the roots of this decline lie in the pioneers themselves. For one thing, they were not good teachers of their followers, a point which he will address shortly. In addition, most of the errors which Ibn Khaldun deals with in the previous part—especially the errors he discusses in the first two sections of that part—were mistakes committed by the pioneers themselves. The names of the distinguished al-Ṭabarī and al-Masʿūdī were two of the most familiar names recalled in that context. Accordingly, the reform of the fine-

art of history must go deeper than stated earlier, and has to include the works and methods of those who supposedly pioneered the fine-art of history.

Ibn Khaldun begins such far-reaching reform of history by defining the task of the historian. A careful reading of his outline of the types of knowledge that a scholar requires in order to engage in historical studies suggests that Ibn Khaldun is attempting to re-define the traditional understanding of the role of the historian. Now, having discussed errors committed by accomplished as well as incompetent historians, Ibn Khaldun states:

Therefore, the companion of this fine-art requires knowledge of the foundations of politics, the natures of beings, and the differences among nations, regions, and epochs with respect to the ways of life, morals, customs, sects, schools, as well as the rest of [these] conditions; to encompass what is present in these and to show the agreement in likeness between it and that which is absent, or to clarify what is different between them, and to explain the causes for the agreement and the difference in this; as well as to uphold the roots of dynasties, religions, the principles of their manifestation, the reasons for their occurrence, the motives for their coming to be, the conditions and reports of those who sustain them, so that he would comprehend the reasons for each occurrence and would behold the root of each report. Thereafter, he would display his own transmitted report against what he has of foundations and roots: if the report agrees with these and is consistent with their course, then it is sound; otherwise he should falsify it and dispense with it. For this [reason] alone, the ancients deemed the knowing of history formidable, until it was taken up (*intiḥalahu*) by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bukhārī, and before them by Ibn Ishāq, as well as by those like them of the nation's learned ones. Many were oblivious regarding this secret in it, and to intrude on it was deemed easy by the commoners and whoever is not firmly established in the types of cognizance, and hence the pasture was mixed with the heedless, the core with the shell, and the truthful with the lying—and to [the judgment of] God is the consequence of affairs. (I.43-44: 10-7)

In this statement, Ibn Khaldun presents and, at the same time, conflates three important points. The first point deals with the type of knowledge needed by the practitioner, or as he puts it, the companion (*ṣāḥib*) of the fine-art of history. The second point concerns what the ancients thought of this fine-art and lists the names of Muslim scholars who supposedly pioneered the study of history. The third and final point deals with subsequent

practitioners of this fine art. In order to better understand the nuance of Ibn Khaldun's argument here, I shall treat each point separately.

With respect to the first point, the list of the types of knowledge the historian needs is long and somewhat complicated. At the head of this list is knowledge of politics in particular and of “beings” (*al-mawjūdāt*) in general. These are the types of knowledge one acquires through an education in philosophy in both its theoretical and practical aspects. These traditional sciences are followed by some type of comprehensive knowledge of how ways of life, morals, customs, and religious beliefs and practices differ in relation to different nations, regions, and time periods. As we will see shortly, this is the type of knowledge at which the science of culture aims, i.e., it is a new type of knowledge through which Ibn Khaldun wishes to influence the education of the practitioner of history. With this background knowledge, the historian can compare and contrast existing moral, political, and religious conditions with past ones, as well as explain the reasons and causes for the similarities and differences among all of these conditions. As I have argued before, Ibn Khaldun makes the rational understanding of existing political reality—in all its physical, moral, and religious complexity—an essential condition for understanding history. But, as we will shortly have occasion to judge, this past-present comparison is not only intended for the sake of verifying historical reports, but also to encourage the rational examination of present political reality.

As a prerequisite to the study of history, Ibn Khaldun moves from the most universal knowledge of political and physical phenomenon—i.e., the foundations of politics and the nature of beings—to knowledge of the particular—i.e., the various types

of physical, political, moral, and religious conditions present in the world—while indicating the ways in which these types of knowledge ought to be applied. Then, having moved from the general to the particular, Ibn Khaldun turns back to the general. He argues the need to examine the roots of dynasties and religions, to explain the principles through which these come to be, to point out the reasons and motives for their coming to be, and to understand the conditions of the people who “sustain” (*al-qā'imīn*) these dynasties and religions. It is only after this background knowledge that it becomes possible for the practitioner of history to look at historical reports and to judge them “against what he has of foundations and roots: if the report agrees with these and is consistent with their course, then it is sound; otherwise, he should falsify it and dispense with it” (I.43-44: 19-1).

