The malfeasance of rural and Coptic officials is incalculably vast and gravely pernicious. I have surveyed this topic elsewhere, however: in a book that I wrote and presented to the prosperous royal treasuries of Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ. Entitled *The Book of Unsheathed Ambition to Take Back What is in the Dhimmis’ Possession*,¹ it shows how incredible it is that the rustics and the Copts should be trusted or exercise leadership, for the simple reason that meanness and perfidy are ingrained in their natures.

—‘Uthmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nābulusī, *A Few Luminous Rules for Egypt’s Administrative Offices*²

Thus did our author, ‘Uthmān ibn Ibrāhīm al-Nābulusī, describe *The Sword of Ambition* some time after he composed it, at a low point in his life, around the year 640/1242. In the book’s conclusion (§4.4.2), he unburdened himself to the reader—whom he envisioned as no less a personage than the Ayyubid sultan himself—of some piteous personal information. He and his fifty-two children and grandchildren were dependent on the dwindling rent from a dilapidated property that his father had left them.³ Social conventions in Cairo obliged them to put on a cheerful face for friends and neighbors, but within their own walls the mood was grim.⁴ They were down to just two Greek slaves—low-grade slaves at that—and three bedraggled riding animals. Yet Ibn al-Nābulusī eagerly informed the sultan that
his prospects had not always looked so bleak. At one time, when he had been overseer of the tax offices in all the land of Egypt, his household had enjoyed the services of ten slaves and sixteen horses and mules. He had spent lavishly on them as well as on clothing, as befitted a high official. In order to sustain this lifestyle without compromising his professional integrity, he had been obliged to sell family property in Syria for the hefty sum of five thousand gold coins. After such sacrifices, he bitterly concluded, the reason for his current poverty was that he had remained honest when handling money.

Ibn al-Nābulusi’s account of his own career contrasted sharply with the patterns that he observed in the careers of the Coptic Christian (and convert) officials employed by the Ayyubid state. Whereas he had been powerful and ended up poor, it seemed to him that even the pettiest Coptic bureaucrat rapidly amassed wealth to spare. The explanation for the contrast was clear to him: the Coptic officials were corrupt. No less clear was the remedy: the Copts should be dismissed from their positions and stripped of their ill-gotten wealth. At the same time, he should be granted an official position and a stipend to match. It was to these ends that Ibn al-Nābulusi directed his literary energies, interweaving his own exhortation with a curious assortment of excerpts from earlier sources to compose the present book, to which he gave the rhyming title *Tajrīd sayf al-himmah li-stikhrāj mā fī dhimmat al-dhimmah* – The Sword of Ambition, or, more literally, *Unsheathing Ambition’s Sword to Extract What the Dhimmis Hoard*.

**The Author**

Ibn al-Nābulusi’s full name, according to one of his students, a certain al-Dimyāṭī, was ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Abū ‘Amr ‘Uthmān ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Khālid ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Salm al-Qurashī, al-Nābulusi (of Nablus) by extraction (*al-maḥtid*), al-Miṣrī (of Cairo) in birth, life, and death. The same source reports that he was born on the nineteenth of Dhū l-Ḥijjah 588 [December 26, 1192]—thus he wrote
*The Sword of Ambition* at the age of about fifty.⁶ His connection to the city of Nablus in Palestine was through his father’s family. Although we cannot be certain when they moved to Egypt, it seems likely to have been during his father ‘Alam al-Dīn Ibrāhīm’s life, inasmuch as Ibn al-Nābulusī’s name meant “son of the man from Nablus,”⁷ and since he still maintained control of property in Syria. We know little about his father, who is described in the sources as a judge (*qāḍī*), an honorific title that should not necessarily be taken literally; we can be certain only that he was a professional witness or notary (*ʿadl*). Ibn al-Nābulusī’s maternal grandfather, the Ḥanbali jurist and preacher Zayn al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Najā al-Anṣārī (508/1114–1115 to 599/1203), known as Ibn Nujayyah, is better known.⁸ He, too, had come to Egypt from Syria and, like his grandson Ibn al-Nābulusī, made it his business to exhort Egypt’s military rulers to godliness.⁹ Ibn Nujayyah served as an ambassador to Baghdad on behalf of the Zangid ruler Nūr al-Dīn in 564/1168–69. In *The Sword of Ambition* (§2.14.3), we find him remonstrating with the Fatimid vizier Ṭalāʾiʿ ibn Ruzzīk about a Christian official called Ibn Dukhān, who in addition to being corrupt and seditious also happened to be obstructing the payment of Ibn Nujayyah’s government stipend. From other sources, we learn that Ibn Nujayyah played a leading role in sniffing out the conspiracy to restore the Fatimid dynasty in which the famous poet ʿUmārah ibn Ḥamzah was involved (one of ʿUmārah’s many poems against Ibn Dukhān features in *The Sword of Ambition*, §2.14.4). After pretending to go along with the plot, Ibn Nujayyah reported it to Saladin, with whom he enjoyed considerable influence, in exchange for the property of one of the conspirators. ʿUmārah and the others were executed.¹⁰

