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The First Layer of the *Sīrat Baybars*: Popular Romance and Political Propaganda

We know quite a lot about the setting of the *Sīrat Baybars* and of other popular *siyar*,¹ the Arabic popular romances. European travellers and scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, among others Carsten Niebuhr,² Edward William Lane,³ and the authors of the *Description de l’Égypte*,⁴ reported that storytellers recited in the coffeehouses of the big cities. In Damascus and Cairo, for a “trifling sum of money,”⁵ they related different sorts of entertaining stories, especially the popular *siyar*, *Sīrat ‘Antarah ibn Shaddād*, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, and the *Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars*. This last text is the subject of this essay.

We know next to nothing about the genesis and the development of these texts. Most of the complete *sīrah* manuscripts at our disposal are relatively late versions of these texts. Of the older layers of the *siyar sha‘bīyah* only fragmentary remnants have survived. The nature of the *siyar* texts poses further problems: the *siyar sha‘bīyah* are clearly anonymous stories, created by several authors who regularly revised and recreated their texts, thus adapting them to the expectations and taste of their audience. In this sense, the popular romances are the structural opposites of texts representing classical Arabic literature, which were created by single authors and which show the influence of their socio-political milieu.

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¹Plural of *sīrah*, meaning in this context account of life history, biography. The most famous example of a learned *sīrah* is the *Sīrat al-Nabī*, the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. See Marco Schoeller, *Exegetisches Denken und Prophetenbiographie* (Wiesbaden, 1998), 37–49. The term *siyar sha‘bīyah* (popular *siyar*) was “coined by Arab folklorists in the 1950s for a genre of lengthy Arabic heroic narratives that in Western languages are called either ‘popular epics’ or ‘popular romances.’” See Peter Heath, “Sīra Sha‘biyya,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 9:664.

²Carsten Niebuhr, *Beschreibung von Arabien aus eigenen Beobachtungen und im Lande selbst gesammelten Nachrichten abgefasst* (Copenhagen, 1772), 106–7.

³Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London, 1846), 2:103–44. See also Alfred von Kremer, *Ägypten: Forschungen über Land und Volk während eines zehnjährigen Aufenthalts* (Leipzig, 1863), 2:305–6.

⁴Charles Louis Fleury Panckoucke, ed., *Description de l’Égypte ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l’expédition de l’armée française*, vol. 18, *Etat Moderne* (Paris, 1821–30), 161–62.

⁵Lane, *Modern Egyptians*, 2:103.



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In order to establish the time, place and social context of the genesis of a text such as the *Sīrat Baybars*, we have to rely on the indirect evidence provided by the text itself, such as specific references to the social or political points of view of its creators. Such an analysis gives us insight into the different functions that the *sīrah* acquired in the course of its development.

Evidence shows that the *Sīrat Baybars* is a composite text in which three layers of text development can be distinguished; those layers originated in three different eras and social environments that merged in a process we can no longer reconstruct. For this article, we will not concentrate on the “adventure-romance” from the fifteenth century, which forms most of the *sīrah*. Nor will we talk about Baybars’ youth and ascent in the *sīrah*, a part of the text in which Baybars is built up as a counter-image to the despotic sultans of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and in which the *ummah*’s anger found its expression regarding corruption and abuse of power at the time of the great crisis of the Mamluk Empire (at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century).⁶ Instead, we shall concentrate on the oldest layer of the legendary biography of the great Mamluk sultan Baybars I. Although initially assumed to be a product of the second half of the fourteenth and of the fifteenth century, we established in the course of our investigation that—judging by the representation of Sultan Baybars and of several other historical figures—the *sīrah* seems to have been inspired by the spirit of the second half of the thirteenth century, thus the early period of the Mamluk Empire. Our line of argument is based essentially on two elements: first on the representation of Sultan Baybars as the virtuous guardian of Ayyubid legitimacy, and second on the representation of a series of historical rivals to Baybars and the *Zāhirīyah* Mamluks.

One of the greatest problems facing the Mamluks at the beginning of their rule was that of legitimacy. If the Ayyubid house, which had ruled before them, had been legitimized by its descent and by investiture by the caliph of Baghdad, the military slaves that finally came to power with Baybars could not legitimize themselves either by descent—having been born in non-Islamic lands—or, for a transitional period after the Mongol seizure of Baghdad, by the religious authority of the caliph. In this context, if we examine the representation of Baybars in the *sīrah*, his origins, his rise, and how he finally took over power, details that at first seem merely to glorify the hero of an adventure story suddenly form a coherent unity.