At this juncture, Ibn Khaldun turns to his second point. He argues that “for this [reason] alone”—i.e., that the verification of historical reports requires so much background knowledge—the “ancients deemed the knowing of history formidable” (I.44: 1-2). There are two interesting things about this statement. First, it is not clear who these “ancients” (*al-qudamā'*) are. It could be a reference to the early Muslims, or it could be a reference to the ancient Greek philosophers. Second, the word *istakbara*, which I have translated above as “deemed...formidable,” has the alternative meaning of judging a thing to be beneath one’s dignity. Now if we render *istakbara* as *deemed formidable*, then the word “ancients” might indeed be a reference to the early Muslims, since later Muslims “took up” the fine-art of history. However, if we render *istakbara* as to *judge something beneath one’s dignity*, then the word “ancients” most likely refers to the ancient philosophers. The evidence that this is indeed the intended meaning by Ibn

Khaldun comes in his general introduction to the science of culture. After making the case for what is innovative about this science, Ibn Khaldun argues:

If every intellected truth has a nature that is proper to investigate what accidents happen to it, then it becomes necessary, in considering each comprehensible and truth, that there be a certain science that is particular to it. But the sages, perhaps because they held in regard a concern for the fruits of such [investigations], and as you have seen, the fruit of this [science of culture]—through its questions are in themselves and with respect to their domains noble—is only concerned with [historical] reports and with the correction of [historical] reports, which is a weak fruit, and that is why they abandoned it. (I.63: 1-9).

The sages or the philosophers (i.e., the ancients) did not formulate a science of culture, because they judged the importance of a science by the “fruits” it produces. The “fruits” of the science of culture are according to the sages weak, because they deemed the correction of historical reports to be of low value, something which is not worth their efforts. But Ibn Khaldun, having shown us in his original introduction how his science of culture is consistent with the well-established philosophical sciences, shows us here his willingness to depart from established opinions by the philosophers. History, according to Ibn Khaldun, plays an important part in shaping the political and moral opinion of the people, and as such the correction of historical reports plays an important part in correcting these opinions. And since the correction of historical reports requires rational engagement with present political reality, the science of culture can further the aims of the philosophical sciences without the stigma that attaches itself to philosophy during times of political decline.

This brings us to Ibn Khaldun’s third point, in which he mentions those Muslim scholars who pioneered the study of history. It is obvious that these scholars did not think of history as beneath their dignity, and it is also obvious that they were not overwhelmed by the enormity of the intellectual work that goes into the study of history. The

introduction of the names Ibn Ishāq, al-Ṭabrī, and Bukhārī, three of the most respected scholars in the tradition of Muslim history, might suggest that these pioneers were up to the task that the ancients supposedly found formidable. But the fact that Ibn Khaldun omits the name of al-Mas‘ūdī, his favorite scholar of history, might be a clue that this point is not in accordance with Ibn Khaldun’s opinion. This clue is strengthened by the fact that Ibn Khaldun passes by these names without offering praise or blame. Moreover, he immediately proceeds to mention how “many were oblivious” about the type of intellectual work necessary for the study of history, so that many unworthy persons involved themselves in writing history. One would assume that, had the pioneers done their work correctly, the fine-art of history would have proven to be off limits to those who are “dull in nature and mind, or those who embraced dullness.” As to where the work of al-Mas‘ūdī fits into the works of the historians, Ibn Khaldun will discuss this at the end of his introduction.

