Introduction

The present study was motivated by the recent discovery by Dr. Noah Gardiner of the holograph (autograph) copy of the third volume of al-Maqrīzī’s famous “Description of Egypt” in the Library of the University of Michigan (Michigan Islamic MS 605). The full title of the manuscript is *al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-al-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-al-āthār* (“The Book of Admonitions and Lessons in the Catalogue of Territorial Divisions and Historical Monuments”; usually cited simply as *al-Khiṭaṭ*). The manuscript was copied well after 818 A.H. (1415 C.E.) and was finished shortly after 831 (1427) by the celebrated Egyptian historian Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442). It is the only known Maqrīzī holograph (autograph) in the Americas. A number of elements in the codex, including the apparent age of the paper, lacunae in the text where the dates of certain events had not been filled in, and a number of marginal addenda and sewn-in inserts containing text found in the printed editions, led Gardiner to suspect that it might be a draft copy of the work. He visually collated the predominant hand of the codex and the inserts with some published images of al-Maqrīzī’s hand and felt that a match was highly likely. He then sent images of the codex to Frédéric Bauden of the University of Liège, the author of numerous articles on al-Maqrīzī autographs. Bauden confirmed that the codex was indeed copied by al-Maqrīzī himself, and was thus a holograph (autograph). He identified it as the fair copy (the author’s final version) of the third volume of *al-Khiṭaṭ*, and thus the only fair copy of any volume of *al-Khiṭaṭ* to have been found.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Given the importance of this discovery for the history of science (al-Maqrīzī’s *Khiṭaṭ* is one of the earliest descriptions of the topography of Cairo and ancient Egyptian monuments in its environs as well as Alexandria),[[2]](#footnote-2) a cross-disciplinary team of researchers affiliated with the St. Petersburg State University (Laboratory of Analysis and Modelling of Social Processes) decided to verify Gardiner’s and Bauden’s findings by using …. To this end, they identified (please give the exact number of holographs (autographs) provided by Bauden, in addition to the Michigan one) and then compared them with… manuscripts not written by al-Maqrīzī’s hand from the University of Michigan Hatcher Library (Special Collections).[[3]](#footnote-3) …..

Conclusion

The join research on al-Maqrīzī’s “Description of Egypt” undertaken by a historian-philologist and two mathematicians from St. Petersburg State University is a unique experiment in working across disciplinary boundaries to achieve a common goal. Its results bode well for the future by opening new horizons for scholars of “Oriental” manuscripts who often desperately lack resources (other than their own eyes and intuition) to verify the provenance and authorship of the manuscript material they are working with. Given the propensity of Muslim scribes and later writers to attribute manuscripts to important luminaries of the past (such as, e.g., al-Ghazālī, d. 505/1111; Ibn al-ʿArabī, d. 638/1240, and others), the new methods of analyzing and verifying handwritten texts, which have been designed and tested by St. Petersburg mathematicians, are bound to become an important tool for their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. These methods may well usher in a drastic reassessment of the written legacy left of the greatest minds of Islamic civilization.

1. For further details see Noah Gardiner and Frédéric Bauden, “A Recently Discovered Holograph Fair Copy of al-Maqrīzī’s *al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-al-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-al-āthār* (Michigan Islamic MS 605),” in *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*, E. J. Brill, Leiden and Boston, vol. 2 (2011), pp. 123-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Franz Rosenthal, “al-Maḳrīzī,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, E.J. Brill, Leiden and Boston; online edition: http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The authors express their deep gratitude to Mrs. Evyn Kropf of the Hatcher Graduate Library who kindly facilitated access to the University of Michigan library resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)