

‘Ilm, Shafā‘ah, and Barakah: The Resources of Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Ulama

We were attending al-Ḥāfiẓ’s class outdoors, on a very hot day. He said: “Let us move away from this heat into the mosque.” Just as we were getting ready to go, and perhaps some of us had already risen, a cloud suddenly covered the sun, and he told us to sit down again. I saw our friends looking at each other, the word spreading among them: “Why, this is a *karāmah*;¹ there was not a cloud to be seen in the sky!” And Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn al-Maqdisī told many things of this kind.²

This fascinating glimpse into the way medieval Muslims perceived the working of *barakah* is offered in Ibn Rajab’s *Dhayl Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah*, an early fourteenth-century biographical dictionary of Hanbali scholars, as a quotation of the Damascene historian Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn al-Maqdisī (d. 643/1245). In the rest of the entry, Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn portrays al-Ḥāfiẓ ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī (d. 600/1203–4), his uncle, as an outstanding authority on hadith with a special expertise in *‘ilm al-rijāl* (the study of hadith transmitters), and as a stringent moralist and ascetic. Illustrating how ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s reputation of sanctity sprang up, this little story also reveals how easily the ordinary and the extraordinary merged for these medieval men, as perhaps

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¹ A wonder or marvel of a holy man (*walī*), perceived as a token of God’s special blessing (*barakah*), and differentiated from *mu‘jizah*: the demonstrative miracles of prophets (see Louis Gardet, “Karāma,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 4:615–16), and *sihr*: sorcery, attributed to heretics and infidels (see Michael Winter, *Society and Religion in Early Ottoman Egypt: Studies in the Writings of ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sha‘rānī* [New Brunswick and London, 1982], 188).

² Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl ‘alā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib Ḥamīd al-Fiqī (Cairo, 1952–53), 2:16–17.



for devout believers of all ages.

ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī was an ʿālim, a teacher of hadith in two central institutions: the Great Mosque of Damascus and the Hanbali mosque of the nearby suburb on Jabal Qāsyūn. He was a troublemaker who often confronted colleagues and political authorities and was made to pay the price,³ but most ulama of his kind enjoyed unprecedented prosperity during the Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. Members of the ruling elite extended their patronage to dozens of religious institutions in capital cities and in provincial towns. They constructed and refurbished mosques, madrasahs, colleges for the study of hadith, Quranic schools, Sufi lodges, commemorative shrines, and mausolea with sanctuaries and sacred relics. Laymen contributed money and labor to the building or reconstruction of numerous smaller religious institutions and donated funds for study circles and assemblies for the recitation of Quran or hadith in mosques and mausolea. Ulama who invested in reaching out to wider circles were rewarded with admiration, popularity, and economic benefits.⁴ Evidently, ʿilm (knowledge of the religious sciences) secured identity, power, prestige, and livelihood in the medieval Middle East, not to speak of its spiritual rewards.

All this is well documented in the Arabic sources and has been studied by quite a few modern scholars.⁵ Yet, the specific venues by which ʿilm served as a resource of power in medieval Muslim societies deserve further study and elaboration. My contention here is that for men of the Mamluk period the mastery of religious knowledge implied much more than the right to teach and the duty to expound the shariʿah. It carried with it also the authority to mediate and intercede (*shafāʿah*)⁶ and the capacity to bestow spiritual

³ For a summary of his biography, see Stefan Leder, “Charismatic Scripturalism: The Hanbali Maqdisi of Damascus,” *Der Islam* 74 (1997): 297–300.

⁴ Preoccupied as they were with networking within the scholarly class, ulama seem to have cared very much about their popularity in wider circles as well. They do not fail to mention the attendance of the ʿāmmah at their sermons, assemblies, and funerals, conveying the impression that the presence of men of plebeian classes was worthy of notice and added to the prestige of scholars.

⁵ E.g., Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1967; second edition 1984); Joan Gilbert, “Institutionalization of Muslim Scholarship and Professionalization of the ʿUlamā in Medieval Damascus,” *Studia Islamica* 52 (1980): 105–35; R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton, 1991), 187–209; Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus 1190–1350* (Cambridge, 1994); Daphna Ephrat, *A Learned Society in a Period of Transition: The Sunni “Ulama” of Eleventh Century Baghdad* (New York, 2000).

⁶ On *shafāʿah* in medieval sacred and secular contexts, see Shaun E. Marmon, “The Quality of



and material blessing (*barakah*),⁷ at times through the manifestation and manipulation of metaphysical power (*karāmāt*). The purpose of this article is to explore perceptions of the relationship between *‘ilm*, *barakah*, and *shafā‘ah* in Ayyubid and early Mamluk times, and to analyze the discourse about wonder-working scholars. Surprisingly little attention has been given to these phenomena in modern scholarly literature, perhaps because a “symbiotic relationship between Muslim sainthood and Sufism” (to use Vincent Cornell’s phrase)⁸ has always been assumed, and therefore Muslim sainthood has been studied almost exclusively in Sufi contexts.⁹ Another reason may be modern Western rationalism, which classifies belief in miracles as incompatible with “serious” learning or scholarship. This attitude is nicely illustrated in Fritz Meier’s introduction to the hagiographical work of thirteenth-century Sufi authors: “A common characteristic of the three above-mentioned authors . . . is their credulity, their uncritical attitude in dealing with the subject and their unbridled interest in miracles. They are not unique in this respect . . . this is particularly astonishing in the case of so great a mind as Ibn al-‘Arabi.”¹⁰

It is worth noting that the comparable case of the miracle-working Jewish sages of late antiquity has been studied with considerable methodological sophistication and has produced some very interesting insights on the

Mercy: Intercession in Mamluk Society,” *Studia Islamica* 87 (1998): 125–40; in more recent religious imagination, see Catherine Mayeur, “L’Intercession des saints en islam Egyptien: autour de Sayyid al-Badawī,” *Annales Islamologiques* 25 (1991): 363–88. For mediation as the essential component of the spiritual authority of Sufi shaykhs from the ninth century onwards, see Arthur F. Buhler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia, SC, 1998), 10–13.

