

were all lavishly praised.²⁴

Political theory produced by the ulama in the Mamluk period was sparse, sententious, and uninspiring. It was also somewhat pusillanimous. Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Jamā'ah (639–733/1241–1333) has been described by Henri Laoust as “the theoretician of the Mamluk state.”²⁵ According to Ibn Jamā'ah, “the tyranny of a sultan is preferable to the flock being left without a master for a single hour.” Ibn Jamā'ah adjusted the preoccupations and vocabulary of earlier political thinkers who had flourished under the Abbasid Caliphate to fit the realities of the early Mamluk regime. He stressed the role of the ulama in advising the sultan and the sultan's duty to protect the ulama. The Muslim people must be led by an imam, but the imamate could be acquired by force (implicitly therefore by a Mamluk sultan). Such an imamate, acquired by force, could obviously be lost by force. Even if the imam was a sinful man, it was generally preferable to obey him, for fear of the anarchy that might ensue if obedience was withdrawn.²⁶ Ibn Taymiyah (661–728/1262–1328) echoed Ibn Jamā'ah when he stated that “Sixty years with an unjust imam is better than one night without a sultan.” He denied that it was necessary for a Muslim community to be governed by a caliph, and he rejected the idea that the imam must be of Qurayshī lineage.²⁷ According to Ibn Taymiyah, people are enjoined to “patient endurance of the injustice and tyranny of leaders.”²⁸ He accepted the de facto situation in which the military authority had usurped for its own jurisdiction a large number of criminal cases.²⁹

In contrast, as we shall see, the kind of material produced by and for the sultan at his soirees belongs in the category of what Patricia Crone has termed *naṣīḥah*, or advice literature.³⁰ Much of it can also be categorized as mirrors-for-princes. The advice offered was essentially secular, and expedient justice took precedence over the shari'ah. The literature focused on kings and how they could maintain their rule and administer justice, and was Persian in origin (where it went under the name of *andarz*).³¹ Often the precepts were delivered in the guise of a last will and testament, a *waṣīyah*, which offered guidance to the succeeding son. A manuscript full of *naṣīḥāt* entitled *A Book Containing Wise Sayings and Literary*

²⁴ Atīl, *Renaissance*, 264–65.

²⁵ Henri Laoust, “Le Hanbalisme sous les Mamlouks Bahrides,” *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 28 (1960): 21.

²⁶ Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (Oxford, 1981), 139–43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 143–51.

²⁸ Ibn Taymiyah, *Public Duties in Islam: The Institute of the Hisba*, tr. Muhtar Holland (Leicester, 1982), 125.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁰ Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh, 2004), 149–64.

³¹ S. Shaked and Z. Safar, “Andarz,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2:11–22.



Anecdotes has survived in a copy made for Qānṣūh's library.³²

So now to the actual content of the *Nafā'is* and *Kawkab*. Right at the beginning of the *Nafā'is* in the *muqaddimah*, or introduction to the records of the soirees, a political question is posed and answered in various ways: "Alexander was asked, 'What man is fit to be king?' 'Either a wise man (*hakīm*) who is king of wisdom, or a king seeking wisdom,' he replied." Then other ruler-sages, the Faghfur of China, the Caesar of Rome, the Fur of India, and so on, give their pronouncements on the importance of wisdom and the disgrace of ignorance and so on, ending up with Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna and Qānṣūh, who pronounces that "there is nothing better in the world than *adab* [which I take in this context to mean literature], as *adab* adorns wealthy men and conceals the poverty of the poor."³³ Recurrent reference throughout the *Nafā'is* and the *Kawkab* is made to the gnomic sayings of the wise rulers of past centuries. Alexander is a favorite source of sagacious advice, but Anūshirvān (Chosroes) and Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna also feature frequently.

