

**Muhammad Malik al-Ashrafani**  
**A Seventeenth Century Druze Historian**

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Historiography is an attempt to describe the development of the forms of literary expression used by a particular community to recapitulate its historical experiences. It is concerned with the analytical study of historical writings, and historical methods in an effort to determine the worth of the available sources. Furthermore, historiography tries to identify the motivation for such compositions, the approach to the subject as well as the perspective of their authors<sup>7</sup>.

One can hardly speak of Druze historiography in the past. The reasons for this lack of interest can be traced to the history of the community itself. From the time the *da'wa* was proclaimed the community was involved in a battle for survival on both the social and religious fronts. This left no time for the pursuit of other interests – historical compositions being one of them. The degree of secrecy with which the Druze surrounded their spiritual practices also contributed to the reluctance on the part of their authors to share any experience with the non-Druze. Hence the location, analysis and, ultimately, publication of historical Druze sources are required and most sought after.

This paper is an attempt to introduce al-Ashrafani and '*Umdat al-'Arifin fi qisas al-nabiyyin wal umam al-salifin*

عمادة العارفين في قصص النبيين والأمم السالفة

Albeit widely quoted by Druze scholars, this work is virtually unknown to others presumably because it contains extensive religious material. Actually Ashrafani does not discuss matter of *tawhid* – knowledge of the unity of God - dogma nor intricate spiritual concerns. What has prevented the editing and publication of this manuscript is the apprehension that some of the 'secrets' of the Faith might inadvertently be revealed.

Discussion of the *tawhid* dogma is beyond the scope of this paper. I will review the biographical dictionary as a source of historical information; examine the text arrangement and style, as well as assessing Ashrafani as a historian.

**Life and works:**

Very little is known about the life of Ashrafani except that he was originally from the village of Ashrafiyya in the Ghuta of Damascus. Ashrafani lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Dates of his birth and death are unknown. The only date mentioned in relation with the author is 1659 the date he completed this composition. An unconfirmed source reports that Ashrafani was accused of a 'transgression' and sought refuge in the seclusion of the rugged hills of the anti-Lebanon to await the clearance of his name. His days in that area were spent in meditation and the compilation of his only known

work: *'umdat al-'arifin*. We are told it took him seven arduous years to complete this undertaking. There is no way to determine how long he lived after that very date.

### *'Umdat al-'Arifin*

*'Umdat* can be considered a special type of biographical dictionary. The biographical entries follow the pattern set forth by Islamic biographers where information within the entry was systematized since the time of Al-Suyuti in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Entries include information that genealogically established the pertinent personalities. Details about their education, teachers (*shaykhs*), compositions, students, and posts are essential features of those biographical entries.

Ashrafani however, differed in the arrangement of the subject matter of the *'Umdat*. While most biographers followed the alphabetical or chronological order, he classified biographies under seven major sections corresponding to the seven cycles or *dawr* of formation in Isma'ili and *tawhid* doctrines. The numerical number seven itself having a special symbolic significance for all faiths.

While no religious hierarchy exists among *muwahhidun* there is a definite structure. All the basic ranks of the hierarchy are among the living in their representative forms. The first cycle or *dawr* is Adam's *sahib al-dawr al-awal*; the second is Noah's, then Abraham's, Moses's, Jesus's, Muhammad's and finally the cycle *dawr* of Hamzah, founder of the *tawhid* faith. These cycles are identified with their respective codes of laws. The seventh cycle is the last in the sequence of these significant cycles.

Biographies in the first volume of *'umdat* correspond to the first four cycles. They are dedicated to the long-established prophets, their lives and philosophies. A supplement to their narrative further explains their underlying significance in the *tawhid* beliefs. According to Ashrafani, these biblical figures exercised a greater influence in determining human relationships than what is related by lay historians.

To the *muwahhidun* they are not however the traditional biblical characters. They have their own exceptional symbolic connotation. *Tawhid* does not negate any of the ancient religions. It just presents a different interpretation of them based on Shi'a allegorical tradition.

For every spiritual figure there is an allegorical one. Al *natiqs* are the prophets or originators of the successive religions to whom the verbal message was revealed; namely: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Each prophet has an *asas* who is in charge of the allegorical interpretation of the articles of faith. The *asas* establishes the doctrine and rituals, expound, interpret and interpolate. Each *asas* has an imam or associate. There are seven imams and each is supported by twelve disciples or *hujaj*. The *hujaj* are calculatingly planted in all the nations of the world in an effort to propagate and publicize the faith.

The life of these prophets and imams is denoted by Ashrafani followed by an account of each of their *asas* and subsequently their respective *hujaj*. They all fall within the hierarchy of Sufi or *batiniyya* orders and represent the organization of the propaganda.

