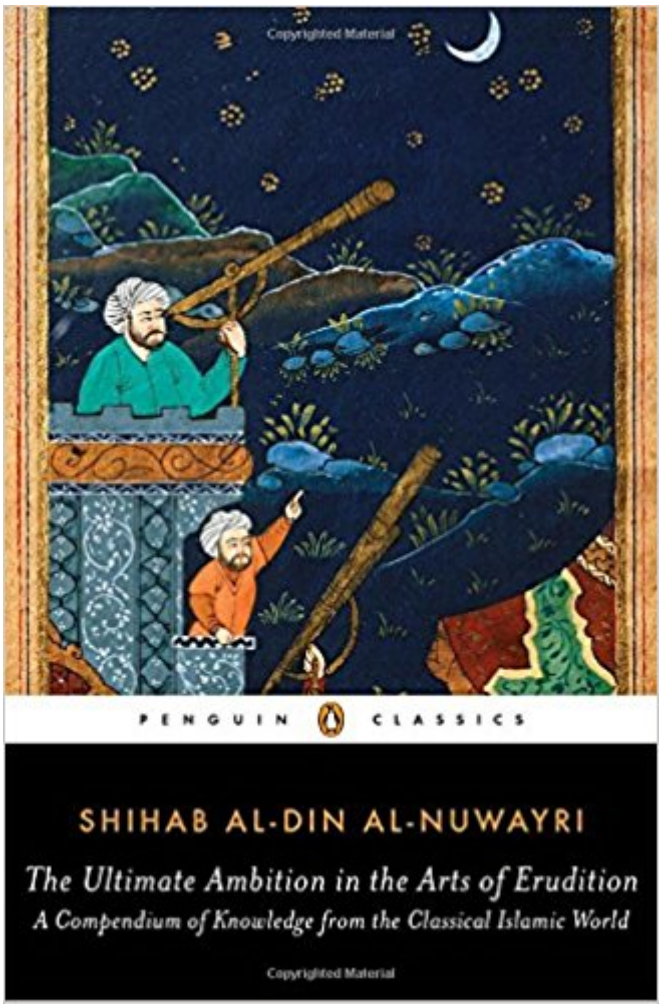
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The Ultimate Ambition In The Arts Of Erudition: A Compendium Of Knowledge From The Classical Islamic World



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Synopsis

For the first time in English, a catalog of the world through fourteenth-century Arab eyesÃ¢â ¬â •a kind of SchottÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Miscellany for the Islamic Golden Age Ã Â An astonishing record of the knowledge of a civilization, The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition catalogs everything known to exist from the perspective of a fourteenth-century Egyptian scholar and litterateur. More than 9,000 pages and thirty volumesÃ¢â ¬â •here abridged to one volume, and translated into English for the first timeÃ¢â ¬â •it contains entries on everything from medieval moon-worshipping cults, sexual aphrodisiacs, and the substance of clouds, to how to get the smell of alcohol off oneÃ¢â ¬â„¢s breath, the deliciousness of cheese made from buffalo milk, and the nesting habits of flamingos. Ã Â Similar works by Western authors, including PlinyÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Natural History, have been available in English for centuries. This groundbreaking translation of a remarkable Arabic textÃ¢â ¬â •expertly abridged and annotatedÃ¢â ¬â •offers a look at the world through the highly literary and impressively knowledgeable societies of the classical Islamic world. Meticulously arranged and delightfully eclectic, it is a compendium to be treasuredÃ¢â ¬â •a true monument of erudition.For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Penguin Classics (August 30, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143107488

ISBN-13: 978-0143107484

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.6 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 7 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #87,204 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #63 inÃ Â Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > History #65 inÃ Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Epistemology #65 inÃ Â Books > History > World > Religious > Islam

