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James Weaver*

# What Wasn't an Encyclopaedia in the Fourth Islamic Century?

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**Abstract:** The usefulness of the term "encyclopaedia" in the study of pre-modern Arabic and Islamic literature has been the subject of some discussion over the last decade. The main concern has been that it is applied to a wide range of texts and text-types in a vague and inflationary manner, leaving the intended meaning unclear in any given case. Although there is much merit to this criticism, the discipline also knows of more systematic usages. This paper surveys some of these, arguing that although the label "encyclopaedia" indeed has its disadvantages, the analytical concepts and categories lying behind a usage are of greater importance than the choice of term itself. In light of these arguments, some of the most prominent scholarly usages of encyclopaedia and encyclopaedism in regard to the fourth Islamic century/tenth century CE are assessed.

**Keywords:** encyclopaedia, Arabic literature, analytical category, actors' category, Abbasid

> By the bye, what a strange abuse has been made of the word encyclopaedia! It signifies, properly, grammar, logic, rhetoric, and ethics and metaphysics, which last, explaining the ultimate principles of grammar—log., rhet., and eth—formed a circle of knowledge. To call a huge unconnected miscellany of the "omne scibile", in an arrangement determined by the accident of initial letters, an encyclopaedia, is the impudent ignorance of your Presbyterian bookmakers.
>
> Samuel Taylor Coleridge[1]

The usage of the term "encyclopaedia" in the study of Arabic literature has been subject to a certain amount of discussion over the last decade, prompted above all by a rather despairing 2006 article from Josef van Ess in which he warns it is employed in an "inflationary manner." Invoking Marco Schöller's detailed critique of the various applications of "humanism" in the discipline, he cautions that something similar has occurred: "it sounds good but it is extremely difficult to pin down, and everybody understands it according to his own gusto", leaving

1 Coleridge 1895: 427.

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us with only "vague associations."[2] For van Ess, previous usage in the discipline makes it unclear if any one of bulkiness, comprehensiveness, multi-disciplinarity, systematization or the fact that a text could conceivably be used as a reference-work might alone be a sufficient criterion for a work to be regarded as an encyclopaedia.[3] "What we need", he asserts, "is a definition."[4]

Van Ess apparently sought to initiate a more critical disciplinary conversation, casting his article as a series of provocative questions rather than a systematic diagnosis of the ailment, yet the response has been largely muted. The most substantial engagement with the issue subsequently has come from Elias Muhanna, who, in his 2012 dissertation on Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī's (d. 733/1333) *Nihāyat al-ʿarab fī funūn al-adab*, defends the application of "encyclopaedia" and "encyclopaedism" to certain texts and intellectual trends of the Mamlūk period.[5] Of course, Muhanna was by no means the first to coin this usage. It can be traced back at least as far as a 1970 article by Régis Blachère, which offers "Quelques réflexions sur les formes de l'encyclopédisme en Egypte et en Syrie du viii$^{e}$/xiv$^{e}$ siècle à la fin du ix$^{e}$/xv$^{e}$ siècle".[6] Blachère begins his essay by introducing Mamlūk encyclopaedism as a revival of an encyclopaedic movement which had held sway in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries in Iraq, concerning which he cites slightly earlier studies by Roger Paret and André Miquel.[7] The idea that roughly these two periods, the fourth/tenth century and the Mamlūk era, constitute the high-points of Arabic encyclopaedism seems to have stuck.[8]

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**2** Van Ess 2006: 6–7, referring to Schöller 2001.

**3** Van Ess 2006: 7–16.

**4** Van Ess 2006: 6.

**5** Muhanna 2012: 11–38.

**6** Blachère 1970.

**7** Blachère 1970: 7, referencing Paret 1966 and Miquel 1967.

**8** A good example of the model can be found in the contributions of Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi to Annie Becq's; 1991 "L'Encyclopédisme," a volume of conference proceedings held up as something of a milestone in the study of mediaeval European encyclopaedias (e. g. by Draelants 2013: 81–82). Chapoutot-Remadi's papers, two of only three to deal with non-European works, discuss Arabic encyclopaedias of the fourth/tenth and the seventh-eighth/thirteenth-fourteenth centuries respectively (Chapoutot-Remadi 1991a – referencing Miquel 1967; Pellat 1966–; Chapoutot-Remadi 1991b). Notably, the third contribution with a non-European focus (Marquet 1991) also deals with a fourth/tenth century Arabic work: the *Rasāʾil* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ. More recently, the model can be observed in Jean-Charles Ducène's 2013 article on "Les encyclopédies et les sciences naturelles dans le monde arabe médiéval (XII$^{e}$–XIV$^{e}$ siècle)". Ducène follows Blachère by opening his study of Mamlūk-era works with a discussion of the encyclopaedias of the fourth/tenth century (Ducène 2013: 201, referencing Paret 1966 and Pellat 1991).

Against the background of van Ess's general critique of the usage of encyclopaedia in the discipline and Muhanna's defence in reference to the Mamlūk period, this paper, arising from a workshop on the phenomena of inventory, classification and arrangement in the fourth/tenth century, examines the usage of the term in reference to that earlier period.

# 1 General remarks

The basic difficulty in applying the term encyclopaedia to pre-modern Arabic literature in any kind of analytical fashion lies in the fact that it is a label for numerous interrelated concepts already within the European tradition.[9] As is well known, the Latin term was coined in the late fifteenth century by humanist scholars to render *enkyklopaideia*, a Greek word which had never existed.[10] The relevant Greek term was really *enkyklios paideia*, which came to refer, by the first century BCE at the latest, to the "general education" which a free-born man should receive in advance of any specialist training in rhetoric, philosophy or a profession, and which consisted of the seven liberal arts: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music.[11] In any case, it was decisive for the humanists' understanding of the term that Roman authors, such as Quintilian, equated it to the Latin *orbis doctrinae*, the "circle of learning".[12] Making full use of the circle metaphor, the humanists then emphasised those aspects of the concept which had to do with the cohesion of the disciplines of knowledge in an ordered whole.[13]

Thus, in the sixteenth century, encyclopaedia began to appear in the titles of books on the classification and interrelation of the sciences, usually ordered according to a mixture of the seven liberal arts and the "Aristotelian" division of philosophy into its theoretical (physics, mathematics, metaphysics), practical (ethics, politics, economics) and productive sciences.[14] It seems to have been Johann Heinrich Alsted, in the seventeenth century, who first gave voice to a concept of the encyclopaedia which went beyond the canon of philosophical

9 The point is well made by Muhanna 2012: 15.
10 Henningsen 1966: 276–282; Fowler 1997: 27–29.
11 Fuchs 1962: 365–398, De Rijk 1965, Fowler 1997: 14–15. Exactly when this meaning became established and what the earlier meaning of the term might have been apparently remain disputed.
12 Henningsen 1966: 285–287, Blair 2006: 201–202; Blair 2013: 379–380.
13 Dierse 1977: 9–15; Fowler 1997: 6–7; Blair 2006: 201–202; Blair 2013: 379–380.
14 Dierse 1977: 9–15.

subjects to encompass "the circle of everything that can be taught", but he acknowledged that this was a loose application and his most important work, the *Encyclopaedia septem tomis distincta*, however influential for the future usage of the term, was still structured as an ordered compendium of the disciplines.[15]

The concept of the encyclopaedia that is generally valid today did not emerge until the eighteenth century, when the term became newly established as the title of a genre of works which had the form of a "universal dictionary of arts and sciences." These presented not the disciplines, but rather the knowledge that results from them: a comprehensive body of basic information about "everything", organized according to alphabetically ordered lemmata and aimed at the general literate public.[16] Through a restriction of "comprehensive" to "comprehensive in a given subject area", we get the modern single-subject encyclopaedia, often directed rather at experts.[17] Thus, the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* has very little to do with *enkyklios paideia*.

As a result of this history, some usages of encyclopaedia refer to systematic conceptualizations of knowledge, others to educational ideals or curricula, still others to kinds of book. Some invoke the idea of amassing knowledge; others require the systematic consideration of its internal structure. Some indicate the organisation and division of the disciplines of knowledge; others just that the knowledge conveyed should be ordered somehow. Some involve multidisciplinarity; others just comprehensive inventory, even of a single subject. Some bespeak a pedagogical programme or at least didactic intent; others that the work should be consultable in form and/or accessible to the non-specialist in content. By calling a pre-modern Arabic text an encyclopaedia, or speaking of the "encyclopaedism" of a given author or period, we could quite reasonably be invoking any of the term's historical usages. It is also highly likely that when we do so, we do not mean to say that some pre-modern Arabic case is exactly like some European case. Rather, as has happened throughout the historical process described above, we are extending, restricting or otherwise modifying the concept with the intention of saying something meaningful about Arabic literary and intellectual history by doing so.[18] The problem is that if too many individual Arabic texts are called encyclopaedias for too many different reasons, it is unclear what information the term imparts about the

**15** Henningsen 1966: 288–292; Dierse 1977: 18–20; Blair 2013: 392–396.

**16** Henningsen 1966: 310–313; Blair 2013: 396–397.

**17** Fowler 1997: 11.

**18** On cultural comparison in the humanities and extension of established cultural concepts to new situations more generally, see Weber 2015.

works in question. This is the inflationism of which van Ess speaks. As a result, we have to specify in each case what is really meant by encyclopaedia and the term itself tends towards redundancy.

