Introduction

A book in a dream means power.
He who sees a book in his hand in a dream will acquire power.

`ABD AL-GHANĪ AL-NĀBULUSĪ (D. 1731

It is not fitting that anyone who possesses even a small amount of knowledge should allow himself to be forgotten.

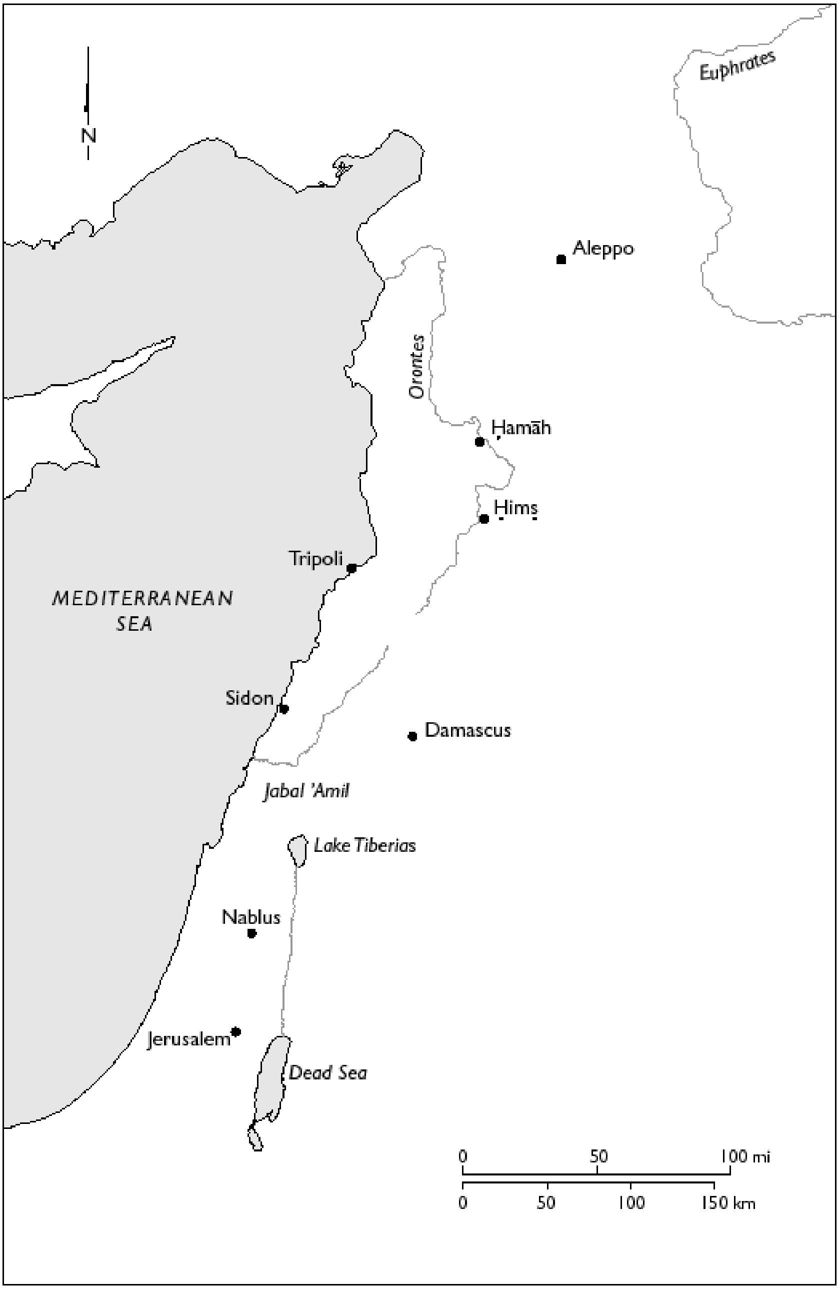
SHAMS AL-DĪN MUḤAMMAD IBN ṬŪLŪN AL-DIMASHQĪ (D. 1546)[2]