While Ashrafani differed from the general biographers of his time, he was in line with Isma'ili and *muwahhidun* beliefs. What is ascertained by these biographies is that *tawhid* started with the creation of souls and progressed from one generation to another until the proclamation of the *da'wa* in 1017.

Evidently, Ashrafani was not interested in the history of ancient civilizations. His focus was on the development of *tawhid* throughout time. Furthermore, he stressed that *tawhid* is not a 'one track' philosophical doctrine, but that it interrelates with other monotheistic beliefs at many junctions.

The second volume of *'umdat al-'arifin* includes pre-Islamic sages and prophets in the cycle of Jesus. It is followed by a short biography of the Prophet Muhammad *sahib al-dawr al-sadis*. Also included in this volume are the Rightly guided caliphs; Shi'a imams and other *awliya* who played a role in the history of Islam. Following Isma'ili tradition Ashrafani gives special attention to the Shi'a imams as the main allegorical interpreters of Shi'a doctrines. A final segment is dedicated to the biographies of Pythagoras, Aristotle and Plato who had great impact on Islamic thought until the advent of Ghazali.

The third volume corresponds with the seventh cycle: *dawr* Hamza. Here the author narrates the history of the Fatimid caliphs and the prominent propagators *da'is* of their cycle are mentioned within these entries. The sixth Fatimid caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amrillah is assigned a detailed biography due to the eminence he enjoys among the *muwahhidun*. Similarly the biography of Hamza bin 'Ali is in line with his status as head of the movement. His four assistants or Functionaries the *hudud* are each given a section that details their lives and their position in the propagation of the *da'wa*.

Biographies of the early respondents to the *da'wa* in Wadiy al-Taym and Mount Lebanon are included in this volume. They are identified in Druze scripture as recipients of Epistles and aids to the fifth Functionary al-Muqtana Baha'eddin. Their contributions to the *da'wa* notwithstanding, these notables were active participants in the history of the region. Among them is emir Abu'l Fawaris Mu'dad whose jurisdiction extended over a large area in Mount Lebanon. The Jandal clan of Wady al-Taym; the Buhturids founders of a dynasty in the Gharb; the clan of 'Abdullah, Banu Turab in Palestine, the elders of the Bustan in the Ghuta, and Rafi' Abu Layl recognized for his gallant defense of the oppressed.

Moreover, Ashrafani offers a detailed biography of emir Jamal al-Din 'Abdullah al-Tanukhi the most venerated individual in the history of the Druzes. A unique biographical entry expounds the life of Sitt Sara and her mission in Wadi al-Taym. She was the only woman of her time to head a delegation of men sent by

Baha`eddin to restore peace disrupted by dissidents. It is interesting to note that contemporary historical sources rarely mention these notable figures. The information offered in *'umdat al-'arifin* about their lives can be considered as a unique contribution by Ashrafani.

Another distinctive feature of this biographical dictionary are the entries dedicated to 'reprehensible' personages of each cycle. A separate account is provided to the most notorious and most detrimental to the *da'wa* while the less important are grouped together under one heading *al-rijal al-madhmumin*. الرجال المذمومين

At the end of each biographical entry under: *sharh al-kalimat wal-mawadi'* شرح الكلمات والمواضع. Ashrafani clarifies ambiguous expressions and gives the meaning of words he considers beyond the comprehension of his prospective reader. Cities and famous sites mentioned in the text are also described. The clarity of his information suggests that he actually visited some of these locations. This section can also be considered as another original contribution of the author.

### **Motives and Concerns:**

A question can be asked at this stage: What was Ashrafani's motive behind this extensive composition and what was his perception of history?

Ashrafani provides us with some answers in his introduction. Following the customary laudatory remarks, he wrote: "God be praised for making knowledge the basis of all virtue". Divine truth can only be attained if we recognize the contribution of the *awliya* mentioned in the Hikma.

Commemoration of these virtuous ancestors is presumably his motive. Relating their lives and praise for their qualities, would establish their worthy status among the *muwahhidun*.

It is therefore, evident from the outset that this biographical dictionary was compiled for religious purposes. It was not intended as a treatise on spiritual issues, but making these issues accessible to the public he was addressing – namely the laymen among the community.

من طالع هذا الكتاب وسمع ما فيه فكأنه عاصر جميع المذكورين فيه وسمع مقالهم وعرف أحوالهم. ومن طالعه ولم يحصل عنده تحضة ولا شوق إلى اللقاء فهو والأموات سواء.

Knowledge is life and ignorance is spiritual death. Presumably the initiate already knows the information offered in *'umdat*. It was the less fortunate the non-initiates that Ashrafani was determined to enlighten by his work. It would help them understand the faith without getting into the complicated subject of understanding *tawhid* views on God, Life and the Intellect. It can also serve as a guidebook for the comprehension of the more complicated Epistles.