⁷ For a rich discussion of the concept, see Joseph W. Meri, “Aspects of *Baraka* (Blessings) and Ritual Devotion among Medieval Muslims and Jews,” *Medieval Encounters* 5 (1999): 46–69.

⁸ Vincent J. Cornell, *The Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, 1998), xxxv.

⁹ A quick look at the inventory of over 1700 titles listed by the *Index Islamicus* under the keyword “saints” strikingly indicates this state of affairs. For exceptions, see the short studies of the *muwallah* (“fool for God”) in Michael W. Dols, *Majnūn: the Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford, 1992), 378–410; Daniella Talmon-Heller, *Islamic Piety in Medieval Syria: Mosques, Cemeteries and Sermons under the Zangids and Ayyūbids (1146–1260)* (Leiden, 2007), 239–40; and of the rural wonder-working shaykh, in idem, “‘The Cited Tales of the Wondrous Doings of the Shaykhs of the Holy Land’ by Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Abī ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Wahīd al-Maqdisī (569–643/1173–1245): text, translation and commentary,” *Crusades* 1 (2002): 111–54.

¹⁰ Fritz Meier, “Ṭāhir al-Ṣadafī’s Forgotten Work on Western Saints of the 6th/12th Century,” in his *Essays on Islamic Piety and Mysticism* (Leiden, 1999), 431.



complex connections between knowledge, power, religion, and magic.¹¹ *Mutatis mutandis*, I hope to draw on some of these insights in my analysis of the medieval Arabic sources: primarily the biographical dictionaries of the Mamluk historians Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1393) and al-Subkī (d. 771/1369), and a few other contemporaneous historical and theological works.

BARAKAT AL-ʿILM

The study of the religious sciences and their transmission (*taʿallum* and *taʿlīm*), just like prayer and Quran recitation, were regarded as pregnant with *barakah* and were considered to affect circles far wider than those of learned shaykhs and their intimate disciples. This *barakah* was known to benefit also the passive attendants of large study assemblies, which included ordinary men who did not belong to the scholarly class and may have hardly been able to follow the lectures, and the community of Muslims as a whole.¹² These notions are clearly expressed already in the eleventh century, by Ibn Abī Yaʿlā (d. 458/1066), the compiler of the first Hanbali biographical dictionary. Writing about the close disciple of a great saintly scholar, he mentions the flow of *barakah*: “The blessing of his teacher reflected upon him, and he became learned, ascetic, and pious. He was popular and well-loved by the people, and known to have his prayers answered (ʿādat barakatuhu ʿalayhi fa-sāra ʿāliman, zāhidan, ʿābidan, wa-ṣahārah hu fī al-nās al-qubūl wa-al-maḥabbah wa-ijābat al-duʿā).”¹³ Referring to his father,

¹¹ See Yuval Harari, “The Sages and the Occult,” in *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joseph Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (Assen, 2006), 521–64; Chana Safrai and Zeev Safrai, “Rabbinic Holy Men,” in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis and Joseph Schwartz (Leiden, 2004); Zeev Safrai and Chana Safrai, “The Study of the Torah and its Values: the Birth of a Resource of Power Essential to the Status of Sages,” in *Renewing Jewish Commitment: The Work and Thought of David Hartman*, ed. Avi Sagi and Zvi Zohar (Tel Aviv, 2001), 2:877–922 [in Hebrew]; David Levine, “Holy Men and Rabbis in Talmudic Antiquity,” in *Saints and Role Models*, 45–57; Eli Yassif, “Legends and History: Historians read Hebrew Legends of the Middle Ages,” *Zion* 64 (1999): 187–220; Jacob Neusner, “The Phenomenon of the Rabbi in Late Antiquity,” *Numen* 16 (1969): 1–20; Joshua Levinson, “Borders and Witches: Conflicts between Rabbis and Sorcerers in the Literature of the Sages” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 75 (2006): 295–328.

¹² See sayings in this vein regarding the study of hadith in Ibn al-Ṣalāh al-Shahrazūrī, *Al-Muqaddimah fī ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth*, ed. D. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Hindawī (Sidon and Beirut, 2001), 123. For Seljuk Baghdad see Ephrat, *A Learned Society*, 144–47; for Ayyubid Damascus see Chamberlain, *Knowledge*, 122; for Mamluk Cairo, see Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education* (Princeton, 1992), ch. 7.

¹³ Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib Ḥamīd al-Fiḳī (Cairo, 1952), 2:255–56. Al-Yūnīnī conveys a similar notion in the late thirteenth century, writing



Abū Yaʿlā Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn (d. 390/1000), whom he presents as a great scholar in all branches of *ʿilm* and who had assembled unprecedented audiences for his public classes of hadith, Ibn Abī Yaʿlā says that “the people received blessing by looking at him (*bi-al-naẓar ilayhi yatabarrakūna*).”¹⁴ *Barakat al-ʿilm* was considered effective even for the dead. Hence, those who could afford it located their mausolea as close as possible to madrasahs. Founders of madrasahs asked to be buried in the institutions of study they had patronized and brought their relatives for burial within them. Nūr al-Dīn’s funerary madrasah, constructed in Damascus in 1168, several years before the sultan’s death, is an early example of such an arrangement.¹⁵ The historian and qadi Bahāʾ al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād (d. 632/1234) located his own *turbah* in between the two institutions of learning he had earlier endowed in Aleppo: a madrasah and a *dār al-ḥadīth*. The whole complex had connecting doors and seven inner grille windows on a single axis.¹⁶ The biographer Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1348) quotes the people of Aleppo conjecturing that Ibn Shaddād “had hoped that the *barakah* of learning (*barakat al-ʿilm*) would affect him in death, as it had served him in life.”¹⁷ Berkey notes that in the later Mamluk period the connection between institutions of learning and places of burial was so natural that the terms madrasah and *turbah* could be conflated.¹⁸

