

AN ARAB'S VIEW OF XIX C. MALTA
SHIDYĀQ'S 'AL-WASITAH FI MA'RIFAT AHWAL MALITAH'

By Dr. PIERRE CACHIA

Introduction

I.

Fâris ibn Yûsuf ibn Mansûr ash-Shidyâq¹ was born in 'Ashqût in the Lebanon in 1804, of a Maronite family. In 1809 his parents moved to al-Hadath near Bayrût, and he received his first schooling in the Maronite school of 'Ayn Waraqah.

When the American Presbyterian Mission became active in the Lebanon, his brother As'ad became a Protestant. The Maronite community did not take kindly to this defection, and As'ad is said to have been "worried to his death." Faris reacted by becoming a Protestant himself.

The Mission sent him to Egypt to complete his education; he then joined the editorial staff of Egypt's official gazette, "al-Waqâ'i' al-Misriyyah," the forerunner of all Arab journalism.

In 1834, he was appointed Director of the American Missionary Press in Malta. While in Malta, he secured in 1838 the office of Preceptor in Arabic, and conducted classes both in the Lyceum and in the Valletta Primary school. He also claims to have taught in the University (Ch. 3), but of this there appears to be no corroboration in the University records. At that time, however, the Maltese showed little interest in the study of Arabic, and Shidyâq appears to have found it easy to obtain leave of absence fairly frequently. Indeed, although he finally left Malta in 1848, it was not until two years later that he intimated his decision not to return, and thus vacated the office.

His travels next took him to France and England where, under the auspices of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, he collaborated in the translation of the Bible into Arabic.

While in Paris in 1855, he met and eulogised the Bey of Tunis. As a result, he was invited to enter the service of the Tunisian government. He did so, and in Tunisia edited the newspaper *ar-Râ'id at-Tûnisi*. There he also became a Muslim, and thereafter was known as Ahmad Fâris ash-Shidyâq.

In 1857, he was appointed Corrector of the Government Press in Istanbul. Still in Istanbul, he founded in July 1860 a very successful weekly, *al-Jawâ'ib*, which in collaboration with his son Salîm he continued to edit until 1884. He died in 1887.

Father Cheikho names a relative and a friend of Shidyâq's as affirming that before his death he confessed his sins to an Armenian Catholic priest, and died a Christian; such an account, however, is obviously suspect.

1. See Brockelmann, *Geschichte*; A. Cremona, *L'Antica Fondazione della Scuola di Lingua Araba in Malta*, Malta, 1955; Louis Cheikho, *al-Adâb al-'Arabiyyah fi 'l-Qarn at-Tâsi' 'ashar*, v. 2, Bayrût, 1926.

II

Shidyâq's earliest known work is *Khabariyyât As'ad ash-Shidyâq* (Malta, 1833), an account of his brother's "martyrdom".

As a teacher, he produced a number of manuals: *Kitâb al-Muhâwarah* (Malta, 1840), consisting of Arabic and English grammatical exercises and dialogues; a *Practical Arabic Grammar* (2nd ed.: London, 1866); an English grammar, *al-Bâkûrât ash-Shahiyyah* (Malta, 1836; Istanbul, 1300 A.H.), and a French one, *as-Sanad ar-Râwî* (Paris, 1854), both for the use of Arabs; and even a translation of W.F. Maier's *Natural History for the use of Schools* under the title of *Sharh Tabâ'i' al-Hayawân* (Malta, 1841). He is also credited with a "philosophy of education" entitled *Falsafat at-Tarbiyah wa 'l-Adab* (Alexandria).

His highest attainments as a scholar were displayed in his linguistic studies: *Kanz al-Lughât* (Bayrût, 1876), a Persian-Turkish-Arabic dictionary; *Sirr al-Layâl fi 'l-Qalb wa 'l-Ibdâl* (Istanbul, 1284), on etymology; *Ghunyat at-Tâlib wa Munyat ar-Râghib* (Istanbul, 1288, 1306), on grammar; and *al-Jâsûs 'alâ 'l-Qâmûs* (Istanbul, 1299), consisting of critical notes on Fîrûzâbâdî's famous dictionary. Cheikho also mentions a work entitled *Muntahâ 'l-Ajab fi Khasa is Lughat al-'Arab*, the MS of which was damaged by fire before it could be printed.

Like most Arab men of letters of his time, Shidyâq wrote poetry — panegyrics and occasional pieces of no great inspiration. One of the seven volumes of selections from the *Jawâ'ib* which have appeared under the title of *Kanz ar-Raghâ'ib fi Muntakhabât al Jawâ'ib* consists entirely of such poems.