Ibn al-Nābulusī had, then, a family heritage that was noteworthy for its ties to both Islamic scholarship and state power. According to his own testimony in *The Sword of Ambition* (§3.2.34), he spent his youth pursuing a law-college (*madrasah*) curriculum that must have focused on Islamic law, quite possibly in the very Nābulusīyyah Madrasah that his father had established.¹¹ His student, al-Dimyāṭī,
notes that he followed the Shāfiʿī legal rite (madhhab). We also know that he heard and later narrated Prophetic Hadith; al-Dimyāṭī reproduces a hadith that he transmitted. The same passage of *The Sword of Ambition* that alludes to his law-college education strongly implies that he and his contemporaries did not view it as a springboard to state service, but on the contrary as quite distinct from the formation expected of a secretary (kātib), though it was of course standard for a judge (qāḍī), mosque preacher (khaṭīb), or other holder of an overtly religious office. Nevertheless, early in the reign of the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil (r. 615–35/1218–38), through the intercession of a patron and thanks to his own talents and his show of reluctance to accept employment, Ibn al-Nābulusī became a state official. One office that he mentions explicitly from this period of his life is the directorship of the Royal Guesthouse (dār al-ḍiyāfah). Sultan al-Kāmil promoted him to a series of progressively more important posts. Eventually, according to his own report as well as that of al-Maqrīzī, he became overseer or auditor (nāẓir) of the tax administration in virtually all of Egypt, a position that he had urged his patron to create. In about 634/1237, however, he fell out of favor with al-Kāmil. This event, as he tells it, was due to the machinations of an Ayyubid emir who coveted a house that he owned beside the Nile in Giza. The house, called Dār al-Malik (or al-Mulk), was part of the property that had been granted to his maternal grandfather, Ibn Nujayyah, by Saladin.

It is to the subsequent nadir in Ibn al-Nābulusī’s career that we owe *The Sword of Ambition*. Another of his works, *Lumaʿ al-qawānīn al-muḍiyyah fī dawāwin al-diyār al-miṣriyyah* (A Few Luminous Rules for Egypt’s Administrative Offices, cited at the beginning of this Introduction), was drafted some time afterward and offers additional biographical clues to the context of *The Sword of Ambition*. For instance, it is evident from information in the *Luminous Rules* that Coptic Christians or converts played prominent roles in the real-estate dispute in which Ibn al-Nābulusī lost his high post in the administration, not to mention his riverfront estate. Our
author tells the story in his typical wounded way. As he engaged in reluctant negotiations with the powerful emir Nūr al-Dīn over the price of the estate, which the latter had espied and sworn to possess, a powerful converted Copt, al-Asʿad al-Fāʿizī, sided vocally with Nūr al-Dīn. Later, after Ibn al-Nābulusī and then Nūr al-Dīn himself had lost control of the property, the same al-Asʿad purchased it from its shadow owner for a song and transferred it to the charitable endowments of the deceased sultan al-Kāmil. Ibn al-Nābulusī later implored the current sultan, al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ (r. 637–47/1240–49), to return the estate to him, describing the hardships that its loss had inflicted upon his family. Having lost their spot on the water, they suffered the indignity of day-tripping: “Now the children and I have no vantage point from which to view the river. When they want to behold the Nile, that great work of God, they have to set up a tent outside the city. Then at the end of the day they have to leave.”

