The Sultan, The Tyrant, and The Hero: 
Changing Medieval Perceptions of al-Ẓāhir Baybars

As the true founder of the Mamluk state, al-Ẓāhir Baybars is one of the most important sultans of Egypt and Syria. This has prompted many medieval writers and historians to write about his reign. Their perceptions obviously differed and their reconstructions of his reign draw different and often conflicting images.

In this article I propose to examine and compare the various perceptions that different writers had of Baybars’s life and character. Each of these writers had his own personal biases and his own purposes for writing about Baybars. The backgrounds against which they each lived and worked deeply influenced their writings. This led them to emphasize different aspects of his personality and legacy and to ignore others. Comparing these perceptions will demonstrate how the historiography of Baybars was used to make different political arguments concerning the sultan, the Mamluk regime, and rulership in general. I have used different representative examples of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century histories, chronicles, and biographical dictionaries in compiling this material. I have also compared these scholarly writings to the popular folk epic Ṣīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars.

In his main official biography, written by Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn Ḥasan, Baybars is presented as an ideal sultan. By contrast, works written after the sultan’s day show more ambivalent attitudes towards him. Some fourteenth-century writers, like Shāfiʿ ibn ‘Alī, Baybars al-Mansūrī, and al-Nuwayrī, who were influenced by the regime of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, tend to place more emphasis on his despotic actions. Other late Mamluk historians, like al-Maqrīzī, al-ʿĀynī, and Ibn Taqribirdī, demonstrate a more balanced approach towards the sultan, and present him as a great ruler while still acknowledging his shortcomings and excesses. In the popular epic Ṣīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars, he is a Muslim hero. Comparing these three main perceptions of Baybars—as idealized sultan, harsh despot, or Muslim hero—shows that certain qualities such as just rule and commitment to Islam were to be emphasized when constructing the ideal image of the ruler, while others
such as cruelty and despotism were to be ignored or downplayed. It also allows us to see through the seemingly straightforward veneer of narrative that these sources employ and to glimpse the undercurrents beneath.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir (1223-92), Baybars’s loyal employee, wrote the sultan’s official biography. The writer was chief clerk in Baybars’s chancery and drafted many state documents himself. Thus he was witness to many of the events he described. Baybars was very much involved in the writing of this work. The writer often read out drafts to the sultan, who duly rewarded him. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir gives Baybars a voice in several passages of the book that begin with phrases like “the sultan told me” or “I was informed by the sultan,” which indicates that his source for this version of an event was the sultan himself. This work was clearly intended as a panegyric of Baybars and sought to promote the Mamluk regime.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir presented Baybars as an ideal ruler and an excellent soldier, ignoring events that could have tarnished Baybars’s image or else relating them in ways that worked in the sultan’s favor. He considered him the true hero of the famous battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt and attributed the larger part of the victory to his military efforts rather than those of the actual leader of the armies, Qūtuz. Furthermore, instead of arguing that Baybars had no role in the murder of Qūtuz, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir insisted that Baybars alone was responsible for killing him and was not a member of a larger conspiracy. This was to legitimate Baybars’s rule

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1The other biography of Baybars is Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir by ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn Shaddād. Unfortunately it does not survive in full. The extant part, dealing with the years 1272-78, has been edited and published by Ahmad Hutayt: ‘Izz al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Shaddād, Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir, Bibliotheca Islamica, 31 (Wiesbaden, 1983). These two works are the main primary sources used by later medieval historians writing on the reign of Baybars.


3Khwaiter, Baibars, 158.


according to what Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir claimed to have been a law of the yasa, namely that a regicide should succeed to the throne. Because of the semi-official nature of the book, we may consider Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir’s account to be the one promoted by Baybars himself.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir’s account of Baybars’s life focused on the sultan’s military endeavors and achievements. He also emphasized the sultan’s piety and his services to Islam; for example, he restored the Abbasid caliphate in Cairo. This of course further legitimized his rule. It also gave him leverage in his confrontation with the Mongols. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir also gave many examples of Baybars’s pious acts, especially his pilgrimage to the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, his ban on the consumption of wine and hashish, and his campaigns against prostitution. The writer’s description of Baybars’s pilgrimage is rather elaborate. The sultan’s trip to the Hijaz, like many of his endeavors, was arranged in semi-secrecy. This habit of making a mystery of his whereabouts and travels contributed to Baybars’s development into a romantic character.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir sought to impress upon his readers that Baybars performed the rites of pilgrimage perfectly. He humbled himself before God:

He remained like an ordinary person not shielded by anyone and protected only by God. He was alone in praying and performing the rites of pilgrimage. He then went over to the Ka’bah—God bless it—and washed it with his hands. He carried the water in a waterskin over his shoulders and washed the blessed house and remained among the common people. . . . He held people’s hands—may God help him—and assisted them to the Ka’bah; one commoner clung to him and could not keep hold of his hand because of the crowds and so clung to the sultan’s clothes and tore them and almost threw him on the ground.

