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Arabic Proverbs

John Lewis Burckhardt (1784–1817) was a Swiss explorer who is best remembered for his re-discovery of the ancient city of Petra in modern Jordan. In 1809 he was commissioned by the African Association to discover the source of the River Niger. In preparation for this journey, for which he needed to pass as a Muslim, Burckhardt spent two years exploring and studying Arabic and Islamic law in Aleppo, before travelling widely in Arabia and Egypt. This volume, first published posthumously in 1830 by the African Association, contains a collection of Arabic proverbs. The main group derives from an eighteenth-century collection, to which Burckhardt added proverbs he had heard during his residence in Cairo. Given in both Cairene Arabic and English, with Burckhardt's explanations of the context in which they were used, these proverbs provide a valuable source for the language and culture of nineteenth-century Cairo.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-02288-0 - Arabic Proverbs
John Lewis Burckhardt
Frontmatter
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Arabic Proverbs

*Or, The Manners and Customs
of the Modern Egyptians*

JOHN LEWIS BURCKHARDT
EDITED BY WILLIAM OUSELEY



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ARABIC PROVERBS,
OR
THE MANNERS AND CUSTOMS
OF THE
MODERN EGYPTIANS,
ILLUSTRATED
FROM THEIR PROVERBIAL SAYINGS CURRENT AT
CAIRO,
TRANSLATED AND EXPLAINED
BY THE LATE
JOHN LEWIS BURCKHARDT.

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L O N D O N :
PRINTED BY C. ROWORTH, BELL YARD,
TEMPLE BAR.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.



MANY of the proverbial sayings translated in this volume, were collected by *Sheref ed dyn Ibn Asad*, (شرف الدين ابن اسد) a native of Cairo, who lived, it is said, early in the last century, but never acquired a very high literary reputation. The translator found those Proverbs written upon nine or ten leaves in the common-place-book of a sheikh, with whom he was acquainted in this city; but they wanted explanation or commentary. Of those he has omitted a considerable number, many being altogether uninteresting, and others so grossly indelicate that he could not venture to lay them before the public, although it must be acknowledged that they excelled in wit. Several sayings which appear to have been popular in the time of Ibn Asad, are no longer current; and these the translator has marked with an asterisk.

The original collection he has augmented by some hundreds, committed to paper as he heard them quoted in general society or in the bázár. Where the sense of a Proverb did not seem quite clear, he has explained

it, or at least noticed the meaning commonly assigned to it, as well as any peculiarity of language wherever the provincial idiom differs from the learned Arabic. In this labour he was assisted by many intelligent Arabs of Cairo. The natives, in general, are so fond of figurative language and of witty allusions and comparisons taken from low life, that these sayings are constantly quoted on every common occasion, and express the tendency or moral of an event much better than could be done by a long or flowery speech. Many of these sayings are rhythmical, and sometimes the rhymes are extremely happy; but the drollery is lost in a plain translation, which has been rendered as literal as possible, and in which the true sense has never been sacrificed to elegance. They are written in the vulgar dialect of Cairo, such as every inhabitant understands and every one uses, except perhaps a few who affect to despise the language of the lower classes. These Proverbs offer a genuine specimen of the Arabic at present spoken in the Egyptian capital, and the same, or very nearly the same, as that used in the towns of the Delta.

These sayings are useful, as they serve to show us how the Arabs judge of men and things, and in this respect it must be acknowledged that many are dictated by wisdom and sagacity. Several Scriptural sayings and maxims of ancient sages will be found here naturalized

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

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among Arabs; as well as some Proverbs which have generally been supposed of European origin.

Meidani has collected many sayings that were current among the ancient Arabs at the most brilliant period of their social state and of their language; but the present collection offers to our view a different nation and different manners; it also exhibits in some places an adulterated dialect, and alludes to vices which were probably but little known among the forefathers of the Egyptians. It proves, however, that the language is not by any means so corrupted as various travellers have imagined, and that the principles of virtue and honour, of friendship and true charity, of independence and generosity, are perfectly well known to the modern inhabitants of Egypt, although very few among them take the trouble of regulating their conduct accordingly.