Few would dispute that the idiosyncratic application of imprecise terminology to describe individual texts is best avoided, but this is only partially a fair characterisation of what is happening. We more frequently encounter two other usage-types. The first consists in a usage of encyclopaedia which is indeed quite thin, but around which there is established consensus well beyond the discipline of Arabic and Islamic studies. This is to employ the term "encyclopaedism", based on an abstraction from the modern concept of the encyclopaedia, to refer to an activity or an ideal which has apparently recurred at numerous times and places throughout human history: that of amassing and ordering information in comprehensive fashion, of inventorying and presenting the known. Any text which is seen to embody this impulse sufficiently can then be called an encyclopaedia.[19] It is pointless to object to such a usage in itself and, in any case, there isn't another obvious word for the intended concept.[20] However, we must also accept that it does not provide us with anything like a fine-grained category of analysis: a truly vast range of otherwise highly heterogeneous works from Arabic literary history partake of this impulse. We can only get so far in trying to understand and describe that history better with such generalities.

A second further usage-type, however, involves several, distinct, narrower and more systematic applications of the term to certain categories of pre-modern Arabic text. These usages differ significantly from one another and are largely mutually incompatible, but they are usually subject to some degree of local consensus in the sub-fields of the discipline in which they are current.

The below discussion will not compare all the idiosyncratic applications of encyclopaedia to individual Arabic texts that one can find in the discipline and demonstrate their divergences and contradictions. Nor will any lengthier attempt be made to discourage the employment of the term in the general sense just outlined. However, it is worth examining some of the more systematic current usages before we turn to the situation in respect of scholarship on the fourth/tenth century in particular.

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**19** This is the meaning proposed, for example, in the introductions to the most recent collected volumes on encyclopaedias or encyclopaedism. See the introductions to König and Woolf 2013; Zucker 2013.

**20** It is worth following Marco Schöller's example (2001: 13) and citing Gérard Gennette's famous tongue-in-cheek remark: "Il serait temps qu'un Commissaire de la République des Lettres nous imposât une terminologie cohérente" (Gennette 1982: 7, n2).

## 2 The approach of Elias Muhanna

Elias Muhanna appears to accept van Ess's charge that the usage of encyclopaedia in Arabic and Islamic studies has suffered from a lack of definition, but considers that this is really "only half the problem."[21] The reason for this, he claims, lies in the nature of the task of studying pre-modern encyclopaedism. He sees that there are two basic approaches available:

> The first (what we might term "analytic") begins by assuming an *a priori* definition of the term "encyclopaedia" and then applying it to texts that fit the definition regardless of their contemporary classification. The second (let's call it "empirical") begins at the level of the text itself and elucidates the medieval nomenclature with which its author identifies his project. Crudely speaking, the analytic method is top-down and the empirical is bottom-up.[22]

For Muhanna, there are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. Following the "empirical" approach and adopting actors' categories allows us to respect the way pre-modern authors conceived of their works and permits an "understanding of the heterogeneous vocabularies and intellectual traditions that underpin" pre-modern compilatory literature.[23] However, it also "makes us vulnerable to a potentially myopic literalism", oblivious to the connections that exist between works categorized by their authors as belonging to different genres, and reliant on actors' categories that are themselves frequently unstable.[24] On the other hand, imposing an "analytical" category upon the material, he states, allows us to observe the relationships between texts of various genres and periods, but also elides "essential differences between" them and can "subordinate the statements of these medieval authors to our own generic categories."[25] It also, he says, "bring[s] us back to the pesky question of definition: what essential elements define the encyclopaedia qua analytic category?"[26]

Muhanna's specific challenge is that of classifying the great Mamlūk-era compilations: above all Nuwayrī's *Nihāya*, Aḥmad Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī's (d. 749/1349) *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* and Shihāb al-Din al-Qalqashandī's (d. 821/1418) *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshā fī ṣināʿat al-inshāʾ*. These texts clearly present themselves as belonging to different generic traditions: they are a work of cultured

21 Muhanna 2012: 28.
22 Muhanna 2012: 19–20.
23 Muhanna 2012: 31.
24 Muhanna 2012: 20, 28–30.
25 Muhanna 2012: 28.
26 Muhanna 2012: 20.

prose (*adab*), a geography (*masālik wa-mamālik*), and a treatise on epistolography (*inshāʾ*) respectively. Nevertheless, Muhanna observes, absolute adherence to these actors' categories would prevent us from identifying important similarities that transcend their claimed generic affiliations. They were composed within a century of one another, in the same place, by people of similar intellectual formation and professional background who "circulated in the same networks of scholarly and political patronage".[27] They also exhibit various features that "bind them to each other whilst differentiating them from their own generic traditions", namely "vast thematic scope, systematic organisation, diversity of source materials, elephantine proportions."[28]

His solution is to propose a "middle path" between the analytical and the empirical approaches. This consists in employing the term encyclopaedia for these texts in reference to the constellation of phenomena just mentioned, but simultaneously "bringing things into focus" by also employing actors' categories and taking seriously how these works are presented by their authors.[29] In practice, this middle path has great merit: Muhanna thereby justifies reading the *Nihāya* in different contexts that obviously help make sense of it, i. e. those of the other Mamlūk encyclopaedias, *adab* compilations (viz. *adab* encyclopaedias, on which see below), as well as cosmographies.[30] It is thus tempting simply to take this ready-made model and apply it to the situation of the fourth/tenth century. Yet however effective the approach is in practice, the framework employed to describe the problem and the solution are misleading and this has important implications for its transferability to other times and places. The mistake is that the relevant distinction is not really between an analytical approach based on *a priori* definitions and an empirical approach based on actors' categories, nor is the middle path in the middle of anything.

One meaning of the term "analytical" is indeed close to "*a priori*:" an analytical, as opposed to a synthetic, statement is one which attributes to its subject no more than is conceptually contained in the definition of that subject (e. g. no bachelor is married).[31] The relevant distinction in our case, however, is between the categories we as historians employ in our analysis, such as encyclopaedia, and actor's categories, like *masālik wa-mamālik*. An analytical

**27** Muhanna 2012: 30.

**28** Muhanna 2012: 30.

**29** Muhanna 2012: 31–32.

**30** On the *Nihāya* and *adab* compilations, see Muhanna 2012: 125–134; on the *Nihāya* and cosmographies, see Muhanna 2012: 16–182. "Cosmography" is also not an actors' category of course: see Von Hees 2002: 109–114.

**31** e.g. as critiqued by Quine 1953: 20–46.

category is just an instance of the former. The notion that analytical categories in this sense should be formed *a priori*—that we would somehow concoct a definition of encyclopaedia and then see what things out there in the in the world fit that definition—is false. Indeed, this is not what Muhanna does when he forms his own analytical category. Rather, based on the careful observation of common formal features and historical connections between Mamlūk-era texts, he builds his category of analysis "empirically", from the ground up. He then calls this category encyclopaedias, but this is not because he has found that the texts it contains fit any *a priori* definition; he never even provides such a definition. The recognition that these texts are encyclopaedias would seem, rather, to follow upon an implicit *post hoc* comparison between them and other texts we call encyclopaedias or with some abstracted, but unstated concept of encyclopaedia. "Mamlūk encyclopaedias" means a particular set of Mamlūk-era texts with certain common features, but the reason why these features allow them to be considered a kind of encyclopaedia does not seem to be of great interest. It is clearly secondary to the establishment of the analytical category itself.