Ibn Khaldun focuses his attention next on a “deeply hidden ailment” from which historians as well as those who read history suffer. He states the problem as follows:

Among the hidden errors with respect to history is obliviousness regarding the change in the conditions of nations and generations as a consequence of change in time periods and the passing of days. It is a strong and deeply hidden ailment for it does not take place except after long periods of time have passed, so that almost no individual from among the created is able to wise up to it. And this is because the conditions of the world, as well as the customs and occupations of nations do not last according to the same manner and the same stable procedure. Rather, these [things] are different in accordance with the [passing of] days and time periods, and the movement from one condition to another. And as this happens to persons, periods, and metropolises, so it does to horizons, regions, time-periods, and dynasties. (I.44: 7-15)

In his statement of this problem near the conclusion of the introduction, Ibn Khaldun presents to us the most important issue with which his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* in general, and the

Muqaddima in particular, is supposed to address. But what is the significance of this problem? Ibn Khaldun reminds us of the considerable change that passed through the world since the time that recorded history spoke of the “old Persian nations, the Syrians, the Nabataens, The Tubbas, the Israelites, and the Copts” (I.44: 16-17). He directs our attention to how each of these nations “had their own particular conditions regarding dynasties, royal possessions, politics, arts, languages, and terminologies, as well as the rest of the ways they commune with their own kind” (I.44-45: 17-1). And if this is not enough to bring home the enormity of change that comes with the passing of time, Ibn Khaldun reminds us how these older nations were replaced by new ones, such as the “later Persians, the Byzantines, and the Arabs” (I.45: 1). With this, the old conditions changed, and “through them customs were transformed, either to what is akin and similar [to the old ones], or to what is different and incompatible [to them]” (I.45: 2-3). And then Islam, with its Muḍar Arab dynasty, came to the forefront of history, and with it “all of these conditions were completely transformed” (I.45: 4-5) once again. As Ibn Khaldun has already indicated through his treatment of the historians’ errors, there were also important changes that occurred after the rise of Islam: “The dynasty of the Arabs and days [of renown] vanished...and with their disappearance, nations, conditions, and customs transformed, and their affairs were forgotten, passing into oblivion” (I.45: 6-10).

Having outlined the extent to which the world in general and the Muslim world in particular has changed since the earliest of recorded times, Ibn Khaldun turns to explain this phenomenon. He maintains:

The common reason for the transformation of conditions and customs is that the customs of every generation follows the customs of their own [political] authority, as is said in the wise proverbs, “The people are in accordance with the creed of their king” (*al-nās ‘alā dīn al-malik*). And the kinsfolk of the kingship and the [political] authority, if they captured the dynasty and the command, then

it is unavoidable that they incline to the customs of those whom they replaced, adopting much of these customs, and meanwhile they would not be oblivious regarding the customs of their own generation; and so some difference would occur between the customs of the first generation and the [new] customs of the dynasty. And if another dynasty comes after them, mixing their customs with its own, then the [resulting] customs would be somewhat different from the previous one, and much different from the first one. And progression in the degrees of difference [from one dynasty to another] would go on until it ends with complete disparity [between the customs of the last dynasty and the first one]. And so, as long as nations and generations continue to succeed one another in kingship and [political] authority, the difference among customs and conditions will continue to occur. (I.45-46: 10-2)

In explaining the reasons for the continuous transformation of the conditions and customs of nations, Ibn Khaldun points to the political elements that constitute much of his historical analysis in the *Muqaddima*. But in order to understand what lies behind Ibn Khaldun's concern with this problem, we need to address the next problem he raises in conjunction with the previous one. And by so doing, we will be able to judge finally that Ibn Khaldun's science of culture is intended not only to inform the study of history, but also to instill in his careful readers the correct judgment of present political reality. Ibn Khaldun argues:

Analogizing and [making] comparisons are a well-recognized nature in the human being, one that is not safe from error. Accompanied by negligence and error, it leads him away from his intention and it sways him from his aim; for someone might hear many of the reports regarding those who passed, and not be aware of the changes and transformations that have occurred in conditions, and so he would make them confirm, at the first instance, to what he recognizes, and to analogize them with what he has witnessed, and the difference between these two [i.e., the reports and what he has witnessed] might be great. Thus he falls into an abyss of errors. (I.46: 2-7)

As we have seen in the course of our analysis of the preface and the introduction, Ibn Khaldun knows all too well how careless readers tend to understand a text through the limited scope of their own experiences. Having this expectation in mind, Ibn Khaldun is able to make arguments that seem at first consistent with traditional opinions. And yet a

careful reading should reveal that he is presenting a challenge to such opinions. This style of writing allows Ibn Khaldun to communicate his ideas to his careful readers, while at the same time to protect himself from attacks by those whose authority is based on tradition.