THIS BOOK ARISES from a footnote—note 13 on page 188 of Tarif Khalidi's book *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*—upon which I chanced more than a decade and a half ago.[3] Before I divulge the contents of that fateful footnote, a bit of background is in order. Envious of the feats of modern European historiography, which had managed famously to uncover the history and reconstruct the worldview of the sixteenth-century Friulian miller, Menocchio,[4] I set out to retrieve "commoners" from the history of the medieval Levant (by which I mean Bilād al-Shām—the area covering the present day states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, (see Map 1). Individuals wiser than me warned of the monumental obstacles ahead: our main (perhaps only) sources for the medieval period are histories written by *`ulamā'* (singular,*`ālim*, scholars of religion, who are equivalent to today's academics), largely about themselves and for themselves. The social historian, then, is left with only one textual window to the social history of the medieval past, and it is a window with a very limited aperture. Obstinately, and all-too-naïvely, I decided to prove that "*`ulam*ology" could not possibly be "almost all the social history that we will ever have."[5] I spent a year canvassing the historiographical production of medieval Levantine *`ulamā'* in the hope of delivering up the commoners, but to no avail. I was in a state of dejection when I chanced upon footnote

13, which mentions "'popular' historiography [by] . . . the 18th-century Damascene barber or the 18th-century South Lebanon farmer al-Rukaynī." Barber historian! Farmer historian! I immediately resolved to desist, once and for all, from lamenting the irretrievability of medieval Arabic-Islamic commoners—and from indulging in bouts of "source envy" of the European historians—and switched to eighteenth-century Ottoman Levantine history. Here, I discovered that the Damascene barber and South Lebanon farmer(s) were not the only commoner or unusual authors to write contemporary history; such chronicles were also written in the eighteenth-century Levant by a couple of soldiers, by a court clerk, by Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic priests, by a Samaritan scribe, and by a merchant.

While I was conducting my research on these histories, there was an extraordinary occurrence: a serendipitous discovery of the original and unique manuscript of the chronicle of the aforementioned Damascene barber: Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Budayr (fl. 1762).[6] The version that I—and the rest of the field—had been using is one bowdlerized and significantly altered in language and content by a scholar in the late nineteenth century. Given that Ibn Budayr's chronicle is the only one in Arabic-Islamic history known to have been composed by a barber, the discovery was most auspicious. I had finally found my Menocchio, or his Arabic-speaking Muslim counterpart.

Ibn Budayr was a barber who lived and coiffed—and, doubtless, circumcised and healed—in the prestigious neighborhood of Bāb al-Barīd at the very center of the walled city of Damascus, the most important urban metropolis in the Ottoman Levant. He was born into markedly humble circumstances: into a family of porters who lived as far away from privilege as can be, at the extreme outskirts of the extramural city. By means unknown to us, the porter's son somehow came to be apprenticed to a fashionable city barber who cut the hair and shaved the beards of some of the city's most illustrious saintly and scholarly figures. Ibn Budayr ended up servicing the same cultured and up-market clientele. Ibn Budayr's striking upward and centerward social trajectory might help in explaining his even more extraordinary achievement: the fact that he wrote a book. Thus, at the heart of this study is the "life and work," the aspirations and fears, of this remarkable eighteenth-century Damascene craftsman.


N
Euphrates
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Hamāh
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Tripoli
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Sidon
Damascus
Jabal 'Amil
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Nablus
Jerusalem
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MAP 1. *The Levant (Bilād al-Shām) showing the cities and regions of origin of the chroniclers. Source: Esri data and maps, 2012.*

The Damascene barber lived in a highly urban environment and hobnobbed with men of letters.[7] He held conformist religious views, and his general social vision was markedly conservative. Nonetheless, he identified himself as a poor man—as one of "the small people"—and viewed his society as one composed of a tyrannical rich and an oppressed poor.[8] He was angry at, and in his chronicle actively criticized, the representatives of the state and the "notables." Even though these acts of political criticism might appear audacious enough, his true, indeed *historic*, audacity lay in the simple and remarkable fact of his *authorship*.[9] Ibn Budayr, someone without the training or certification of a scholar, found the confidence, the *authority*, to behave like an *`ālim* and write a book. Ibn Budayr's most remarkable act of mobility was his trespass into a literary, cultural, and discursive domain where no barber had ever been known to set foot.