Ibn al-Nābulusī thus had enemies among the converted Copts in the administration; it is not unreasonable to suppose that this factored in his decision to write The Sword of Ambition, a book against Coptic officials that contains strident, thinly veiled personal polemic against those of them who had converted outwardly to Islam (§§2.15.1–3, 4.2.2). The tone of the Luminous Rules, too, reflects Ibn al-Nābulusī’s zeal to denounce fellow administrators whom he judged to be incompetent, corrupt, impious, or dull. This might justly be called the central theme of the book, to the degree that in its introduction the author was at pains to distinguish between sincere advice (naṣīḥah) and self-serving slander of rivals (siʿāyah). His own book, naturally, was naṣīḥah, but he nevertheless confessed that he hesitated to write it, so much did he worry that he might be suspected of harboring ulterior personal motives (aghrāḍ) against his colleagues. Perhaps this hesitation arose from his intention to level a string of savage accusations at his fellow officials, several of whom he named in the work. As in The Sword of Ambition and indeed in his work on the Fayyūm (see below), he evinced marked
antipathy not only to Copts but also to rural Muslims, undereducated Muslims, and even, in one passage of our work (§§4.2.32–36) ignorant Muslim judges. We may thus characterize our author as well-bred, educated, and professionally accomplished, yet at this point in his life also embittered and envious.

It is evident from Ibn al-Nābulusī’s third and final surviving work that he found his way for a time into the graces of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, the last independent Ayyubid sultan in Egypt. The Luminous Rules and/or The Sword of Ambition, which were directed to al-Ṣāliḥ, may thus indirectly have had their desired effect. This third work, Iẓhār ṣanʿat al-Ḥayy al-Qayyūm fi tartīb bilād al-Fayyūm (A Presentation of the Living, Eternal God’s Work in Regulating the Fayyūm), has recently been described as “the most detailed tax survey to have survived from any region of the medieval Islamic world, a Domesday Book for the medieval Egyptian countryside.”21 It is a detailed report on conditions in the fertile Fayyūm oasis of Egypt—whither Ibn al-Nābulusī was dispatched as an inspector in 642/1245—insofar as these are relevant to tax administration, touching for instance upon demography, land tenure, and sources of revenue. This work constitutes the last indication we have of the author’s life until he died, in relative obscurity, at Cairo on 25 Jumādā I 660 [April 17, 1262], a Monday evening. He was buried at the foot of the Muqaṭṭam heights to the east of the city.

Ibn al-Nābulusī composed at least three other works, none of which seems to have survived. One is known only from an allusion in The Sword of Ambition (§1.1.4), and had a theme similar to that of the present work. Its title—Taṣrīḥ al-Qurʾān bi-l-naṣr ‘alā man istaʿāna bi-kuffār al-ʿaṣr (The Qurʾan’s Assurance of Victory over Those Who Seek Aid from the Infidels of This Age)—indicates that it used scriptural exegesis to demonstrate that allying or cooperating with non-Muslims is forbidden and will lead to the downfall of the Muslim who indulges in it. The work might possibly have been a polemic against the Ayyubid rivals of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn, namely al-Ṣāliḥ ʿĪmād al-Dīn and al-Ṣāliḥ ʿIsmāʿīl, who at various
times allied with the Franks against their kinsman. Another of his works, mentioned in the book on the Fayyūm, was probably a panegyric to the Ayyubid sultan; its title is Ḥusn al-sulūk fī faḍl malik Miṣr ‘alā sāʾir al-mulūk (A Seemly Demonstration of the Superiority of Egypt’s King over All Others). Ibn al-Nābulusī showed elsewhere that he was prepared to praise the sultan in effusive (not to say sycophantic) terms. The final composition attributed to Ibn al-Nābulusī—Ḥusn al-sarīrah fī ttikhādh al-ḥiṣn bi-l-Jazīrah (The Excellent Idea of Establishing the Island Fortress)—appears to have praised al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ’s decision to build a citadel on the Nile island of al-Rawḍah to serve as a base for his large corps of mamlūk (“owned”) Turkic military slaves. It was they, of course, who would soon supplant the Ayyubids as rulers of Egypt. For more than a century the Mamluk rulers would be known as the baḥrī or “river” dynasty because of their ties to this fortress.

Ibn al-Nābulusī earned very minor repute as a poet. The account by his student al-Dimyāṭī preserves five lines of his verse. It is fitting that they should express the author’s preoccupation with hierarchy, railing eloquently against the elevation of low-class people (al-asāfil) at the expense of the high-born (al-aʾālī).