Yet, as we can learn from our sources, ulama did not necessarily propagate *barakah* through teaching or by the direct utilization of religious knowledge. For one, there may have been a notion that *barakah* is inherent in some official or semi-official positions. Consider the following excerpt from Bahāʾ al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād, regarding the *barakah* of preachers (*khaṭībs*). “Saladin

about another disciple of another shaykh: “He became his student and was known by his companionship. . . . The light of the shaykh and his *barakah* reflected upon him and he acquires his virtues,” al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl Mīrʾāt al-Zamān* (Hyderabad, 1954–61), 2:57; Chamberlain, *Knowledge*, 109, 118–19.

¹⁴ Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:201. Mentioning his father and forefathers he adds: “*wa-jaʿala dhikrunā la-hum barakah taʿūdu ʿalaynā*” [and may our recalling be a blessing for them, that returns to us], Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:208.

¹⁵ For other funerary mosques and madrasahs in Ayyubid Damascus see R. Stephen Humphreys, “Women as Patrons of Religious Architecture in Ayyūbid Damascus,” *Muqarnas* 11 (1994): 38–49; for Mamluk Cairo, see John A. Williams, “Urbanization and Monument Construction in Mamluk Cairo,” *Muqarnas* 2 (1984): 34–35; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Islamic Architecture in Cairo: an Introduction* (Leiden, 1989), 95–105.

¹⁶ Donald S. Richards, *The Rare and Excellent History of Saladin or al-Nawādir al-Sultāniyya waʾl-Mahāsīn al-Yūsufiyya by Bahāʾ al-Dīn Ibn Shaddād* (Aldershot, 2001), 3.

¹⁷ Ibn al-Wardī, *Tārīkh* (Beirut, 1996), 2:157.

¹⁸ Berkey, *Transmission*, 144.



always sought out Fridays for his battles, especially the times of Friday prayer,” he explains in his biography of the sultan, “to gain the blessing (*barakah*) of the preachers’ prayers on the pulpits, for they were perhaps more likely to be answered.”¹⁹ The Shafi‘i ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī (d. 660/1262), one of the most important, learned, and assertive scholars of his age, seems to be combating the idea of such “automatic” *barakah* and *shafā‘ah* in one of his fatwas. He warns *khaṭībs* that if they phrase their supplications in false terms, using the laudatory titles (*alqāb*) of rulers without justification (calling a tyrant *al-‘ādīl*, or an ignoramus *al-‘ālim*, for example) their *shafā‘ah* would become null and void.²⁰

Some ulama transmitted *barakah* by touch: the direct touch of their hand, or the mediated touch of their garment or seat, food they had partly consumed, the utterance of a phrase, a book or an amulet containing their handwriting (*bi-khaṭṭihi*).²¹ Talismans and amulets are rarely mentioned in narrative sources, but on the basis of extant medieval “magic material,” as yet little researched, we have good reason to assume that they were in common use.²² Talismans prepared by the very learned *muḥaddith* and *muftī* Abū Aḥmad al-Silafī of Alexandria (d. 576/1180), for example, were known to be particularly effective for women in labor.²³ The uncle of the Aleppo historian Ibn al-‘Adīm, a copyist well versed in hadith and *fiqh*

¹⁹ Richards, *The Rare and Excellent History*, 72. Nūr al-Dīn is quoted expressing a similar dependence on intercessory prayers (*du‘ā*)—those of jurists, Quran reciters, ascetics, and Sufis; see Yaacov Lev, “Piety and Political Activism in Twelfth Century Egypt,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 31 (2006): 225.

²⁰ ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī, *Fatāwā*, ed. Muḥammad Jum‘ah al-Kurdi (Beirut, 1996), 400–1. True to himself, al-Sulamī refused to mention the title “al-Ṣāliḥ” (the righteous) of the Ayyubid ruler al-Malik Ismā‘īl ibn al-‘Ādil II in his Friday sermon, holding him a traitor to the Muslim cause on account of the treaty he had concluded with the Franks in 638/1240. As a result, al-Sulamī’s *shafā‘ah* may have remained intact, but his pulpit was taken away from him, and after a short period in jail he was banished from Damascus. For the historical context, see R. Stephen Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: The Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193–1260* (Albany, 1977), 266–67.

²¹ For Joseph Meri’s typology of the transmission of *barakah*, see his “Aspects of *Baraka*,” 63–64.

²² For a short introduction on amulets and talismans see Emilie Savage-Smith, “Introduction,” in *Magic and Divination in Early Islam*, ed. idem (Aldershot, 2004), xxii–xxv. She claims that “the twelfth century, for whatever reason, saw a marked increase of interest in magic . . . and the production of magical texts began to increase dramatically,” *ibid.*, xxvii.