Indeed, from his introduction in the romance, the representation of Baybars seems entirely motivated by the idea of the legitimation of Mamluk rule. Although

⁶For this, see my Ph.D. thesis to be published in 2002 (“Genese, Überlieferung und Bedeutung der *Sīrat* Baibars in ihrem sozio-politischen Kontext”).



he is shown as a military slave—it would have been unconvincing to try to disguise it—Baybars is in the *sīrah* Muslim by birth, bears the name of Maḥmūd, and is the son of the king of Khurasan, who became a slave after he had been betrayed by his brothers.⁷ Baybars does not stay a slave for long: in Damascus, where he is first brought after having been enslaved and where he is serving as a house slave, a rich widow “adopts”⁸ him because he resembles her deceased son. She names him after her son Baybars and makes him the master of her fortune.⁹ It is in Damascus that the four *aqṭāb*, in Sufi belief the mystical poles of the universe¹⁰ (in the *sīrah* Aḥmad al-Badawī, al-Dasūqī, al-Jīlānī, and the *ṣāhib al-waqt*¹¹), appear to Baybars and pray for him. It is also in Damascus that during the *Laylat al-Qadr*, the Night of Destiny in which people believe that God determines the fate of men for the following year, the gates of heaven open to Baybars. He is told that he will become sultan of Egypt and Syria.¹² Having come to Cairo, Baybars quickly rises in rank, becomes commander of a Mamluk regiment, *wālī*, *muḥtasib*, and governor of several provinces. Finally, Baybars is “adopted” by the Ayyubid sultan al-Ṣāliḥ and his spouse in the *sīrah*, Shajarat al-Durr,¹³ thus recovering a

⁷*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars*, ed. Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī (Cairo, 1996), 469. This is a re-edition in five volumes with new pagination of the first edition by al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Amīn Dirbāl (Cairo, 1326–27/1908–9) and the second edition by Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Ḥijāzī (Cairo, 1341–44/1923–26). Whereas the betrayal of Baybars’ brothers shows obvious borrowings from the story of Joseph in the Bible and the Quran (Genesis 37:4 and Quran 12:5), Baybars’ fictitious origins go back to the origins of his predecessor Quṭuz al-Muẓaffar as related by some Arab historians. Ibn Iyās reports, citing Ibn al-Jawzī, that Quṭuz had once been beaten by his master Ibn al-Za‘īm, over which he bitterly wept. Being asked why he wept so bitterly because of a single blow he answered: “I only weep because he cursed my father and my grandfather, whilst they are more deserving than he is.” He was asked: ‘But who are your father and grandfather, aren’t they Christians?’ He said: ‘No, on the contrary, I am a Muslim son of a Muslim and my name is Maḥmūd, son of Mamdūd, nephew of the Khwarizm Shah, from the progeniture of the kings of the east. The Mongols took me as a boy, after they had defeated them.’ This is why Quṭuz was not a slave.” (Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’ al-Zuhūr fī Waqā’i’ al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā as *Die Chronik des Ibn Ijās* [Cairo/Wiesbaden, 1960–84], 1:1:303). See also: Donald P. Little, “Quṭuz,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 5:571.

⁸We put the word “adopts” in quotation marks, because in Islamic law full adoption does not exist.

⁹Fāṭimah al-Aqwasīyah was a widow and without a male descendant following the death of her son. There is a certain resemblance to the *sīrah* of the Prophet, although it differs from it in that Baybars does not marry Fāṭimah, which would not have suited the *sīrah*’s story.

¹⁰See F. de Jong, “Al-Ḳuṭb: 2. In Mysticism,” *EI*² 5:543.

¹¹“Ṣāhib al-waqt” or “Ṣāhib al-zamān,” the temporary *qutb* (pole, axis; the head in the hierarchy of the “saints”). See de Jong, “Al-Ḳuṭb,” 543. It is also one of the names of the *mahdī*. See Heinz Halm, *Shiism* (Edinburgh, 1991), 77.

¹²*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 159 ff.

¹³*Ibid.*, 462.



double royal descent, that of his father, king of Khurasan, and that of al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb, the last great Ayyubid on the throne of Egypt.