Ibn Budayr's intellectual cosmos was formed and informed by both the oral and the written.[10] The barber's location in a barbershop, which in the Ottoman world was inextricably intertwined with the institution of the coffeehouse, allowed Ibn Budayr to be exposed to the art of public storytelling and other performative oral genres, such as the recounting of traditional epics. But the location of his master barbershop, in the center of the walled city of Damascus, where most of the city's venerable colleges stood, also permitted Ibn Budayr familiarity not only with the individual scholars who taught and studied there but also with their culture, and with their products—namely, written texts. Thus Ibn Budayr's cultural formation was neither "high" nor "low" (although sometimes, for convenience, these terms will be used in this study). Rather, his existence was entirely *appropriative*: he used and integrated disparate literary traditions that were at his disposal. This might also explain Ibn Budayr's "relaxed" relationship to text as well as to language. Ibn Budayr mixed the demotic with the higher registers of the Arabic language without anxiety or fear of being in violation of any rules.[11] He spoke, and reveals himself to us, in his own voice, in a book that he freely authored of his own will and in his own way.

The fact that Ibn Budayr wrote a chronicle, instead of some other type of book, is also significant since the genre by its very nature permits a high degree of *self-authorship*. Not only did the barber use the chronicle's capaciousness to portray himself in a certain "fashion," but he also used some of its other features to insinuate himself into the social worlds of the scholars and saints of his city. Indeed, the chronicle, at the hands of the barber, turned out to be a productive tool for social jockeying. Thus, just as Ibn Budayr managed to find for himself a physical location among the scholars in downtown Damascus, his literary appropriation constituted a self-instatement into their social world. Ibn Budayr, in other words, seems to have heeded the advice of the famous sixteenth-century historian, topographer, and scholar Ibn Ṭulūn quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The barber possessed some knowledge and subsequently did not allow himself to be forgotten. He authored himself.[12]

The barber's entry into the chronicle was not so benign. The mere entry of a craftsman into the scholarly form of the chronicle changes the very nature of the genre. Ibn Budayr admits to the text formal and literary features that are unaccustomed in the chronicle; he also introduces topics and protagonists that are equally unusual. The result is a subversion of the intention of the genre. In a significant departure from the conventions of the scholarly chronicle, under the authorship of the barber the state no longer functions as the raison d'être and cause célèbre of the genre. Ibn Budayr subjects the representatives of the state and the notables to merciless questioning and scathing critique. Although not radical in his vision of society—indeed, he implicitly invokes an older, more pristine social and moral order—he turns the chronicle from a complacent text into a platform of interrogation. Viewed from this perspective, Ibn Budayr and his chronicle may be seen to anticipate a definitive new figure of the nineteenth century and his equally definitive text: the public intellectual of al-Nahḍa (the Arab Renaissance) and his newspaper article.

A significant part of this book is a search for the sources of authority of the barber, what he did with that authority, how he used it, and to what end (Chapters 1, 2, and 5). This study will also trace what happened to the barber's authority (that is, his book) after his death, and how it was, in turn, appropriated (Chapter 6). But beyond the barber, this book is a pursuit of something larger. Ibn Budayr's appropriation is not singular, but rather a *symptom* of a phenomenon. He was not the only one who poached the genre of the chronicle for his own purposes in the eighteenth century. He was joined by other new authors whose social backgrounds were quite unusual for the genre of the chronicle: a couple of Shīʿī farmers from southern Lebanon, a Samaritan scribe from Nablus, a Sunni court clerk from Ḥimṣ, a Greek Orthodox priest from Damascus, and two soldiers also from Damascus. Thus, even though the core of this project is about the life and work of the barber, and about his chronicle's subsequent reception and bowdlerization, this study is also about an apparently unprecedented and historically significant social and literary phenomenon of the emergence of a group of unusual historians (Chapters 1 and 3). The barber, the farmers, the clerk, the scribe, the priest, and the soldiers were all representatives of this phenomenon, which I am calling "*nouveau* literacy."