An actors' category, on the other hand, is a category employed by the authors of the texts we study, or by their contemporaries. They are empirical only in the sense that we observe their existence as categories of the actors involved. We can, of course, choose to employ actors' categories as our own analytical categories and very often, we do exactly this. Moreover, as literary or intellectual historians, we are inevitably interested in actors' categories at some level: that ʿUmarī refers to his text as a work of *masālik wa-mamālik* is a fact that potentially gives us important information about how he understood and wished to present his work. However, none of this means we are somehow compelled to work *only* with actors' categories, for precisely the reasons Muhanna outlines.[32] There is no good reason why we should be restricted by the fact that no premodern, Arabic-writing author observed the similarity between Nuwayrī's, ʿUmarī's and Qalqashandī's works and coined an Arabic expression equivalent to "Mamlūk encyclopaedias." Actors' categories are simply not in competition with whatever other analytical categories we employ, unless we make the essentialist assumption that texts can only belong to one category.[33]

32 Muhanna 2012: 28–31.

33 There is, of course, a debate about the metaphysical reality of certain kinds of categories, known as "natural kinds", for which such an essentialist understanding of the relationship between an object and its "proper" category is sometimes defended (see Khalidi 2013: 1–41). Here, however, even for those who defend this view, we are talking about a rather restricted range of categories of objects (and processes, states etc.) in the natural world, and a defence of

In the debate around the usage of encyclopaedia in respect of pre-modern Arabic literature, the issue of actors' categories is a distraction. Encyclopaedia is obviously not an actors' category. The only question is whether there are any well-founded and useful analytical categories of Arabic literature to which "encyclopaedia" can reasonably refer. Muhanna's argument is essentially that there is at least one such category. This does not make his approach some kind of middle path between *a priori* and empirical categories, but rather a sophisticated reading of Nuwayrī's text using both an "empirically" grounded analytical category—labelled Mamlūk encyclopaedias—*and* actors' categories (adopted as analytical categories).

## 3 Concepts, categories and labels

Muhanna's methodological discussion nevertheless takes us in the direction of an important distinction: precisely the difference between an analytical category constructed "empirically" (i.e by observation of common features between texts) then labelled encyclopaedia and one formed around an *a priori* definition of an encyclopaedia. There is, of course, no pure empiricism involved in constructing "empirical" analytical categories like "Mamlūk encyclopaedia". Numerous decisions or assumptions concerning what sort of features are relevant to the formation of an empirically constructed analytical category of texts are made in advance of the examination of the material. The point here is to distinguish between two procedures: (1.) grouping Arabic texts together by the observation of common features we consider to be relevant when grouping texts *generally*, then deciding to call one or some of the resulting categories "encyclopaedias" for whatever reason; and (2.) beginning with an *a priori* definition in which *all* relevant common features for membership of the category "encyclopaedia" are defined in advance, so that the presence or absence of other common features between the Arabic texts falling into the category, and between the members of the category and other Arabic texts, are not taken into account.

In the case of an empirically constructed category like Mamlūk encyclopaedias, we believe that the texts at the core of the category share a set of densely overlapping common features which connect them to one another and

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the idea of natural kinds does not depend on the essentialist view anyway (Khalidi 2013: 42–81). Otherwise, the view is generally held that objects can be classified in as many ways as we are capable of classifying them, whatever one considers the actual reasons (biological-psychological, rational-epistemic, conventional, pragmatic, etc.) for our privileging certain categories (whether as natural kinds or not) over others might be (Needham 1975:349–350; Khalidi 2013: 201–230; Rorty 1999: xxvi).

distinguish them from other categories of Arabic texts. Another example would be "*adab* encyclopaedia", as defined in an influential 1982 article by Hilary Kilpatrick. This term is used to refer to a set of topically arranged anthologies which, she claims, aim at providing "the basic knowledge in those domains with which the average cultured man may be expected to be acquainted."[34] The structure of these categories is such that to the extent the texts they involve really do present the claimed density of common features (and that we privilege those features as relevant to the formation of literary categories), we would consider them coherent phenomena of Arabic literature regardless of what we chose to call them.[35] If we didn't call them Mamlūk encyclopaedias or *adab* encyclopaedias, we would still want to call them *something*. In such cases then, the argument over the use of the term encyclopaedia largely reduces to a question of the appropriateness of the label for the phenomenon: why have we chosen to call these categories of texts encyclopaedias? What is the significance and effect of doing so? Is there a better alternative?

In applying this polysemic term from the European literary tradition to these categories of pre-modern Arabic texts, we are relying on a process of (usually implicit) comparison. For both *adab* encyclopaedia and Mamlūk encyclopaedia, what has been underdefined is thus not the usage of encyclopaedia with respect to Arabic literature, but rather the object and terms of the comparison which has led to the usage, i. e. what concept of encyclopaedia is being invoked and in what way is it similar to our category of Arabic texts? Yet the very fact that neither Muhanna nor Kilpatrick attempts to justify their employment of the term encyclopaedia by specifying the ways in which *adab* encyclopaedias or Mamlūk encyclopaedias resemble any of the varieties of text from which the term is borrowed (e. g. the modern or Renaissance encyclopaedia) already shows that detailed comparative insight is not the aim. Such usages certainly should not be understood make a claim to specific, "thick" convergence between bodies of European and Arabic literature in terms of form, content, likely audience and function. The point is rather that when searching for a convenient label for these analytical categories of Arabic texts, encyclopaedia somehow presents itself as an intelligible candidate.

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**34** Kilpatrick 1982: 34.

**35** Such categories do not result in "Aristotelian" definitions, in which an identical set of criteria must be present in every member of the category. They are probably, rather, for a given value of "sufficiently", either sufficiently dense categories of family resemblance, i. e. polythetic categories, in which each member has features in common with other members, but no single feature must be present in all members (Needham 1975); or else they are sufficiently tight radial categories, i. e. with a prototypical member at the core and other members being closer to or further away from that core based on degree of similarity (Slingerland 2008: 59–60).

Labels themselves can be misleading of course. Just because one *could* reasonably call a given category of texts encyclopaedias doesn't mean that it is helpful to do so. What makes encyclopaedia an intelligible label in these cases is probably just that the texts in question conform (although in very different ways) to the highly abstracted concept of "encyclopaedia as an ordered compendium of knowledge on diverse topics," i. e. they are similar to the modern encyclopaedia in this "thin" sense. However, the numerous, more specific connotations of the term can easily provide false expectations, and thus many potential reasons for critics to claim the usage is inappropriate. For example, the topical arrangement of instructive anecdotes, excerpts of exemplary prose, poetic snippets, scriptural citations and wise sayings of the *adab* encyclopaedia constitute neither a systematic presentation of the multiple disciplines of knowledge nor an ordered assembly of its essential objects. Likewise, although the range of subjects included in *adab* encyclopaedias expands over time, encyclopaedia here should not be understood to imply that the knowledge presented aims at "universality" in terms of the major knowledge systems of the day. The natural sciences, mathematics, medicine, metaphysics, even theology and law are barely present in many examples, if at all. Any encyclopaedic "comprehensiveness" lies rather in the impression that these works convey, in ordered fashion, everything necessary for a certain kind of cultivated man to know, overwhelmingly as regards appropriate social conduct and speech.[36]

Nevertheless, whilst one might try to seek out labels with fewer unwanted connotations, the obvious alternatives usually either fail sufficiently to distinguish the corpora in question or are just as misleading. Mamlūk encyclopaedias stand apart from their respective generic traditions through the set of common features identified by Muhanna. These features also distinguish them from other kinds of Mamlūk compilatory literature. As a result, we cannot simply call them "Mamlūk compilations" or "compendia." "Florilegium", "anthology", "manual", and "hand-book" are all even less appropriate. For Kilpatrick, an *adab* encyclopaedia is clearly something different from an *adab* anthology: she states that an anthology selects the best examples of some genre or genres, whilst an encyclopaedia aims to cover all possible subjects.[37] This only works if we mean "all possible subjects relevant to *adab*" and don't employ overly expansive formulations like "all branches of human knowledge,"[38] but to the extent that the distinction is sustainable, the label encyclopaedia has a role in distinguishing

36 For a critique of the term *adab* encyclopaedia on similar grounds, see Heck 2002: 16–17.
37 Kilpatrick 1998a: 94.
38 Kilpatrick 1998b: 208. Elsewhere, *adab* anthology can, however, be found as more or less a synonym of *adab* encyclopaedia. See, for example, Rosenthal 1970: 252–277, Khalidi 1994.

these texts from other types of *adab* compilation. In these cases then, the label encyclopaedia has advantages of discrimination between Arabic texts even while implying potentially misleading similarities to certain European texts.

In any case, both Mamlūk encyclopaedia and *adab* encyclopaedia now at least have the merit of sustained consensus around their usage: whatever the potential unintended connotations of the labels, they operate today largely as functional tags. New usages of the term have effectively been created to refer to certain corpora of pre-modern Arabic texts. As long as we do not reify such usages to the point of considering Mamlūk encyclopaedias and *adab* encyclopaedias to be two species of some kind of genus of "Arabic encyclopaedias," or let them tempt us to overemphasise the degree of similarity to certain genres of European text, then the labels do not obviously present any great obstacle in themselves. Much more important is the coherence of the underlying analytical categories, their groundedness in the material they categorize, and their resulting usefulness for describing and understanding the history of Arabic literature.