Customer Reviews

One of NPRÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Best Books of the YearOne of The GuardianÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Best Books of the YearÃ¢â ¬Å“Sparkling . . . Marvelous . . . Wondrous . . . A monument of classical Islamic learning . . .Ã Â Muhanna renders what might have been a rather baroque text in elegant prose. . . .Ã Â The text opens a window into a lively and eclectic world of scholarship, a realm of humanist scribes and poetry-spouting polymaths. . . .Ã Â Reading this compendium is like exploring a cabinet of curiosities, each section home to uncanny and startling mirabilia. . . . The pleasure of The Ultimate Ambition lies in exploring its bewildering scope, a range emblematic of the broad imaginations and curiosities of the 14th-century Islamic world.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The New York Times Book ReviewÃ¢â ¬Å“This bizarre, fascinating book . . . illustrate[s] the sprawlingly heterodox reality of the early centuries of Islam, so different from the crude puritanical myths purveyed by modern-day jihadis. . . . Reading it is like stumbling into a cavernous attic full of unimaginably strange artifacts, some of them unforgettable. . . . The book is full of strange myths and nostrums that hint at what mattered to people in the fourteenth century: sex, money, power, perfume. . . . From the alleged self-fellation of monkeys to the many lovely Bedouin words for the night sky . . . nothing seems to escape NuwayriÃ¢â ¬â„¢s taxonomic ambitions.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •The New York Review of BooksÃ¢â ¬Å“This energetic primer to a staggeringly rich moment in timeÃ Â might end up being an indispensable addition to your library. . . . [It] is a celebration of knowledge for its own sake. . . . For feeding your curiosity, it handily succeeds.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •NPR.orgÃ¢â ¬Å“Ultimate AmbitionÃ Â lives up to its bold titleÃ¢â ¬â •its eclectic, protean entries cover lunar cults, the sugary drinks in the sultanÃ¢â ¬â„¢s buttery, and how to attract your dream woman by burying a crowÃ¢â ¬â„¢s head.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã Â Ã¢â ¬â •The Paris Review DailyÃ¢â ¬Å“[It] spills over with insatiable curiosity at its most irrepressible: an elixir for dark days.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Marina Warner, The Guardian, Ã¢â ¬Å“Best Books of the YearÃ¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬Å“A fascinating peek at the minds of our ancestors. You can see how manÃ¢â ¬â„¢s understanding of the world has changed drastically in some ways and remained startlingly constant in others. Plus the book is just plain fun to read.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •A. J. Jacobs, New York Times bestselling author of The Know-It-All and The Year of Living BiblicallyÃ¢â ¬Å“A smart, exhilarating selection from a vast work. The scholarship is solid but unobtrusive, and the style, clear andÃ Â flavorful, draws the reader in. Al-NuwayriÃ¢â ¬â„¢s encyclopedia, somewhat like Vincent of BeauvaisÃ¢â ¬â„¢sÃ Â a hundred years before him, delights as it moves between learned tradition, jaw-droppingÃ Â anecdote, and elegant (and elegantly translated) poetry. Dip in,Ã Â and a distant world, endlessly colorful, comes to sparkling life.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Andras P. Hamori, Princeton UniversityÃ¢â ¬Å“From the structure of the heavens to the curious anatomy of the hippopotamus, with stops to view everything

from book-keeping to aphrodisiacs, this charming fourteenth-century encyclopedia gives a glimpse of the entire world as seen by a very learned Egyptian summing up the powerful tradition of medieval Islamic scholarship known in his time. Elias MuhannaÃ¢â ¬â„¢s very readable translation allows the reader to gain a rounded experience of a deeply interesting bygone world.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Roy P. Mottahedeh, Harvard UniversityÃ¢â ¬Å“Finally, thanks to Elias MuhannaÃ¢â ¬â„¢s expert translation, editing, and explanatory notes, we have access to a real encyclopedia to place alongside BorgesÃ¢â ¬â„¢s mythical Chinese text. An extraordinary work, The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition strives for nothing less than an orderly, total account of the world, and Al-NuwayriÃ¢â ¬â„¢s unique accomplishment in the encyclopedic tradition is not to suggest that wonder is to be found in the many oddities, rarities, and exceptions of the given world, but to show how, beneath these features, there is a deeper and more marvelous order.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Elliott Colla, Georgetown UniversityÃ¢â ¬Å“This engaging volume lets you dip into the world of a fourteenth-century Egyptian encyclopedist who knew about the endless rain in England, the skillfulness of artists in China, how a woman can get away with claiming to be a prophetess, why a bureaucrat should never commit the size of the army to writing, and anything else worth knowing.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Michael Cook, Princeton UniversityÃ¢â ¬Å“This delightful volume offers readers of English the first opportunity to sample the vast and varied literature of Arabic encyclopedism. Under Elias MuhannaÃ¢â ¬â„¢s expert guidance you will encounter advice and information strangely foreign and occasionally familiar, drawn from al-NuwayriÃ¢â ¬â„¢s 14th-century perspective on history and politics, medicine and the natural world.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Ann Blair, Harvard UniversityÃ¢â ¬Å“A veritable Wikipedia of its time . . . The erudition and breadth of the book is staggering, and it is a positively entertaining collection. . . . A valuable addition to the library of those who are interested in medieval miscellany [and] a corrective to narratives that might isolate the Islamic world from the wider cosmos of medieval thinking.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Publishers WeeklyÃ¢â ¬Å“Fascinating . . . This condensed, abbreviated English-language rendition more than does justice to the Arabic text. . . . [A] clear, accessible translation . . . with copious notes and suggested further readings.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Library JournalÃ¢â ¬Å“In a time like ours, when one of the worldÃ¢â ¬â„¢s great religions and cultures is under attack in the west, it might feel like a civic duty to learn more about the texture and history of Islamic tradition, but donÃ¢â ¬â„¢t read this book only for that reason. Read it because it is profoundly poetic and filled with sublime passages of the most extraordinary delicacy. For instance, Ã¢â ¬ËœThe enmity between the wolf and the sheep is so great that if some bowstrings are plucked togetherÃ¢â ¬â •one made from the intestines of a wolf, and several others from the intestines of a

sheepÃ¢â ¬â •they will not make any sound.Ã¢â ¬â„¢ Or, Ã¢â ¬ËœThe night is divided into twelve hours, each with its own name given to it by the Bedouin Arabs: Sunset, dusk, darkness, blackness, the enfeebling hour, midnight, the heart of the night, the disgracing hour, the foretokens of morning, the first dawn, the second dawn, the widespread dawn.Ã¢â ¬â„¢ An accessible, delightful, and stirring record of 14th-century Islamic thought.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â •Jeff Deutsch, Seminary Co-op Bookstore