The Alexander who features in Qānṣūh's soirees is not the Macedonian world conqueror familiar to modern historians, but rather a half-Persian legendary seeker of knowledge and eternal life as portrayed in the *Shāhnāmāh*. According to the *Nafā'is*, "Alexander was asked, 'What is the best state of the people?' He said, 'When their king has a brilliant mind, sound judgement, and is knowledgeable about government.' He was asked, 'And the worst?' 'When their king lacks all these things.'" And al-Ḥusaynī goes on, of course, to add that, thank God, all these qualities are found in the sultan Qānṣūh.³⁴ Again, "Alexander said, 'The best of kings is he who keeps justice in his mind and whose excellent qualities inspire those who come after him,'" and once again al-Ḥusaynī is swift to point out that this characterization fits Qānṣūh perfectly.³⁵ There are many more (not particularly interesting) examples of Alexander's wisdom.

Perhaps such precepts derive from the *Naṣā'ih-i Iskandar*, or "Counsels of Alexander," a manuscript of which had been copied for Bāysunghur. Or perhaps they come from Niẓāmī's treatment of the Alexander romance. Although Alexander features prominently in Firdawsī's *Shāhnāmāh*, the *Shāhnāmāh* does not seem to be the source for the precepts of Alexander as relayed in the soirees. For example, Firdawsī included a version in verse of the letter that Alexander wrote to his mother on his deathbed. The *Nafā'is* also quotes a deathbed letter from Alexander to his mother in prose, but it is full of pietistic platitudes about the acceptance

³² Geza Féheravari and Yasin Safadi, *1400 Years of Arab Art: A Catalogue of the Khalili Collection* (London, 1981), 42.

³³ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 3–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.



of death that are not found in Firdawsī.³⁶ Or, to take another example, according to the *Nafā'is*, "Alexander was told that there were 300,000 men in the army of King Dārāb, but Alexander replied, 'So many sheep do not frighten the butchers.'"³⁷ Dārāb, Alexander's great foe, does feature prominently in the *Shāhnāmāh*, but this particular exchange is not found in Firdawsī's poem.

Farīdūn, a king in ancient Persia who features in the *Shāhnāmāh*, is quoted in the *Nafā'is* to the effect that besides having all the virtues, the ideal ruler must have perfect physiognomy, great strength, and a loud voice. Happily again, Qānṣūh happened to have all these characteristics.³⁸ And here al-Ḥusaynī adds that Persians paint images of their kings and their battles on the walls of their houses so as to perpetuate the memory of those kings, before he goes on to lay out the shari'ah's stipulations for an imam. According to the shari'ah, it is preferable that the ideal imam should be of the Banū Ismā'īl, or, if not from the Banū Ismā'īl, then from the Persians or the Banū Ishāq. Again it is fortunate that the Circassians are descended from the Banū Ishāq.³⁹ Qānṣūh and his panegyrist subscribed to the legend that the Circassians descended from the Arab Ghassanids.⁴⁰ Incidentally the more orthodox Sunni position is narrower than that suggested by al-Ḥusaynī, as most medieval Sunnis held that the imam should be of Qurayshī descent.⁴¹

There are fewer allusions to previous Mamluk sultans, though al-Ḥusaynī records that at one *majlis* Shaykh Ibn 'Amm Abī al-Ḥasan arrived with two books, one of which was the *Sīrah* of al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars and the story of his invasion of the land of the Franks, which he proposed to read in its entirety, but al-Ḥusaynī argued against this, saying that if Baybars were alive today he would want to hear the story of the *majlis* of our Lord the Sultan.⁴² Presumably the *Sīrah* in question was the history by Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, rather than the anonymous folk epic.

Later, when Qānṣūh was preoccupied with preparations for the hajj, the dispatch of an army down to the Hijaz, and the fortification of Jedda, he asked if the hajj was ever suspended. In answer a fairly lengthy account is given of the rivalry between Baybars and Hulagu for the control of Mecca and the hajj.⁴³

At one point Qānṣūh tells a most curious story of Muḥammad Qalāwūn (*sic*, but presumably Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn is meant) summoning a group

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴¹ Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 224–25.