The situation is quite different when it comes to categories constructed from *a priori* definitions. Here, we can consider an example from the work of Syrinx von Hees, who devotes a 2006 article on Zakarīyā' al-Qazwīnī's (d. 686/1283) *'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt* to proving "that Qazwīnī's text is a full-fledged encyclopaedia."[39] To accomplish this, she "follow[s] the criteria for a definition of the literary genre 'encyclopaedia' developed by recent medievalist research, as for example the studies of Christel Meier and Bernard Ribémont."[40] She extracts nine criteria from these studies and attempts to show that the *'Ajā'ib* fulfils them, effectively thereby adopting the concept of the medieval European encyclopaedia as an *a priori* definition in respect of Arabic literature. The most important criteria appear to be that an encyclopaedia offers "an organised compendium of knowledge"[41] which "transmits basic knowledge drawn from authoritative specialized works [...] in a clear and intelligible structure"[42] as "a learning tool for [its] readers,"[43] which has a central focus on natural history, and is designed to make "scientific knowledge available for a broader public."[44] There is no more tightly defined usage of the term for a pre-modern Arabic text than that offered by von Hees, but it is important to pay attention to what such a procedure really achieves.

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**39** Von Hees 2006. See also Von Hees 2002: 109–114.
**40** Von Hees 2006: 173.
**41** Von Hees 2006: 174.
**42** Von Hees 2006: 185.
**43** Von Hees 2006: 186.
**44** Von Hees 2006: 186.

The work of Meier and Ribémont indeed provides a useful model for thinking about the usage of encyclopaedia in respect of pre-modern Arabic literature, as they address its usage in reference to medieval European literature.[45] The situations are analogous, because the term encyclopaedia, not coined until the late fifteenth century, is alien to both. Notably however, neither Meier nor Ribémont devotes much space to worrying about the appropriateness of the anachronous terminology itself. Rather, what is at stake for them is the establishment of a coherent category of medieval European texts grounded in observations of common features. This is clearest with Ribémont, who speaks of "a real tradition"[46] which was "founded under Isidore[of Seville]'s pen".[47] Most importantly, he claims that "any medieval encyclopaedic text must ... follow an initial prototype from which all other types of texts composing the historical family can be deduced by derivation ... the initial prototype ... is Isidore's work, the *Etymologies*".[48] Meier's approach is somewhat different, focussing on the description of the constants of form and content present in the "Gattung", but she too abstracts this from what is clearly conceived as a category of formally related texts which all present themselves as modulations of a certain "Basisstruktur" according to intended function and audience.[49] For her too, Isidore was the founder of the genre.[50]

Above all, the point for both scholars is not to justify the applicability of the term encyclopaedia, but to inquire into the characteristics of a particular textual tradition and to explain its function in medieval European society. Unlike von Hees, they are not interested in "proving" that any medieval text is an encyclopaedia by testing it against a definition *a priori* to the medieval European literary tradition.[51] The most we get from either on why the category of texts they discuss should be labelled encyclopaedias is a brief comment from Meier to the effect that like the modern encyclopaedia, the medieval encyclopaedia is a comprehensive assemblage of knowledge.[52] Far more important for them is

**45** Meier 1984; Meier 1997; Ribémont 1997.
**46** Ribémont 1997: 52
**47** Ribémont 1997: 49
**48** Ribémont 1997: 54. He refers to radial nature of the category of medieval European encyclopaedias formed around Isidore's *Etymologies* also earlier: "Empirical investigation reveals a central core, with a range of satellites and one text that is clearly fundamental" (1997: 49).
**49** Meier 1984: 478–492.
**50** Meier 1997: 104.
**51** As Meier puts it, "Es ist hier keine Begriffsdiskussion beabsichtigt (die müßig wäre)." (1984: 469).
**52** Meier 1984: 470

that the medieval European encyclopaedia is a coherent analytical category useful for understanding medieval European literary and intellectual history.

Von Hees's argument rests on the assumption that if Meier and Ribémont have successfully established a definition of encyclopaedia in respect of medieval European literature, we could simply take that definition and apply it to Arabic literature in order to identify "full-fledged" encyclopaedias there too. But this overlooks the structure of the category they identify. The fact that the *ʿAjāʾib* happens to share nine features with medieval European encyclopaedias does not make it an instance of that category according to Meier and Ribémont's models: above all, it obviously does not belong to the "historical family" descending from Isidore's *Etymologies*. What it means, rather, is that we have found an isolated text in a different tradition that happens to exhibit certain similarities—some quite superficial, some more vital—to the so-called medieval encyclopaedia. This is an important observation and merits the close attention von Hees gives it. She demonstrates effectively that there is much to learn about the *ʿAjāʾib* through the comparative exercise. But what meaning does it give to the claim that this text is a "full-fledged encyclopaedia"?

It is quite reasonable, of course, to refer to the *ʿAjāʾib* as an encyclopaedia due to its similarities to medieval European encyclopaedias (even though "medieval European encyclopaedia" is itself just a scholarly coinage). But the problem here has been mentioned already: there are many Arabic texts that could individually be called encyclopaedias based on different sets of similarities to different concepts of encyclopaedia. As a result, the term lacks the specificity to function as a shorthand for the detailed comparative insights that von Hees offers and little is gained. It sells her analytical work short to make out that its conclusion should just be that it is legitimate to call the text an encyclopaedia. Indeed, the argument can be turned on its head without much change to the consequences of the analysis: what is most interesting is that the *ʿAjāʾib* has so many similarities to the medieval encyclopaedia even though it is *not* a mediaeval encyclopaedia. Either way, the task of the intellectual historian remains to explain those similarities in relation to the different historical contexts in which the *ʿAjāʾib* and medieval European encyclopaedias were composed and used.

However, von Hees's argument that the text must be considered a "full-fledged encyclopaedia" would seem to be about something more than this. She states that classifying the *ʿAjāʾib* this way helps us to understand its purpose better and "to describe its position and function in Arabic literary history".[53] But it is not at all obvious that presenting it as a member of such a category can help orient it in Arabic literary history at all, as the category is simply not grounded

53 Von Hees 2006: 185.

in the analysis of Arabic literature. Rather, because the definition of encyclopaedia she chooses is derived from a European literary category, it orients the *ʿAjāʾib* in terms of its similarity to European literature. That is not an illegitimate exercise, but it is not the same thing.[54]

It also begs the question why we would more generally want to set about classifying Arabic literature according to *a priori* definitions drawn from European literary categories. One obvious issue here concerns the arbitrariness of whatever *a priori* definition we decide upon. For example, we can consider that in defending the term encyclopaedia in reference to the *Rasāʾil* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, Godefroid de Callataÿ invokes a similar definition to that employed by von Hees, one suggested by Baudouin Van den Abeele: medieval encyclopaedias are "des compilations thématiques et ordonnées de connaissances relatives à plusieurs disciplines, touchant principalement à l'univers et à la nature, rédigées dans une perspective didactique et édifiante à partir d'un travail de mise en extraits d'œuvres reconnues pour leur autorité."[55] De Callataÿ is just as correct that the *Rasāʾil* fulfils these criteria as von Hees is that the *ʿAjāʾib* fulfils hers. However, despite the close similarity, there are still key differences in the definitions. Van den Abeele makes multi-disciplinarity a criterion while von Hees does not. This helps the respective claims, because it is not obvious in what sense the *ʿAjāʾib*—a seventh/thirteenth century inventory of the entities of the heavens and the earth (i. e., a "cosmography"[56])—can be considered a multidisciplinary work. The *Rasāʾil*—a fourth/tenth century collection of epistles covering the disciplines of the philosophical cannon—clearly is. Von Hees includes the criterion "An author of an encyclopaedia seeks to make his book as user friendly as possible", by which she means that the work uses devices to aid consultation-reading, such as "a detailed table of contents, a clearly marked hierarchical structure, numerical or alphabetical lists, introductions, summaries, glossaries or cross-references."[57] Van den Abeele's definition doesn't mention anything of this, which is just as well, because the *Rasāʾil*, a few cross-references notwithstanding, cannot unambiguously be said to fulfil this criterion. Whether an Arabic work is a "full-fledged" encyclopaedia or not is

54 Elsewhere, von Hees does describe the position of the *ʿAjāʾib* within Arabic-Islamic literature (2002: 104–109). However, this is not done on the basis of the imported definition of encyclopaedia, but rather on the basis of commonalities in form and content with other Arabic and Persian texts. An attempt to place the *ʿAjāʾib* within a larger analytical category of "encyclopaedias of the natural sciences" can be found in Ducène 2013.

