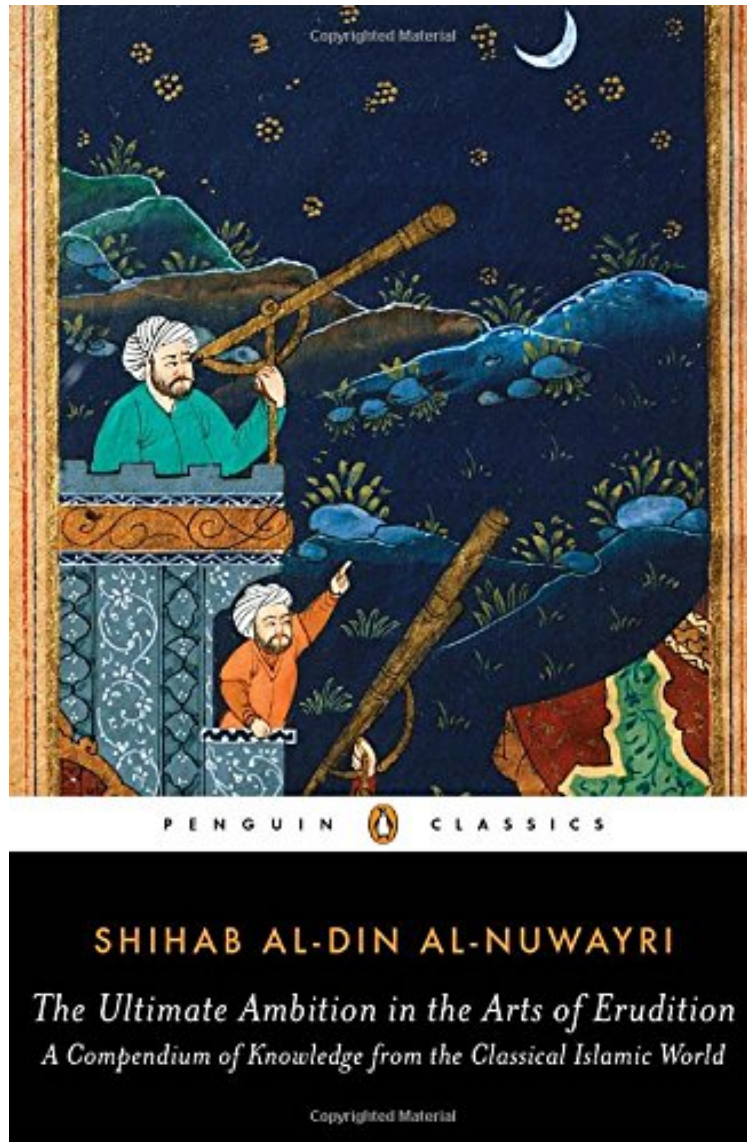


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The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition: A Compendium of Knowledge from the Classical Islamic World

Shihab al-Din al-Nuwayri

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For the first time in English, a catalog of the world through fourteenth-century Arab eyes a kind of Schotts Miscellany for the Islamic Golden Age An astonishing record of the knowledge of a civilization, The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition catalogs everything known to exist from the perspective of a fourteenth-century Egyptian scholar and litterateur. More than 9,000 pages and thirty volumeshere abridged to one volume, and translated into English for the first timeit contains entries on everything from medieval moon-worshipping cults, sexual aphrodisiacs, and the substance of clouds, to how to get the smell of alcohol off ones breath, the deliciousness of cheese made from buffalo milk, and the nesting habits of flamingos. Similar works by Western authors, including Plinys Natural History, have been available in English for centuries. This groundbreaking translation of a remarkable Arabic textexpertly abridged and annotatedoffers a look at the world through the highly literary and impressively knowledgeable societies of the classical Islamic world. Meticulously arranged and delightfully eclectic, it is a compendium to be treasureda true monument of erudition.For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

One of NPRs Best Books of the YearOne of The Guardians Best Books of the YearSparkling . . . Marvelous . . . Wondrous . . . A monument of classical Islamic learning . . .Muhanna renders what might have been a rather baroque text in elegant prose. . . .The text opens a window into a lively and eclectic world of scholarship, a realm of humanist scribes and poetry-spouting polymaths. . . .Reading this compendium is like exploring a cabinet of curiosities, each section home to uncanny and startling mirabilia. . . . The pleasure of The Ultimate Ambition lies in exploring its