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8 Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir, Rawāḍ, 69; Irwin, Middle East in Middle Ages, 37.
10 Khowaiter, Baybars, 35.
12 Ibid., 266.
13 Ibid., 176, 350.
15 Thorau, Lion of Egypt, 197.
16 Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir, Rawāḍ, 355.
He also instructed his close employees to distribute money and clothing discreetly
to the people of the Haram. Baybars obviously wanted to perform the pilgrimage
correctly and to carry out all the rites to perfection, so much so that he had the
Hanafi qādī al-qudāh accompany him throughout the trip and instruct him in
matters of religion. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir concluded the account of the pilgrimage
by declaring that: “the sultan performed the duty of pilgrimage as it should be.”

Baybars the ideal sultan was also necessarily a just ruler. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir
dealt extensively with Baybars’s administration of justice. He described how Baybars
restored the Dār al-‘Adl and often presided over the court himself. He related
various cases to prove to his readers that Baybars was extremely firm and stern
about justice. For example, a man was in dispute with the sultan over the ownership
of a well which Baybars had started digging and which the man had completed.
Baybars insisted that he and his opponent be treated equally before the shar’ and
stepped down from his position of judge at the Dār al-‘Adl so that the qādī
al-qudāh could decide the case. The qadi ruled that the sultan had the right to the
well but must pay the building expenses of his opponent. Baybars is thus shown
as setting an example to demonstrate that the shar’ and rule of law must be
observed by all, even the sultan. He is portrayed as a strong sultan who is not
afraid of being made equal with his subjects.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir’s presentation of Baybars’s death was in line with his approach
throughout the rest of the work. In dealing with this he was very formal and
discreet: he merely stated that Baybars fell sick and died. He did not mention
any of the unseemly circumstances of his illness, which according to other reports
was due to poison or drinking too much qumz, a favorite Mamluk alcoholic drink
made from mares’ milk.

By contrast, in later works written during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,
a more ambivalent attitude towards Baybars emerged. This led the writers of these
works to include less glamorous and less flattering accounts of the sultan alongside
accounts of his military achievements and the glories of his reign. Some of these

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 356.
19 Ibid., 77, 84, 176; Holt, “Virtuous Ruler,” 32-33.
20 Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir, Rawd, 84.
21 Ibid., 472-73.
Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah (Cairo, 1957), 1:635; Muṣafḍāl ibn Abī al-Faḍā’il, Histoire des
sultans mamlouks: texte arabe publié et traduit en française par E. Blochet (Paris, 1919), 276-77;
Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rahīm ibn al-Furāt, Tārīkh Ibn al-Furāt, ed. Qustāṭīn
Zurayk (Beirut, 1942), 7:85.
historians, such as Baybars al-Manṣūrī (d. 1325), Shāfiʿ ibn ‘Alī (d. 1330), Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. 1336), and al-Nuwayrī (d. 1332), may have wished to diminish the importance of Baybars’s legacy in order to enhance the achievements of the regime of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. This is particularly evident in Shāfiʿ ibn ‘Alī’s Ḥusn al-Manāqīb al-Sirrīyah al-Muntaza‘ah min al-Sīrāh al-Zāhirīyah, his mukhtaṣar of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s Rawḍ. P. M. Holt argued that this work might have appeared as a sort of companion to Shāfiʿ’s biography of Qalāwūn, Al-Fadl al-Ma’thir min Sīrat al-Sultān al-Malik al-Mansūr during the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.23 This later work was intended as praise of Qalāwūn and served to legitimize his regime and by extension, those of his sons.24 Shāfiʿ had the task of justifying Qalāwūn’s usurpation of the throne from the sons of Baybars, his khushdash and former sovereign to whom he owed allegiance. This prompted Shāfiʿ to slight Baybars’s reputation while simultaneously praising Qalāwūn. Yet even in these works, Baybars’s legacy and importance could neither be ignored nor completely obliterated. Historians writing in the later Mamluk period, such as Ibn al-Furat (d. 1404), al-Maqrīzī (d. 1441), al-‘Aynī (d. 1451), and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 1469), even expressed a sense of nostalgia for “the good old days” which prompted al-Maqrīzī to describe Baybars as “one of the greatest rulers of Islam.”25