It is interesting to observe how the *sīrah*'s authors relate the upheaval during the transition from Ayyubid rule to that of the first great Mamluk sultan, al-Zāhir Baybars: as al-Šāliḥ dies, it is Baybars to whom he limits his succession, asking God to have all those who were due to become sultan before Baybars die by an unnatural death.¹⁴ By this strategy, the *sīrah* takes into account the historical succession of rulers and simultaneously confirms Baybars as the true heir and undoubted guardian of the Ayyubid dynasty's legitimacy. In fact, Baybars refuses the sultanate each time a successor to al-Šāliḥ is nominated—'Īsā al-Mu'azzam Tūrānshāh, al-Ashraf, al-Šāliḥ al-Šaghīr ibn al-Ashraf (a fictive sultan), Aybak al-Turkumānī, and al-Muzaffar Quṭuz, who are all shown as Ayyubids in the *sīrah*—with the vehement words: "God forbid that I take the dignity of a sultan under the eyes of the Ayyubid princes! Who am I to divest them of their right to the throne, I who once used to be their slave?"¹⁵

It is equally interesting to observe how the *sīrah* diverts historical responsibility from Baybars for the murder of two of al-Šāliḥ's successors, 'Īsā al-Mu'azzam Tūrānshāh and Quṭuz. The case of the first of al-Šāliḥ's successors is that of 'Īsā al-Mu'azzam Tūrānshāh, al-Šāliḥ's son and immediate successor. He was apparently more interested in the fine arts and wine than in government or the army, and he was murdered by the Baḥrīyah Mamluks under the leadership of Baybars following the battle of al-Manṣūrah against the Crusader army of Louis IX. According to a number of historians it was a group probably headed by Baybars himself which carried out the assassination of the young sultan.¹⁶ The authors of the *sīrah*,

¹⁴Ibid., 965–66, and the manuscript versions: Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek Gotha MS 2628, fol. 18a (catalogue listing: Wilhelm Pertsch, *Die orientalischen Handschriften der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Gotha*, pt. 3, *Die arabischen Handschriften*, vol. 4 [Gotha, 1883], no. 2628); British Library London MS Or 4649, fol. 13a (catalogue listing: Charles Rieu, *Supplement to the Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts of the British Museum* [London, 1894], no. 1191); Staatsbibliothek Berlin MS We 572, fol. 76b (catalogue listing: Wilhelm Ahlwardt, *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, vol. 20, *Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften*, vol. 8 [Berlin, 1896], no. 9155 [We 561–586]); Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek Gotha MS 2600, fol. 79a (catalogue listing: Pertsch, *Die orientalischen Handschriften*, no. 2600); *Le roman de Baibars*, translated by Georges Bohas and Jean-Patrick Guillaume from a nineteenth-century Aleppo manuscript (Paris, 1985–), 6:76 f.

¹⁵Bohas/Guillaume, *Roman*, 6:83 f.

¹⁶The following historians state that Baybars was the leader of the group that murdered Tūrānshāh or, alternatively, that he assassinated him personally: Muḥammad ibn Sālim Ibn Wāṣil, "Mufarrij al-Kurūb fī Akhbār Banī Ayyūb," Paris Bibliothèque Nationale MS Ar 1702, fol. 371a–b; Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. 'Abd al-Azīz Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1396/1976), 50; Ismā'īl ibn 'Alī Abū al-Fidā', *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar*



however, do not make ‘Īsá al-Mu‘azzam Tūrānshāh die directly by Baybars’ hand but rather show his death as God’s punishment for a sinful way of life. In the *sīrah*, ‘Īsá becomes completely drunk while sitting on an elevated seat he had built in order to be able to watch the battle of al-Manṣūrah against the Frankish troops and falls, breaking his neck.¹⁷

The case of the second successor of al-Ṣāliḥ for whose death Baybars is responsible is that of al-Muẓaffar Quṭuz, the hero of the battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt against the Mongols, a Mamluk just like Baybars. While the historical Quṭuz was trapped by Baybars in an ambush and killed in cold blood,¹⁸ the *sīrah*’s Quṭuz is murdered by Frankish spies.