⁴² Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73–74.



of his beloved and telling them that if they loved him they would throw themselves out of the palace, whereupon they said “*bismillāh*” and threw themselves from the first floor to the ground. As they lay there they shouted up to the sultan, “Our love for you extends this far, and he who can go further, let him be the favored one.”⁴⁴

Another story not featured in conventional history books is the story of the fate of an Ottoman fleet sent against the Mamluks during the reign of Qāyṭbāy. The *amīr kabīr* had advanced out of Egypt to counter the threat. He proposed to some of his retinue they recite the *fāṭihah*. They recited it that afternoon and all of the enemy were drowned by the decree of fate that night. In the morning the Mamluks sent out small ships to seek out those who had tried to save themselves by clinging to bits of wood and cut off their hands. This happy event was all due to the *fāṭihah*.⁴⁵ The reference here would be to the Ottoman fleet under the command of Hersek-oğlu Ahmed Pasha, many of whose ships were indeed sunk in a great storm in 893/1488. The *amīr kabīr* in question was the Atabeg Uzbek.⁴⁶

On the one hand, secular and legendary Persian figures are used both to denounce tyranny and to justify kingship. For example, Bahrām ibn Bahrām said, “A lion that crushes everything he devours is better than an unjust king, and he in turn is better than persistent disorder.”⁴⁷ But on the other hand, Qānṣūh’s rule is also justified on religious grounds, for, according to a hadith, “The sultan is the shadow of God upon earth and he who is sincere before him is rightly guided, but he who deceives him errs.”⁴⁸ The sultan’s rule is preordained by fate and sanctioned by God. In one *majlis*, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Maḥallī relates a dream he has had in which a band of armored men looking like Turkmans advanced to invade Egypt, but the Prophet appeared flanked by Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī, and the Prophet declared himself the protector of Egypt. Al-Maḥallī’s dream prompts the sultan to recall how thirty years previously, when he was just an amir, he entered the house of Yashbak the *dawādār*, where he encountered an amir who hailed him and told him that he had had a dream in which Qānṣūh had appeared with a ring of iron round his neck. He had taken this dream to Yashbak. They interpreted it as meaning that great power would come to Qānṣūh, and that it was inevitable that he should become sultan.⁴⁹ (This, in turn, leads to a silly story about a man who dreamt that Shāhrukh was wearing a pearl the size of a watermelon in his ear.)

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24–25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁶ Shai Har-El, *Struggle for Domination in the Middle East: The Ottoman-Mamluk War, 1485–1491* (Leiden, 1995), 181–82.

⁴⁷ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā’is*, 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 79.



The sultan should be generous. The story is told that Jahānshāh, the Qaraqoyunlu ruler of Tabriz, had very poor-quality black bread distributed at his madrasah, but when threatened by a *faqīr* with retribution in the afterlife, he repented. Qānşūh claimed that he had resolved to be as generous as the repentant Jahānshāh.⁵⁰ The sultan should avoid behaving tyrannically and should offer redress to those who had suffered tyranny. The tale is told of a king of Hind who, when he became deaf, gave orders that plaintiffs who appeared before him who were victims of tyranny should wear red, so that he would not miss their complaints.⁵¹

At one point the legitimacy of a Mamluk regime is raised. In 890/1485 Qāyrbāy had sent one of his closest associates, the amir Jānībak Ḥabīb al-ʿAlay al-Īnālī, on a placatory but ultimately unsuccessful mission to the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II.⁵² According to the *Nafāʾis*, when Jānībak entered the Ottoman lands, the Ottomans tauntingly demanded to know by what right the Mamluks, who were sons of infidels, should govern the Bayt Allāh and the Ḥaram (in Mecca). That prerogative should surely belong to the Ottoman sultan, who is the son of a sultan, grandson of a sultan, and great-grandson of a sultan. But Jānībak retorted by pointing out that the father of Ibrāhīm was an infidel and so was the father of Muḥammad. Moreover, the nobility of a person depends upon knowledge and comportment (*adab*), not lineage and descent. Shaykh Kurānī (who was presumably in Jānībak's retinue) added that those present should not even discuss the legitimacy of the sultans of Egypt as they covered themselves with disgrace. Bayezid marvelled at this and he bestowed many precious gifts upon him.⁵³ Elsewhere in the *Nafāʾis*, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib is quoted to the effect that a man's nobility, knowledge, and decorum are more important than his lineage and tribe, and it is soon after that the origins of the Circassians are discussed.⁵⁴