55 De Callataÿ 2016: 271, citing Van Den Abeele 2007: 5.

56 On the applicability of this term and its problems, see Von Hees 2002: 109–114.

57 Von Hees 2006: 179.

then just a consequence of the decision made when forming the definition, even if we base it on a European prototype.[58]

A possible response would be that Meier's medieval encyclopaedias include both multi-disciplinary examples and works that focus only on cosmology, thus multi-disciplinarity should be included as a possible but not necessary feature.[59] The presence of devices to aid consultation reading is also not consistent across the tradition. Thus, because under the current model a "full-fledged" encyclopaedia is just a text that sufficiently resembles the medieval European encyclopaedia, both the *Rasāʾil* and the *ʿAjāʾib* would still qualify. The more serious problem here though is that even if Meier may have found good reasons for categorizing the European works together despite these discrepancies, we simply don't know if the same reasons apply in the Arabic case. True, the fact that the Arabic texts must display the features listed in the *a priori* definition means that they also have features in common with one another. However, the procedure encourages us to focus only on those common features they share with medieval European encyclopaedias; the wider relationships of these texts to one another and/or other Arabic texts are ignored. Moreover, the extent to which each text exhibits the defined features, the mode by which it does so and the significance of those features with regard to the text as a whole can vary greatly. If we move beyond the procedure of simply labelling individual texts encyclopaedias because of their similarity to some European encyclopaedic prototype, and start trying to use definitions drawn from the European literary tradition to classify Arabic texts generally, then what we end up taking the template of the European medieval encyclopaedia and cutting a chunk out of the Arabic literary tradition to fit as best we can. If our purpose is just to look for Arabic texts that resemble the European medieval encyclopaedia to some sufficient extent, so be it, but the *Rasāʾil* and the *ʿAjāʾib* do not necessarily thereby belong to something we would consider a single tradition or historical family of Arabic encyclopaedias analogous to the medieval European encyclopaedia.[60]

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**58** The way in which von Hees's definition is apparently constructed in order to fit the *ʿAjāʾib* is noted already by Muhanna (2012: 27), who also rightly observes that if applied more generally, it would, through its insistence that encyclopaedias must have a focus on "the study of nature" exclude numerous texts often called encyclopaedias in the discipline.

**59** Meier 1984: 484.

**60** On the dangers generally of attempting to study Arabic-Islamic culture by beginning with concepts abstracted from phenomena of European historical experience, see Schöller 2000: 6–38.

This is not to say that *a priori* definitions of encyclopaedia can never serve a purpose in the analysis of Arabic literature. A useful example can be found in a 2007 article from Regula Forster, which distinguishes the form and function of the Arabic, Latin and German versions of the *Secretum Secretorum* by arranging them on a spectrum between the poles of "encyclopaedia" and "mirror for princes".[61] Forster claims that for a text be described as an encyclopaedia, it must fulfil three criteria: (1.) it must present comprehensive knowledge; (2.) it must be aimed at a wide circle of reception; (3.) it must be well-ordered and consultable. A mirror for princes, on the other hand, would fulfil three contrasting criteria: (1.) it must present knowledge relevant for life as a ruler; (2.) it must be composed for the reception of a real or hypothetical prince; (3.) it is not ordered in any special way/is designed to be read consecutively.[62] If applied more generally, these broad definitions of encyclopaedia and mirror for princes would not give us categories any more useful for indicating the relationships between Arabic texts than an *a priori* definition drawn from the concept of the medieval European encyclopaedia. But that is not the point. Rather, as Forster makes clear, the three variables at stake in the definitions provide us with a framework against which to measure certain changes in the form and function of the translations of the *Secretum Secretorum*. Thus, "encyclopaedia" and "mirror for princes" are nothing more than hypothetical, contrasting constellations of the variables of interest.[63] They define those aspects to be considered when comparing the versions of the *Secret Secretorum*, the point really being precisely that the versions *do* vary in these three aspects and thus none of them is ever quite an "encyclopaedia" or a "mirror for princes".[64] The *a priori* definition here thus serves a clear, but highly specific, analytical purpose in respect of these texts.

This takes us the heart of the matter. At minimum, we use certain categories, and not others, because they are useful for our purposes.[65] There may be local purposes which justify using a specific *a priori* definition of Arabic encyclopaedia—whether based on particular European textual traditions or not—, but these should be made explicit. If, however, as is more usually the case in the study of Arabic literary and intellectual history, we want to do something analogous to

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**61** Forster 2007.

**62** Forster 2007: 257–258.

**63** Forster 2007: 258: "Ich ziele damit nicht auf eine echte Definition von 'Fürstenspiegel' ab, sondern auf eine, die hilft, diesen Begriff gegen den Begriff 'Enzyklopädie' abzugrenzen."

**64** Forster 2007: 258–269.

**65** Rorty 1999: xxvi. There is, of course, a large literature arguing that at least some categories are not just human constructs of purely pragmatic function (See Khalidi 2013: 201–230).

what Europeanists have done with the analytical category of medieval encyclopaedia, i. e. to describe Arabic textual traditions and their intellectual-historical contexts, we cannot just import definitions taken directly from Europeanists' work and apply them *a priori* to pre-modern Arabic literature. Rather, we would do as they do (and as Muhanna and Kilpatrick do) and develop "empirically" grounded categories of analysis from the ground up. The question of whether we then label these categories encyclopaedia or not is secondary and rests on pragmatic considerations, such as the availability of alternatives, the desire to avoid potential misleading connotations, and the utility of avoiding inflationism.

## 4 The encyclopaedia is not always a book

The above discussion has focussed on the application of the term encyclopaedia to varieties of text, as this is the problem addressed by the most recent scholarship on the term in the discipline. We have already seen, however, that this is not the case with every concept to which the term refers. The common usage of encyclopaedic and encyclopaedism to indicate any attempt to amass and order "comprehensive" knowledge, or the intellectual attitude which emphasizes this goal, leads eventually to the usage of encyclopaedia to refer to books. This is not, however, because encyclopaedias are all the same kind of book, but because they are a venue for the same kind of activity or express the same ideal. Arabic and Islamic studies knows a more specific usage of this type: the encyclopaedia as the totality of interrelated sciences.

Gerhard Endress, for example, employs "the encyclopaedia of the sciences" to refer to the concept of the whole system of the rational disciplines of knowledge.[66] For him, this concept is discernible mostly in the work of the *falāsifa* and deals at its core with the canon of disciplines inherited from the Alexandrian curriculum, but can also involve, at least for some authors, the question of how all the of the sciences present in Arabic scholarly culture, including the Islamic sciences, should be related to one another. Such a system can, of course, be instantiated in books, but not necessarily in a single book or in a particular kind of book. Thus, according to Endress, whilst the *Rasāʾil* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ gives a unified literary expression to the encyclopaedia, al-Farābī (d. 339/950) only bears witness to it through his *oeuvre* as a whole, once his series of commentaries on the "fundamental Greek manuals of logic, the parts of philosophy—ethics,

66 Endress 2006: 107–114, 116–133; Endress 1987: 57–61.

physics and metaphysics—and of the mathematical quadrivium" together with his *Iḥṣā' al-'ulūm* are taken into account.[67]

This is also the concept of encyclopaedia that animates Hinrich Biesterfeldt's work on "Arabic-Islamic encyclopaedias."[68] These are always books, either works on the classification of the sciences, such as Ibn Farīghūn's (fl. first half of the fourth/tenth century) *Jawāmi' al-'ulūm*, or philosophical *summae* such as Ibn Sīnā's (d. 428/1037) *Shifā'*, but what is at stake is not a genre or textual tradition with consistent form, function and content, but rather works which explicitly discuss or implicitly express a totalizing and systematic conceptualization of knowledge ordered by its distinct disciplines.[69]

The word encyclopaedia in this sense too knows no pre-modern Arabic equivalent. Endress and Biesterfeldt are clearly right that the *concept* of a system or programme of interrelated sciences existed for many pre-modern Arabic-writing authors, but it had no single label, or at least no label distinct from "the sciences" (*al-'ulūm*). There is also some haziness over where exactly we have derived our own label from. Endress discusses similar conceptions of the system of the sciences in pre-Islamic Late Antiquity—particularly as evidenced in the classification of Aristotle's works by his Alexandrian commentators—and describes the clear influence.[70] However, despite the occasional assertion to the contrary, it is not obvious that the term *enkyklios paideia* ever referred to such conceptions in the pre-Islamic period. Such a meaning is not discussed in the modern specialist literature on the term, and it is somewhat expanded from the notion of *enkyklios paideia* as the "all-round" curriculum of liberal arts propaedeutic to philosophy that one does find there.[71] In employing the label encyclopaedia for the concept of an ordered system of related sciences, we are probably invoking something closer to the Renaissance usage of the term.[72]

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**67** Endress 2006: 120–122; Endress 1987: 57–58. Endress also mentions other sense of encyclopaedia, such as as a *Bildungsideal* and as a book "sketching, exposing or giving the full content of the essential knowledge" (2006: 106) and he does briefly look at texts that only really fit the latter definition (2006: 115–116). Nevertheless, it is the meaning of a system of interrelated disciplines that predominates.

**68** Biesterfeldt 2000; Biesterfeldt 2002.

**69** Biesterfeldt, however, also has an article on *adab* encyclopaedias, where the usage essentially mirrors that of Kilpatrick (Biesterfeldt 2004).