Obviously the *sīrah* had to convince its audience of Baybars’ innocence; it could not entirely suppress his historical role in these events, but it skilfully integrated the allegations against Baybars and invalidated them. So ‘Īsá does not die at the hands of the future sultan, but gets caught in the ladder of his elevated seat, stumbles and falls while fearing the anger of Baybars, who furiously approaches him in the middle of the battle, having seen him drinking while watching the battle. In the case of Quṭuz, Baybars’ historical responsibility for the murder finds expression in the account that the Frankish spies who murder Quṭuz leave by the side of the corpse a slip of paper on which Baybars declares his responsibility for the crime.¹⁹

Further, the account of al-Ṣāliḥ’s different Ayyubid successors in the *sīrah* not only depicts Baybars as the altruistic guardian of Ayyubid legitimacy, it also shows that after al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb the Ayyubids could no longer provide a sovereign able to rule the empire and thus rightly lost their power to the Mamluks. All the

(Constantinople, 1286/1870; repr., Cairo 1325/1907–8), 190–91; Abū Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar fī Jāmi‘ al-Ghurar* (Cairo and Freiburg, 1972), 7:382–83; Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah fī al-Tārīkh* (Cairo, 1993–94), 13:202; Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-‘Ibar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada’ wa-al-Khabar fī Ayyām al-‘Arab wa-al-‘Ajam wa-al-Barbar* (Būlāq, 1284/1867), 360–61; Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma‘rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafá Ziyādah (Cairo, 1934–), 1:2:359–61.

¹⁷See: *Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 984; British Library MS, fol. 28a–b; Staatsbibliothek Berlin MS We 562, fol. 78a (catalogue listing: Ahlwardt, *Handschriften-Verzeichnisse*, no. 9155 [We 561–586]); Gotha MS 2628, fol. 19a–b.

¹⁸Ibn Wāṣil, “Mufarrij al-Kurūb fī Akhbār Banī Ayyūb,” Paris Bibliothèque Nationale MS Ar 1703, fol. 163b; Mūsá ibn Muḥammad al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl Mir’āt al-Zamān fī Tārīkh al-A‘yān* (Hyderabad, 1374–80/1954–61), 1:370–371; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:2:435. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir stresses the point that Baybars murdered Quṭuz himself without any help: *Rawḍ*, 68: “The sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir did what he did on his own and reached his aim alone, in the midst of a powerful army and massive protection. And nobody was able to speak and nobody could resist him.”

¹⁹*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 1079: “It was no one else but the amir Baybars who accomplished these deeds and attained this destiny, [my] writing and seal testify to this.” Nota bene the proximity to the account of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 68, cited above.



successors of al-Šāliḥ that the *sīrah* calls Ayyubids are shown to be either unworthy of the sultanate (ʿĪsā Tūrānshāh, Aybak), or unsuitable for it due to their youth (al-Šāliḥ al-Šaghīr), gender (Shajarat al-Durr²⁰), or finally to be entranced saints (*awliyāʾ*) (al-Ashraf Khalīl, Qutuz) who were equally unsuited for the office of sultan of the Ayyubid Empire. So the *sīrah* depicts the transition from the Ayyubids to the Mamluks not only as legitimate, but also as consistent.

In my opinion, the important place that Ayyubid legitimacy occupies in those parts of the *sīrah* dealing with the transition to the Mamluks points to the beginning of the Mamluk period. Whereas the *vita* of Baybars composed by the court biographer Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir shows him as the spiritual heir of al-Malik al-Šāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb,²¹ the picture of the great sultan that Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir’s nephew Shāfiʿ ibn ʿAlī draws some thirty years after his uncle²² already shows the consolidation of Mamluk power. As P. M. Holt put it, “The Baybars of *Husn al-manāqib* is still an impressive, even an heroic figure, whose military achievements secured the future of Islam in Syria against the threats from the Mongols and the Franks. He appears, further, as an autocratic but just ruler, who was (to use a cliché) the true founder of the Mamluk sultanate. What he has lost is the aura of legitimacy as the true heir of al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb, by which Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir sought to disguise his twofold usurpation. But when Shāfiʿ wrote, Ayyubid legitimacy had long ceased to be a political issue, and Baybars could stand justified by his deeds.”²³

It is not only the picture of Baybars drawn by the *sīrah* that makes us presume that a first layer of the *Sīrat Baybars* dates from early Mamluk times. If we look at the representation of several historical characters of the *sīrah*, we note that they are shown in a certain number of purely fictitious episodes of the romance in an extremely negative light. This evidence gains further importance since these characters were all historical rivals or opponents of Baybars and his Zāhirīyah Mamluks. Their negative representation thus faithfully reflects the conflicts of interest and power of the time of Baybars’ rule or of those of his immediate successors and that from a “Baybarsian” point of view.

The most prominent examples of this representation are those of al-Muʿizz Aybak and of al-Manšūr Qalāwūn. Al-Muʿizz Aybak, who was, like Baybars, a Mamluk and before him—from 648/1250 to 655/1257—sultan, is shown in the

²⁰ Although she is not of Ayyubid descent, the *sīrah* represents her nearly as such.