He also had a reputation as a prose writer, his main vehicle being, as it was for most of his Arab contemporaries, the short prose piece — article, essay, or simple narrative — which more often than not appeared in a periodical, but sometimes also in book form as in *al-Lafîf fi Kull Ma'nâ Zarîf* (Malta, 1839; Istanbul, 1299, 1306) and *al-Maqâmah al-Bakhshîshiyah* (Algiers, 1893). Indeed it was through his impressions and reactions to European life, and consequently his criticisms of Arab life, that he made his most distinctive mark on the Arab Renaissance. The record of these impressions and reactions we find in countless articles, in his twin travel books *al-Wâsitah fi Ma'rifat Ahwâl Mâlitah* (The Means to the Knowledge of Malta's Conditions) and *Kashf al-Mukhabbâ 'an Funûn Urûbbâ* (The Unveiling of what was Hidden regarding the Arts of Europe) published together in I volume (Tunis, 1855; Istanbul, 1299), and in *as-Sâq 'alâ 's-Sâq fîma huwa 'l-Fâryâq* (Paris, 1855), in which he related the adventures of Fâryâq (his own name telescoped) in various countries, interspersing his narrative with criticisms of various social institutions. Superficial and ephemeral as these works are in themselves, they were nevertheless one channel through which Europe and its culture became known to the Arabs, and a current of fresh ideas was stirred up which eventually produced Modernism.

Until the end of the 18th century, Arab letters had been stunted by rigid conventionalism both in subject matter and modes of expression, and "fine

writing" had become largely a display of wordy ingenuity, echoes of which we find in the clumsy rhyming titles of Shidyâq's books. The style which Shidyâq and other journalists and writers now adopted, direct and functional, was in itself a new departure and pointed the way to future practice. Shidyâq further enlivened his style with touches of humour all too rare in Arabic writing, although precisely because of a lack of tradition of fine humour his sallies tend to be coarse and crude.

III.

In Shidyâq's books on Malta, the bias against the Maltese is so patent that no one need be warned against it. Unsubtle reasons for this bias are not far to seek. As a one-time Catholic turned Protestant, he could scarcely have felt altogether at ease while in Malta, and his observations — although presumably jotted down at various times — were not published until after he had entered the service of a Muslim prince and became a Muslim himself. But there is more to it than this.

Beginning with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798, Europe had burst upon the Arab world in a sudden and none too friendly fashion. Its superior techniques not only gave it political ascendancy, but also shattered ways of living and ways of thinking that the Near East had for centuries accepted without question. Not surprisingly, many Arabs simply recoiled from the ways of the West in bewilderment and horror. They were the reactionaries. But those who were in time to determine the course of the Arab Renaissance looked upon the West with a mixture of admiration and resentment: they admired its success, they resented the position of inferiority in which it placed them. And in time, Arab Modernism was to make use of both these sentiments, seeking in the West itself the sources of strength that would enable it to assert itself against the West.

Shidyâq was one of the precursors of this Modernism. His admiration of the West is clearly expressed — he is surprised to find what he takes to be a deficiency in the music of Europeans (Ch. 6) for "I considered that all sciences had come into their hands, and all arts were theirs alone." And so is the resentment: He lashes out against European travellers who criticize Arab cities (Ch. 3), and he confesses candidly — confident that his Arab readers would approve — that rather than admit that at home there were no such splendid public occasions as the Governor's fancy-dress ball, he gave enquirers a misleading answer (Ch. 3).

But in Shidyâq these raw materials of Arab modernism as yet serve no militant purpose, form no coherent pattern. London and Paris overwhelm him. They are centres of palpable might and undeniable achievement, they belong almost to a different world. But to find anything comparable in tiny Malta, standing as it does on the doorstep of the Arab world and displaying some points of kinship with it, irks him beyond endurance, and he pours out his gall upon it. Its cultural life he can regard only as the refuse of what is to be found in Europe (Ch. 2); he finds it necessary to inveigh even against its God-given features, its climate and its geography; and it clearly assuages his wounded pride to assert that the Muslims once reduced the Maltese to subjection by brute force rather than entertain the view that their penetration was unopposed. Even when he changes his tone, as when he praises Maltese

women for their thrift (Ch. 4), one suspects that he is actuated not so much by a sense of justice as by a desire to preach to his own folk.

When this massive bias has been discounted, it remains curious to observe how this man, who was open-minded enough to favour social practices regarding engagements and marriages (see Ch. 4) which conflicted with prejudices most deeply entrenched in his own society, yet balked at minor differences of convention in matters of dress or etiquette. It is as though he had burst into a room where the lighting arrangements were so unexpected that his sense of perspective was upset.