In these later works, Baybars’s role in the murder of Qutūz was no longer the main one, nor was it necessarily to be celebrated.26 The murder of Qutūz was presented as a conspiracy involving several amirs, among whom was Baybars.27 In some versions he was not even the one to deal either the first blow or the death blow.28 They further emphasized the abhorrent nature of the act by portraying

24 Ibid., 148.
25 Al-Maqrīzī, Sūlūk, 1:641.
Quṭūz in positive terms as a good and pious Muslim, suggesting he did not deserve to be killed and that his murder was therefore unjust.²⁹ Quṭūz in these writings was a good, pious sultan who was betrayed by his men. This was emphasized by reports that Quṭūz was originally "Maḥmūd", the Muslim-born son of the Khwarizm-shahs, who was sold into slavery after the Mongol defeat of his dynasty and who was later the hero of the battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt, where the Muslims achieved victory over the Mongols.³⁰ In contrast to Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir’s version, which left no room for contenders to the throne, Shāfī‘ ibn ‘Alī wrote that the top Mamluk amirs had chosen Sayf al-Dīn Balban al-Rashīdī, “the most prominent amongst them,” to be their next sultan.³¹ The idea that Baybars was not among the prominent Mamluk amirs is echoed in Ibn Kathīr’s version, which complements Shāfī‘’s. Ibn Kathīr wrote:

It is said that when he [Quṭūz] died the amirs were confused amongst themselves over whom to make sultan. They each feared the consequences and that what befell others could quickly befall them [i.e., that they could be murdered by fellow Mamluks like Quṭūz, his predecessor Aybak, and the Ayyubid Tūrafašiḥāh before them], so they agreed on Baybars al-Bunduqdārī, though he was not among the most prominent muqaddamin; they wanted to try it out on him.³²

These writings presented the harsh and despotic side of Baybars’s rule. Baybars was known for his strictness and severe punishments.³³ These writers reported that he spied on and imprisoned several top Mamluk amirs, often on the grounds that they were conspiring against the sultan.³⁴ These accounts tended to present unfavorable images of Baybars as a paranoid, insecure dictator rather than a strong ruler trying to control a huge empire. Baybars’s imprisonment of Shams

al-Dīn Sunqur al-Rūmī, for instance, could have been presented as an example of the sultan reining in his top generals, which was always a challenge for the Mamluk regime. Instead, Shāfiʿ ibn ‘Alī and al-Nuwayrī cast shadows on Baybars’s character in their accounts of the incident. According to Shāfiʿ, the sultan imprisoned Sunqur al-Rūmī, who had tortured one of his mamluks to death despite the sultan’s intercession. Shāfiʿ explains that Sunqur had discovered that the mamluk was a spy for Baybars.35 Al-Nuwayrī’s version, on the other hand, suggests that the sultan might have been attracted to the mamluk, who was “good looking,” and it was this which prompted Sunqur al-Rūmī to punish him.36 Both explanations for the imprisonment of this amir thus portray Baybars in a negative light.

Other writers, like al-Maqrīzī, did not criticize this toughness that Baybars demonstrated in dealing with the Mamluks. So, for example, in dealing with the imprisonment of a top general, Sayf al-Dīn Balban al-Rashīdī, al-Maqrīzī mentioned his several transgressions and Baybars’s patience and tolerance until he was informed—through spies, of course—of this amir’s conspiracy with an Ayyubid ruler against Baybars, which the sultan could not allow to go unpunished.37 Here Baybars hardly seemed despotic in seeking to control the Mamluk generals and pre empting a coup d’état.

Nevertheless, even these later writings, which were not intended to idealize Baybars, acknowledged his active role in the administration of justice and the implementation of shariʿah.38 Unlike Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, who suspiciously ignored Baybars’s decision to appoint four chief judges from the four schools, later sources dealt with the decision but differed in its evaluation. Shāfiʿ ibn ‘Alī, in his mukhtaṣar of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s work, explained that the reason behind the decision was the strictness of the Shafiʿi qadi, Ibn Bint al-Aʿazz, which led to a state of stagnation in the administration of justice.39 Ibn Kathīr explained that Ibn Bint al-Aʿazz held up rulings that went against the Shafiʿi madhhab but were allowed by other madhāhib.40 This was also the explanation given by al-ʿAynī later in the fifteenth century.41 The qadi’s adherence to the letter of the law rather than its spirit appeared almost unjust and obstructive. Thus Baybars’s decision was presented as an

36Al-Nuwayrī, Niḥāyat al-Arab, 30:123.
37Al-Maqrīzī, Sulūk, 1:493.
innovative solution to the everyday problems which people faced in the qadi’s court. It could be interpreted as an act of religious tolerance that simultaneously enhanced the power of the sultan.\textsuperscript{42}