²³ One of his disciples reveals, sarcastically I think, that what the shaykh actually wrote was: “*Allāhumma, innahum qad aḥsanū ḡannahum bi, fa-lā tukhayyib ḡannahum fiyya*” [God, they think well of me. May they not be disappointed]. Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād al-Ma‘rūf and Muḥyī Hilāl al-Sirḥān (Beirut, 1981), 21:28.



who was extremely fond of the works of al-Tirmidhī and had collected most of his volumes, used to prepare charms (*ta'āwīdh*) from the pen parings (*barawāt al-aqlām*) he gathered during the months of Ramaḍān, which he spent copying the Quran and practicing *i'tikāf* (seclusion in a mosque). The *barakah* of those charms was well known, according to Yāqūt.²⁴

Finally, medieval biographers tell of ulama whose *barakah* was manifest in the performance of wonders (*karāmāt*), implying that they enjoyed the elevated status of *wilāyah*—sainthood emanating from intimacy with God.

THEORY OF *KARĀMĀT*

The first extant coherent theory of *wilāyah* was composed by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, one of the greatest and most prolific Sufi authors of the ninth century. According to his theosophical system, the *awliyā'* are second to the prophets in the spiritual hierarchy of the cosmos. They, rather than the scholars, are the true heirs of the prophets,²⁵ and their proximity and direct access to God accord them second sight (*firāsah*), divine inspiration (*ilhām*), and the power to perform wondrous feats (*karāmāt*). For al-Tirmidhī, all this was so self evident that he could not think of any motive other than envy behind the stand of those who denied the existence of the above-mentioned hierarchy.²⁶ Stories about the wondrous deeds of the friends of God have been collected and transmitted since the ninth century, one of the earliest compilations being *Kitāb al-Awliyā'* by Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 281/894).²⁷ Eleventh-century Sufi authorities such as al-Hujwīrī, al-Qushayrī, and al-Ghazzālī repeated and developed those perceptions.²⁸

At the same time, the notion of sainthood and the feasibility of *karāmāt*

²⁴ David Morray, *An Ayyūbid Notable and his World: Ibn al-ʿAdīm and Aleppo as Portrayed in his Biographical Dictionary of People Connected with the City* (Leiden, 1994), 178; Yāqūt, *Irshād*, ed. David Samuel Margoliouth, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series, vol. 6 (Cairo, 1930), 34. The title of the first edition is: *The Irshād al-Arib ilā Maʿrifat al-Adīb or Dictionary of Learned Men of Yāqūt*, ed. David Samuel Margoliouth, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series (London, 1913), 6:34.

²⁵ Bernd Radtke, "Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī on Miracles," in *Miracle et Karāma*, ed. Denise Aigle (Turnhout, Belgium, 2000), 290–91; Bernd Radtke and John O'Kane, *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism: Two Works by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī* (Richmond, 1996), 8.

²⁶ Radtke, "Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī," 295; idem, "Walī," *EP*, 12:110. Another early creed professing similar ideas is that of the Egyptian Hanafī scholar Abū Jaʿfar al-Tahāwī (d. 321/933); see Joseph Meri, *The Cult of the Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford, 2002), 68.

²⁷ Radtke, "Walī," 109–10.

²⁸ Frederick M. Denny, "Prophet and Walī," in *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions*, ed. Richard Kieckhefer and George D. Bond (Berkeley, 1988), 91.



became widely acknowledged well beyond the Sufi milieu. In the tenth century most Ashʿaris and even some Muʿtazilis developed theological-scholastic arguments that supported the validity of *karāmāt*.²⁹ In the early thirteenth century, the renowned Hanbali jurist Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī wrote the following paragraph in praise of the people of the Sunnah: “It is amongst them [the Sunnis] that one finds the observant ulama (*al-ʿulamāʾ al-ʿāmilūn*), the friends of God (*al-awliyāʾ*), and the righteous (*al-ṣāliḥūn*) . . . and *ahl al-walāyāt wa-al-karāmāt*. . . . They are a refuge to men afflicted by hardship, and kings and others of lesser ranks go out and visit them, and are blessed by their supplications (*yatabarrakūna bi-duʿāʾihim*), and appeal to God through their intercession (*yastashfaʿūna bi-him*).”³⁰ Whether Ibn Qudāmah is speaking of four separate categories, or of overlapping groups, it is clear that this excerpt (taken from his polemical anti-Muʿtazili treatise) unequivocally illustrates the wide recognition of *barakah* and its manifestation in *karāmāt* in all echelons of society. It also establishes a clear connection between piety, intercession, and wondrous deeds.³¹

In some circles, however, the notion of sainthood remained contested throughout the ages, due to different theological reasoning,³² or because of the apprehension that charismatic, spiritual, non-scholarly, and potentially disruptive authority aroused among the established ulama.³³ In anti-Sufi

²⁹ Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, ed. and trans. Samuel Miklos Stern and C. R. Barber (London, 1967), 2:337–41; Gardet, “*Karāma*,” 615–16.

³⁰ *Ibn Qudāma’s Censure of Speculative Theology*, ed. and trans. George Makdisi (London, 1962), 14, (trans. partly used here) 10.

³¹ See also Josef Van Ess, “Sufis and their Opponents,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics*, ed. Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke (Leiden and Boston, 1999), 35.

³² For al-Andalus, see Maribel Fierro, “The Polemic about the *Karāmāt al-Awliyāʾ* and the Development of Sufism in al-Andalus (fourth/tenth–fifth/eleventh centuries),” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55 (1992): 236–49. Fierro finds that the polemic was imported into al-Andalus from Qayrawān in the second half of the fourth/tenth century, and was concerned mainly with the danger of discrediting prophets. Al-Sulamī, in sixth/thirteenth-century Syria, disputes with “the Muʿtazilis and others,” who consign miracles and wonders to prophets only, denying *karāmāt al-awliyāʾ* (al-Sulamī, *Zabad Khulāsat al-Taṣawwuf al-musammā bi-Ḥall al-Rumūz wa-Mafātīḥ al-Kunūz* [Cairo, 1995], 77–78). See a short discussion of this theme in William M. Brinner, “Prophet and Saint: The Two Exemplars of Islam,” in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John S. Hawley (Berkeley, 1987), 36–51.