Shidyâq's work suffers from other defects which reflect in part the cultural stagnation from which the Arabs were then emerging, in part the inadequacies of the man himself. For all that he had broken the stiff formalism of literary convention and injected some life into his book, his writing remains so disgressive and unintegrated that several of his chapters appear to derive their titles merely from the contents of the first paragraph. He also betrays his scholastic background in the way he sets up one authority against another to decide questions of History (Ch. 1) — and in what other 19th century writer would one find an appeal to Aristotle to explain the salinity of Malta's water? He has no qualms about reporting on hearsay — although he lived in Malta for 14 years — that some Maltese eat mice or frogs to counter a fright. Indeed some of his own observations are not only suspect, but patently absurd, as when he asserts that vegetables even if grown abroad lose their savour when they are brought to Malta. Above all nowhere in Shidyâq's book does one find a glimmer of analytical insight, of appreciation of cause and effect, relationship at any but the most superficial level, or of understanding of the forces that mould society. To this shallow — although by no means brief — acquaintance with the object of his study, we must ascribe Shidyâq's ludicrous misreadings of history (Ch. 1), such naive conclusions as that the finest musical instrument in the West is the concertina (Ch. 6), and such misguided pronouncements as his condemnation of judges who treat the low-born and the respectable alike (Ch. 3).

In fact, in its expressed opinions, in its stresses and omissions, the book is more revealing of the mental processes of a 19th century Arab in his contacts with a foreign culture than it is of conditions in Malta. This is why — in Ch. 4 in particular — notes have been added which attempt to define the starting point of Shidyâq's observations. The book contains, nevertheless, a wealth of details which it is possible to rescue from the author's mishandling. It is an eye-witness account, and even though the eye be a jaundiced one it will, if cautiously approached, repay study by those who are interested in things Maltese.

* * *

Chapter I, which deals with "The Topography of Malta" consists of a selection of passages from a source of which Shidyâq says no more than that it is "a short book composed by Micallef on the history of Malta", and into which he occasionally interjects some comment or observation of his own.

Despite its heading, the chapter touches not only on the topography, but also on the climate, produce, population, and history of Malta. Unfortunately, Shidyâq was ill-equipped to deal with most of these subjects: he chose his material without discrimination, and sometimes ludicrously misconstrued it. His excursions into Arabic etymology, however, take him onto somewhat

firmer ground, and what he has to say of early 19th century Malta or of Malta's connection with the Arabs — whether the observations be Micallef's or his own — is not devoid of interest either. The chapter ends with the following reference to Gozo:—

“Let me add that I have seen the island of Ghawdex more than once. Its name I believe to be corrupted from the word *hawdaj* [the camel-borne palanquin in which Arab women used to be carried], and that the Muslims gave it this name because it looked like one, even as they called the other two islands *kamunah* (cummin seed), and *filfilah* [Filfla: pepper grain], because they are small. An objection to this derivation is that its own inhabitants pronounce it with a *ghayn*, not a *'ayn* as do the Maltese, and I know of no other word in their language in which the ‘h’ has been changed to *ghayn*; the substitution of ‘sh’ for ‘j’, on the other hand, is frequent.

Its land is fairer than that of Malta, especially as its fields are open to view — like those of France and England, but unlike those of Malta, as will be mentioned later. Its fruits and plants are better [than Malta's], and its people more open-hearted. Its donkeys and mules are sturdy, but not lively. A donkey there may be sold for [as much as] forty pounds. As for trees, its apples are scarcely any bigger than the brambles of Syria, its fig-trees spread out on the ground, and it has only one walnut; there is also a palm-tree there, but it bears no fruit.

The names of all its villages and topographical features are pure Arabic.

One manifestation of the stupidity of its people which made me laugh is that they have their wheat threshed by their farm animals without the help of a threshing machine: thus they may tie every two [animals] together and make them tread on the ears of corn until one part is forced to this side and the other to that. The same is true in Malta.

A curious feature of the soil of Ghawdex is that every part of it is planted and ploughed except the one that faces Malta; it is as though it was a matter of maintaining equivalence!

As for Comino, there is nothing in it except one house and a church. Its soil is of little use.”

* * * *

In Chapter 2 “On the Climate of Malta, its Recreational Spots and Other Such Matters”, Shidyâq touches on the derivation of Malta's name, which, “if it is of Arabic origin, is from the root m-l-t. Most derivatives from this root denote nakedness and emptiness, or denuding and voiding; it would follow that it was so called because it is devoid of groves, mountains, rivers, and the like.”