For writers like al-Nuwayrî, Ibn Bint al-‘azz was a respectable, firm judge who followed shari‘ah strictly even when it was in contradiction to the interests of the ruling authorities, the Mamluks. In this version of the incident, the qadi had issued a ruling which harmed the interests of one of the top amirs, and it was this amir who suggested that Baybars appoint four chief judges.\textsuperscript{43} Al-Nuwayrî’s probable disapproval of the decision is hinted at by his account of the Syrian judges’ resistance to this decision. They first refused their appointments and then tried to resign, but the sultan would hear none of that.\textsuperscript{44} That there would be resistance to such a decision after traditional Shafi‘i control is perhaps understandable.

Al-Maqrîzî’s account, on the other hand, included an anecdote that reveals how unpopular the decision was. Somebody saw al-Zâhir Baybars in a dream after his death and asked him how God had judged him. Baybars responded that he received the most punishment for appointing four judges since this had disunited Muslims.\textsuperscript{45} This then was his most unjust decision according to al-Maqrîzî.

The ambivalence of later Mamluk sources towards Baybars’s harshness and injustice is further demonstrated in their accounts of the fires in Fustat and the taxation of Damascus. Both cases were ignored by Ibn ‘Abd al-Zâhir, who sought to promote an ideal image of the sultan.

The fires that plagued Fustat in 1264 were obviously dangerous and threatened to lead to disorder. They occurred during a time when Crusaders were among the main enemies of Islam and when toughness with Franks and Christians in general was welcomed by many Muslims. Copts were blamed for the spread of the fires, supposedly as revenge for Baybars’s attacks on and destruction of churches in Syria after his defeat of various Frankish enemies.\textsuperscript{46} Baybars reacted by ordering that all Copts and Jews, including the elders of both communities, be burned. They responded by offering to ransom themselves. Some sources report that the elders of the community paid the ransom.\textsuperscript{47} While none of the writers consulted outwardly criticized Baybars’s actions, some of their accounts seem to suggest they thought the punishment was too severe. Thus Mufaṣṣal ibn Abī al-Faḍā’il (a Copt himself) along with al-Nuwayrî wrote that a pious Coptic monk who was

\textsuperscript{42}Thorau, \textit{Lion of Egypt}, 165-66.
\textsuperscript{43}Al-Nuwayrî, \textit{Niḥāyat al-Arab}, 30:117.
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{45}Al-Maqrîzî, \textit{Suluţ}, 1:640.
known for helping people in need regardless of their religion paid the requested amount.\textsuperscript{48} This man was tortured to death on the basis of a \textit{fatwá} given by the \textit{fuqahā́} citing “fear of fitnah.”\textsuperscript{49} The positive terms in which that man is described suggest that by helping pay the fine he was doing a good deed, which in itself implies that these people were treated unjustly.

While all sources appreciated Baybars’s war efforts and his victories against the Mongol and Frankish enemies of Islam, later sources also acknowledged that this glory came at a high price. Building and sustaining large armies cost a lot of money. This overburdened some members of the population more than others. Baybars raised the taxes on Damascus and its environs, arguing that this was land reconquered from the Mongols and therefore as technically \textit{‘anwah} land it could be taxed at a higher rate.\textsuperscript{50} The sultan’s earlier decision to appoint four chief qadis came to his service. He secured \textit{fatwás} from Hanafi jurists legitimizing his argument and his decision.\textsuperscript{51} Yet this decision was listed among Baybars’s injustices in several later sources. The understandable unpopularity of this maneuver was still clear a century later in Ibn Kathĩr’s \textit{Al-Bidãyah} where he wrote:

\begin{quote}
This issue is famous and there are two opinions on the matter; the correct one is that of the majority, which is that [Muslim property reconquered from infidels] should be returned to its original owners.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