**The Work**

In *The Sword of Ambition*, Ibn al-Nābulusī explains the circumstances and motives of the work’s composition, announcing in its introductory section that he has been inspired by a recent edict that imposed traditional discriminatory restrictions on non-Muslims, notably the distinctive clothing they were required to wear (the ghiyār; see §0.2). He also expresses confidence that this measure is only a first step in the right direction, and hope that the present book will encourage the sultan to finish the job, as it were, by dismissing and cashiering his Coptic officials. In the conclusion, Ibn al-Nābulusī gives three reasons for having composed the work. The third and most important of these is his straitened financial condition, which contrasts to the opulence his Coptic colleagues
allegedly enjoyed. The other two reasons he provides are his ardent zeal for the money of the Muslim community and his love for the sultan.

The Sword of Ambition resists precise dating. Other works by Ibn al-Nābulusī may have been composed and redacted in stages, so that no single date can be assigned to them. While there are no definite indications that this was the case for the work at hand, neither is it possible to accept the estimate of ca. 638/1240 given by Claude Cahen, on the basis of the dating of the edict concerning non-Muslim clothing. That edict should probably instead be dated to 640/1242 (see §0.2 of the Translation). A handful of passages found in some manuscripts, however, refer to events that occurred long after this date, but within the lifetime of the author (e.g., §4.2.7, which mentions the year 660/1261–62). Ibn al-Nābulusī might conceivably have produced multiple recensions of the work, or early copyists might have added to it.

The perspicuous “table of contents” (§§0.3–6) presents the work’s rather stiff structure, relieving us of the need to detail its contents and organization here. Taken together, its four chapters, each of which comprises either three or fifteen sections, give the impression that the author drew on all available arguments to make the point that Coptic Christians (and converts), as well as Jewish, rural, and otherwise disreputable individuals, were unfit for state service and should therefore be dismissed. Some (and only some) of the sources used to back up these arguments were: Qur’anic exegesis; hadith of the Prophet; historical accounts of Muslim rulers’ dealings with non-Muslim officials; demonstration of the perfidy and sedition inherent in Copts and Jews; poetry mocking incompetent officials; jokes about bumbling and illiterate Copts and other despicable persons; and both poetry and prose demonstrating the excellence of real secretaries (kuttāb), whom the author contrasted to the loathsome pretenders who were laying claim to that sublime title. The work’s eclectic angles of attack must be read in their full variety to be appreciated. The character of its intended audience,
namely the Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ himself, may have shaped the author’s decisions about its content. The sources depict al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ as proud, acquisitive, sober, taciturn, and aloof, an inspirer of reverence and dread. Although he did not impress his contemporaries as particularly bookish, he was known as a patron of scholars. These aspects of the sultan’s character might have simultaneously emboldened Ibn al-Nābulusī to beg for employment and led him to keep the sections of his work brief and vivid in order to hold the attention of his royal audience. There is some evidence that *The Sword of Ambition* was intended more to entertain than to bear learned scrutiny. For example, much of the poetry in the third chapter seems to have been borrowed without acknowledgment from the works of al-Tha'ālibī (d. 429/1038), but carelessly attributed to the wrong poets in the course of the borrowing process. Similarly, a passage concerning Ibn Ṭūlūn’s rule in Egypt (§2.4.1) ascribes certain past misdeeds of the government to the Copts, where in other sources, the same misdeeds are ascribed to Muslim administrators. A learned reader would have noted such discrepancies, which the sultan, by contrast, could have been expected to overlook. Ibn al-Nābulusī thus probably did not mean *The Sword of Ambition* to be a resource for serious scholars. He seems rather to have intended to entertain an audience that was unlikely to have had deep prior familiarity with his material.

What sort of book is this? Its multifarious contents and disparate registers make it a poor fit for any one genre. It would be unsatisfying to classify it as exegesis (*tafsīr*), history (*tārīkh*), law (*fiqh*), polemic (*jadal*), or, save in the broadest sense, belles lettres (*adab*), though it contains elements of all these. I would suggest, however, that it was not *sui generis*. Rather, it was intended to be read (or listened to) as a representative of the established Arabic genre of advice literature (*naṣīḥah*). While its form is not typical of “mirrors for princes,” *The Sword of Ambition* qualifies as *naṣīḥah* in that it, like standard examples of that genre, was directed to a ruler in the hope of convincing him to bring his wayward conduct into line...
with certain principles. Unlike many naṣīḥah works, *The Sword of Ambition* does not present a comprehensive ethical vision for the ruler’s conduct. Instead it is concerned with a specific issue, namely the ongoing employment of Copts and other undesirables. In this it stands as an early example of a small cluster of anti-Copt treatises that were composed in Egypt between the late twelfth and mid-fourteenth centuries. It drew on the same sources as some other works in the cluster did, and served as a source for others.\(^{33}\) *The Sword of Ambition* is also closely comparable to Ibn al-Nābulusī’s own *Luminous Rules*, which was written, as we have seen, around the same time, and which declares itself openly to be a work of naṣīḥah. Both works, no matter how far they digress, circle relentlessly back to the problem of socially marginal and unqualified men who receive stipends and administrative posts, while the deserving few (notably the author himself) are left in the cold.