The following extracts from this chapter are of interest:—

“On the whole, Malta deserves to be called “a chest of winds” for it is never without wind, either cold or hot. Its commonest wind in the summer is the *Sâfiyâ'* which brings dust and pulverised matter, blowing it into the faces of people and causing it to penetrate houses through the interstices of window panes.

Strangely enough, the East wind which in winter it bitterly cold is in summer oppressively hot. It causes the timbers of houses to crack even if they are stained. It makes the rafters of the roof creak. It dries up glass and makes it brittle so that it breaks at the slightest touch. It wrinkles skin and paper. Even iron and brass and bone and the like are affected by it.

Tallow is made to rot so that a candle in the house will smell like a corpse. The temperature may reach over 100°. During the night the heat will then dictate that one should wear light linen clothing and sleep without a blanket. Most of the Maltese sleep on the roof because the roofs of their houses, unlike those of Europe, are not sloping.

In summer, if a man walk but a few steps he finds himself swimming in perspiration, and before long he is scorched by a gust of hot wind; one must therefore be more wary than a crow. Moreover, because the land is without woods or groves, without hills or rivers — it is in fact just a dish in the middle of the sea — when the sun shines upon it it covers it all uniformly; there is no shelter on it from anything. It may also be that its heat is increased by the fire which comes out of the mountain of Sicily.

[Incidentally], in spite of its proximity to Italy its houses — unlike those of Tunis — have no marble in them; nor have they any running water as Syrian houses have.

One of the reasons which make winter there harsh and unpleasant is that its buildings are of a humid stone. Indeed if it is kept in a shaded place for a number of years it is covered with greenery. When it is first quarried it is green and watery, and does not turn white until it has been exposed to the air and the sun for a number of years. One of its properties is that it is easily carved, so that one can see various holy images made of it in the houses and the churches. Some of this stone may even be sent as trade to other countries

Sometimes the drugs and aromatics which are stored for long in Malta deteriorate altogether and lose what property they have. Tobacco and snuff and wine if kept there long lose their aroma altogether; this is because its floors and walls and roofs are, as I have said, of moist stone, so that if, for example, salt is placed in a box it soon becomes as moist as if it had been mixed with water. Foodstuffs and liquids similarly turn putrid if placed in a pantry of stained wood, for humidity communicates itself to the stain . . .

One thing recommended by the doctors here is the use of the woollen vests known at "flannels", both in summer and in winter — in winter for warmth, and in summer for the absorption of perspiration and for protection against the harmfulness of the wind which penetrates the pores. [So harmful indeed is this] that the Maltese fear the effect of the wind on their animals, and if they halt a horse turn its face away from the wind. This is the standard by which to measure.

Malta's ground is bald, a bare rock poor in soil or trees or plants, and the whole of its perimeter is rocky, with nothing growing on it. Yet by dint of its people's efforts and excessive toil most kinds of vegetables and fruits grow in it. Nevertheless their crops suffice them only four months [in the year]. The remainder [of their needs] has to be brought in from the lands which produce them. Thus wheat and cotton garments are imported from Egypt, Turkey and Greece; fruit and wine from Sicily; cattle and sheep and oil from Africa, and so on. Some even assert that the soil was originally brought in from Sicily.

Carob trees and cacti which require but little soil are there more precious than walnuts in Syria. The carob trees stick close to the ground like buttons, and the cacti are surrounded with high walls as if they formed a fruit-garden, and each [prickly pear] is wrapped in a garlic leaf to protect it from the

evil eye, although it is something which the eye tries to avoid. And if you ask one of the Maltese why they have so few groves, he says, "We Europeans concern ourselves only with the cultivation of the soil." How graceless and unjust they are!

If you should wander off into the countryside you will find between every two fields a wall so high as to prevent you from seeing what there is beyond. How ill does this compare with the plains of France or England which are open to the eye in all their freshness and luxuriance, with their heaps of grain or herbage unguarded by any watchman and unprotected by any wall.

Most kinds of fruit trees and edible vegetables — except sweet lemons, sugar-cane, and gherkins — are to be found in Malta, and the fruit is, on the whole, good. Prickly pears, however, are mostly pips, and so are pomegranates. Most fruits are sold unripe; they are seldom allowed to ripen for fear that thieves might steal them. They are all cheaper than in Egypt. Figs are of many varieties. Grapes do not last more than three months, but oranges are in season for some seven months, and some are sent as delicacies to England and other countries. Such fruit as is imported from Sicily is meant only to supplement the deficiency [in local production].