³³ Meri, *The Cult*, 66; Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabī in the Later Islamic Tradition* (New York, 1999), 53; Maribel Fierro, “Opposition to Sufism in al-Andalus,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, 183. For a live (and lively) contest between a wonder-worker (the Sufi shaykh Ibn Qawām, d. 658/1260) and anti-Sufi scholars and dignitaries in a northern Syrian town, see al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 1:392–412, or al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfiʿīyah al-Kubrā*, ed. A. M. al-Hulūʾ and M. al-



polemics well into the Mamluk period, miracle-workers were unfavorably compared with men of intellectual and educational superiority, and their *karāmāt* were juxtaposed with the knowledge, rectitude, and piety of the scholars. A fine example may be quoted from ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī, the protagonist of our first anecdote. Asked why more tales of *karāmāt* are told about “shaykhs” (*mashāyikh*) than about scholars, he answers: “Can the scholars wish for a greater wonder than their being preoccupied with study (*ishtighālīhim bi-al-‘ilm*)?”³⁴

The apologia of the Egyptian scholar and Sufi Ibn Abī ‘Aṭā’ Allāh (d. 709/1309) “on the theme of saint’s miracles” seems to indicate that he felt the need to defend “such things as the collapsing of the distance between one place and another, walking on water, flying through the air, cognizance of entities which used to exist [but exist no longer], or of entities which have not yet come into existence through supernatural means, multiplying food or drink, producing fruit out of season . . . etc.” He also piously adds that “miracles of the spirit,” e.g., constant observance of God and sincere reliance on him, are the greatest of wonders.³⁵

While the realness of wondrous feats was hardly doubted (allegations of trickery are very rare in our sources), the sanctity of individuals who were known to perform them was not necessarily beyond doubt. It was questioned in sayings such as “Satan goes in one moment from the East to the West” (attributed to Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī al-Khayr of the tenth century),³⁶ or in Ibn Taymīyah’s claim that “a premonition or inspiration about something, or supernatural deeds . . . allegedly occur [also] to many infidels, unbelievers, and heretical innovators.”³⁷ Some wonder-workers were suspected of collaboration with jinn, rather than with divine grace.³⁸ ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Sulamī insists that a *karāmah* may occur only to a true believer and devout Muslim, neither by his choice, nor necessarily with his awareness. Moreover, the true saint was expected to conceal his *karāmāt*.³⁹

The best indication of the near-consensus in favor of the recognition of sainthood and its wondrous manifestations may be found in the occurrences

Tanāhī (Cairo, 1971), 8:412–13 (trans. in Meri, *The Cult*, 161).

³⁴ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 1:15–16.

³⁵ Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī, *The Subtle Blessings in the Saintly Lives of Abu Abbas al-Mursi and His Master Abul-Hasan*, trans. Nancy Roberts (Louisville, KY, 2005), 73–74.

³⁶ Quoted in Denny, “Prophet and Walī,” 93.

³⁷ Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū‘ Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymīyah*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad al-‘Aṣimī (Riyadh, 1990), 2:213–14, translated in Meri, *The Cult*, 69.

³⁸ See my “Cited Tales of the Wondrous Doings,” 121, 137; Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 2:336–38.

³⁹ Al-Sulamī, *Zabad al-Khulāsah*, 77.



of *awliyāʾ* and *karāmāt* in non-Sufi literature, written by judicially trained ulama. General (as opposed to Sufi) biographical dictionaries, and the *wafayāt* sections of chronicles, relate anecdotes about wondrous feats. These include restoring health, assuring safety in perilous situations, thwarting sin and crime, securing the supply of water and grain, conveying knowledge of future events and things hidden from the eye, arbitrating with humans and with God, and bringing about conversion to Islam. In these genres scholars could be praised both for their literary production and for performing wonders in the same entry. A comparable mingling of the fields of scholarly work and magic, which secular men and women of the modern age usually find surprising, could be found on the institutional level in Mamluk cities. The *dār al-ḥadīth* constructed by the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf (d. 635/1237) in Damascus was designated to serve a double purpose: the study of prophetic tradition, and the display of a sandal of the Prophet, a precious relic that was bequeathed to the sultan by one of his subjects. The combining of the cult of the Prophet as a saint and the “academic” study of his lore must have made perfect sense to al-Malik al-Ashraf and to his contemporaries.⁴⁰ Another institution that disseminated ʿilm and *barakah* simultaneously was the Madrasah al-Jawhariyah, established in Cairo some 300 years later, in which a magical pearl and a talismanic bowl were kept for healing purposes.⁴¹

BIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE

The eleventh-century biographer Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, the author of the first comprehensive dictionary of Hanbalis (to which Ibn Rajab later added his *Dhayl*), glorifies God, saying: “He has made the scholars of this nation (*ummah*) absolutely the most virtuous among the scholars of all nations, and the most blessed. And he has provided them with wonders (*karāmāt*).”⁴² Ibn Abī Yaʿlā does not mention any wonders in the entries dedicated to members of the first two generations of the Hanbali school. *Barakah* and *karāmāt* first appear in his book with scholars of the third generation, men of the fourth/tenth century, in the second volume of the modern edition of the work. The numbers are small: 10 of the 129 entries of the volume report about the *barakah* and *karāmāt* of their biographees. The first case appears in the biography of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Zāhid al-ʿArīf (d. 313/925). Moved by the misery of a student who is about to have his hand amputated by his

⁴⁰ For a full account of this story see my *Islamic Piety*, 203–5.