Only a portion of *The Sword of Ambition* represents what a modern reader would call Ibn al-Nābulusī’s original work. The author, like most of his compeers in the Arabic literary heritage, makes liberal use of the sources available to him. Only in a few instances, however, does he name his sources. From a literary perspective, a work like this one would have been judged not for its originality or meticulousness, but for its artful arrangement of engaging selections of poetry and prose, interspersed with apposite remarks and digressions by the author himself. Parts of the work can be traced (or, rarely, are openly credited) to such earlier works as *The Life of ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz* (*Sīrat ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz*) attributed to ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 214/829); *The History of the Conquest of Egypt* (*Futūḥ Miṣr*) by the latter’s son ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 257/871); *The Book of Songs* (*Kitāb al-Aghānī*) of Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī (d. 356/967); unnamed writings of the well-known Fatimid official al-Muwaffaq ibn al-Khallāl (d. 566/1171); *The Eternally Incomparable* (*Yatīmat al-dahr*) and *Inimitability and Pithiness* (*al-Iʿjāz wa-l-ījāz*) of al-Thaʿālibī; and (for most of the historical accounts in the first and some in the second chapter) an
as-yet-unidentified work against non-Muslim officials composed around the time of Saladin’s accession in Egypt (ca. 567/1171). This last source also influenced many, though not all, of the polemical works composed against Christian and Jewish officials in later medieval Egypt.34

*The Sword of Ambition* has greater value as an historical source for the late Ayyubid period and for inter-communal relations over the *longue durée* than as a work of literature *per se*. As a source, it is an intriguing inventory of the ideational resources available to Muslim polemicists in Egypt in the seventh/thirteenth century, and a clue to the potential methods by which, and conditions under which, these were deployed. For example, the stories about inept and illiterate Copts and others (§4.2.1 and following) might serve as a source for the social history of popular stereotypes and of humor in medieval Egypt. The work also reflects changes in the composition and self-conception of the Egyptian state’s administrative corps, given its numerous and vivid incidental references to conditions among both religious specialists (ʿulamāʾ) and secretaries (kuttāb), particularly as these groups related to state power. It is, for instance, instructive to observe the author as a liminal figure, trained as a scholar but employed as a state secretary in an age when membership in these groups increasingly overlapped (more on this below). In his capacity as a scholar-bureaucrat, Ibn al-Nābulusī uses the issue of Coptic officials to mount subtle critiques of state power, as where (§2.4.1) he attributes the standing state monopoly on the mineral natron to a Coptic plot that dated from Abbasid times, implying that this un-Islamic monopoly should be rescinded. Finally, the work is of value in that it preserves numerous earlier passages, some of which have been lost or survive only in much later sources. For example, Ibn al-Nābulusī includes long and entertaining anecdotes in §§2.9.1–3 that preserve parts of the work of al-Muwaffaq ibn al-Khallāl, otherwise found only later and in different forms in the works of the official Ghāzī ibn Aḥmad ibn al-Wāsiṭī (d. 712/1312) and the historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442).
In The Sword of Ambition’s anthologizing portions, the author’s choices were guided by subject matter rather than literary artistry; even in sections (notably Chapter Three) that present outstanding examples of poetry and prose produced by secretaries, these appear invariably in the vein of *bons mots*. This is not surprising in view of Ibn al-Nābulusī’s professional background. Although he wrote in praise of refined literature (*adab*, §3.2.1), Ibn al-Nābulusī was in fact a bureaucrat and religious scholar of ordinary rank who does not seem to have been much noted as a *littérateur*. Ibn al-Nābulusī’s lifelong involvement in the competitive worlds of scholarship and court life, along with his weighty family responsibilities, may have forced him to subordinate his literary aspirations to the more quotidian tastes of the audience he needed to sway.