NOUVEAU LITERACY IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LEVANT

Nouveau literacy, then, is about the arrival of authors of unusual backgrounds into the space that had historically been arrogated to the *`ulamā'*, literally, "the people who know." These new authors chose to write contemporary chronicles, that is, records of the events that took place in their own lifetimes. Here, I will offer the conceptual contours of this phenomenon by considering the relationship between the social and literary dimensions of the genre, the intention behind and the conditions that facilitated its appropriation by these "random" individuals, and the connection between literacy and appropriation of texts. I propose that the emergence of these new historians is not necessarily connected with an increase in the level of technical literacy, the "mere" knowledge of how to read and write. Rather, it is a socially impelled appropriation connected to a subtly and significantly different quality: *cultural* literacy.

This study proceeds on the assumption that texts, or rather genres, are socially apportioned.[13] That is to say, the production and consumption of certain genres falls broadly within the purview of specific social groups, whereby these groups address their concerns and desires in the appropriate discursive space and simultaneously use the genre as a means for self-presentation and/or preservation.[14] The Arabic chronicle is about the establishment and legitimization of the Islamic order.[15] Organized annalistically by the Islamic Hijrī date,[16] the main subject of the chronicle is the accomplishments (and predicaments) of Muslim rulers whose very existence, and hence preservation, ensures the continuing existence of an Islamic polity.[17] The *`ulamā'* were the other buttress of that political order. As the bearers of Islamic knowledge, the guardians of religious and moral values, and the promulgators and executioners of Islamic law, their very existence was predicated on that of the state. As such, it is natural that the religious scholars would emerge as the primary authors of the chronicle.[18]

But a genre does not just engender a set of power relations and politics. Inscribed in it are specific literary demands having to do with arrangement, language, registers, and content that reflect the conditions of production and consumption, and the social practices surrounding the genre. The chronicle as a form was therefore initially located in the social space between *`ālim* and prince. In other words, it was *elite*. More significantly, it was *scholarly*. And it was intensely bound up with the authority of the preservers of Islamic knowledge (Chapter 4).

Given the entanglement of the chronicle with Muslim scholars, the coincidence of chronicles being authored by so many people of such different backgrounds in the eighteenth century is striking. Some of these new authors come from contexts that are not associated with literacy at all, such as the barber and the two soldiers. And if they come from literate traditions, such as two Shī`ī famers in southern Lebanon,[19] a Greek Orthodox priest from Damascus, or a Samaritan scribe from Nablus, their products are distinctly different within their respective traditions. They either represent an unprecedented attempt at chronicle writing (the Shī`ī farmers) or a new kind of participation in a historical discourse that is uncharacteristically non-ecclesiastical and is concerned with mundane and daily occurrences in their respective locations (the chronicle of the Damascene priest is set in Damascus and that of the Samaritan scribe in Nablus). It is not so much that non-*`ulamā'* never wrote chronicles before the eighteenth century, as we will see many singular examples in a later chapter. Rather, the issue is that in the eighteenth century *so many* non-*`ulamā'* wrote chronicles at around the same time. In other words, this is a phenomenon of *convergence* by people of diverse backgrounds on the genre of the chronicle in the eighteenth-century Levant.

Before drawing out the significance of the emergence of these new historians, a clarification about their social backgrounds is necessary. These authors come from backgrounds that are not dominant either socioeconomically, such as the barber, the farmers, the soldiers, and the judicial court scribe; or religiously and culturally, such as the priest, the Samaritan scribe, and the Shīʿīs. However, as we shall see, none of them were either entirely poor or powerless. Indeed, some of them managed to acquire riches and/or high positions. This brings me to my next important point: the phenomenon of eighteenth-century non-*ʿulamā'* chronicles is precisely about social mobility.