Shihab al-Din al-NuwayriÃ Â (1279Ã¢â ¬â œ1333) was an Egyptian scholar and civil servant in the Mamluk Empire. His nine-thousand-page, thirty-three-volume encyclopedia, The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition, is one of the most important medieval collections of Arabic literature and Islamic thought. Elias MuhannaÃ Â (editor/translator) is the Manning Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University and the author of The World in a Book: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition. A scholar of classical Arabic literature and Islamic intellectual history, he has written for TheÃ Â New York Times, TheÃ Â New Yorker, The Nation, andÃ Â Foreign Policy, and he runs the blogÃ Â Qifa Nabki, about the contemporary Middle East. Born in Lebanon, he now lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

This is such an amazing book. Never would I have imagined these ideas being side by side--it really shows the richness of life comes from variety! Thank you, Elias Muhanna for translating this incredible piece of history for us to read, understand and enjoy!

This collection of Muslim scholarship, collected in the fourteenth century, exemplifies the approach Islam takes to careful observation, rational evaluation, and lucid interpretation--as well as humorous interpolation. Those of us who follow the tradition and civilization especially of the first seven centuries of Islam will keep this anthology near us, close to our hearts. I had my students summarize their knowledge about some of the topics of this tome.

Very, very,very interesting seeing their world view. I fell over backwards when I realized Sindh was described as it’s own country separate from India. Now it’s a dusty, rural, not very prominent province in Pakistan. I was amused by how they thought crocodiles behaved. Highly disturbed by older men being given a lecture on staying away from boys lest they be tempted. Why is this even something they were thinking about? Anyway the writing of the translation is both beautiful and interesting.

A medieval encyclopedia summarized in one very readable book. Science, history, government, and human nature. Poetry and proverbs. This book will transport you into the past and show you how much has changed.

A must read for anyone interested in medieval Middle Eastern history, esoterica, politics, and philosophy. A true gem.

Totally enjoyed "The Ultimate Ambition..."! I would say - immerse yourself in this splendid book if you are a lover of human culture. As it opens a window on the past, it illuminates our present, showing that our ancestors were preoccupied by the same concerns and mysteries that trouble and dazzle us today. I have published a review of/essay on the book on my blog "On Art and Aesthetics". Here are a few points:----Al-NuwayriÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s towering humanistic achievement emerges out of the wondrously inquisitive context of the Islamic Golden Age. The encyclopedia contains ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“poetry, literary epistles, historical narratives, taxonomies, pharmacopoeial antidotes, ancient fables, and much moreÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ all this in about two million words, 9,000 pages and 33 volumes.Professor Muhanna first encountered "The Ultimate Ambition" as a graduate student. He writes in the introduction:
ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Unfettered by the doctrinal shackles that moderns tend to associate with the medieval era, the world that "The Ultimate Ambition" presents is full of paradox and pleasure -which is to say, alive.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Al-NuwayriÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s style is ecumenical; he is unafraid of contradictions and frequently provides multiple viewpoints on one issue.In the delightful new Penguin Classics edition that preserves the eclecticism of the original, we read about the marriage contract between two deaf-mutes, a method of urination that can save one from a rhinoceros attack, omelettes that increase sexual potency and jams that strengthen sexual appetite. Al-Nuwayri talks about the wildlife in India, the curios of China. He mentions PlatoÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s "Republic" and AristotleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s "Physics". Even the constant rain that covers the island of England!The compendium is arranged in sophisticated hierarchical and classificatory schemes. Its five principal divisions are: (i) the cosmos , (ii) the human being, (iii) the animal world (iv) the plant world and (v) universal history.I will share an excerpt that I liked from the fifth book on history:"The study of history is required for the king and the minister, the general and the prince, the scribe and the counselor, the rich man and the poor man, the desert dweller and the city dweller, the sedentary and nomadic. The king gains experience by contemplating former states and peoples. The minister imitates the

actions of his predecessors who successfully wielded both the sword and the pen. The general may learn, from history, about the stratagems of war and different battle positions. The counselor considers his opinion and only offers it after much reflection; he studies a matter as a member of the rulerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s entourage, possessed of a sharp mind."The scribe bears witness to history in his letters and other writings, and may expatiate upon it in straitened conditions. The rich man praises God for what He has conferred upon him in the way of blessings and prosperity, and he spends what God has given him when he understands that there is no escape from his own end and passing. And the poor man desires asceticism because he knows that the world is not eternal. Every other person hears about history through evening conversations, desiring to learn the stories of the different nations, the battle days of the Arabs, and the wars with the barbarians."

Beautifully written. Fascinating and clearly well researched. Would be interesting to many.

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