²¹ Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 46.

²² Shāfiʿ ibn ʿAlī finished his *Kitāb Husn al-Manāqib al-Sirrīyah al-Muntazaʿah min al-Sīrah al-Zāhirīyah* (ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Khuwayṭir [Riyadh, 1396/1976]) in 1316.

²³ P. M. Holt, “The Sultan as Ideal Ruler: Ayyubid and Mamluk Prototypes,” in *Süleyman the Magnificent and His Age: the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern World*, ed. Metin Kunt and Christine Woodhead (London and New York, 1995), 136–37.



sīrah as a crypto-Christian and ally of the Franks, who nourishes in his heart hatred towards Muslims. He is introduced into the romance as king of Mosul, who wants to attack al-Şāliḥ Ayyūb's empire, but finally enters into the sultan's service and conspires against the Muslims from the heart of their state.²⁴ After the death of al-Şāliḥ he wants to seize power and pretends that Baybars had murdered his master, but his words turn out to be lies.²⁵ Nevertheless, Aybak threatens to "make the blood cool in floods" if Baybars should become sultan.²⁶ After the death of 'Īsā Tūrānshāh, Khalīl ibn 'Īsā as al-Ashraf and al-Şāliḥ al-Şaghīr ibn al-Ashraf successively become sultan, and Aybak poisons both of them and seizes power.²⁷ He finally tries to assassinate Baybars as well.²⁸ Baybars leaves for Syria where he installs a counter rule.²⁹ It quickly comes to a conflict between Baybars and Aybak as the coins minted by Baybars in Damascus have a higher value and render those minted by Aybak worthless in the market.³⁰ People mock Aybak, who falls in love with a Bedouin girl and no longer shows any interest either in state affairs or in his spouse Shajarat al-Durr, who finally murders him out of jealousy.³¹

This extremely negative and, except for his death, totally unhistorical representation³² of Aybak in the *Sīrat Baybars* goes back, in my mind, to the historical struggle for power, to the time between the death of the last great Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Şāliḥ and the first great Mamluk sultan Baybars. Al-Malik al-Mu'izz Aybak, the first Mamluk on the throne of Egypt, recognized the Baḥrīyah Mamluks, one of whose leaders was Baybars, correctly as a permanent threat. It is true that the Baḥrīyah did not dare to seize power immediately after the assassination of 'Īsā Tūrānshāh and preferred to accept temporary and unstable

²⁴*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 71–75, 87–92. During Baybars' rise to power in Cairo, Aybak acts regularly on the side of the qadi Jawān, a crypto-Christian and the main evil character of the romance, trying to get Baybars executed (e.g., *ibid.*, 270ff., 744 ff.). The corrupt *wālī* Ḥasan Āghā and his nephew the *muḥtasib* (market-superintendent) Qarājūdah are also crypto-Christians from Aybak's entourage (*ibid.*, 506 ff., 586 ff.) who try to harm Baybars. According to his status as crypto-Christian, Aybak deserts the Muslims during the battle against the Mongols and tries to collaborate with the latter (*ibid.*, 773 ff.).

²⁵As Aybak pretends after al-Şāliḥ's death to become the future sultan, the vizier Shāhīn reprimands him, saying that someone like him could never merit the sultanate: "And the vizier said: 'Please preserve a sense of decency in this matter. Somebody like you will never deserve the sultanate.'" (*ibid.*, 966ff.).

²⁶British Library MS, fol. 14a.

²⁷*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 985ff., 992ff.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 1007 ff.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 1034 ff.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 1061 ff.

³¹*Ibid.*, 1069–74.

³²Aybak's rule over Egypt, his marriage with Shajarat al-Durr, and his neglect of her for another woman are the only historical elements in the *sīrah*'s account of Aybak.



solutions such as the rule of the female Shajarat al-Durr with Aybak as *atabeg*.³³ But this circumstance did not hinder them enough to cause them to deny soon afterwards the legitimacy of Aybak's sultanate and to act more and more in a self-assured and arrogant way.³⁴ Fāris Aqṭay, the leader of the Baḥrīyah-Jamdārīyah Mamluks, began to act as the true ruler of Egypt and finally asked Aybak and his spouse to leave the citadel, in order to permit him to accommodate his own spouse, the daughter of the ruler of Ḥamāh, in keeping with her station.³⁵ Aybak then decided to eliminate Fāris and his Mamluks. On 1 January 1254 (10 Dhū al-Qa'dah 651), he ordered Fāris Aqṭay to visit him at the citadel. As soon as Fāris entered, he was captured and murdered by a troop of Aybak's personal Mamluks. In spite of Aybak's immediate attempt to capture the remaining Baḥrīyah-Jamdārīyah Mamluks, the majority managed to flee.³⁶