Of course, this intention to communicate his true ideas to a preferred readership is not born out of the desire for self-gratification, but out of concern for the welfare of the larger community. With respect to religious and worldly affairs, the traditional opinions of the larger community are influenced by their view of the past. This view of the past, as Ibn Khaldun argues here, is colored by peoples' experiences in the present. A vicious circle is thus formed: people seek to find in history guidance regarding their present political reality, but without knowledge of the conditions unique to this present reality, they tend to interpret (and thus distort) the past by reading what exists in the present into the past. Contrasting what is unique about the past is, then, the first step toward understanding what is unique about the present. This is the reason why Ibn Khaldun wishes to reform history. His departure from the philosopher's attitude toward history, though a student of their methods and teachings, can itself be the result of the changes time has wrought to the customs and conditions of nations. History did not possess the great influence it had on public opinion as it did at the time Ibn Khaldun was writing. On the other hand, philosophy had apparently fallen out of favor in the time of Ibn Khaldun and was regarded with great suspicion. Since the pursuit of philosophy could not be done openly, Ibn Khaldun had to choose a different path that would allow the use of the rational sciences without appearing to challenge the predominant opinions of his time.

At the conclusion of his introduction Ibn Khaldun positions his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* as a crucial reference to future historians and as a safeguard for the fine-art of history. He does so by first making explicit what was implicit in his preface, namely, that there are two types of historical scholarship. The first is scholarship on particular histories, and the other is scholarship on general histories. As I have argued in chapter three, Ibn Khaldun’s *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* is much closer to the second type of historical scholarship than the first. Since Ibn Khaldun argues that “history is *only* the mentioning of specific reports relating to a time-period or a [particular] generation” (I.50: 19-20), then it is safe to assume that the first type of scholarship is what should properly be called by the name *history*. Now, the more specific the report, the more conducive it is for moral and political instruction, as well as for entertainment. But there are two problems with particular histories. The first, as Ibn Khaldun has illustrated in the introduction, is that their moral and political lessons are heavily dependent on the intellectual competence and honesty of the historians—who are, after all, fallible human beings easily swayed by prejudice, partisanship, and greed (cf. I.56-57: 13-15). The second problem has to do with what Ibn Khaldun has raised at the end of his conclusion, namely, the fact that the habits and customs of nations and generations change with the passing of time. Accordingly, the moral and political value of the historical lesson is inevitably time bound.

As for the other type of historical scholarship, it is not clear by what name it should be called. Certainly Ibn Khaldun himself does not give it a specific designation. After stating what history properly so called is, he goes on to maintain:

As for the mentioning of the general conditions of boundaries, generations, and time-periods, this is the foundation for the historian, upon which he builds most of his objectives, and through which he clarifies his reports. (I.50-51: 20-1)

If history is indeed “only the mentioning of specific reports,” then these general histories cannot properly be called histories. And yet, as Ibn Khaldun indicates above, they provide an indispensable service to the historians. But rather than explain how and why this “foundation” guides the historians in their works, Ibn Khaldun gives us the example par excellence of such a foundation.

People used to single it out by means of composition, as did al-Mas‘ūdī in his book *Murūj al-Dhahab*, in which he explained the conditions of nations and boundaries, both in the East and in the West, up to his own age, in the period of three hundred and thirty [942 AD]. He mentioned their sects and customs, described the different localities, mountains, seas, royal possessions, dynasties, and distinguished among the Arab and the non-Arab peoples. Thus he became an *imam* to the historians, to which they come back, and a root on which they verify much of their reports. Then after him came al-Bakrī, and so he did something similar, especially with respect to paths (*al-masālik*) and royal possessions—and excluding the rest of conditions because, in his age, neither much alteration nor great change occurred in nations and generations.

Providing a chronological context through which the historian can temporally situate his particular subject is the most obvious way in which general histories can serve as a foundation for specific works in history. But, as Ibn Khaldun suggests through his example, a foundational work for history goes deeper than just a chronological survey. The work of al-Mas‘ūdī provides a comprehensive coverage of nations and national territories, of religious diversity and local customs, of world geography and regional topography, of kingships and dynasties, and, for the benefit of his immediate audience, the difference among Arab and non-Arab peoples. Accordingly, a work that can truly be described as “a foundations of the historians” is one that would provide the scholar of history with the larger context through which he can situate the national, territorial, political, and religious component to his specific subject of study.