In the *Kawkab al-Durrī* another, more minor clash with Bayezid II is mentioned, when Bayezid allegedly wrote to Qāyrbāy wanting to know why the latter prefaced his decrees with the words *bismillāh al-rahīm al-rahīm*. Qāyrbāy replied that he did so because any important enterprise was defective without the *basmalah*. Why did Bayezid not preface his decrees with a *basmalah*?⁵⁵

In one *majlis* the sultan asked whether the sultan or the caliph took precedence in a funeral procession. Doubtless he was gratified to be told that the sultan did. This in turn led to reminiscences about the dispatch of robes of honor by the caliph

⁵⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁵¹ Ibid., 70.

⁵² Har-El, *The Struggle*, 128–30.

⁵³ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafāʾis*, 133–34.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 84–85.

⁵⁵ *Kawkab*, 7–8.



in Egypt to Jahānshāh ibn Qarā Yūsuf, the Qaraqoyunlu ruler from 837/1434 until 872/1467, and to the Ottoman sultan Mehmed, presumably Mehmed II. In Jahānshāh's case, when the caliph's emissary explained the gift, Jahānshāh said: "If you were not a stranger, I would have cut out your tongue." Then he made the emissary wear the robe and gave him three hundred dinars for having entered the royal presence. In Mehmed's case, after the emissary had explained the robe in the sultan's council, Mehmed declared that he was himself the Caliph of the World and that every sultan in the world should don the robe. Then he gave orders for it to be cut to pieces.⁵⁶

On a separate occasion another aspect of the caliphate was debated. Did the glory of the sultan of Egypt derive from the fact that he was deputy of the caliph? Al-Ḥusaynī argued that this was not the case, since, if the sultan of the Yemen was independent and his status did not depend on his being the deputy of the caliph, *a fortiori* this must be true also of the sultan of Egypt and the two Holy Places. He was really only the deputy of the shari'ah law. Then al-Ḥusaynī was asked what was said about Baybars when he donned the caliph's robe. Al-Ḥusaynī replied that the caliph's glory derived from the sultan and not vice versa, whereupon one of al-Ḥusaynī's rivals and debating foils in the *majlis* observed that if al-Ḥusaynī had made such a remark in the days of Qāyrbāy he would have had his head cut off. This talk of cutting off people's heads made the sultan angry.⁵⁷

The *Kawkab* includes yet another debate on the question of the caliphate. This arose when the Safavid Shāh Ismā'īl had sent Qānṣūh a book of Mongol history and in it there was an obituary of a certain Shāhīn-bak, where he was referred to as "Caliph of the Age." This raised the question whether it is ever permissible for a king to call himself Caliph. The verdict was that a king can be called Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of the Prophet, but it is not acceptable to call himself Caliph of God or Caliph of the Age.⁵⁸

Occasionally strictly contemporaneous matters cropped up. On one occasion, as the sultan's oxen were being led out to clover, their keepers had run amuck looting shops in Cairo—the sort of thing that had allegedly happened frequently under earlier sultans like Baybars and Qalāwūn. Qānṣūh issued a proclamation banning this *bid'ah*, and he made arrangements through Zaynī Barakat, the *muhtasib*, for the shopkeepers to be compensated. However, it would appear that during the disturbances some of the sultan's cattle were killed, and therefore four men were crucified and strangled and the rest were disgraced (Ibn Iyās does not mention this incident). In order to emphasize that this truly was royal justice,

⁵⁶ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 101–2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 111

⁵⁸ *Kawkab*, 73–74.



al-Ḥusaynī follows the mention of those executions with a tale about how Sultan Maḥmūd [of Ghazna], disguised as a *faqīr*, was wandering about at night when he was accosted by a sorrowful old woman. When he asked about the cause of her grief, she told him that a trooper (*jundī*) had fornicated with her daughter. Sultan Maḥmūd asked her to describe the man, which she did. Thereupon the sultan had the "trooper" killed, and only after that did he reveal that the executed man was his own son. The anecdote is then capped by a maxim from Anūshirvān to the effect that "rightness of judgement is better than many soldiers and kingship."⁵⁹