This decision was listed among Baybars’s injustices in several later sources. Ibn al-Furãt and al-Nuwayrĩ reported that the people of Damascus suffered so much that they prayed Baybars’s rule would end.\textsuperscript{53} Al-Nuwayrĩ wrote that various ulama of Damascus had pleaded with Baybars to decrease the heavy taxes, and though the sultan promised them to end all taxes once he defeated the enemy, he broke his promise.\textsuperscript{54} After much pleading and with the intercession of al-Šãhãb Fakhir al-Dîn (son of the vizier Ibn Ḥãnnã), who had studied Shãfã‘i jurisprudence, Baybars agreed to allow Damascenes to keep their property in return for a million dirhams paid in installments.\textsuperscript{55} When he died, Damascenes had paid only half of the amount due.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48}Ibn Abã al-Faďâ’il, \textit{Histoire des sultans mamlouks}, 135-36.
\item \textsuperscript{49}Al-Nuwayrĩ, \textit{Nihãyat al-Arab}, 30:151-52.
\item \textsuperscript{50}Ibid., 152-53.
\item \textsuperscript{51}Al-Yũnĩnî, \textit{Dhayl}, 2:386-87; al-‘Aynî, \textit{‘Iqd al-Jumãn}, 2:30.
\item \textsuperscript{52}Ibn Kathĩr, \textit{Al-Bidãyah}, 13:252.
\item \textsuperscript{53}Ibn al-Furãt, \textit{Tãrîkh}, 85.
\item \textsuperscript{54}Al-Nuwayrĩ, \textit{Nihãyat al-Arab}, 30:362-63.
\end{itemize}
Historians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries cast doubts over the manner of Baybars’s death which further tarnish his image. In several versions, the sultan had planned to poison another man but the cups were mixed up and Baybars drank the poison by mistake. The insinuations in these stories cannot be ignored. First they imply that Baybars was in the habit of killing and poisoning other men for no legitimate reason. In this case, the man for whom the poison was intended was an Ayyubid who had performed outstandingly in a battle and received high praise, which is said to have made the sultan jealous. But more importantly, these reports imply that Baybars deserved to die such a death, which in itself betrays the authors’ true judgment of his rule. Most versions suggest that Baybars died of poison, although they differ in their rendition of the details. This air of conspiracy and mystery adds to the legend of the sultan.

While historians were busy writing their interpretations of the Mamluk regime and the reign of Baybars, other histories, unofficial and unscholarly, were also being constructed. The events of Baybars’s life and reign provided a source for popular entertainment. The first major work of a popular nature to take Baybars as its protagonist was Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars.

The dating of Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars is a fundamental problem facing researchers who wish to use it as a source for cultural and social history. We know that some form of the Sīrah had come into being by the fifteenth century, because it was mentioned by Ibn Iyās. His comments were very brief and do not indicate to what degree it had developed by then. The earliest extant manuscript of the Sīrah is found in the Vatican collection and dates back to the sixteenth century.

The fact that the Sīrah was primarily a work for oral performance meant that it was a fluid, changing text, rather than a static and defined one. The storyteller and the audience reconstructed the already fluid text at every recitation. This work, which began as an oral folk epic, was eventually put into writing, though most surviving manuscripts of the Sīrah date back only to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Even so it continued to be a living oral tradition; E. W. Lane gave an account of the reciters of “Seeret Ez-Zahir” in the nineteenth century, and Tāhā

59Connelly, Arab Folk Epic, 8.
Husayn mentioned public recitations and the sale of printed editions of it in the early twentieth century.\footnote{E. W. Lane, Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (The Hague, London, and Cairo, 1978), 395; Tāhā Ḥusayn, Al-Āyyām ( Cairo, 1992), 82.}

The printed versions of the Sīrah that are now available are not carefully prepared editions of specifically identified manuscripts, nor are they faithful to the richness and language of the manuscripts.\footnote{Georges Bohas, “L’autobiographie de Bābārs,” La Museon 104 (1991): 125.} The only serious academic work carried out so far on Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars is the still incomplete translation into French—without an accompanying edited Arabic text—by Georges Bohas and Jean-Patrick Guillaume.\footnote{Georges Bohas and Jean-Patrick Guillaume, Roman de Bābārs/Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars, 8 vols. (Paris, 1985- ).} This translation is based on a nineteenth-century manuscript from Aleppo.\footnote{Robert Irwin, “Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars,” Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature, ed. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London, 1998).} For this article I have used the printed edition currently available in the bookstores of Cairo. This is a five-volume edition published in 1996 by al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah lil-Kitāb.\footnote{Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars, 5 vols. ( Cairo, 1996).} The title page of each part (of which there are fifty in the five volumes) includes the title Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars, Tārīkh al-Malik al-‘Ādil Śāhīb al-Futūḥāt al-Mansūrah and announces that it is a second edition of a version first published in 1341/1923.

The importance of Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars in studying the historiography of Baybars himself has not received sufficient consideration. It is as if scholars of the Sīrah were trying to divorce its protagonist from his historic counterpart. It is important for the scholar to realize and to emphasize that Baybars the sultan, Baybars of the historical scholarly sources, and Baybars of the Sīrah are not identical. Yet it is equally important to realize that this distinction was probably lost on most reciters, listeners, and readers of Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars. Thus the reconstructions of Baybars’s life through the Sīrah—just as those in traditional primary sources—were meant to comment on Baybars the sultan and consequently on rulership in general even while they entertained the public.