Another motive could be the fear that the *muwahhidun* living amongst a majority of the Sunni Muslims might lose sight of their history. *‘Umdat al-‘arifin* would preserve the community by making its advocates proud of their heritage.

Ashrafani was living towards the end of the Ma’nid Emirate the pinnacle of Druze political influence. With the execution of Fakhreddine the community was in danger of persecution by the ruling Sunni Ottomans. While on punitive expeditions against the Ma’n emirs, Ottoman soldiers had confiscated many of their religious books. The carefully guided Epistles could now be subject to the scrutiny of the *‘ulama’* of Damascus. A biographical dictionary such as *‘umdat* might dispel some of their doubts that *tawhid* is a grievous deviation from Islam.

Furthermore, Ashrafani might have been trying to absolve himself from allegations that he himself had diverted from *tawhid* tenets. His work would leave no room for anyone to doubt the tenacity and fervor of his *tawhid* convictions.

On the other hand, Ashrafani might have considered it his mission to rectify what he perceived as a deteriorating state of spirituality among the *muwahhidun*. Much like emir al-Sayyid in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, tension among the Druze scholar filled him with this sense of duty. Growing debate induced him to leave and take refuge in remote parts of the anti Lebanon. It might not be erroneous to assume that Ashrafani was trying to reaffirm the *da’wa* to the *muwahhidun* of that area. His adversaries might have been in favor of more tolerant prescripts.

Whatever his motives, Ashrafani was an advocate of the Truth. He respected the right of everyone to seek knowledge and a wider understanding of the history of *tawhid*. His credence was that believers must concern themselves with the life and works of those they intend to follow.

### **Sources and Style**

In selecting the material of the text Ashrafani was influenced by the meaning of history. Like other historians of his era he interpenetrated history to the point where terms like *tarajim* and *siyar* became synonymous with *tarikh*. As a point of fact, biographical dictionaries were built upon, among other things, the desire to survey an entire ‘cross-section’ or group of the community - in this case religious. Accordingly, the spiritual function of the individual remained the predominant factor for inclusion.

Ashrafani offers an extensive list of sources consulted or quoted in *‘Umdat al-‘arifin*. The list includes Biblical material, Islamic theology, Druze epistles, treaties of emir Abdullah al-Tanukhi and a wide range of historical and literary works. This array of sources attests to the high degree of scholarship of the author. Ashrafani puts emphasis on the necessity to examine the sources, check their authenticity and corroborate their accounts. Ashrafani is also aware that oral testimony should be subjected to careful scrutiny. Among his sources we find reference to original manuscripts that are either lost or obscured in private collections.

The language of the text is clear and devoid of ambiguity. The style is simple and direct. His religious affiliations are manifest in every entry. He extols the virtues of the faithful and censures the others with disparaging remarks.

Ashrafani omitted all *isnad* for the cause of brevity with the exception of al-Shaykh al-Fadil a renowned Druze scholar who was cited to authenticate or verify a report. Ashrafani would compare, analyze and choose what he deemed correct and disregard suspect reports.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, one can say that as biographical dictionaries of this period however, *'umdat al-'arifiyin* failed to present an original contribution to the genre. Generally speaking, Ashrafani was not interested in innovation. Any alteration was confined to the elaboration and modification of prefigured patterns. While copying predecessors he would exclude or augment information, presumably to offer a more creative technique. As his range was circumscribed by convention, concentration on *tawhid* allowed him some creative freedom.

The value of *'umdat al-'arifin*, however, lies in preserving biographies of prominent men who contributed to the propagation and defense of the Druze faith. Those mentioned only by name in the scriptures, are discussed at length by Ashrafani. Through the experiences of such individuals Ashrafani traces the progress of *tawhid* from its origins until the proclamation of the *da'wa*.

Furthermore, the presentation of the material and the annotations of the author facilitate understanding a faith that is so intricate and entwined with arduous philosophical terminology.

While Ashrafani was neither a philosopher of history nor one to reflect on the principles of historical change, his account was not devoid of analysis. He looked beyond factual narrative to understand the nuances of *tawhid*.

History for him is moreover a 'depot' of human experience; and the historical lesson *عبرة* should not escape us. Finally, in *'umdat al-'arifiyin* Ashrafani tries to convey a salient message and a warning to his community against the dangers of discord.

However, the most frustrating aspect of this work is its lack of interest in socio-politics. Such information would have contributed to the understanding of a decisive period in Druze history. With the scarcity of historical compositions by members of the faith, the Druzes have had their history misinterpreted and misrepresented by ignorant, vengeful or blundering historians.