

## ‘ALĪ AL-WARDĀNĪ

A closer study of the history of Tunisian culture shows that ‘Alī al-Wardānī (1861–1905) was among its most outstanding nineteenth-century representatives. And yet, analyses of his output are practically absent from the contem-

porary discourse within the field of Arabic studies. Interestingly, though, Arabic travel literature of the period is relatively popular among researchers, however, their interest is usually limited to the study of works of either Egyptians or the inhabitants of Greater Syria. The only references to al-Wardānī in Western research are, apparently, a chapter in Henri Pérès's book from 1937<sup>12</sup> and mere mentions of al-Wardānī's name accompanied by his short biography in Ons Debbech's monograph.<sup>13</sup> Definitely much more has been written about al-Wardānī in Arabic by Tunisians themselves. However, the information on his life is very scarce.

According to most sources (and as indicated by his *nisbah*), Sīdī 'Alī Sālim al-Wardānī al-Tūnusī<sup>14</sup> was born in 1861 in the town of Wardānīn<sup>15</sup> or Ukūdah<sup>16</sup> in the al-Sāhil region, whose capital is Sūsah (*Dā'irat Sūsah*). Nothing is known about his childhood. All his biographers say is that he moved to Tunis "at an early age" and began studying in the al-Ṣādiqīyah College. There, he learned Turkish, French, and Italian, which proved crucial to his future career.

As an outstanding disciple of the al-Ṣādiqīyah, he attracted the attention of Khayr al-Dīn Pasha, the prime minister of the beylik of Tunis at the time. The politician invited 'Alī to dine with him on several occasions, and soon employed him in his office (*dīwān*) as his personal secretary.<sup>17</sup> After his forced resignation, Khayr al-Dīn went to Istanbul<sup>18</sup> and took al-Wardānī with him, having hired him as an interpreter. He also provided al-Wardānī with accommodation in his own house. While in Istanbul, Khayr al-Dīn introduced al-Wardānī to many important figures of the political and cultural life of the Ottoman capital, and soon to the sultan himself, recommending him as a trans-

<sup>12</sup> See Henri Pérès, *L'Espagne vue par les voyageurs musulmans de 1610 à 1930* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1937), 62–72.

<sup>13</sup> See Debbech, *Les voyageurs tunisiens en France au XIXe siècle*, 192–93. For the biography of al-Wardānī, see also 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Sharīf, "al-Baḥṭh 'an al-makḥṭūṭāt wa-al-riḥlah al-ilmīyah," in 'Alī Ibn Sālim al-Wardānī, *al-Riḥlah al-Andalusīyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Sharīf (Tūnus: al-Dār al-Tūnusīyah li-al-Nashr, 1984), 11–28; al-Ṣādiq al-Zamarlī, *Alī al-Wardānī (1861–1905): al-Fannān, al-ālim wa-al-shā'ir*, in al-Ṣādiq al-Zamarlī, *Ālām tūnusīyūn* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1986), 113–20; Muḥammad Maḥfūz, *Tarājim al-mu'allifīn al-tūnusīyīn* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1986), vol. 5, 128–29; Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-Ālām* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ilm li-al-Malāyīn, 2002), vol. 4, 290; Muṣṭafā al-Sattī, "al-Adīb al-tūnusī 'Alī al-Wardānī mukallifan min al-sulṭān bi-himmaḥ ilmīyah fī Isbānyā," *Leaders*, August 10, 2018, Leaders, <https://ar.leaders.com.tn>.

<sup>14</sup> This is how his full name is spelled by Henri Pérès. See Pérès, *L'Espagne vue par les voyageurs musulmans de 1610 à 1930*, 62.

<sup>15</sup> Wardānīn is a town located south of Sūsah, currently in the Munastīr wilāyah.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Maḥfūz, *Tarājim al-mu'allifīn al-tūnusīyīn*, 128; al-Zamarlī, *Alī al-Wardānī (1861–1905)*, 113; al-Sattī, "al-Adīb al-tūnusī 'Alī al-Wardānī mukallifan min al-sulṭān bi-himmaḥ ilmīyah fī Isbānyā." Ukūda is located north of Sūsah, currently in the Sūsah wilāyah.

<sup>17</sup> See al-Zamarlī, *Alī al-Wardānī (1861–1905)*, 114; Maḥfūz, *Tarājim al-mu'allifīn al-tūnusīyīn*, 128.

<sup>18</sup> From 1878 to 1879, Khayr al-Dīn held the office of Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire.

lator in the planned delegation to Europe, the purpose of which was to search for collections of Arabic manuscripts there.

After returning from the expedition, al-Wardānī settled in Istanbul, but due to his mother's illness he soon had to return to Tunis. Immediately on his return, he took the position of a translator at the Ministry of Justice, and then one of a secretary at the State Council.

Al-Wardānī was also known as a poet, an author of *rubā'iyats* written in the style characteristic of the classical representatives of this genre. Among his most famous poems was *Qaṣīdat al-Wardānī*, a satire of bey 'Alī III, written after he had signed the Convention of al-Marsá. Unfortunately, none of al-Wardānī's poems has survived till today. Since he left no descendants, apparently there was no one to take care of his poetic legacy. He also published many articles in the local press, mainly in the weekly *al-Hāḍirah*. As an active participant in the cultural life of his country, he took part in meetings at the literary salon run by the Egyptian Princess Nāzilī, who in the mid-1890s moved from Cairo to Tunis and arranged her palace in al-Marsá so as to make it resemble her residence in Cairo. The place became an important center for the reformist cultural movement in Tunisia. After al-Wardānī's untimely death, many friends of his dedicated elegies and memoirs to him.