The Sīrah relates the exploits of “Maḥmūd” Baybars, the legendary Muslim hero who triumphs over wicked kuffār. It is important to note that in the epic it is Baybars, not Qutṭūz, who is born into a noble Muslim family.\footnote{Ibid., 128, 277, 469, 471-77, 704.} This fabricated royal lineage might have been necessary to legitimize Baybars’s—and by extension, the Mamluk regime’s—rule. Just as in official discourse Baybars needed the legitimation provided by a caliph’s seal, so in popular discourse this legend served...
to affirm the right of slave troops who were born non-Muslims to rule over most of the central Islamic lands.

Most medieval scholarly sources did not dwell on Baybars’s pre-Mamluk life. He entered official narrative as a mamluk of Aydakin Bunduqdâr, after which he rose through the military bureaucracy and became one of the top mamluks of al-Šâlih Ayyûb. Sirat al-Zâhir Baybars offered a domesticated image of this military slave. It did not portray Baybars in any barracks. Instead, “Maḥmûd” was adopted by a rich Damascene lady, Fâṭimah al-Aqwaṣîyah. She is the one who named him “Baybars,” after her deceased son. Thus the Sîrah domesticated its hero and presented him in terms to which the audience could relate. The motif of Baybars’s adoption is repeated with al-Šâlih Ayyûb and Shajar al-Durr, who also adopt Baybars as their son and name him as al-Šâlih’s heir. The emphasis on Baybars’s origin as “Maḥmûd,” as well as his adoption by prestigious Muslim families, appears to be a response to the charge that Mamluks did not know their families and their parents. For a culture that highly esteems the family as a social unit it would have been important to present the hero as a man from a “good family.”

All medieval scholarly reports, both those in Baybars’s favor and those against him, claimed that he had played a part in the regicide of his predecessor, Qûṭuz. Contrary to that stance, however, Sirat al-Zâhir Baybars attempted to clear its hero from any such charge. The relationship between the two men was portrayed as amiable and strong: Qûṭuz treated Baybars very generously and appointed him his heir to the throne. Baybars in turn “commended Qûṭuz’s doings and rulings and praised him.” Qûṭuz was mysteriously killed and a note beside the corpse accused Baybars of the regicide. It turned out that Baybars’s Frankish enemy, Juwãn, was behind both the murder and the accusation, and subsequently Baybars was cleared.

Sirat al-Zâhir Baybars is rather nuanced in its interpretation and representation of Baybars’s legend. It presents him as a hero, a good pious Muslim ruler. Yet unlike the ideal sultan which Ibn ʿAbd al-Zâhir makes Baybars out to be, Sirat al-Zâhir Baybars humanizes rather than valorizes its protagonist. This Baybars is not a larger than life hero; he does not perform miraculous feats himself and is often caught in troublesome situations and needs assistance. It is the secondary

67 Sirat al-Zâhir Baybars, 164.
68 Ibid., 1076-77.
69 Ibid., 1078.
70 Ibid., 1079.
71 Ibid., 1080-81.
“helper” characters of ‘Uthmān and Jamāl al-Dīn Shīhah (an Isma‘ili chief) who perform miracles and are often considered to be divinely guided. Baybars himself is neither almighty nor invincible. This almost subversive portrayal of a ruler’s power is best exemplified in the way the Sīrah deals with Baybars’s relations with the Isma‘ilis.

In the official narrative Baybars crushed and subjugated the Isma‘ilis of Syria. A great deal of emphasis is placed on how they were forced to pay tribute to the Mamluks rather than to the Franks. In the Sīrah, however, the Isma‘ilis are presented as one of Baybars’s main support groups who came to his rescue when he was in danger and performed miracles to save him. Their leaders saved Baybars from deadly situations when Christian enemies tried to kill him. It is as if he owed to them his sultanate and the maintenance of his power. Yet even in the Sīrah Baybars appointed their leader for them, choosing an outsider for the job; an act of extreme subjugation for such a group.

Baybars’s piety and loyalty to Islam was stressed throughout the Sīrah primarily in terms of popular religious beliefs and practices. He was looked after by several saints who saved him by miracles from life-threatening dangers. He was also depicted as performing orthodox religious rituals strictly. Sayyidah Zaynab is the patroness of many of the characters of the Sīrah, ensuring their victory and helping them out of trouble. Sayyidah Nafisah is the one who unites Baybars with his aide and companion ‘Uthmān ibn al-Ḥublā.