The number of *nine hundred and ninety-nine* Proverbs might easily have been augmented by one, but the translator refrains from completing the thousand, adopting here a notion prevalent among Arabs, that even numbers are unlucky, and that any thing perfect in its quantity is particularly affected by the evil eye. He does not pretend to possess such a thorough knowledge of the learned Arabic as would have enabled him to indicate every instance of discrepancy between the language of these popular sayings and that used by the

ancient Arabian writers. His long residence at Cairo rendered the vulgar idiom of its inhabitants familiar to him; and knowing how few specimens of that idiom have hitherto been published, he flatters himself with the hope that this collection may interest and gratify the Orientalist, and that his explanations will be regarded as the hasty work of a traveller subject to numerous inconveniences, and who may, in some cases, have been deceived by erroneous or defective information, and not criticised as the elaborate treatise of a learned Arabic scholar or grammarian, surrounded by all the means of making his composition perfect.

CAIRO, 25th of March, 1817.

NOTE OF THE EDITOR.

To Burckhardt's short Preface a few lines must here be added. That accomplished traveller has sufficiently explained his motives for withholding from publication several Proverbs which had found a place in his original collection. It seems necessary that the Editor should account why this volume does not contain even so many as Burckhardt evidently intended to publish, (nine hundred and ninety-nine). The numerical series is interrupted in various parts of the manuscript, not by any accidental injury, mutilation, or loss of leaves, but by chasms, which amount in some instances to whole decades of Proverbs; the most considerable deficiency occurring

NOTE OF THE EDITOR.

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where (in the middle of a page) immediately after No. 516 follows No. 577. These omissions may not unreasonably be supposed to have arisen from the writer's mistake of one figure for another; in fact the 1 of No. 516 so much resembles a 7, (being nearly joined to the 5 by a stroke of the pen at its upper part,) that it might easily deceive the eye. Some allowance must also be made for the effect of those inconvenient circumstances to which our ingenious traveller has above alluded. Under whatever circumstances of difficulty, danger, or inconvenience, he may have collected and explained these Proverbs, his work offers a variety of curious and original information respecting the manners, customs, and opinions of an extraordinary people; while his philological remarks must prove highly useful and interesting to all who are desirous of understanding, with critical accuracy, the modern Arabic dialect used at Cairo.

In the composition of this work, as of his volumes already published, he adopted the language of our country, and generally with sufficient correctness; it has been, however, in some places, necessary to substitute an English for a foreign idiom, Burckhardt's meaning being on all occasions most scrupulously preserved; even where his translation of certain terms or phrases (which the Arabic scholar will soon discover) appeared more literal than decent, it has been endeavoured by circumlocution to express the sense without offending delicacy. These and the omission of a few Proverbs (found to agree most exactly both in words and signification with others given under preceding numbers) constitute the only liberties which have been assumed by the Editor

WILLIAM OUSELEY.

London, May 21st, 1830.

CORRIGENDA.

PROVERB

5 for	نجس	read	نحس
19 —	بالشحاته	—	بالشحاتة
34 —	لناس	—	للناس
75 —	<i>mangul</i>	—	<i>mangal</i>
117 —	<i>ever though</i>	—	<i>even though</i>
124 —	السلفه	—	اسلفه
140 —	المنارة	—	المنارة
156 —	القحبه	—	القحبة
166 —	هندوية	—	هندية
199 dele	the second	' over	تجّر
208 for	حلني	read	حلني
215 —	اناك	—	آنك
217 —	خرة	—	خُرة
249 —	جلك	—	رجلك

PROVERB

266 for	ياجنب	read	ياجنب
289 —	ليسر	—	ليس
346 —	خطوه	—	خطوة
365 —	شغلني	—	شغلني
396 —	اصبع	—	اصيف
414 —	اخصموا	—	اخصموا
431 —	عازن	—	عازب
436 —	بصرة	—	بظرة
454 —	نسجة	—	نسجه
520 —	هذه	—	هذة
578 —	زرقة	—	رزقة
605 after	كل	insert	ما
643 for	ستحي	read	يستحي