It will be worthwhile briefly to consider The Sword of Ambition alongside other premodern literary productions of a similar stripe. To the classicist, for example, it may recall the polemics of the Neo-Platonist philosopher and Christian bishop Synesius of Cyrene (d. ca. AD 414) against politically influential “barbarians,” primarily Goths, in *De Regno* and *De Providentia*. Synesius’s opposition to powerful Gothic generals and courtiers did not arise from Roman chauvinism alone; it had an additional, ideational aspect. “Let all be excluded from magistracies,” Synesius wrote in *De Regno*, “and kept away from the privileges of the council who are ashamed of all that has been sacred to the Romans from olden times, and has been so esteemed. Of a truth both Themis, herself sacred to the Senate, and the god of our battle-line must I think, cover their faces when the man with leather jerkin marches in command of those that wear the general’s cloak, and whenever such a one divests himself of the sheepskin in which he was clad to assume the toga.”

Ibn al-Nābulusī’s own invective urges the exclusion of officials who spurned symbols revered by Muslims (the Pilgrimage rites, for example, in §2.15.2) and mocks pretenders who dared don the cowl or *ṭaylasān*, the garment that marked Muslim secretaries and scholars (e.g., §4.2.9).
Well after Ibn al-Nābulusī’s lifetime, we find another point of comparison in the work of the Ottoman official and historian Muṣṭafā ʿĀlī (d. 1008/1600), who in his book of advice, Nuṣḥatū s-selāṭīn, plainly intended to secure the dismissal of his rivals by invoking their ethnicity and alleged unsuitability for employment. His larger corpus of writings, like Ibn al-Nābulusī’s, evinces a petulant preoccupation with the sagging standards of state officialdom. Muṣṭafā ʿĀlī’s modern biographer, Cornell Fleischer, has described him as “able, well-educated and far more outspoken than most of his peers,” but also “an embittered bureaucrat . . . a disappointed man who felt that his abilities had gone unrewarded.”

Mutatis mutandis, the characterization holds for Ibn al-Nābulusī, who, though a lesser intellect than Muṣṭafā ʿĀlī, channeled his disappointment into similar literary productions.

Notwithstanding its similarity to works of other times and places and its liberal use of earlier sources, The Sword of Ambition is very much the product of a particular moment in the history of Egypt, and indeed of Islamic societies more broadly. It should be noted that Ibn al-Nābulusī’s preoccupation with non-Muslim state officials was widely shared in certain Muslim circles in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Egypt, and that it was a recurrent issue in Islamic history. It has often been pointed out that Muslim rulers sometimes preferred to hire non-Muslims for certain positions; those employees’ relative weakness and lack of connections to powerful Muslim factions tended—in the eyes of some Muslim employers, at least—to make them more trustworthy. This phenomenon can be traced from the Syrian Umayyad court, where a Christian progenitor of John of Damascus oversaw the empire’s finances, to Islamic Spain, where Jewish officials, such as the tenth-century figure Hasdai ibn Shaprut, occasionally served as the Muslim ruler’s right-hand men, to the very eve of modernity. When Napoleon invaded Egypt, he found the financial administration in the hands of a Copt, Jirjis al-Jawhari, whom the French preserved in office. Muslim religious elites regularly objected to the empowerment of non-Muslims.
Their complaints form a continuous discourse that runs throughout Islamic history, and in which *The Sword of Ambition* participates. The fact that Muslim rulers regularly perceived non-Muslims as especially trustworthy was the hidden counterargument that Ibn al-Nābulusi, like other figures who contributed to the discourse, sought to discredit.

We may briefly consider two major ways, however, in which the work reflects more particularly the social, religious, and political developments of its day. Both relate to what may be called the “Sunni shift,” a series of momentous changes in the relation of emergent Sunni Islam to state power in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. The Sunni shift saw the accession of a number of powerful dynasties, from Afghanistan to North Africa, that relied for their legitimacy upon the established Sunni religious elites who already functioned as foci for popular support in their capacity as scholars, preachers, judges, and local notables. The religious elites who supported these dynasties were rewarded with unprecedented patronage, notably via such novel institutions as the *madrasah* for legal scholars and *khānqāh* for Sufis, both of which were supported by the expanded use of *waqf* (charitable endowment) as a means for transmitting wealth and social power. The rapprochement between military rulers and Sunni religious elites tended to benefit both parties, faced as they were with the religio-political challenges of Shiʿite-leaning states with heritages dating to the tenth century, of the European Crusading movement that challenged Muslim ascendency in Egypt and greater Syria from the early twelfth century until the late thirteenth and even beyond, and finally of the Mongol storm that broke across the region in the mid-thirteenth century.