The Ottoman eighteenth century was a time of unusual opportunity, both economic and political. It was a time of fiscal and political devolution from the center, Istanbul, to the provinces. This devolution resulted in two crucial novelties: semi-independent rule and (almost) private ownership of land. As such, the eighteenth century could be legitimately seen as a new order, a time of social flux, in which political and social power was redistributed and led to the formation of new provincial households. The influx of wealth into Damascus is evidenced by the erection of magnificent public buildings as well as the construction of private palatial residences. Thus the change of Damascus' cityscape reflected the new wealth and power of a new elite. As new households and, subsequently, patronage networks came to be forged in the region, all these authors in our sample experienced or stood to experience entry into these networks and an amelioration in social position—whether as individuals or as members of a collective. Consequently, their authorship is impelled by, and was a product of, their desire to negotiate for or in new social positions. This was a moment of an extraordinary "opening" of a social structure in flux, and people took advantage of it. For such social transactions, the contemporary chronicle was strikingly suitable. Because it is a record of the events surrounding the author, the chronicle is author-centric and allows ample room for the self. Though by no means intended to be autobiographical, the contemporary chronicle enables the author to place himself in the world and in his present. In other words, it constitutes a potent instrument of self-fashioning. Hence these new authors whose positions had just improved or who had the opportunity to do better wrote *history* (*tārīkh*) to immortalize or display their now "new and improved" selves, but they wrote history as a *contemporary* document in order to seize the chance for, or to consolidate their hold on, a better position in their present. It is precisely the opportunity for, or the proof of, tangible betterment that motivated these new chroniclers. The new authors understood the words of their contemporary saint and scholar, `Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī: a book meant power (or a desire and/or demonstration of it).

It is worth clarifying a few issues regarding those authors in our sample who do not come from traditions of literacy, such as the barber and the soldiers. It is important to remember that these new historians wrote books intended for *publication* (as opposed to private records—although there is one chronicler in this study whose text seems to have been intended as a private diary). A sense of how remarkable this is may be gained by juxtaposing this fact with our own time. Even by the standards of today, in the age of mass literacy, how many barbers or soldiers attempt (or dare?) to write academic, or even popular, books? I ask this question because the production of books by new groups is usually associated with the rise of technical literacy—the knowledge of how to read and write—among these groups. One of the main points of this study is precisely to dissociate book authorship from technical literacy. Such literacy is a precondition to consume a book, but it does not, in and of itself, provide the wherewithal to produce one. The production of a book necessitates the writer being confident that her authority is credible and receivable. She must be certain of a market for her product and confident that her role as a producer (as opposed to a mere consumer) is accepted as such. In short, this phenomenon is not about the sudden rise of literacy. Rather, it is about the *rise of authority* in new social groups. More specifically, it is about the rise of authority in the field of history among seemingly "random" individuals, who come from different backgrounds and who do not have any connection to one another. Somehow, there was something about the eighteenth century that gave license to a barber and a couple of soldiers to author books. As for the issue of technical literacy, whose measurement is notoriously difficult and inaccurate for the pre-print age, this study both assumes and will demonstrate that there was always a literate part of the population outside the circles of the *`ulamā'*.[20] Consequently, the phenomenon of the emergence of new historians has something to do with another kind of literacy: a cultural literacy. When we consider the whole sample of authors mentioned above—whether they come from literate traditions or not—the mere fact that they chose to write in a genre that is not originally theirs and that is historically associated with the `*ulamā*' betokens a knowledge on their part, no matter how rudimentary, of the culture of scholars and of the rules and regulations of scholarship that are woven into and demanded by the genre of the chronicle itself. Given that they do not come from the particular Islamic tradition of chronicle writing, these authors are therefore *recently literate* in the genre of the chronicle, and in the culture that surrounds its production and consumption. They have recently arrived (or are about to arrive) in new social positions and also in the particular literary or cultural sphere. In short, they are *nouveau* literates.