Al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn is the second historical figure whose extremely negative representation in the *sīrah* makes me believe that parts of the *Sīrat Baybars* go back to the struggle for power in the early Mamluk period. Qalāwūn, who historically was one of Baybars' comrades, is depicted in a number of manuscript and printed versions of the *sīrah* as a Mamluk who hates Baybars from their first encounter.³⁷ On their way with a slave caravan from Bursa to Damascus, Baybars and Qalāwūn share the same mount. Baybars, who is severely ill, suffers from diarrhea³⁸ and asks Qalāwūn to help him to dismount. Qalāwūn is disgusted by Baybars and pushes him at dawn from the animal and so Baybars nearly dies in the desert.³⁹ Later, when Baybars has already become sultan, Qalāwūn becomes one of his

³³ A Turkish term used from Saljuq to Mamluk times designating a military leader mostly of slave origin who was acting as a tutor for a young prince. He typically married the mother of the minor prince and thereby acquired great power. The tutorate of Aybak for Shajarat al-Durr as regent-spouse of the heir and widow of al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb is a special case. See Cahen, "Atabak," *EI*² 1:731.

³⁴ Peter Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt*, trans. P. M. Holt (London, 1992), 47.

³⁵ Amalia Levanoni ("The Mamluks' Ascent to Power in Egypt," *Studia Islamica* 72 (1990): 143–44) writes: "Being the accepted candidate of the Baḥrīyya-Jamdārīyya Emirs, Aqṭay began behaving like a pretender to the throne. Riding through Cairo, he acted like a sovereign. His Mamluk comrades already called him al-Malik al-Jawād among themselves and addressed their requests of Iqṭā' to him. The climax of this process came when Aqṭay asked Aybak al-Turkmānī, Atābak al-'Asākīr, and his wife Shajar al-Durr to leave the palace of Qal'at al-Jabal in order to house his bride, daughter of the ruler of Hamah, in a residence befitting a princess."

³⁶ See Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt*, 47.

³⁷ See, for instance, Staatsbibliothek Berlin MS We 561, fol. 39b (catalogue listing: Ahlwardt, *Handschriften-Verzeichnisse*, no. 9155 [We 561–586]).

³⁸ "Baṭnatuhu māshīyah," *ibid*.

³⁹ See also Vatican Library MS Barberiniani Orientali 15, fol. 4a (catalogue listing: Giorgio Levi Della Vida, *Elenco dei manoscritti arabi islamici della biblioteca vaticana: Vaticani, Barberiniani, Borgiani, Rossiani* [Vatican City, 1935]); Gotha MS 2628, fol. 5b; and Bohas/Guillaume, *Roman*, 1:80–81.



permanent opponents. He tries to seize power by any means, even murder. So he poisons Baybars⁴⁰ and then his two sons al-Sa‘īd⁴¹ and Aḥmad Salāmish.⁴² When, after the murder of al-Salāmish, the people of Cairo hear that Qalāwūn has become the new sultan, they decide to kill him on his triumphant entry into the city.⁴³ They throw stones at Qalāwūn even before he enters Cairo, so the vizier Shāhīn advises him to enter the city by night from behind the citadel. After having entered the city secretly, Qalāwūn sends the army, which slaughters one third of Cairo’s population. The vizier advises Qalāwūn to declare peace, but the latter does not listen to him. The vizier responds: “This man is a traitor. He cannot hope for anything else than the sword from us. [Indeed] he must be put to death!”⁴⁴ Following the printed version of the *sīrah*, the people of Cairo make fun of Qalāwūn at his entry into the city: “Who for heaven’s sake has put this one on the throne?” Furious, Qalāwūn orders the ulama to draw up a *fatwá* declaring that such behavior is to be punished by the sword, and he lets his soldiers loose on the people of Cairo for three days. Qalāwūn himself tries to rape Tāj Bakht, Baybars’ spouse, but she flees to a poor woman who gives shelter to her and her children.⁴⁵ The famous hospital Qalāwūn constructed in Cairo is also shown as a diabolic invention: having realized his sinful way of living,⁴⁶ Qalāwūn builds a hospital. In spite of healing sick people, Qalāwūn forces the doctors to concoct a poison, which he gives to a man who tries to approach one of his concubines. The man dies in a spectacular way and the sultan’s concubine is driven crazy. There is little doubt that this story excited the erotic imagination of the storytellers’ audiences. Qalāwūn then builds a hospital for lunatics where the patients are healed by music.⁴⁷

According to the *sīrah*, the son of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn, al-Ashraf Khalīl, who reigned after his father’s death from 689/1290 to 693/1293, did not inherit his

⁴⁰*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 3078–80.

