

Book Review

THE EASTERN KEY

Kitab al-ifadah wa l-i`tibâr of 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdâdi. Translation by K. Hafuth Zand and John A. and Ivy E. Videan (Allen and Unwin, 63s.).

Review by Martin Lings

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This volume contains a facsimile edition of the autograph Arabic manuscript of 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdâdi's eye-witness description of Egypt written in 1204 A.D. The text given here is the author's own abridgement of his longer and more detailed work which has been lost. The Arabic original is accompanied throughout by an English translation on the opposite page.

The work falls into two parts: the first is a general description of Egypt, its fauna and flora, the Egyptians themselves and the food they eat and above all the remains of the civilization of Ancient Egypt which the author found especially fascinating. The second part is about the Nile and about the terrible famine which took place at the turn of the century in the years 1200-1201 A.D. because the river did not rise high enough. In the famine it was not long before uninhibited cannibalism, starting in the Cairo underworld, became prevalent in a large section of the community. Not only were children and also adults continually being kidnapped and eaten but even the cemeteries were robbed. The Governor of Cairo decreed that anyone found eating human flesh should be burnt alive, but this appeared to make no difference, and the bodies of those who suffered this punishment were often eaten before they could be buried. This part of the book is perhaps not without its significance for the modern Western world, and in particular for England, for we live perpetually on the brink of famine, overcrowded to an extent without parallel in history and utterly dependent for our food upon a fantastically complex organisation. If anything ever went seriously wrong with this—and sooner or later is it not bound to happen?—nothing could save us from famine; and we may well ask ourselves whether or not a few weeks of extreme hunger would produce cannibalism and with it, here as in Cairo, an almost total moral collapse in other respects. As regards this last point few will be likely to maintain that the underworld of London in 1967 is in any respect better, to say the least, than the underworld of Cairo in 1200; and if anyone doubts whether any Englishman is a potential cannibal, let him remember that 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdâdi himself could scarcely believe his own eyes and ears.

The translators have been, one feels, unnecessarily free in one or two places. Also it is little short of a mystery why, in transcribing Arabic words into Latin letters, they have so often totally ignored the indications given by the author himself, who inserted the vowel marks wherever he felt that a reader might hesitate. His etymological paragraph on the derivation of the word "Nile" is unnecessarily marred in the English, and among the other examples I may mention, at the risk of pedantry, the names *Dinouri* in mistake for *Dinawari*, *Maizz* for *Muizz*, and *Sha'ari* for *Shi`ra* (Sirius). But these are small points. The translation on the whole is good and readable and

together with the fine Arabic manuscript in facsimile (the author, though not a professional calligrapher, had a good hand of archaic Naskhi) it serves to make this handsome volume an asset to libraries of far more general scope than those few which are attached to schools of Oriental studies.