⁴¹ Jonathan Berkey, “Tradition, Innovation, and the Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Near East,” *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 38–39.

⁴² Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:212.



physician, Abū al-Ḥasan beseeches God's mercy in a somewhat provocative manner, then "reads over" the sick man (most likely Quranic verses, but perhaps some other formulae), and the hand is cured. Interestingly, Abū al-Ḥasan's colleagues, who are quoted discussing his *shafā'ah*, *barakah*, and spiritual ranking, use the typically Sufi terms *awliyā'*, *abdāl* ("substitutes," an elevated saintly status),⁴³ and *mustakhlifūn* ("successors," here designating an even higher rank, equivalent to that of the prophets).⁴⁴ A similar scene is depicted in the biography of Shaykh Abū Bakr 'Abd al-ʿAzīz ibn Jaʿfar (d. 363/974), who was an author of varied scholarly works. Ibn Abī Yaʿlā's informant describes a group of people standing at the city gate, talking about *karāmāt al-awliyā'*.⁴⁵ Whether the voice speaking is that of the eleventh-century compiler or that of the tenth-century discussants at the gate (a feasible possibility, in my mind), *karāmāt* obviously formed a part of the religious imagination of scholars from an early stage, even if they were not often ascribed to men of their own circles.

Ibn Rajab's "appendix" to Ibn Abī Yaʿlā's work, *Al-Dhayl ʿalā Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah*, is comprised of 613 entries dedicated to Hanbalis who lived between ca. 400/1010 and 740/1340. Many entries are very short: merely 2–3 lines that supply minimal data. Some are several pages long (up to 38 pages), rich with anecdotes about the biographee, descriptions of his scholarly works, and summaries of the juristic and theological debates he took part in. *Karāmāt* are ascribed to 27 of the biographees. If we do not take into account some 40 entries which provide hardly anything more than names and dates of death (assuming that at least in some of those cases the dearth of material is due to the compiler's limited access to information, rather than to the biographee's insignificance),⁴⁶ five percent of shaykhs are portrayed as possessing *barakah* and *karāmāt*.

The seventh and eighth volumes of Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī's *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfiʿīyah al-Kubrā* include 480 entries dedicated to men who had died

⁴³ According to Sufi theory, a fixed number of *abdāl* are chosen by God to preserve universal equilibrium, especially during periods between prophets, and to perform *shafā'ah* for their brethren on the Day of Judgement (Jacqueline Chabbi, "Abdāl," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* [London, 1985], 1:173–74).

⁴⁴ "Al-mustakhlif fī al-arḍ makāmuḥu makām al-anbiyā'" (Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:62–63). For more anecdotes, see the appendix.

⁴⁵ Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:123.

⁴⁶ This is explicitly acknowledged by Ibn Rajab at the end of his very short entry about al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Hamadhānī: "wa-lā aʿlamu min ḥālihi ghayr hādihā" (Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 1:208; similar comment *ibid.*, 2:481).



between 500/1106 and 700/1300 (excluding a hundred “empty”⁴⁷ and extremely brief entries). The vast majority of the biographees are scholars, but some members of the ruling and military elite are included as well. Most entries are very short and strictly informative. Some of the longer entries consist of anecdotes of sorts, poems, fatwas, and selected scholarly contributions, especially in the field of jurisprudence. Slightly more than six percent of the entries relate wondrous doings or occurrences, or explicitly mention *barakah* and *shafāʿah*.

Ibn Rajab and al-Subkī are much alike in their treatment of *barakah* and *karāmāt* not only number-wise, but also in the typology of their wonder-working scholars. Early and late wonder-working scholars in both works are constructed by similar characteristics: extraordinary piety expressed by devotional works, commitment to the service of fellow men, frugality and asceticism. Both dictionaries, however, also portray ascetics (*zuhhād*) and Sufis to whom no wonders are ascribed.⁴⁸

The first wonder-working scholar in Ibn Rajab’s dictionary is Abū al-Wafāʾ ibn al-Qawās (d. 476/1083–84), a member of the twelfth generation of Hanbalis, an ascetic who spent fifty years in retreat in his mosque. A student who used to study Quran with the shaykh narrates the wonder, referring to it, rather generously, as “remarkable.” It is a rather unassuming version of *firāsah*: the shaykh astonished his student by offering him, at the end of the school day, the exact sum he needed for the return trip home, but had lost on his trip to town earlier that day.⁴⁹

An unusually dense concentration of *karāmāt* is to be found in the biographies of scholars belonging to the Hanbalī milieu of the Ṣāliḥīyah, a neighborhood that was established in the 1160s by emigrants from Jabal Nāblus.⁵⁰ Stephan Leder treated the outstanding members of this clan, known as al-Maqādisah, in a fine article in *Der Islam* (1997). He coined the term “charismatic scripturalism” to characterize their particular type of

⁴⁷ Entries that consist of nothing more than a name. Perhaps al-Subkī had meant to complete them at a later stage of his work, but never did; perhaps information was lost by copyists of later generations.

⁴⁸ For example: 7:112–14, 156–57. Abū al-Qāsim al-Ṣūfī, the nephew of the Shaykh Abū Najīb al-Suhrawardī, who was master to many novices, is not described as a wonder-worker, but his *barakah* is mentioned as the power that has led sinners to repentance and men to God (al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:340).

⁴⁹ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 1:39.