**70** Endress 2006: 107–109. See also Hein 1985.

**71** Hein (1985: 2) claims, without providing any reference to a primary source or secondary literature that *enkyklios paideia* was used in this sense in Late Antiquity. Such a usage is not mentioned, however, in Fuchs 1962 or De Rijk 1965.

**72** See Dierse 1977: 9–25, Blair 2013: 391–396.

The encyclopaedia as the totality of disciplines in their division and interrelation is by no means as thin a usage as the generic encyclopaedism-as-the-amassing-and-ordering-of-knowledge, but it too is prone to inflationism when it comes to labelling individual books encyclopaedias because they "express" that concept. In referring to texts that deal explicitly with the classification of the sciences as encyclopaedias, we make the same move as some Renaissance authors who used encyclopaedia in book titles: these are texts devoted to elaborating the concept of the encyclopaedia.[73] However, when we move to philosophical *summae*, such as Ibn Sīnā's *Shifāʾ*, we are already dealing with something slightly different. Ibn Sīnā did write an encyclopaedia in the sense of a treatise on the classification of the sciences as well,[74] but a work like the *Shifāʾ* is detailed exposition of philosophy organized according to (part of) such a classification.

Any problems here are avoided in practice because Endress and Biesterfeldt restrict themselves mainly to works of philosophers. This gives the usage a certain coherence: philosophical treatises on the classification of the sciences and philosophical *summae* organized according to (parts of) such classifications are clearly related to one another and can both be understood as engagements with the same concept of the encyclopaedia. Once we leave philosophy behind however, it becomes harder to establish to what extent the systematic consideration of the interrelation of the sciences must be present. For example, something like Ibn an-Nadīm's (d. 385/995) *Fihrist*—a large bibliography *raisonné* with biographical information on authors—certainly expresses a division of knowledge in its ordering of authors and books, but is this really a theoretical system of interrelated sciences? Likewise, administrative treatises, such as Qudāma b. Jaʿfar's (d. first half of the fourth/tenth century) *Kitāb al-kharāj*, could also be said to express an encyclopaedia. The ideal bureaucrat must know information from many subject domains; thus Qudāma neatly divided his work into sections on writing, language, the administrative system, fiscal jurisprudence and political thought.[75] This, however, hardly counts as a systematic division of the panorama of knowledge, and it is an open question whether Qudāma would all have considered all of the subject areas he treats to have been distinct disciplines.[76]

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**73** Dierse 1977: 9–25; Blair 2013: 391.

**74** His *Risāla fī aqsam al-ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyya*. See Biesterfeldt 2000: 93.

**75** See Heck 2002: 3.

**76** Heck 2002: 16–18 argues that he did.

If we start to accept that works which merely present diverse subject matter in topical arrangement express an encyclopaedia, we have moved a long way from the concept of the encyclopaedia of the sciences with which we began (*adab* encyclopaedias would become encyclopaedias also in this sense). This is an instance of the general problem with using encyclopaedia to refer not to categories of books based on common features of form, content and function, but to books that "express" a concept of *the* encyclopaedia or *an* encyclopaedism. If we do not stick to the original concept to which we attached the term (i. e. the *systematic* conceptualization of the *totality* of the *disciplines* in their *interrelation*) and we do not specify in what sense that concept must be "expressed" in any given text, the usage can quickly become thin and the analytical purchase on the material reduced. We effectively end up back at the vague encyclopaedia as ordered compendium of knowledge in diverse subjects.

## 5 Fourth/tenth century encyclopaedias and encyclopaedism in the scholarship

Following this survey of the types of usage of encyclopaedia in recent studies of pre-modern Arabic and Islamic literature, we turn now to the period in question: the fourth/tenth century. Of course, some of Kilpatrick's *adab* encyclopaedias were composed in this period, as were the majority of the encyclopaedias of the sciences listed by Biesterfeldt and Endress. In neither case, however, is the concept as chronologically focussed as Mamlūk encyclopaedias.[77] The idea of an encyclopaedism specific to the fourth/tenth century which is both equivalent in status to, and a forbear of, Mamlūk encyclopaedias does not originate in these

77 If we are allowed to include an author as early as Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), the relevant *adab* encyclopaedias would be his *'Uyūn al-akhbār*, Ibn 'Abd Rabbih's (d. 328/940) *'Iqd al-farīd*, and Rāghib al-Isfahānī's (*fl.* before 409/1018) *Muḥāḍarāt al-udabā' wa-muḥāwarāt al-shu'arā' wa-l-bulaghā'*. If we collate the texts mentioned by Endress and Biesterfeldt, the relevant encyclopaedias of the sciences would be Ibn Farīghūn's *Jawāmi' al-'ulūm*, Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Khwārizmī's (fl. second half of fourth/tenth century) *Mafātīḥ al-'ulūm*, al-Fārābī's *Iḥṣa' al-'ulūm*, the *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', Ibn Sīnā's *Risāla fī aqsām al-'ulūm al-'aqliyya* and his *Shifā'*, Abū Sahl al-Masīḥī's (d. 401/1010) *Aṣnāf al-'ulūm al-ḥikmiyya*, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's (d. 414/1023) *Risāla fī l-'ulūm*, Abū l-Ḥasan al-'Āmirī's (d. 381/992) *Kitāb al-i'lām bi-manāqib al-islām*, and Abū 'Alī Miskawayh's (d. 421/1030) *Tartīb al-'ulūm wa tartīb al-sa'ādāt*.

usages.[78] It goes back, rather, to the work of two Arabists of an earlier generation who, apparently independently, and within the space of two years, published influential studies of Arabic encyclopaedias and encyclopaedism: André Miquel and Roger Paret.[79]

Miquel's 1967 *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu'au milieu du 11e siècle* offers a detailed typology of Arabic geographical writing that presents a list of encyclopaedias in a chapter called "La géographie sans les géographes", in a sub-section entitled 'les encyclopédistes'.[80] Here, encyclopaedias appear as a type of work in which "non-geographers" treat geography as one amongst many themes. The other types he mentions are *adab* compilations,[81] bibliographical works[82] and histories.[83] This makes it appear as if he considers encyclopaedia to be a category of Arabic literature on a similar level to these other broad groupings. On closer inspection, however, the reasons given for considering his chosen texts to belong together as encyclopaedias are unconvincing.

Miquel begins with what appears to be an *a priori* definition: an encyclopaedia is a work "qui vise à faire la somme des connaissances du temps",[84] and which differentiates itself from *adab* anthologies (whatever he understands by this term) because rather than indulging only in eclecticism, it seeks "à dresser l'inventaire complet de la connaissance."[85] Later on, it is revealed that they are also not administrative works, some of which, such as Qudāma b. Jaʿfār's *Kitāb al-kharāj*, are to be considered encyclopaedic in scope and structure but excluded because of their greater focus on technical matters.[86] He then describes his encyclopaedias in some detail in the following order:

1. Ibn Rusta's (d. first half of the fourth/tenth century) *al-Aʿlāq al-nafīsa*[87]

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**78** The most recent reference to the idea of a general fourth/century encyclopaedism is Ducène 2013: 271. The idea dominates in; Tahmi 1998 (especially 7–27, 269–274) and Chapoutot-Remadi 1991a. Miquel (1967).

**79** Miquel 1967: 191–227; Paret 1966. Pellat 1966 and Pellat 1991 have also been influential but deal with a longer time-frame.

**80** Miquel 1967: 191–227.

**81** Miquel 1967: 228–235.

**82** Miquel 1967: 235–239.

**83** Miquel 1967: 239–241.

**84** Miquel 1967: 191.

**85** Miquel 1967: 192.

**86** Miquel 1967: 192. For a critique of Miquel's fundamental division of ʿAbbāsid writing into technical and non-technical, and the effects of this on his typology of geographical writing, see; Montgomery 2005: 179–184.