Ibn Khaldun informs us that *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* is modeled after the work of al-Masʿūdī, and aims to update, so to speak, the latter's *Murūj al-Dhahab*, as well as to address a deficiency in this work. The deficiency that Ibn Khaldun wishes to address has to do with the history of the Maghrib. For although al-Masʿūdī did an exceptional work in describing the Eastern regions of the world (I.53: 1), he “fell short in his details with respect to the conditions” (I.53: 3) of the Maghrib. As such, Ibn Khaldun declares that he will mention in his *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* “what [he] can regarding this western region” (I.52: 14-15). As for the update, Ibn Khaldun informs us that al-Masʿūdī's comprehensive work stops at the year 330H/942 AD. So much change and transformation happened in the world through the four centuries that has passed since *Murūj al-Dhahab* was composed.

According to Ibn Khaldun:

If the conditions [in the world] changed completely, then it would be as if the creation has radically changed and the world in its entirety has transformed, as if it is a new creation, a fresh growth, and a modern world. (I.52: 8-10)

This age (i.e., 8th/14th century), therefore, requires one who would record the conditions, borders, generations, customs, and sects that has changed, and, in doing so, “to follow the path al-Masʿūdī made for his own time, so that he could become a root to be taken as a model by whomever of historians come after him” (I.52: 10-12).

We see here, then, how Ibn Khaldun explicitly positions his *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* as an important guide for future historians, something similar to the way *Murūj al-Dhahab* was to past historians. As such, Ibn Khaldun carefully presents himself not as an innovator, but as a disciple of an old master, who charted the path along which Ibn Khaldun follows. Ibn Khaldun's conclusion of the introduction seems to contradict his teaching in the rest of the introduction as well as in the preface, where we see him, both explicitly and

implicitly, charting new territories of research and inquiry. This praise of al-Mas‘ūdī—which must be viewed as excessive in light of what Ibn Khaldun is attempting to do—has to be tempered by the fact that, in many of the reports Ibn Khaldun criticizes as nonsensical, al-Mas‘ūdī is singled out as the one who reported them, or at least as one of the reporters (cf. I.9: 9-10, I.14: 1-2, I.58: 5-11, I.58: 12-16, I.59: 12-16, and I.59-60: 20-10).

In order to solve this apparent contradiction we need to bear in mind that Ibn Khaldun’s *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* has two important parts, the *Muqaddima* and the *History*. In the *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun formulates a new science whose subject is “mankind’s culture (*al-‘umrān al-basharī*) and human social organization (*al-ijtimā‘ al-insānī*),” and has its own questions which it seeks to address, namely, “the clarification of each aspect of the essential conditions of culture” (I.61: 17-18). In the *History*, Ibn Khaldun focuses “on the Maghrib, on the conditions of its generations and nations, on the mention of its royal possessions and dynasties over that of other regions—since [he is] unfamiliar with the conditions of the East and its nations, for the reports that are in circulation about it do not satisfy what [he] need[s] of it” (I.52: 15-18). So insofar as the *History* is concerned, Ibn Khaldun does indeed follow the path of al-Mas‘ūdī, but insofar as the *Muqaddima* and formulation of the science of culture is concerned, Ibn Khaldun provides a truly unique and innovative approach to the study of history. In the *History* Ibn Khaldun provides the historian of the future a comprehensive view of an important region in the Muslim world that was never given its due course of study. In the *Muqaddima* Ibn Khaldun address what al-Mas‘ūdī has apparently failed to do, namely, how the conditions of nations and generations change with the passing of time. Through an understanding of what is

essential and what is particular in human culture, one would be in a better position to understand what is constant and what is changing in the course of human history.

Conclusion

“What is the larger political-philosophic significance of Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddima*?” This was the question I asked myself when, a few years ago, I first encountered the *Muqaddima*. The question lingered and later guided the subject of my dissertation. In the initial stages I knew that to answer this question adequately I needed first to give an account of the larger idea that informs not only the subject of the *Muqaddima*, but also the subject of the *History*, i.e., the general idea that animates the two principal parts of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar*.