⁴¹Paris Bibliothèque Nationale MS no. 4997, pt. 24 (catalogue listing: Edgar Blochet, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes des nouvelles acquisitions* [Paris 1925], nos. 4981–97); Forschungs- und Landesbibliothek Gotha MS 2609, fol. 67b (catalogue listing: Pertsch, *Die orientalischen Handschriften*, no. 2609); *Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 3071.

⁴²*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 3109–10.

⁴³Gotha MS 2609, fol. 70a–b: “We’ll kill him, if he enters [the city].”

⁴⁴Ibid., fol. 70b: “This man is a traitor. The only thing he can await from us is the sword. He must be killed.”

⁴⁵*Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 3111–14.

⁴⁶Ibid., 3112: One of the ulama who interpreted his dream for him said: “You did wrong and you used unlawful violence against your Muslim subjects.”

⁴⁷Ibid.



father's wickedness, but was inclined to the *dawlat al-Zāhir*⁴⁸ and is therefore placed by his father in the relatively remote post of governor of Damascus.

In searching for the reasons for this extremely negative representation of Qalāwūn in the *sīrah*, we can first ascertain that it neither corresponds to the historical record nor does it go back to an actual enmity between Baybars and Qalāwūn. On the contrary, Qalāwūn enjoyed Baybars' full confidence.⁴⁹ According to Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, Baybars made a great effort to consolidate Qalāwūn's position. Therefore, he had raised the number of soldiers under his command, given a better *iqṭā'* to him, and increased his salary. Baybars had made Qalāwūn his chief counsellor (*ra's al-mashūrah*) and had "depended on him as no king had ever depended on an amir and as no sultan had ever depended on a counselor."⁵⁰

Matters become clearer only if one establishes a link between Qalāwūn's relations to al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars' Mamluks. Qalāwūn had indeed deposed the young sultan al-Sa'īd with the backing of the Ṣāliḥīyah Mamluks and had therefore kept the younger Zāhirīyah Mamluks away from state power.⁵¹ During the next sultanate of Baybars' underaged son al-Salāmish, Qalāwūn *de facto* already ruled the empire⁵² and made use of the time to place his men from among the Ṣāliḥīyah Mamluks—his comrades in having served al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb—in a series of key positions.⁵³ Having thus consolidated his power, Qalāwūn finally put himself on the throne through the Ṣāliḥīyah amirs, who definitely invited the enmity of the Zāhirīyah Mamluks. Indeed, he suffered during most of

⁴⁸Ibid., 3115: Khalīl asks the Ismailian Ibrāhīm al-Ḥawrānī what he should do against his father's behavior: "O my commander, my father used violence and did wrong against the dynasty of al-Zāhir; he is anxious to turn me away from the dynasty of al-Zāhir. [So] he banished me to Damascus and made me [his] governor there. Indeed I hate injustice and immoderateness! Al-Malik al-Zāhir did not harm us in any way; he even let my father kill his sons." See also *Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, 3118: "The deeds of King Khalīl after his father [']s death] and how he was inclined to the dynasty of al-Malik al-Zāhir."

⁴⁹Several anecdotes from the year 661/1262–63 prove this. Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 148, 166–69, 181; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:2:480–81, 501. (Cited from Linda S. Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan* [Stuttgart, 1998], 72).

⁵⁰Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, "Al-Faḍl al-Ma'thūr min Sīrat al-Sulṭān al-Malik al-Manṣūr," Oxford Bodleian MS Marsh HS 424, fol. 4a; Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 166–69, 181; David Ayalon, "Studies on the Structure of the Mamlūk Army, part III," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16 (1954), 69. (Cited from Northrup, *From Slave*, 73).

⁵¹See Northrup, *From Slave*, 78–80.

⁵²Ibid., 78–83.