**87** Miquel 1967: 192–202.

2. Abū l-Ḥasan al-Masʿūdī's (d. 345/956) *Murūj al-dhahab wa maʿādin al-jawhar*[88]
3. Al-Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī's (d. second half of the fourth/tenth century) *Kitāb al-bad' wa-l-ta'rīkh*[89]
4. The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā''s *Rasā'il*[90]
5. Al-Khwārizmī's *Mafātīḥ al-ʿulūm*[91]
6. The *oeuvre* of Abū l-Rayhān al-Bīrūnī[92]

The first problem here is the lack of correspondence between the *a priori* definition and this list of works. It is perhaps only the *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān—a collection of about fifty philosophical epistles, each devoted to a particular discipline of knowledge, arranged as "a sophisticated programme of instruction and moral purification"[93]—that can be said to fulfil both criteria. The *Mafātīḥ* of Khwārizmī—a lexicon of terms in the sciences ordered according to a classification of those sciences—might be said to provide an inventory of knowledge, but it does not "sum it up". This seems to be why Miquel dubs it a marginal case,[94] yet for the rest of the texts of the list, the definition hardly seems apt at all. Masʿūdī's *Murūj* and Maqdisī's *Bad'* are works of Islamic world-history that incorporate large amounts of cosmographical, physical- and human-geographical material to provide the setting in which that history plays out. From the themes Miquel concentrates on in his discussions of these works, they would appear to be encyclopaedias simply due to the comprehensiveness or diversity of that material, or else the "breadth of vision" it implies.[95] Bīrūnī's *oeuvre* is discussed as a whole and here it seems to be his polymathy in general that matters, rather than its instantiation in any given work.[96] Only the section on geography of Ibn Rusta's *al-Aʿlāq* is extant. Miquel apparently considers it an encyclopaedia either because he presumes it was part of a multi-disciplinary work, or because of the wide variety of the material it presents under the topic of geography.[97]

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**88** Miquel 1967: 202–212.
**89** Miquel 1967: 212–217.
**90** Miquel 1967: 218–221.
**91** Miquel 1967: 222–223.
**92** Miquel 1967: 223–227.
**93** De Callataÿ 2013.
**94** Miquel 1967: 222. On the *Mafātīḥ* more generally, see; Bosworth 1963; Biesterfeldt 2002: 71–73; Biesterfeldt 2000: 86–87.
**95** Miquel 1967: 210–213. On Masʿūdī, see; Khalidi 1975; Shboul 1979; Radtke 1992: 27–66, 169–205. On Maqdisī, see; Tahmi 1998; (but also the comments on this study below); Radtke 1992: 68–94, 201–205; Adang 1996: 48–50.
**96** Miquel 1967: 223–227. On Bīrūnī, see; Yano 2013.
**97** Miquel 1967: 192–202.

These are all grounds upon which these texts (or person, in the case of Bīrūnī) might individually, albeit sometimes very loosely, be labelled encyclopaedias, but they don't appear to be so in any shared sense. Not even the generic usage of encyclopaedia to refer to a work that amasses and orders knowledge in diverse subjects would cover all of them, and that definition could not serve to distinguish these texts as a corpus anyway. This makes the analytical purpose of grouping them together as encyclopaedias unclear at best. They do not, as a whole, correspond to the *a priori* definition offered, and they certainly do not belong to any category based on common formal features, content, likely function or participation in any specific literary or intellectual tradition. Whether Miquel intended it or not, the list gives every appearance of implying a distinct corpus of Arabic encyclopaedias, but if the term is supposed to refer to an analytical category of Arabic literature, then that category is incoherent.

That wouldn't matter so much if it hadn't proved itself to be highly misleading to later scholarship. Chapoutot-Remadi's 1991 article on "*L'Encyclopédie arabe au X^e^ siècle*" adopts Miquel's list in its entirety and presents his encyclopaedias, without qualification, as a literary tradition of the fourth/tenth century that came into being, on the one hand, as a reaction to the disintegration of the ʿAbbāsid caliphate and, on the other hand, as a response to the "encyclopaedism" of earlier authors such as al-Jāḥiẓ.[98] Political disintegration and the prestige of al-Jāḥiẓ were doubtless factors at some level in the composition of much fourth/tenth century prose and may indeed provide a relevant context for the interpretation of all of these works. To imply, however, that Miquels's encyclopaedias constitute a specific and unified tradition formed in reaction to them, depends upon and reinforces the false idea that these works belong to a discrete and internally consistent category of Arabic prose composition. They clearly do not.

Going further still, Mahmoud Tahmi, also reliant on Miquel, writes of a fourth century "ésprit encyclopédique" which became "vraiment un phénomène littérraire conscient de lui-même".[99] Indeed, in his 1998 monograph on Maqdisī's *Kitāb al-Badʾ wa-l-taʾrīkh, L'Encyclopédisme musulman à l'âge classique*, Tahmi attempts to argue that the *Badʾ* represents a "chaînon manquant"[100] in the evolution of Arabic encyclopaedias between Masʿūdī's *Murūj* and the *Rasāʾil* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ.[101] He bases this claim on the observation that it adopts a sort of "mi-chemin" within the genre of encyclopaedias: whereas the *Murūj* is a compilation of a "multitude de sujets" and the *Rasāʾil* is neatly divided by discipline, the

**98** Chapoutot-Remadi 1991a: 39–46.
**99** Tahmi 1998: 8.
**100** Tahmi 1998: 8.
**101** Tahmi 1998: 9–10, 273–274.

*Bad'* apparently sits between both models; whereas the *Murūj* presents *akhbār* (reports) and the *Rasā'il* offers *naẓar* (theoretical reflection), the *Bad'* gives us both.[102] He even goes as far as to argue on this basis that the *Bad'* was inspired by the *Murūj* and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' were in turn inspired by the *Bad'*.[103]

In reality, as set out by Bernd Radtke in his comprehensive study of Muslim and Christian world-historical writing in Arabic, Persian, Latin, Greek and Syriac, the *Bad'* is a text highly similar in form and content to the *Murūj* and to other Arabic-Islamic world-histories of the late third and fourth centuries. This is a category that also includes Mas'ūdī's shorter world-history, the *Tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf*, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī's (d. 310/923) *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk* and Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb al-Ya'qūbī's (d. after 292/905) *Ta'rīkh*.[104] All of these texts (to the extent we can tell from their extant parts) follow the model of beginning with an account of the creation of the world, in which cosmological material is embedded, then working through a pre-Islamic history focused above all on Persian and Byzantine kings, Hebrew prophets and the pre-Islamic Arabs, followed by a biography of Muḥammad, and finally a history of the Islamic age.[105]

There are a few features that, in a very loose sense, might be said to make the *Bad'* appear more multi-disciplinary and more oriented towards *naẓar* than the *Murūj*: (i.) Maqdisī tends to collect material together into thematic chapters more consistently than Mas'ūdī, e. g. including a chapter on Islamic factions, and a specific chapter on geography, whereas such material is scattered throughout the *Murūj*[106]; (ii.) Maqdisī prefaces his account of the Creation with a theological section, in which he provides doxographical material on the justifications of the *mutakallimūn* and non-Muslims for the existence and unicity of God and the reality of his prophets; (iii.) he includes several fairly long citations of cosmographical material from the *Placita philosophorum* of pseudo-Plutarch.[107] However, even if Tahmi had paid any attention to these features, they still have nothing in common with the systematic, discipline-by-discipline approach of the *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān, based on a modified form of the "Aristotelian" division of the sciences.[108] Moreover, even the *Bad'*'s most

**102** Tahmi 1998: 274.
**103** Tahmi 1998: 274.
**104** Radtke 1992: 11–94, 160–205; Radtke 1991.
**105** Radtke 1991.
**106** Maqdisī (1899–1919): IV/39-104 (on geography); V/121-150 (on Islamic factions). See Van Ess 2011: 558–597.
**107** E. g. Maqdisī (1899–1919): I/137, II/17. For a full list of *Placita* citations in the *Bad'*, see Daiber 1980: 80–85.
**108** On the ordering of the *Rasā'il* and its correspondence to the classifications of the sciences provided by the Ihwān al-Ṣafā, see; De Callataÿ 2003.

"philosophical" section—i. e., its largely neutral doxography of the cosmological theories of the early *mutakallimūn* and the pre-Socratics—has very little in common with the Ikhwān's expository treatment of the programme of the sciences, to say nothing of the fact that much of the *Badʾ* is occupied with a fairly standard run-through of the histories of the kings and prophets, the life of Muḥammad and the reigns of the Caliphs. It is certainly possible to call the *Murūj* and the *Badʾ* encyclopaedic in certain aspects: in surveying the geographical and cosmographical setting in which the history of the world plays out, they can, like some medieval European encyclopaedias, be seen as "world books", aiming at a "complete" overview of the world and its history.[109] Nevertheless, except in the thinnest of senses, there are no grounds upon which these texts can meaningfully be considered to belong to the same textual or intellectual tradition as the *Rasāʾil* of the Ikhwān, let alone that one could possibly be the model for the other.[110]

It would be unfair, of course, to criticize Miquel for the way in which Tahmi and Chapoutot-Remadi interpret his list of encyclopaedias to be a distinct literary genre of fourth/tenth century Arabic writing—he never explicitly states as much. By no means all of the faults in Tahmi's reading of the *Badʾ* or Chapoutot-Remadi's vague historical determinism are attributable to that interpretation anyway. Nevertheless, these examples illustrate well why such incoherent usages of encyclopaedia are a problem: they can be and have been understood to imply historical connections and formal commonalities that simply do not exist. They promote descriptions of the history of Arabic literature that distort rather than clarify relationships between texts.

