

Irwin, Robert: *Ibn Khaldun. An Intellectual Biography*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2018. ISBN: 9780691174662.

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Ibn Khaldun, the remarkable and profound fourteenth-century historical scholar, now benefits from a wide-ranging, readable, specific, and authoritative intellectual biography. Ibn Khaldun, born in Tunis in 1332, studied in Fez, then served a lifetime as scholar, teacher, judge of Maliki law, and pious Muslim who quietly followed the sufi path. At midlife he moved to a retreat and composed his great work on history and society in North Africa, the *Muqaddimah*, during the 1370s. He then moved eastward to work in the Mamluk capital of Cairo, where he died in 1406.

The author of this biography is a well-known scholar on the Mamluk state, also well known as a literary stylist. The blurbs indicate the high regard in which Robert Irwin is held by his colleagues, labeling the book as „an exhilarating work of intellectual recovery“ and „a masterful study of the outstanding visionary of Islamic civilization.“ More specifically, one observer argues that Ibn Khaldun is shown to have been „authentically unmodern.“ On the latter point, Irwin seeks first to set the reader into a backward-looking perspective in North Africa of the fourteenth century, portraying Ibn Khaldun „among the ruins“ of Roman, Carthaginian, and Umayyad regimes, seeking to analyze change but not progress. Irwin moves next to place Ibn Khaldun in the context of his two great scholarly models: the tenth-century historian, al-Masudi, and his contemporary mentor, the poet Ibn al-Khatib. Out of this comparison, the reader encounters clear examples of Ibn Khaldun’s relentlessly critical frame of mind.

Core chapters describe Ibn Khaldun’s famous interpretation of the rise and fall of dynastic states in North Africa, giving particular attention to the place of nomadic tribes as essential elements of military dominance. Ibn Khaldun’s claim to have developed a science of history remains one of his most original contributions. Irwin emphasizes that while Ibn Khaldun articulated methods of history,

he applied them to North Africa rather than to the world. Still, the method and logic of his history could be extended to other subject matter. Irwin scrutinizes the logic and consistency of Ibn Khaldun’s text and finds cases of inconsistency and of unbelievable logic yet concludes with others that Ibn Khaldun’s was a mind of remarkable rigor and imaginative insight. Was he a philosopher? While he had some experience with Aristotle, in Irwin’s view Ibn Khaldun’s philosophy owed more to the Qur’an and Maliki law.

Other chapters explore Ibn Khaldun’s deep interest in the occult, his explorations of economic life, and his work as a teacher and writer. A chapter on Ibn Khaldun’s years among the Mamluks recounts his work as a judge, his edits and additions to the *Muqaddimah*, and his 1401 encounter with the amir Timur. As Timur prepared the siege of Damascus, the Mamluk sultan dispatched Ibn Khaldun along with his forces for defense. Ibn Khaldun ended up in a series of conversations with Timur, a leader parallel to those he had earlier chronicled. Ibn Khaldun was allowed to return to Cairo, where he described the encounters in his autobiography; meanwhile, Timur completed his destruction of the city.

A signal contribution of Irwin’s biography is his thorough and sensitive argument that Ibn Khaldun must be seen as a pious participant in sufism. While Ibn Khaldun, as a judge, was deeply associated with the institutional structure of Islam, there was room for him to seek a personal connection with God. Thus, his historical interpretations give great emphasis to the logic of the cyclical dynamic he discovered, yet also allow for changes that he could only explain through the intervention of God. More broadly, this era of plague, recurring warfare, and climatic dessication nourished mystical movements in several religious traditions.

In an important addition to the intellectual biography of Ibn Khaldun himself, Irwin devotes more than a full chapter to what he calls „The strange afterlife of the *Muqaddimah*.“ The *Muqaddimah* was never lost—numerous copies survived, including copies in Ibn Khaldun’s own hand that still exist in Fez and Istanbul. It was read by Ottomans, including by Muhammad Ali in Egypt. In a brilliant his-

toriographical review, Irwin emphasizes that only in the nineteenth century was the *Muqaddimah* translated into European languages, becoming a centerpiece of Orientalist discourse. French, German, English, American, and Arab scholars have seized upon the *Muqaddimah* as a path-breaking analysis—generally seeking to show that it supported their own views. Arnold J. Toynbee and H.A.R. Gibb lauded Ibn Khaldun for quite different reasons. Irwin tries to abstain from treating Ibn Khaldun as a commentator on the modern world. Yet, knowing that the debate and appropriation of Ibn Khaldun's thought will continue, he reconfirms the strength of the principal translation of the *Muqaddimah*, in three volumes by Franz Rosenthal, so that the efforts to assess and perhaps appropriate Ibn Khaldun can safely continue.

Irwin sets Ibn Khaldun into his fourteenth-century time; he assembles a memorable picture of that time from the writings of this skilled, critical, pious, and austere scholar. I conclude that the place of this book among the many books on Ibn Khaldun is that it is essential but not definitive. It is useful for selecting which other books to read, or for suggesting how to balance the viewpoints of numerous authors. The book is entertaining and thought-provoking in itself; it is not the last word but provides a fascinating guide to further reading.

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