In 1752 an Indian Muslim savant paid a visit to Ottoman Egypt, where he settled and spent the rest of his life. Shawkh Abū al-Fayḍ al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Razzāq, better known as Mūrtaḍa al-Ḥusaynī al-Zabīḍī al-Ḥanafi — or simply Mūrtaḍa al-Zabīḍī — was born in India in 1732. He became an itinerant scholar who made the pilgrimage several times. He visited Egypt at the suggestion of his teacher Shawkh 'Abd al-Rahmān al-'Aydārūs, who described the country to him in glowing terms. He also initiated him as a ṣūfī and licensed him to teach his works. Al-Zabīḍī was not to be disappointed with his decision to come to Cairo. He received the patronage of Ismā‘īl Kādkhudā ‘Azbān, and travelled the length and breadth of the country, in the course of which he seems to have been held in high esteem on all sides [2]. According to his biographer al-Jabarti, the panegyric of praise recited in his honour, both in prose and verse, would, if collected, have filled a fat volume. His magnus opus, completed in 1767, was the compilation of an Arabic dictionary, the Tāj al-‘arūs fi sharh al-qāmūs, which was a commentary on the earlier dictionary of al-Firuzābādi, the Qāmūs al-muhīt [3].

Around 1770 al-Zabīḍī started work on another much smaller work, on the art of calligraphy, called the Ḥikmat al-iṣḥārāq ilā kuttāb al-ṣāfāq [4]. By the time of the author's arrival in Egypt the country had been an Ottoman province for 250 years. Politically, Ottoman control was purely nominal: the governors sent from Istanbul, rarely remained for more than a few years at a time; their power was almost non-existent and the country was in the hands of local Mamluk rulers or beyṣ. Culturally, however, Egypt was firmly part of the Ottoman world, with Ottoman tastes and fashions penetrating even to the level of such relatively inconsequential areas as book-binding, calligraphy and manuscript illumination.

The Ḥikmat al-iṣḥārāq, was composed for the calligrapher Ḥasan b. 'Abd Allāh al-Rūmī, called al-Rushda, who after the death of Ismā‘īl Wahhī in 1773—74, became Chief Writing-Master (shawkh al-muktahīn). The date of completion of the work is 12 Dhū al-Hijja 1184 / March 1771 [5].

The final chapter in al-Zabīḍī's handbook on calligraphy is entitled: "An account of the noble scribes from the time of the Prophet ... until our own time, arranged in good order and instructively presented". This is not however, a simple chain of authorities. Al-Zabīḍī was clearly trying to link two separate calligraphic traditions — the earlier Arab/Mamluk one with the Ottoman one, which by the 18th century was dominant in Egypt.

Like other histories of Ottoman calligraphy, the summary consists of the sibîla, or catena of calligraphers from Ibn Muqla onwards. However, it is traced through Ibn al-Bawwāb to Yaqūt al-Mawṣili, who died in 1221 and not, as one would expect, Yaqūt al-Musta’sī, who died in 1298. As al-Zabīḍī gives the biography of Yaqūt al-Mawṣilī at some length, we may presume that he was not confusing him with his more famous namesake, but was tracing the lesser known calligraphic branch of Syria and Egypt under the Mamluks which culminated in the work of 'Abd al-Rahman b. al-Sā‘igh (d. 1441—42) [6]. Al-Zabīḍī seems to have done his best to trace this Mamluk branch, for he refers several times to the various works which he has consulted in the course of his research. Indeed the information given in this part of the chapter was not conveniently available elsewhere in earlier works [7].

* In the preparation of this article, and an earlier one in Manuscripta Orientalia XII/2 (2006), pp. 3—7, I am grateful for the help of Dr. Abdou Filali-Ansary and Dr. Geoffrey Roper of the Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisation, Agha Khân University, London.

© D. James, 2006