Another influential study promoting the idea of an encyclopaedism particular to this period sets the dates of the phenomenon slightly earlier: Paret's 1966 "Contribution à l'étude des milieux culturels dans le Proche-Orient médiéval: «l'encyclopédisme» arabo-musulman de 850 à 950 de l'ère chrétienne". This essay identifies two groups of Arabic-Islamic encyclopaedias. The first consists of works Paret sees as primarily administrative in focus: Ibn

**109** Meier 1984: 472–475; Radtke 1992: 195–205.

**110** The claim would be hard to sustain on chronological grounds anyway. The textual history of the *Rasāʾil* is still not entirely clear, but it seems a portion of the corpus must have been in circulation in some form before the mid-fourth century (De Callataÿ 2013), too early for its authors to have had access to the *Badʾ*, from which there is no evidence of citation in the *Rasāʾil* anyway. We don't even know whether the *Badʾ*, finished in 355, probably in Bust, Sīstān, had made its way very far west even by the end of the fourth century. It is cited already by pseudo-Thaʿālibī in the *Ghurār akhbār mulūk al-furs wa-siyarihim* (Thaʿālibī 1900: xxi, 501), but the first citation we can be sure comes from outside Iran is found in Yāqūt's (d. 626/1229) *Muʿjam al-buldān* (Yāqūt 1977: III/280–281).

Khurradādhbih's (d. 300/911?) *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, Ibn Rusta's *al-Aʿlāq al-nafīsa* and Qudāma b. Jaʿfār's *Kitāb al-Kharāj*.[111] The second he terms a "genre littéraire" that shares the "ambition d'universalisme" of the first group but which he understands to be composed for the consumption of the educated classes more generally: the works of Ibn Qutayba, primarily *Adab al-kātib*, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār* and *Kitāb al-maʿārif*; Ibn al-Faqīh's (d. first half of the fourth/tenth century) *Kitāb al-buldān*; and Masʿūdī's *Murūj al-dhahab*.[112]

Paret openly acknowledges the diversity of the texts he has selected, but claims they nevertheless display "convergences significatives" that unite them in providing a conception of "l'essentiel commun de ce qu'il importe de connaître et de faire connaître".[113] These convergences consist, he tells us, in an interest in marvels and wonders, a fondness for reporting tales whose value lies in their strangeness, a tendency to bring together as many stories as possible relevant to a particular theme, and a scrupulousness about reporting only what could be grounded in a tradition.[114] He further claims that these works employed common techniques of composition, had common objects of investigation, and displayed a common attitude of universalism bordering on eclecticism.[115] This, apparently, is what binds them together as encyclopaedias. He then spends the rest of his article discussing the historical conditions that led to the emergence of the Islamic encyclopaedism expressed in these texts. On the one hand, he focusses on the general "encyclopaedism" of the elite cosmopolitan culture of ʿAbbāsid Iraq, which he sees as summed up in the word *adab*, and which he believes to have existed across two interconnected domains that correspond to his categories of encyclopaedia: the secretariat and the merchant class.[116] On the other hand, he emphasizes the role of the Islamic sciences, particularly the influence of thematically ordered *ḥadīth* collections and the system of authenticating material by provision of the chain of transmitters (*isnād*).[117]

The main problem here is that the connections Paret draws between his encyclopaedias, the supposed general encyclopaedism of elite ʿAbbāsid culture in the period, *adab*, and the modes of composition of the traditionists are, at best, vague. Admittedly, he usually, although not always, places the words encyclopaedia, encyclopaedic and encyclopaedist in inverted commas,

**111** Paret 1966: 49–75.
**112** Paret 1966: 75–86.
**113** Paret 1966: 86.
**114** Paret 1966: 86.
**115** Paret 1966: 86.
**116** Paret 1966: 86–92, 99.
**117** Paret 1966: 92–99.

apparently in order to imply that the words are being used at some distance from their standard meaning. Nevertheless, such a device does nothing to change the analytical categories lying behind the usages, and, as ever, it is this, rather than the word itself which really matters.

Regarding his usage of encyclopaedia, he apparently tries to form an analytical category through the identification of certain common features of the works he mentions, then divides this category by postulating different audiences for such works. However, the features he mentions—an interest in the theme of wonders and strange tales, the organisational principle of grouping together large numbers of reports on a single issue, the use of traditions and "eclecticism"—are so widespread throughout otherwise heterogeneous compositions of the period and present to such different degrees in the texts he mentions that it is difficult to discern how they should function as a way to group these texts together at all. In reality, "encyclopaedia" here is no grounded analytical category; it is just a vague way to refer to very different kinds of texts that make use of compilatory techniques and contain material on diverse themes.

When it comes to the more general "encyclopaedism" of the period, ʿAbbāsid elite culture is seen as encyclopaedic as a result of having produced these encyclopaedias, whilst it was also the encyclopaedic character of that culture—somehow related to *adab* and the activities of traditionists—that resulted in the production of the texts. To add further circularity, *adab* and the methods of the traditionists are then read back into the encyclopaedias as defining features.[118] It is hard to pin down, however, what Paret actually means by the general encyclopaedism of 850 to 950, because he rarely attaches the term itself to anything specific. Instead, he presents wide-ranging descriptions of cultural complexes like *adab* and the Islamic sciences before summarising his results in cryptic statements, such as "L'univers mental du «savant» arabo-musulman du iv$^{e}$/x$^{e}$ siecle peut être dit «encyclopédique», mais cet « encyclopédisme » est clos".[119] It would seem that what he is trying to do is to identify various intellectual attitudes, themes of interest and modes of composition that could be characterised as encyclopaedic. He then takes all of these elements in aggregate to constitute a general encyclopaedism of the age and interprets this to be associated somehow with the notion of *adab*. The latter move is, however, inevitable, as his operative definition of *adab* relates it to all of ʿAbbāsid elite culture and the literature it produced.

The difficulty here, as far as the usage of encyclopaedia is concerned, is that the encyclopaedic elements of ʿAbbāsid intellectual life and textual composition

**118** Paret 1966: 89, 93–96.

**119** Paret 1966: 99. The "clos" apparently has something to do with what he perceives as the predominance of a stifling Arab traditionalism in the intellectual culture of the period.

that he identifies are heterogeneous, not always related closely to one another and appear to be encyclopaedic in quite different senses of the word. The notion that they could form a shared encyclopaedism rests on a false abstraction; the supposed encyclopaedism of the age is, rather, many discrete features that could be characterised as encyclopaedic for different reasons. He discusses, for example such factors as the diverse heritage of *adab*, its Arab, Persian and Hellenistic sources and its context in what he terms "l'ambiguïté du milieu urbain iraqien", where encyclopaedic would seem to mean merely something like "broad and diverse" and to characterise an entire social setting. Elsewhere however, it is particular modes of *adab* composition that matter, i. e. structural features of texts, such as lists and assemblages of anecdotes, where encyclopaedic refers rather to the apparent interest in the comprehensive inventory of given topics. It is completely unclear how it serves any analytical purpose to diagnose these phenomena as aspects of a single encyclopaedism.

We have seen that "Mamlūk encyclopaedias" functions analytically because the category to which it refers is coherent and grounded in the material it seeks to describe: it is possible to identify numerous common features that bind these texts to one another and set them apart from others. Moreover, the term encyclopaedia, despite its disadvantages, is a reasonable label for this category, partly because there is no obvious alternative that is less open to misinterpretation and which would refer to the category equally well, and partly because the usage is now the subject of established consensus. The supposed fourth-century encyclopaedia and the wider fourth/tenth century encyclopaedism also have the merit of some established consensus in their usage, but the analytical categories to which they refer are incoherent and insufficiently grounded in the textual material they seek to describe. Numerous heterogeneous texts are labelled encyclopaedias for quite different reasons and many phenomena, the connections between which are either thin or not well understood, are abstracted into a single amorphous encyclopaedism. This is a procedure with no obvious analytical advantage for understanding the literary and intellectual history of the fourth/tenth century.

# 6 Conclusions

The main point of this study has been an attempt to move the discussion of the usage of encyclopaedia in Arabic and Islamic Studies away from the question of how the term should be defined (for it can obviously be defined in many ways) and towards a focus on the character of the analytical categories to which our usages refer. Despite criticism of the discipline's employment of the term, it has been argued that there are several quite reasonable applications to coherent and useful

analytical categories, such as Mamlūk encyclopaedias, *adab* encyclopaedias and encyclopaedias of the sciences. The label still has its disadvantages, but these usages are now well established, which largely mitigates the effect of the potentially misleading connotations of such a polysemic term. When it comes to the fourth century, *adab* encyclopaedias and encyclopaedias of the sciences are well-represented. However, the scholarship that invokes the notion of a general fourth/tenth-century encyclopaedia or a broader fourth/tenth-century encyclopaedism has so far failed to develop useful analytical categories to which these labels should refer.

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