⁵³As *atabeg*, Qalāwūn had many of the rights of a sultan. His name was included along with Salāmish in the *khuṭbah* and was minted on one side of the coins. See: al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 4:5; Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāyah*, 13:322; Muḥammad ibn Shākir al-Kutubī, "Uyūn al-Tawārīkh," *Dār al-Kutub MS 949 tārikh*, vol. 21, pt. 1, fol. 191; Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥīm Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārikh Ibn al-Furāt*, ed. Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayq (Beirut, 1936–42), 8:148. (Cited from Northrup, *From Slave*, 81).



his regency from their opposition.⁵⁴ It is for this reason that Ibn Taghrī Birdī reports that the Mamluks despised Qalāwūn, for they believed that Qalāwūn had poisoned al-Sa‘īd.⁵⁵ In fact, Qalāwūn did not assassinate al-Sa‘īd after his deposition, but banished him to al-Karak, where the latter died in March of the following year (1280) under unclear circumstances. The following year Qalāwūn authorized al-Sa‘īd’s mother to bury her son in Baybars’ mausoleum in Damascus, a ceremony that took place during Qalāwūn’s stay in the city. It is highly probable that this public *mise en scène* of his attachment to the deceased and his family was supposed to stop rumors of Qalāwūn’s responsibility for al-Sa‘īd’s death.⁵⁶

Not only the Zāhirīyah Mamluks, but also a certain number of elderly Šālihīyah amirs had reason to feel themselves ignored. It is true that they had been rewarded by Qalāwūn for their backing, but in principal they had the same rights to the throne as he had. It is not astonishing then that al-Maqrīzī reports that Qalāwūn, having become sultan, did not dare to ride out in public because of his fear of the Šālihīyah and the Zāhirīyah Mamluks’ jealousy. According to al-Maqrīzī, the people heard about it and began insulting him at night, shouting in the dark under the citadel. They defiled his coat-of-arms and insulted his amirs, so that he finally avoided contact with the people.⁵⁷

As we can see, the authors of the episodes focussing on al-Manšūr Qalāwūn have adopted quite faithfully the critique of the Zāhirīyah Mamluks, who felt betrayed by Baybars’ successors. It seems as if these authors belonged to the milieu of the Zāhirīyah or the Šālihīyah Mamluks who were mourning their old sultan.

It is of course possible that the negative image of Qalāwūn did not focus on Qalāwūn as the rival of the Zāhirīyah Mamluks but was rather created only at the end of the thirteenth century and aimed at Qalāwūn as the ancestor of the Qalawunid “dynasty.” This view is expressed by Ibn Iyās at the beginning of the sixteenth century in his commentary on the seizure of power by the first Circassian sultan, al-Zāhir Barqūq, in 1382. He notes that the last sultan of the Qalawunids, al-Malik al-Šālih al-Ḥajjī, took the regnal name of al-Manšūr as did his ancestor Qalāwūn and that Barqūq had snatched power from the descendents of Qalāwūn just as Qalāwūn had snatched it from Baybars’ sons with the words: “Just as one takes, it is taken from him.”⁵⁸

⁵⁴Northrup, *From Slave*, 87.

⁵⁵Abū al-Maḥāsin Yūsuf Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1929–72), 7:272. (Cited from Northrup, *From Slave*, 88).

⁵⁶Northrup, *From Slave*, 89.

⁵⁷Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, I:3:672; see also the French translation by Etienne Quatremère, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks de l’Egypte* (Paris, 1837–45), 2:14–15. (Cited from Northrup, *From Slave*, 88).

⁵⁸See Ibn Iyās, *Kitāb Tārīkh Miṣr al-Mashhūr bi-Badā’i’ al-Zuhūr fī Waqā’i’ al-Duhūr* (Būlāq,



The thesis that parts of the *Sīrat Baybars* initially go back to a propaganda text of early Mamluk times, and the view that they aimed at legitimizing Barqūq's seizure of power by shedding a negative light on Qalāwūn, are not mutually exclusive. Texts like the *Sīrat Baybars* are complex structures in constant development. They integrate new elements, conserve or eliminate old evidence, and interpret such elements in new contexts and in a new manner.

In my view, the evidence indicates that the first layer of the *Sīrat Baybars* was created in the last decades of the thirteenth century by persons or their descendants whose accounts obviously still testify to the conflicts of the time of Baybars and his immediate successors, and who therefore clearly take a political stand in them.

1311/1893/94), 1:290, lines 5–8. I thank Jean-Claude Garcin for identifying this passage.



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