Baybars’s loyalty to Islam was also expressed in terms of strong religious prejudice against Franks as well as Christians in general. The Franks were the main enemies of Islam in the Sīrah, along with fire-worshipping Mongols. Baybars’s principal enemy and the personification of evil in the Sīrah was Juwān, a Christian monk who disguised himself in several personae, including that of chief qadi, in

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72For example: ibid., 571, 636.
75Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, for example: 203, 206, 565, 705, 1038, 1051, 1055, 1106, 1171, 1173, 1175, 1186, 1322.
76Ibid., 1175.
78Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, 290, 323, 570, 573, 592.
79Ibid., 676, 718.
80Ibid., 145, 257, 325, 328, 332, 621, 720.
82Ibid.
order to kill Baybars and defeat the Muslims. This motif of the Christian villain in Muslim disguise is echoed throughout the Sīrah. Several minor villains also turn out to be Christians in disguise. Baybars defeats them all, with the help of ʿUthmān or the Ismaʿilis. Tough and despotic measures taken by Baybars and Shihḥah against Christians, such as destroying churches or turning them into mosques, are related with pride.

As in the more scholarly sources, in constructing a heroic image of Baybars, a great deal of emphasis is placed on his justice. Baybars himself laid down forty conditions which had to be met before he would accept the sultanate. Most of these conditions have to do with government and the administration of justice. Similar to the image of Baybars in some of the later medieval sources, despotic suspicion seems behind some of these conditions. Thus any two amirs consulting over a decision of the sultan’s would be killed, amirs were not to convene except in the sultanic diwān, and only the ulama had the right to voice opposition to any of his decrees. In contrast, Jamāl al-Dīn Shihḥah set only one condition for Baybars to be sultan: “Abide by justice and fairness. For I have made you ruler over Egypt, Syria, and other Muslim lands as long as you obey God. If you steer away from the course of Truth you will be dismissed and we would not owe you any obedience.”

The despotic side of Baybars which was apparent in many of the medieval sources is, as one might expect, almost absent in the Sīrah. Yet the Sīrah does deal with the taxation of Damascus, which was considered one of Baybars’s most unjust decrees. In the Sīrah, Baybars tries to levy taxes on Damascus in order to fight the Mongol enemy Hulāwūn, but the Damascenes refuse to pay, arguing “you are a king and kings meet one another and fight for their positions; . . . we serve whoever sits on the throne.” The pious shaykh al-Nūrī tells Baybars that these taxes are unjust. When Baybars asks how he is then to defend his land from unbelievers, the shaykh curses him and accuses him of insulting the men of virtue and the doctors of the law. The Sīrah reverses the traditional balance of power between ruler and subjects. Baybars appears helpless in the face of strong opposition from the people and the ulama. This must have brought a sort of sweet imaginary revenge to audiences accustomed to heavy taxation throughout the centuries. 

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84 Ibid., 946, 982, 1202, 1238, 1242, 1245.
85 Ibid., 1084.
86 Ibid., 1084-85.
88 Ibid.
While in the scholarly sources most justice was carried out within the boundaries of formal judicial and legal procedures, the Sīrah celebrates a more crude street style of justice, where Baybars always defeats the "bad guys." His use of questionable means is justifiable, because it leads to the triumph of good over evil. Thus one of the recurring motifs of the work is Baybars killing off an evil character apparently without due cause. In court, the truth is made clear and it becomes obvious that Baybars's action had been just. His taking the law into his own hands is not condemned.

This practical attitude towards justice and the law demonstrated in the Sīrah was paralleled by a distrust of qadis and the court system. Thus Baybars’s main opponent and the personification of evil in the Sīrah, the Christian spy Juwān, spent the first half of the work disguised as chief qadi in the Ayyubid court. In his position as qadi he repeatedly tried to prosecute Baybars for the various murders, but Baybars always came out justified. The Sīrah also made fun of the schools of law. To save himself from a long wait for their case to be heard by a qadi, ‘Uthmān, Baybars’s friend and aide, proposed that he would be a Hanafi while Baybars could be a Shafi’i "for today." This further confirms the pragmatic stance that the Sīrah, and by extension its Cairene audience, took with regard to the law, a stance that one could argue is still part of Egyptian urban culture to this day.

Baybars’s reputation, from the earliest scenes of the Sīrah, is based on his justice. In his pre-sultanate days, Baybars rose quickly through the government bureaucracy and at each new post fought corruption and injustice against the common people. This—rather than some miraculous power—seems to have been both his greatest credential and his greatest achievement. Baybars’s main attraction as a hero in this Sīrah was his ability to defeat wrongdoers and dispense justice. This fight to establish internal justice and order preceded external battles against enemy troops.