My coinage of the term *nouveau literacy* is clearly inspired by the expression "nouveau riche," which I am stripping of its derogatory implications and am using to denote new cultural wealth. In their arrival on the stage of historiography, these new historians are arrivistes in that they sport old literary habits and new cultural wealth. They come in with their "old baggage" and with their particular and distinctive linguistic heritage and literary traditions, which are unusual in scholarly forms such as the chronicle. The resultant gaffes and faux pas committed by these authors are not exclusive to form but also extend to content: some of these new authors unabashedly admit to the chronicle things that are not traditionally sanctioned. In their appropriation of the scholarly form and in their adding special seasoning from their own backgrounds, these authors offer not the accustomed chronicle written by an `*ālim* but something entirely new.

IBN BUDAYR'S *EVENTS OF DAMASCUS*

The published chronicle of the Damascene barber Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Budayr is one of the sources most widely used by modern historians of the eighteenth-century Levant. The chronicle was edited and abridged in the late nineteenth century by the Damascene scholar Muḥammad Sa`īd al-Qāsimī (d. 1900), who, in his own words, "refined" the language and content of the chronicle. The effect of al-Qāsimī's editorial strategies on the narrative of the barber is the subject of Chapter 6. Here, it suffices to say that al-Qāsimī renamed Aḥmad Ibn Budayr by according him the sobriquet "al-Budayrī," which is the name under which the barber has subsequently become known. Al-Qāsimī's recension of Ibn Budayr's chronicle was edited by Aḥmad `Izzat `Abd al-Karīm and published in

Damascus in 1959 under the title *Ḥawādith Dimashq al-yawmiyya* ("The Daily Events of Damascus"), with the author given as Aḥmad al-Budayrī al-Ḥallāq.[21] The present study will use the original text, of which an apparently unique manuscript exists in the Chester Beatty collection in Dublin, Ireland. I will refer to the author as Ibn Budayr, the name that appears on the title page of the original unedited manuscript, discarding the sobriquet "al-Budayrī" that al-Qāsimī bestowed on the barber of Damascus.[22]

Ibn Budayr's chronicle covers the years 1154–1175 AH, that is, 1741–1762 CE. The framing unit of dating in the chronicle is the Hijrī year. The author does not include monthly entries, so the chronicle remains strictly annalistic. Once Ibn Budayr establishes the year, the chronicle is entirely event-led: he chooses what he deems to be worthy of recording and records the date and day of the event. The exception to this trend is the annual announcement of the advent of the month of Ramadan, probably on account of its religious significance as the month of fasting.

As is the habit of the genre, Ibn Budayr's history is overwhelmingly concerned with news of political import: the appointment and dismissal of rulers and other authority figures, and skirmishes and armed conflict on the streets of Damascus and the surrounding regions. Strongly local in flavor, Ibn Budayr's chronicle very rarely reports on political events beyond the Levant. The usual repertoire that constitutes the stuff of history is also found in the barber's chronicle: natural disasters, epidemics, unusual weather phenomena, and miraculous occurrences.

Strikingly recurrent in Ibn Budayr's chronicle—sometimes placed immediately after the annual entry—are lists of prices of produce and staple foods. Because food prices are a measure of the functioning of the market place and an indication of the justice of rule (or lack thereof), chroniclers have historically paid attention to food prices. In Ibn Budayr's case, the listing of prices is almost obsessive, and usually followed by a call for succor from God.

Unlike some chronicles of the period, the barber's chronicle does not include regular reports on the news of the annual pilgrimage caravan, and its progress to and back from Mecca, or the "Egyptian Treasury," which is the annual caravan carrying the "revenue" that the Egyptian province owed to Istanbul. The author reserves the mention of these caravans to moments when things go awry with them, as when a pilgrims' caravan is raided by nomads or afflicted by a natural disaster. We shall see how Ibn Budayr's exclusion of regular and recurring "normal" events lends his text a special urgent tone and a different political message.