The *Kawkab* includes a discussion of what could be done about Birkat al-Ratlī. The area round this Cairene pleasure lake had become a place of low repute where people were drinking alcohol and consuming drugs, and yet some important people, including several of the leading ulama, had acquired houses in the area. The sultan thought that this showed a lack of maturity (*murūwah*) on their part. The celebration of the mock marriage of the Birkah with the Khalij al-Nāṣirī at the time of the Nile's flooding with the throwing of henna, halva, and other stuff was particularly reprehensible. The crowds included riffraff (*awbāsh*), veiled women, and loose women displaying themselves at windows or on rugs. What should be done about this? The author of the *Kawkab* offers several possibilities, such as filling up the Birkah, without saying what, if anything, the sultan decided.⁶⁰ However, Ibn Iyās reports that in 917/1511–12 a decree was issued that none of the civil functionaries should dwell on the banks of the Birkah on pain of severe penalties. So the area became sad and deserted and there were indeed rumors that the sultan was going to close it to boats.⁶¹

Other incidents from recent times cropped up. In one *majlis* the sultan teased the qadi Shams al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, saying that this man had a vulgar intellect. Here the sultan was alluding to the rebellion of the amir Dawlatbāy against the sultan. (This short-lived affair started in Tripoli in Jumādā II 910/November–December 1504.)⁶² At that time the qadi had counselled Dawlatbāy against revolt, warning him that it would come to no good. Dawlatbāy angrily told him to shut up and declared that he had "a vulgar intellect." The qadi then fled from Dawlatbāy.⁶³

The sort of political theorizing offered to Qānṣūh was, in its own way, just as sententious as the theorizing of ulama like Ibn Jamā'ah. As Crone puts it in her discussion of advice literature in *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*: "They often seem to be written on the assumption that political problems could be solved by

⁵⁹ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 120–22.

⁶⁰ *Kawkab*, 64–66.

⁶¹ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, 4:234.

⁶² Petry, *Protectors*, 37.

⁶³ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 132.



moral precepts.”⁶⁴ If the ruler is morally perfect there can be no problem. But Qānṣūh was not really perfect.

In these soirees Qānṣūh appears as a vain, pious, prissy, quite witty, scholarly man with wide literary and cultural interests. Contrary to the impression given by Ibn Iyās, he seems to have spent a lot of time listening to the opinions of the ulama. The above has been a selection from an idealized account of what went on at the soirees. Doubtless the questions that were unanswerable, the ums and ers, as well as examples of the sultan’s stark ignorance and ugly spats between competitive courtiers, were erased from the record. The aim of both treatises was to glorify Qānṣūh. It may well be that the sultan only paid lip-service to the precepts of Ardashīr and Alexander or the example of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā. But the point is that these were the models to which he thought he should be seen to be paying lip-service. This was Qānṣūh’s self-presentation. It was perhaps not a true one, but it was the fashionable one. And perhaps the sultan himself was as much deceived by this façade of high-minded debate as his courtiers pretended to be. This was the language of despotism in the early decades of the sixteenth century. That story about the deaf Hindu king instructing victims of tyranny to wear red so that their complaints might properly be addressed must have seemed laughable, or rather something to weep over, to those who had witnessed Qānṣūh’s licensing of brutal amirs like Qāyt Rajabī and professional torturers like Zaynī Barakat.

In 910/1504–5, the year of the sessions covered in the *Nafā’is*, while Qānṣūh and his courtiers debated obscure points of shari‘ah law and the literary merits of the *Shāhnāmah*, the qadi Badr al-Dīn Muzhir was subjected to prolonged and horrific torture under which he eventually died. The *nāẓir al-jaysh*, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad, had his carefully collected marble arbitrarily confiscated by the greedy sultan. Illegal taxes were levied. Extortion, torture, popular discontent, and threats of revolt were leitmotifs running throughout Qānṣūh’s reign. Perhaps the reports of the soirees tell us very little about the real political thinking of Qānṣūh (much less so than the table-talk of Hitler tells us about the mentality of Hitler), but they tell us a great deal about the language of political panegyric and obfuscation that prevailed at the time.

⁶⁴ Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 161.