In adducing the Crusades, we in fact identify the first major way in which *The Sword of Ambition* most pervasively reflects its historical moment. The work may be read, with considerable justification, as representative of the Muslim “counter-crusade” by which militant sentiment against the European Crusaders contributed to significant change within Islamic societies, notably by generating
pressure upon marginal elements to conform to an ideal of comprehensive Muslim ascendancy as articulated and advocated by certain Sunni religious elites. In such a climate, native Christians and Jews, especially when seen to exercise undue power, could more easily find themselves in conflict with Muslims who saw non-Muslim power as an implicit challenge to their vision of the properly ordered Islamic society. In practical terms, non-Muslims, especially Christians, could come under suspicion as a fifth column for Crusader designs on Muslim territory. This fear is clearly visible in *The Sword of Ambition*, as both an historical “fact” (as in §2.14.4, the case of the disloyal Christian Ibn Dukhân) and a present danger. Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil is made to remark in a timeless tone (§3.2.37) that when Copts become too wealthy, their incorrigible tendency to conspire with foreign enemies poses a grave threat to the security of the Egyptian state.

Although it is plain that the idea of “counter-crusade” resonates strongly with particular passages in *The Sword of Ambition*, the currency of counter-crusade ideology in the mid-thirteenth century does not explain why Ibn al-Nābulusī should have found it expedient to invoke that ideology, in a limited way, in his screed against Coptic officials, or indeed why he set out to write the screed at all. The more finely grained problem of authorial motivation and strategy highlights the second major way in which *The Sword of Ambition* most pervasively reflects its historical moment, namely as a symptom of a set of social and political developments that are relatively detached from the counter-crusade and more firmly internal to the Islamic sphere. In the period following the Sunni shift in Egypt, for reasons that cannot be developed here, the state both increased its control over economic activity in Egypt and expanded its patronage of Sunni urban religious elites (ʿulamāʾ), generating heightened competition for state patronage among those elites and between them and other competitors, such as Christians, Jews, and (Ibn al-Nābulusī would remind us) Muslim rural elites. As S. D. Goitein argues, “from the thirteenth century on, ... when the economy became increasingly
monopolized by the state, the clamoring of Muslim candidates for government posts became ever stronger, and the minority groups had to give way.” The clamoring arose as the madrasah was increasingly utilized by the Ayyubids to make the military-patronage state the primary source of economic support for Sunni religious elites, cementing ties between them and the Sunni rulers. Beginning in the late twelfth century, it became increasingly common for state officials to be drawn from the ranks of madrasah-trained religious elites. In earlier centuries, by contrast, administrative personnel had traditionally represented a more eclectic and less uniformly orthodox cross section of the population. The secretaries (kuttāb) of the Abbasid period were famed not only for their literary virtuosity, much celebrated in The Sword of Ambition, but also for their moral laxness and their frequent dissent from law- and tradition-centered Islam of the kind that would become dominant in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. After the disintegration of the Abbasid empire in the ninth and tenth centuries, the Fatimids and their deputies and allies who ruled Egypt and much of Syria employed a motley assortment of non-Muslims, converts, foreign Muslims, Shi’ites (both Isma’ili and Twelver), military men (who might also be of foreign origin and/or converts), and local Sunnis. Under the Ayyubids, however, as under their ideological progenitors, the Seljuq Turks, it was the Sunni scholars who increasingly received the bulk of the state’s patronage, in the form of official employment and stipends for scholars and students. Ibn al-Nābulusī was fully immersed in these currents. Madrasah-educated, with no specific training for government service (see §§3.2.34–35), he nonetheless came to depend on the state for his income. Competition from his peers, whom he portrayed as undeserving of employment because of their religious affiliation, level of education, or regional and class origin, provoked him to marshal his madrasah-honed linguistic and literary skills in support of his own cause. Michael Chamberlain has described the culture of fitnah—disapproved but ubiquitous conflict for patronage and power—that prevailed among the urban learned
classes in Ayyubid and Mamluk domains of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Ibn al-Nābulusī’s shrill critique of his competitors, both in *The Sword of Ambition* and in the *Luminous Rules*, is a typical product of this competitive culture.