The *Muqaddima*, of course, formulates the science of culture, while the *History* is concerned, almost exclusively, with addressing the gap that exists in the historical record regarding the peoples of the Maghrib. This led me to conclude that giving an account of the idea that animates *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* meant explaining Ibn Khaldun’s conception of the relationship between history and the science of culture. My initial belief was that this relationship was as straightforward as the original introduction, passages in the *Muqaddima*, and the whole structure of *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* seem to suggest, namely, that the science of culture develops the rational tools by which historians verify historical reports. All I needed, then, was to articulate this relationship clearly and afterwards proceed to examine the political questions that must arise with respect to Ibn Khaldun’s conception of this relationship.

As I began a closer examination of the original introduction—in which the relationship between the science of culture and history is first articulated—in conjunction with the careful study of the *Muqaddima* and the scholarly literature on it, doubts arose to

trouble my initial assumptions with respect to the relationship between the science of culture and history.

First, as I have argued in Chapter One, it was not clear to me how subjects that Ibn Khaldun investigates in the *Muqaddima* should guide scholars in their verification of historical reports. Add to this the fact that Ibn Khaldun's own historical reporting in the *History* part of his *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*, fails to measure up to the standard of "scientific rigors" that he displays so prominently in the course of his investigation in the *Muqaddima*.

Second, Muhsin Mahdi's discussion of the philosophic foundation of the science of culture—in which he clearly shows that Ibn Khaldun did not attempt to break with the classical-medieval tradition of philosophy—focused my attention on the question of the extent to which Ibn Khaldun was a serious student of Muslim philosophers. Still, his apparent preoccupation with history and with the reform of the "fine-art" of history was very problematic. At the very least, it signaled an important departure from the philosophers' teaching regarding the status of this subject—a departure that called for explanation.

I could not find an answer to this question in the available scholarly literature. In Mahdi's work, for example, the impressive philosophical background that he brings to bear on the understanding of the *Muqaddima* seems at times to drown out the voice of Ibn Khaldun. And yet this same voice, at least as it appears in various passages at different parts of the *Muqaddima*, tends all too often to rebuff Mahdi's own arguments.

Of course, the more I studied the *Muqaddima*, the more I noticed the possibility that Ibn Khaldun uses a variety of voices and of arguments in order to speak to different readers at different levels. For me this could explain why there is such disagreement

among Ibn Khaldun's scholars regarding his intellectual orientation. Paying attention now to this tendency of Ibn Khaldun's to speak in different ways so as to reach different audiences, I shifted the focus of my research. I searched first to discover out a clear standard by which to officiate among what appears to be Ibn Khaldun's contradictory arguments and positions. This standard had clearly to come from Ibn Khaldun himself, and it had to be proven to be Ibn Khaldun's own standard.

The most logical place to find the standard, of course, is at the beginning of the book, i.e., the original introduction, for it is there that Ibn Khaldun has to make the case for reading his book. The standard, to be sure, comes from understanding the central idea which gives coherence to *Kitāb al-'Ibar*. Thus, I found that I needed to examine more carefully the apparent relationship between the science of culture and history as it was presented in the original introduction. As part of this re-examination I needed to pay close attention to the manner in which Ibn Khaldun presents his arguments, then to examine and prove the possibility that Ibn Khaldun writes on multiple levels. The working out of this problem was to constitute the first part of my dissertation. The second part of this dissertation was to be concerned with showing how the central idea discussed in the original introduction unfolds in the rest of the *Muqaddima*. And this was to be pursued with the same meticulous treatment I show in the first part. As I began the first part of the dissertation, I realized that this idea could not possibly be accomplished in the time at my disposal. I thus had to postpone the second part for future studies.

As such, this dissertation focuses on Ibn Khaldun's style of writing, the substance of his ideas, and the relationship between his style and the substance of what he has to say. The order of the chapters illustrates my intellectual movement beginning from a

tentative or preliminary understanding of Ibn Khaldun's writing style (Chapter 2), passing through a careful examination of the style of presentation and the substance of the teaching (Chapter 3), and culminating in an exploration of the implication of this teaching (chapter 4).