It is Baybars’s local reputation as a man of honor and courage, a man capable of fighting corruption, which qualified him to lead armies into battle and earn his troops’ loyalty. The Sīrah is full of anecdotes about Baybars’s military capabilities and stories of his courage in battle. In many instances, however, Muslim victories were due more to trickery and intelligence than simply to military and physical power.

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90 Lyons, The Arabian Epic, 1:34.
91 Khūrshīd, Aḏwā’, 105-6.
92 Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars, 981-82, 989, 996, 1163.
Fourteenth-century Egyptian scholars writing under Qalawunid influence and patronage tended to throw unfavorable light on Baybars’s image and present his legacy in a negative manner. The text of the Sirah appears to be conscious of those subtle tensions. In Sirat al-Zāhir Baybars, Baybars the protagonist is poisoned to death by none other than Qalāwūn!\footnote{Ibid., 3078.}

Thus historians of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries and the creators of Sirat al-Zāhir Baybars presented very different perceptions of al-Zāhir Baybars. These varying and often contradictory accounts show that they used the historiography of this sultan to make various political arguments. For example, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir glorified Baybars in an attempt to legitimize his rule and promote the then newly-established Mamluk regime. This he accomplished by presenting its founder as an ideal sultan and ruler. Historians of successive generations demonstrated more ambivalent attitudes towards Baybars. Some, like Baybars al-Mansūrī, Shāfī’ ibn ‘Alī, and al-Nuwayrī, might have been interested in de-emphasizing Baybars’s achievements in order to enhance those of the regime of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. This might not seem strange in light of the changes that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was introducing to the institutional foundations set by the founders of the Mamluk state, including his own father, Qalāwūn. His experience being ousted from the sultanate twice left him determined to turn his third reign into a new beginning for Mamluk rule and to make a name for himself as a great ruler.\footnote{Amalia Levanoni, A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn (1310-1341) (Leiden, 1995), 31, 197.} To justify and rationalize his innovations it followed that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and his court intellectuals would attempt to slight the founders and originators of the very traditions they sought to overturn. It is revealing that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad chose to destroy and rebuild at a lower height Baybars’ famous Bridge of the Lions, the lions adorning the bridge being Baybars’s emblem.\footnote{Al-Maqrīzī, Al-Mawā’iz wa-al-l’tibr bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭat wa-al-Āthār (Cairo, 1996), 3:238.} This might have prompted fourteenth-century Egyptian historians to include negative aspects of Baybars’s rule and character. That they were not writing under his control, as Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir was, also allowed them more freedom in expressing their views—a point which Shāfī’ ibn ‘Alī explicitly makes.

Their distance from the court and the fact that they did not hold official positions meant that they were less likely to be influenced by the attempts to slight and defame the legacy of Baybars for the benefit of the Qalawunid dynasty. The third Syrian historian of this period referred to in this article is Abū al-Fidā, the Ayyubid prince of Ḥamāh. Though Abū al-Fidá was part of the ruling regime he was more concerned in his work with provincial affairs. Being an Ayyubid himself, he did not need to legitimize the Qalawunid dynasty and consequently he, too, was not overly prejudiced against Baybars. Thus the attitudes expressed by fourteenth-century Syrian historians towards Baybars paralleled those of later Egyptian historians of the fifteenth century.

Yet obviously the legacy of Baybars was so strong that even rival regimes could not afford to ignore his achievements. His military victories and conquests and his establishment of a strong, centralized, extensive empire were not ignored by any of the Mamluk writers I consulted. Needless to say, a severe attack on the founder of the Mamluk state would have undermined the legitimacy of the regime under which they all lived and worked. Furthermore, the ambivalence that these writers demonstrated towards Baybars suggests that while they appreciated his contributions to state building and his establishment of order and military conquests, they also realized that these came at a heavy price. Maintaining large armies that were strong enough to expand Mamluk rule into Nubia, Libya, and Armenia, to keep such a huge empire together, and to fight off enemies, east and west, such as the Mongols and the Crusaders, also entailed a high degree of discipline and order and were—necessarily—funded by heavy taxation. However, by the fifteenth century writers were removed from the events of Baybars’s reign and the heavy burdens caused by his achievements had been somewhat forgotten. His reign came to represent an age of glory, perhaps because these writers perceived their own time as one of decline and decadence. In popular memory Baybars lived on through Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars, which presents him as a humanized Muslim hero who fought the internal as well as external enemies of Islam and who carried out justice for all. During the nineteenth century, an age of European occupation and Egyptian defeat, these memories of past glory were so popular that E. W. Lane reported that there were thirty reciters, in Cairo alone, who specialized exclusively in Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars.

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97 Little, Introduction, 46.
98 Lane, Manners and Customs, 395.