There are also kinds of fruits which are not to be found in our lands. One kind is called *farâwlî* (It. fragole: strawberries); it consists of small red berries of the same size as brambles; they are sour, but are improved by sugar. Another is called *nisbulî* (It. nespole; medlars); it is like the apricot or the ox-eye, and has a large stone. Another is called *zorbî* (It. sorbe: sorb-apples); it resembles the azarole and is very sour; it is kept in clusters, which resemble racemes of dates: a few of the fruits ripen every day, and the whole cluster lasts for months.

The Maltese do not know how to preserve fruit for use in winter, as is done in European countries — in France and England, apples and grapes are never unobtainable.

Their vegetables, however, are not good, being too watery: when you see them in the market place, you are delighted by their freshness, but once cooked they turn out to be tasteless. Onions and radishes and the like, which are biting by nature, are tasteless there, and even if imported from other countries they alter their taste. The same is true of cabbages, aubergines, and the like; scarcely does any one of these appear [in the local market] but it turns gross and tough.

Strange to say, although Malta's vegetation is as has been described, its honey is extremely good.

Among the vegetables not to be found there are marrows, cucumbers, and Jew's mallow; similarly deficient are milk, cream, and melted butter; of this last the mere off-scourings are sometimes imported from Tripoli [in Libya], but the Maltese all loathe it, and cook their food with lard

Of its gardens, the most famous is that of San Antonio, the summer residence of the Governor. It is there that the Amir Bashir Shihab² resided with his family, the Governor having given it up in his favour, in order to do honour to his position. [This garden] is bright and well set out, but it is in

2. A powerful man in the Lebanon, the Amir Bashîr sympathised with Muhammad 'Ali of Egypt and welcomed the weakening of the Ottoman hold on the Arabs. When in 1840 the Egyptian forces had to withdraw from Syria and Ottoman authority was re-asserted, the Amir had to leave the country.

a hollow, and has no seats or suitable places in which the stroller might eat or drink. It is not the custom of the Maltese to take food to such places of recreation on feast days or at other times; they follow in this the custom of the English, for they can sit only on chairs. The use they make of them is therefore limited to walking, or strutting conceitedly arm in arm with a friend, or ambling alone whistling and chirping. Even if they had a water-side parade or a fine garden, they would not know how to enjoy themselves except by strolling³. I know of a promenade known as *Biyâtâ* (Pietà) which is very elegant, but there is no place there in which one may have coffee or an iced drink, no restaurant, no music, no chair to sit on. If there were such a place in Paris or Egypt or Syria you would see it stacked with chairs and seats from beginning to end, and equipped with everything that delights the soul. On the whole, the English and the Maltese alike have no taste in such matters.

Then there is the *Bûskit* (Buskett), which means the Grove. It is three hours distant from Valletta. It is of unpleasantly steep approach and of little reward, for it consists of a few trees and dishevelled flowers, planted without art. In it however is a grotto within which is an abundant spring, with a table and stone seats around it, where those who wish to eat may sit. This spot is the best in the whole island for recreation, and this water the most limpid to be found. Near it is a tower which of old was a prison in which those who contravened the Church were punished, as was the practice also in Spain and elsewhere.

Then there is *al-Mutahlab* (Mtahleb) which is more verdant than the Buskett, and also farther [from Valletta], being at the extremity, lengthwise, of Malta. There is a pond there the water of which is covered with green moss (Ar.: *tahlub* or *tihlib*). It would seem that the place was named after this.

Malta's water-wheels are similar to those of Egypt and Syria. The Tunisians and Tripolitarians use the word *sâniyah* [another word for water wheel], which according to lexicographic works means a she-camel upon which water is drawn⁴.

(To be continued).

3. Cf. C.S. Sonnini, *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*, London, 1800: "The Orientals who are not obliged to work, remain almost always seated, with their legs crossed under them; they never walk without occasion, but only to go from one place to another, when anything calls them. If they have a mind to enjoy the coolness of an orchard, or of the vicinity of the water, as soon as they get there they sit down. They know not what exercise is, except on horseback, for they are very fond of riding. It is a curious thing to see them survey an European that is walking in a room, or in the open air, and continually turning about. They cannot comprehend the motive of this going and coming, without any apparent object, and which they consider as an act of madness. The most rational among them think it is by the advice of our physicians that we walk about in this manner, as an exercise necessary for the cure of some disease".

4. Lane elaborates as follows: "A she-camel upon which water is drawn from a [deep] well [by a man riding or leading it away from the well, it having the two extremities of a long rope tied to the saddle, and the upper end of the well-rope being tied to the middle of the former rope].