In Chapter Two, I illustrate how Ibn Khaldun expresses the general character of his *Kitāb al-'Ibar* through its title, and detail how he presents himself to his reader through his public profession of faith in the invocation. Positing the reasonable assumption that adroit authors capture, through the titles, the substance of their arguments, I submitted the full title of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*'s to rigorous analysis. Fortunately, the assumption yielded positive results and enabled me to show not only how the title speaks to the two parts of *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, but also suggest the two ways in which readers can reasonably engage Ibn Khaldun's book. This last point was demonstrated through the treatment of the word to which the totality of Ibn Khaldun's title is reduced, i.e., *'Ibar*. This word which is conventionally understood as "instructive lessons" can also mean "allusions," something from which a great benefit can be had, but only through careful study and analysis. And in my examination of the invocation in this chapter, I illustrate Ibn Khaldun's thoughtfulness and subtlety as a writer. The purpose here is to provide the first clues of the care with which Ibn Khaldun makes his arguments, and consequently to make the case for the care the reader ought to invest in examining these arguments.

In Chapter Three, I raised the question of whether Ibn Khaldun's apparent objective for *Kitāb al-'Ibar* is indeed an expression of this work's true objective. I address this question by keeping close to Ibn Khaldun's surface argument and by showing how, through this surface argument, Ibn Khaldun both covers and uncovers his

true objective, i.e., uncovers the central idea that informs and gives coherence to the totality of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*. In the preface, as I have argued, Ibn Khaldun presents to the careful reader two points regarding history. First, that history, like poetry, serves as an important source of entertainment and of public instruction. Second, that left to its own devices the “fine-art” of history will cause great harm to the public in general, and to the learned in particular.

With these two points, we begin to see the considerations that compelled Ibn Khaldun to depart from the philosophers with respect to the study of history. The reform of history, in turn, is based on an observation Ibn Khaldun makes in passing regarding the relationship between general and particular histories. The particular histories, which constitute the greatest part of historical scholarship, always proceed through a framework that is presented by the general histories. To reform the fine-art of history, therefore, Ibn Khaldun had to present his work in the form of general history.

In Chapter Four, I focus more on the substance of Ibn Khaldun’s argument than I do its style. Through a careful analysis of the original introduction, I reveal the political aspects of the central objective of *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* and how it is presented and elaborated on in the introduction. His central objective is to encourage, through the study of history, the rational examination of political life in a politically salutary way. In his critique of reports regarding the size of the Israelites’ troops, Ibn Khaldun brings knowledge of politics, political geography, natural population growth, and military strategy to bear on these reports. He also shows us the necessary limits to any public discussion of the results reached through the rational examination of history: sacred opinions and reports regarding miracles. Unlike al-Farabi or even Maimonides, Ibn Khaldun is not willing to

call miracles into question—not even obliquely. In his critique of reports impugning the character of significant historical figures, such as the early Abbasid caliphs, Ibn Khaldun shows the negative consequences of these reports on moral instruction. Thus Ibn Khaldun shows his willingness to abandon scholarly objectivity in order to promote what defends the grounds for decent conduct—differently stated, what is politically salutary. However, in his excessive defense of the Abbasids, Ibn Khaldun provides room to reflect on the complex character of the problem of morality. And finally, in his critique of reports that contest the Alid lineage of the founders of certain dynasties, Ibn Khaldun shows the need to disengage historical studies from insoluble partisan conflicts.

With these examples Ibn Khaldun brings his introduction to a conclusion, one in which he raises a final problem: whether the moral and political actions of the past cannot serve as proper guide for actions in the present due to the fact that, with the passing of time, the customs and conditions of people change. The solution to this problem is the embedded in science of culture. Unlike the general history of al-Mas‘ūdī, which benefited those historians who were closer to his time period, the combination of Ibn Khaldun’s particular introduction setting forth his science of culture and the historical exposition of his *Kitāb al-‘Ibar* is designed to provide the careful reader with the necessary tools to distinguish between what is essential and what is accidental in human culture. This, more than the truth about particular reports, is what brings forth the awareness necessary for guidance with respect to present “religious and worldly conditions” (I.8: 15), so that those who reflect might “tear [their] grip away from the [habit] of imitation and behold of the days and groups that were before [their] times and that will be after it” (I.6: 7-9).

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