⁵⁰ See Daniella Talmon-Heller and Benjamin Z. Kedar, “Did Muslim Survivors of the 1099 Massacre of Jerusalem Settle in Damascus? The True Origins of the al-Ṣāliḥīyah Suburb,” *Al-Masāq* 17 (2005): 165–69.



religious leadership, highlighting their “extraordinary ability to combine two elements of religious experience which were often held distinct: the literalist aspect of traditionalist religious orientation, and charismatic religious leadership.”⁵¹ The *muḥaddith* ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī, with whom we opened this paper, was one of them. His two cousins, shaykh Abū ‘Umar Ibn Qudāmah and Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn Qudāmah, enjoyed a similar, if not higher, reputation. Abū ‘Umar, the imam and *khaṭīb* of the Hanbali mosque in the Ṣāliḥīyah, was known for piety, *shafā’ah*, and *karāmāt*. His prayer for rain during a dry season (which he carried out with his female relatives on a holy site in the vicinity of Damascus) was instantly accepted. He could recognize indecency and read thoughts. People believed that he mediated *barakah* by the vocalization of certain verses from the Quran. A member of his community gives eloquent testimony to the efficacy of the shaykh’s *barakah*, saying that Abu ‘Umar’s custom of frequently reciting the *āyāt al-ḥaras* (Quran 2:284–86, 7:52–54, 7:109–11, 9:256, 37:1–11, 55:33–36, 59:212–14, 70:1–4) and *āyat al-kursī* (2:255) kept evil away from them in times of constant warfare, violence, and banditry. He also used to copy the Quran and certain works of exegesis, Hanbali theology and law, and Sufi biographies, and distributed them gratis among community members. Books in his handwriting were considered to carry *barakah* into the homes of those holding them. Likewise, petitions he addressed to local governors and officials on behalf of people who asked for his intercession in matters of this world were considered to be helpful not necessarily on account of their content, but rather due to the *barakah* contained in the document he had handled. A riot almost broke out at his funeral, as men and women fought over the water that had washed his body in preparation for burial.⁵²

Muwaffaq al-Dīn, author of the first comprehensive compilation of Hanbali law, *Al-Mughnī*, and of several important theological treatises, was regarded as an extraordinary scholar by his contemporaries and throughout the centuries. His biography in Ibn Rajab’s *Dhayl Ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah* includes the following laudatory quotation of the Ba‘labakī Hanbali scholar ‘Abd Allāh al-Yūnīnī (d. 617/1220), who must have known him in person:

I have seen his noble character, his fine companionship, his abundant forbearance, great knowledge and intelligence, his

⁵¹ Leder, “Charismatic,” 298.

⁵² For a detailed portrait of shaykh Abū ‘Umar, see Daniella Talmon-Heller, “Hanbalite Islam in 12th–13th Century Jabal Nāblus and Jabal Qāsyūn,” *Studia Islamica* 79 (1994): 103–20. Chamberlain suggests that copying had a talismanic power not only by transmitting the *barakah* of the copyist, but also of the author, whether alive or dead (*Knowledge*, 144).



perfect manliness and great modesty and constant cheerfulness and his detachment from things of this world and its people and offices, to a degree that the greatest *awliyā'* hardly attain. The Prophet had said: "The greatest blessing that God can bestow upon his servant is to inspire him with constant remembrance of himself," which means that *ilhām al-dhikr* is worthier than *karāmāt*, and the worthiest *dhikr* is that which extends benefits to other men, namely the teaching of the religious sciences and the sunnah.⁵³

Al-Yūnīnī seems to be engaging in a competition between scholars and Sufis. Himself at home in both traditions,⁵⁴ al-Yūnīnī praises scholars using Sufi discourse, especially the theme of *naḥ*—benefit to the people. Here, he positions Ibn Qudāmah as more virtuous than most *awliyā'* in this respect and stresses his righteousness. A few lines down the page the compiler Ibn Rajab dedicates a paragraph to "the mention of some of his [Ibn Qudāmah's] wonders." There we find two rather pale examples of Ibn Qudāmah's penetrating insight and healing techniques, crowned by the following little anecdote, which is related by the *qawwām* (keeper) of the Damascene mosque Ibn Qudāmah used to frequent. The *qawwām* says: "When Ibn Qudāmah spends the night in the mosques, the doors open for him and close behind him by themselves."⁵⁵

ʿImād al-Dīn al-Maqdisī was another renowned saintly figure of the Banū Qudāmah in thirteenth-century Damascus. Though learned, he preferred good works to scholarly work ("*wa-kāna min kuthrat ishghālihi wa-ishtighālihi lā yatafarraḡhu lil-taṣnīf wa-al-kitābah*"), and never completed his book on religious law.⁵⁶ His devotion and generosity to his students and to those who came to seek his guidance, advice, and help was legendary. Many *karāmāt* were attributed to him, such as the overwhelming effect his presence had on a sinner.⁵⁷ It was even said that he was one of "the seven who uphold

⁵³ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 2:138. On the importance attached to *dhikr*, the memory of God, in Christian and Islamic non-Sufi contexts, see Johannes Pahlitzsch, "The Concern for Spiritual Salvation and *Memoria* in Islamic Public Endowments in Jerusalem (XII–XVI C.) as compared to the Concepts of Christianity," in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, vol. 3, ed. Urbain Vermeulen and Jo van Steenbergen (Leuven, 2001), 332–35.

⁵⁴ Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 2:57. See Li Guo, *Early Mamluk Syrian Historiography* (Leiden, 1998), 1:15, about Sufism in the al-Yūnīnī family.