bewildering scope, a range emblematic of the broad imaginations and curiosities of the 14th-century Islamic world. The New York Times Book This bizarre, fascinating book . . . illustrate[s] the sprawlingly heterodox reality of the early centuries of Islam, so different from the crude puritanical myths purveyed by modern-day jihadis. . . . Reading it is like stumbling into a cavernous attic full of unimaginably strange artifacts, some of them unforgettable. . . . The book is full of strange myths and nostrums that hint at what mattered to people in the fourteenth century: sex, money, power, perfume. . . . From the alleged self-fellation of monkeys to the many lovely Bedouin words for the night sky . . . nothing seems to escape Nuwayris taxonomic ambitions. The New York of Books This energetic primer to a staggeringly rich moment in time might end up being an indispensable addition to your library. . . . [It] is a celebration of knowledge for its own sake. . . . For feeding your curiosity, it handily succeeds. NPR.org Ultimate Ambition lives up to its bold title: its eclectic, protean entries cover lunar cults, the sugary drinks in the sultans' buttry, and how to attract your dream woman by burying a crow's head. The Paris Daily [It] spills over with insatiable curiosity at its most irrepressible: an elixir for dark days. Marina Warner, The Guardian, Best Books of the Year A reader-friendly translation . . . with an extensive introduction and explanatory notes . . . There seems no reason why Al-Nuwayris' vast compendium of useful, useless and curious knowledge should remain the province of scholars alone. Al-Ahram Weekly A fascinating peek at the minds of our ancestors. You can see how man's understanding of the world has changed drastically in some ways and remained startlingly constant in others. Plus the book is just plain fun to read. A. J. Jacobs, New York Times bestselling author of The Know-It-All and The Year of Living Biblically A smart, exhilarating selection from a vast work. The scholarship is solid but unobtrusive, and the style, clear and flavorful, draws the reader in. Al-Nuwayris' encyclopedia, somewhat like Vincent of Beauvais's hundred years before him, delights as it moves between learned tradition, jaw-dropping anecdote, and elegant (and elegantly translated) poetry. Dip in, and a distant world, endlessly colorful, comes to sparkling life. Andras P. Hamori, Princeton University From the structure of the heavens to the curious anatomy of the hippopotamus, with stops to view everything from book-keeping to aphrodisiacs, this charming fourteenth-century encyclopedia gives a glimpse of the entire world as seen by a very learned Egyptian summing up the powerful tradition of medieval Islamic scholarship known in his time. Elias Muhannas' very readable translation allows the reader to gain a rounded experience of a deeply interesting bygone world. Roy P. Mottahedeh, Harvard University Finally, thanks to Elias Muhannas' expert translation, editing, and explanatory notes, we have access to a real encyclopedia to place alongside Borges's mythical Chinese text. An extraordinary work, The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition strives for nothing less than an orderly, total account of the world, and Al-Nuwayris' unique accomplishment in the encyclopedic tradition is not to suggest that wonder is to be found in the many oddities, rarities, and exceptions of the given world, but to show how, beneath these features, there is a deeper and more marvelous order. Elliott Colla, Georgetown University This engaging volume lets you dip into the world of a fourteenth-century Egyptian encyclopedist who knew about the endless rain in England, the skillfulness of artists in China, how a woman can get away with claiming to be a prophetess, why a bureaucrat should never commit the size of the army to writing, and anything else worth knowing. Michael Cook, Princeton University This delightful volume offers readers of English the first opportunity to sample the vast and varied literature of Arabic encyclopedism. Under Elias Muhannas' expert guidance you will encounter advice and information strangely foreign and occasionally familiar, drawn from al-Nuwayris' 14th-century perspective on history and politics, medicine and the natural world. Ann Blair, Harvard University A veritable Wikipedia of its time . . . The erudition and breadth of the book is staggering, and it is a positively entertaining collection. . . . A valuable addition to the library of those who are interested in medieval miscellany [and] a corrective to narratives . . . that might isolate the Islamic world from the wider cosmos of medieval thinking. Publishers Weekly Fascinating . . . This condensed, abbreviated English-language rendition more than does justice to the Arabic text. . . . [A] clear, accessible translation . . . with copious notes and suggested further readings. Library Journal In a time like ours, when one of the world's great religions and cultures is under attack in the west, it might feel like a civic duty to learn more about the texture and history of Islamic tradition, but don't read this book only for that reason. Read it because it is profoundly poetic and filled with sublime passages of the most extraordinary delicacy. For instance, The enmity between the wolf and the sheep is so great that if some bowstrings are plucked together—one made from the intestines of a wolf, and several others from the intestines of a sheep—they will not make any sound. Or, The night is divided into twelve hours, each with its own name given to it by the Bedouin Arabs: Sunset, dusk, darkness, blackness, the enfeebling hour, midnight, the heart of the night, the disgracing hour, the foretokens of morning, the first dawn, the second dawn, the widespread dawn. An accessible, delightful, and stirring record of 14th-century Islamic thought. Jeff Deutsch, Seminary Co-op Bookstore About the Author Shihab al-Din al-Nuwayri (1279-1333) was an Egyptian scholar and civil servant in the Mamluk Empire. His nine-thousand-page, thirty-three-volume encyclopedia, The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition, is one of the most important medieval collections of Arabic literature and Islamic thought. Elias Muhanna (editor/translator) is the Manning Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University and the author of The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition. A scholar of classical Arabic literature and Islamic intellectual history, he has written for The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Nation, and Foreign Policy, and he runs the

blogQifa Nabki, about the contemporary Middle East. Born in Lebanon, he now lives in Providence, Rhode Island.