Unlike the chronicles of the other nouveau literates in our sample, Ibn Budayr's text closely mimics the *`ālim* chronicle in that it includes biographies (*tarjama*, pl. *tarājim*). In the event of the death of a scholar or a saint—and in some instances family members and friends—he includes a biography of the deceased in the accustomed scholarly form and style. We shall see later that he puts the biography into good use. Also, as with the scholarly chronicle, Ibn Budayr offers poetic musings to commemorate special events, such as his visits to shrines or his picnic outings.

His barbershop must have functioned as a place of gossip about the goings on in the town. The other chroniclers in this study rarely relay news of sexual indiscretions, but Ibn Budayr does not shy away from reporting infidelities and juicy tales of sexual jealousies.[23] However, more often than not, his reports on sexual stories are in the vein of demonstrating the collapse of the moral order and are not impelled by the sheer joy of gossip.

It should be noted that Ibn Budayr's text does not include a beginning and a conclusion. Though the absence of a conclusion may be indicative of the sudden death of the author, the absence of the usual preamble (*khuṭba*) suggests that a part of the text went missing after the completion of the composition. Further, the author mentions having written a chronogram on the occasion of his son's death, "which has been placed at the beginning of [t]his book,"[24] but no such verses appear in the beginning of the book. This further confirms that the history is partly missing. Interestingly, because the bowdlerizer al-Qāsimī's rendition covers the exact same years and events, it seems likely that the editor used the same manuscript that I am using in this study (and in which, as we shall see, some marginal notes might have been al-Qāsimī's), or an identical copy of it. It should be noted that even though the original text ends in the year 1176 AH, the editor al-Qāsimī rightly claims that the barber added an extra year by mistake and ends his version with the year 1175 AH.

I have often been asked why I believed the barber—more precisely, why I believed that the author was a barber and not just an impersonator, an author pretending to be a groomer. My answer is, "There is just not enough razor and scissors in it."[25] Had the author been an impersonator, he would have set up the barbershop as a stage for the narration and included in it everything one expects from a barber and in a barbershop. We will see throughout that the barber's references to the craft and to his shop are entirely incidental. Ibn Budayr's focus is overwhelmingly on his city, and the events (and deaths) that took place in it.

The credibility of the barber himself with regard to the events that he narrates is attested by modern historians, who have made extensive use of his history as a source, and who have cross-checked the barber's information with other sources.[26] As is the case with any premodern text, Ibn Budayr records what seems to us incredible and fantastical, such as miracles of saints. However, it is very clear that in every instance of such "unusual" occurrences, Ibn Budayr is reporting from hearsay—although, of course, he himself is credulous of the stories.[27] The barber does show a proclivity toward exaggeration in tone, which is enhanced by his copious use of rhymed prose; but Ibn Budayr knows when to insert his emphatic eyewitness *I* when he thinks that his report might be taken with a grain of salt ("I saw with my own eyes al-Marja flooded as though it was a part of a sea.")[28]

Like in any other text (and because a text is, by definition, a public space), there is a great degree of active engagement in self-editing and self-fashioning by the author. A major theme in this study is the extent to which Ibn Budayr uses his chronicle to portray himself in the most complimentary fashion. We shall see how the barber is keen to show off his connections with the town's illustrious scholarly elite. However, what concerns me is not so much the veracity of his telltales about interactions with famous scholars and miracle-working saints but the very fact of his attempt to fashion himself, and the methods he employs to do so. Having stated this, I find no reason not to believe the barber. We will see that he has friends, high and low, and he accords them equal amounts of respect. In short, although Ibn Budayr is eager to emphasize his social strengths and hide his social weaknesses, he does not seem to alter or grossly misrepresent reality, at least not intentionally. After all, Ibn Budayr did not write in a vacuum and did not write anonymously. He envisioned an audience at whom he pitched the history of his city, which was also his audience's city. His lies would have been immediately found out, and the barber was no fool.