*The Sword of Ambition* has seen sporadic use by modern scholars since its rediscovery and partial transcription by Claude Cahen in 1960 (on Cahen’s published transcriptions, see “The Arabic Text” below). These scattered references to the work may be placed into two broad categories. First, the simple fact of the work’s composition is cited as a symptom of anti-dhimmi sentiment in thirteenth-century Egypt, or as another iteration of the regular calls for enforcement of the theoretical dhimmah regulations that rigorists believed should govern the lives of non-Muslims under Islamic rule (on the term dhimmah, see “Pact of Security” in the Glossary).

While it is perfectly defensible to use the work in this way, there is at the same time a certain risk in extrapolating from a few works of this nature to larger cultural trends without also highlighting the personal circumstances and motivations of the authors. Similarly, although Ibn al-Nābulusī does make passing reference to legal aspects of the dhimmah arrangement in *The Sword of Ambition*, it is not primarily a legal work and makes scarcely any mention of the “conditions” (shurūt) that many jurists thought should lie at the heart of that arrangement. Indeed, putative rules concerning the employment of non-Muslims as state officials are not, strictly speaking, part of the dhimmah; the obvious awkwardness of requiring non-Muslims to refuse offers of employment from Muslim leaders generally prevented Muslim elites from proposing such a requirement. It is telling that in the best-known work in the legal discourse on the dhimmah, *Aḥkām ahl al-dhimmah* by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350), the chapter against non-Muslim officials features only the same string of Qur’ānic admonitions and cautionary anecdotes that we find in *The Sword of Ambition*, probably culled from the same (unidentified) source. The goal of these selections was to dissuade powerful Muslims from employing non-Muslims, not
to dilate upon a law that non-Muslims themselves were meant to observe.

Second, modern scholars have used *The Sword of Ambition* in passing references that are of particular relevance to their own research. Thus, for example, Josef van Ess has used the work as evidence for chiliastic expectations surrounding the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim; Joseph Sadan has studied passages relevant to Jews; Brian Catlos has examined the extended anecdote involving the author’s grandfather, Ibn Nujayyah, and the Christian Ibn Dukhān; and Hassanein Rabie has used the work for evidence concerning the *iqṭāʿ*. The present publication of a full edition and translation will, it is hoped, make it easier for more scholars to use the work in similar ways.

The publication of *The Sword of Ambition* at the present moment poses certain challenges, however. There is, for instance, the current predicament of non-Muslim populations in many countries in the Middle East, Egypt among them. Inasmuch as *The Sword of Ambition* contains hostile denunciations of Christians and Jews, might it not lend support to those today who advocate the harsh subordination of non-Muslims? Conversely, virulent hostility toward Islam and Muslims is alive and well in Europe and North America. A work like this one could help to confirm the dark aspersions of intolerance that are regularly hurled at “Islam.” Indeed, I do not believe that either fear can be dispelled. *The Sword of Ambition* may really provide material for polemicists. It is in the nature of historical data to be available for a wide variety of narrative agendas.

However, there are also many reasons that favor bringing the work to light. These may even help to redeem its less appealing aspects. Most obviously, several historical works closely comparable to *The Sword of Ambition* in tone and subject matter are already available on bookstands in Arabic-speaking countries and online. At least one of these, which in fact drew on the present work, was translated into English long ago. Equally evident is the precept of modern scientific historiography according to which all evidence
must be considered, no matter how marginal or unsavory it might appear. The precept is particularly important in the case of premodern history, where scarcity imbues all written sources with significance, particularly those that, like *The Sword of Ambition*, vividly represent aspects of contemporary life and abound with pungent anecdotes. Polemical literature has enriched our knowledge of other historical figures and their societies. How much the poorer would the study of early Christianity be if the polemics of Tertullian, Celsus, and Chrysostom were excised from it, much as these might still embolden Christian supremacists, militantly intolerant atheists, and anti-Semites? The history of medieval Islam deserves no less. Indeed, in the light of contemporary trends it may deserve more. *The Sword of Ambition* affords us an unusual opportunity to situate virulent religious polemic in the particular historical context that generated it, allowing us to see such antagonism as circumstantially conditioned. The author’s patent desperation and autobiographical candor make it clear that the project was not suggested to him by sacred texts or abstract reflection alone, but instead was inspired by historically specific, self-interested motives, however sincerely he meant it. For obvious reasons, polemicists tend not to reveal such contingent and personal aspects of their writings. It may be hoped that the present work’s manifest contingency will dull its edge among Islam’s militant supporters and its militant opponents alike. Both may in fact glimpse in it their own reflections.