⁵⁵ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 2:137–38.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:94–95.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:101.



the earth.”⁵⁸ Another family member to whom *aḥwāl* (spiritual “states”) and *karāmāt* (especially of multiplying food for the needy) are attributed is Aḥmad ibn Abī al-Makārim (d. 1225/622), the righteous imam and *khaṭīb* of the village of Mardā (Jabal Nāblus).⁵⁹

The Banū Qudāmah correspond well to Ernst Gellner’s category of “charismatic lineages,” typical of the Moroccan Atlas.⁶⁰ *Barakah* “ran” in the family for at least four consecutive generations, perhaps due to the particular characteristics of the community that recorded its wonders. It was a community of emigrants from a rural area, with an extraordinarily dedicated and competent leadership,⁶¹ and with a documented tendency towards the veneration of holy men and the production of a hagiographical tradition.⁶² If we surmise that stories of *karāmāt* are told where there are not only charismatic shaykhs, but also needy communities and convincing storytellers, the case of the Banū Qudāmah is a combination of all three prerequisites.

A few other examples will take us away from the Banū Qudāmah. Speaking about the grammarian, poet, and expert on *qirāʾāt* Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim ibn Firruḥ al-Shāṭibī (d. 590/1194) of the Madrasah al-Fāḍiliyah in Cairo, the Damascene historian Abū Shāmāh (d. 665/1267) notes that Shaykh al-Shāṭibī not only “combined learning with good works,” but was also a saint of well-known miracles.⁶³ Muḥammad ibn al-Khiḍr Ibn Taymīyah (d. 622/1225) was the undisputable spiritual leader of Ḥarrān, on top of being the learned author of many works. He served as the *khaṭīb* and imam of the great mosque of Ḥarrān, he taught in one of its main madrasahs (al-Nūriyah), and he held popular assemblies of exhortation (*majālis al-waʿz*) for both the elite and the commoners. Ibn Rajab notes that he was known to have performed wondrous deeds and supernatural feats (*karāmāt wa-*

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2:103.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2:164.

⁶⁰ About “holy lineages” (albeit as an alternative to the ulama), see Ernst Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge, 1981), 116–17.

⁶¹ See my “Islamic Preaching in Syria during the Counter-Crusade (Twelfth–Thirteenth Centuries),” in *In Laudem Hierosolymitani: Studies in Crusades and Medieval Culture in Honour of Benjamin Z. Kedar*, ed. Iris Shagrir, Ronnie Ellenblum, and Jonathan Riley-Smith (Aldershot, 2007), 65–66.

⁶² See Talmon-Heller, “Hanbalite Islam”; idem, “The Cited Tales.”

⁶³ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ismāʿīl Abū Shāmāh, *Al-Bāʿith ‘alā Inkār al-Bidaʿ wa-al-Ḥawāḍith*, ed. H. Salmān (Riyadh, 1990), 223; Ibn al-ʿImād, *Shadharāt al-Dhahab fī Akhbār Man Dhahab*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Arnāʾūt and Muḥammad al-Arnāʾūt (Beirut, 1991), 6:494–95. Ibn al-ʿImād does not relate the *karāmāt*, but he stresses the righteousness of al-Shāṭibī and his special pious customs.



khawāriq), but he does not give specific examples. He does offer a detailed account of the shaykh's theological disputations with Muwaffaq al-Dīn ibn Qudāmāh, and of dreams attesting to the shaykh's elevated status post mortem.⁶⁴

In the very long biographical entry dedicated to 'Izz al-Dīn al-Sulamī in *Ṭabaqāt al-Shāfi'īyah al-Kubrā*, al-Subkī inserts short stories about al-Sulamī's *karāmāt* between the plot of a complicated theological debate in which the shaykh was involved, and a presentation of his *fatāwā* regarding highly contested political issues. In one anecdote, al-Sulamī recognizes the impurity of a piece of cheese brought to him as a present (and indeed it turns out that it had been bought from a *dhimmi* woman who had pork on her hands).⁶⁵ The most spectacular wondrous doing of his was performed during the battle of al-Manṣūrah in the winter of 647/1250. When the Frankish boats came dangerously near to the Muslim forces, al-Sulamī raised his hands towards the wind and ordered it, in a loud voice, to turn against the enemy. The wind immediately changed its course, the Frankish boats capsized, and many of their passengers drowned. The Muslims gave thanks to God "for giving them a man whom the wind obeys,"⁶⁶ "a man that, had he been in India, or at the very end of the world, the sultan should do his utmost to bring him to his country in order to secure his blessings for himself and for his country" (*law kāna fī al-Hind aw fī aqṣā al-dunyā kāna yanbaghī lil-sultān an yas'a fī ḥulūlihi fī bilādihi li-tatimma barakatuhu 'alayhi wa-'alā bilādihi*).⁶⁷

Claiming that it was superfluous to tell the *karāmāt* of al-Sulamī's contemporary and fellow Shafi'i Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676/1278) since they were so well known, al-Subkī reproduces only a small hagiographical anecdote about the scholar's childhood. He quotes al-Nawawī's father, telling that when Yaḥyā was only seven years old, he was the only one in the household to be awakened by a glorious light in the middle of *laylat al-qadr*. Al-Subkī also comments that the impossibly huge volume of al-Nawawī's writing must be regarded as wondrous. Al-Nawawī himself, in his exemplary piety, was willing to recognize as wondrous only an answered prayer, a sip of water in the desert, or a piece of bread in the wilderness.⁶⁸

The only shaykh whose *karāmāt* were transmitted *bi-al-tawātur*,

⁶⁴ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 2:151–62.

⁶⁵ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:213.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 8:216, 84.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8:96.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8:396; Richard Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes: Theologien und Erscheinungsformen des islamischen Heiligenwunders* (Wiesbaden, 1987), 298.



uninterruptedly (according to ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn ‘Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī), and to whom the largest number of *karāmāt* were attributed (according to Muwaffaq al-Dīn Ibn Qudāmah), was Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 563/1166). Known by later generations as the founder of a Sufi *ṭarīqah*, in Ibn Rajab’s biographical dictionary he is presented as a renowned preacher, connected with a large madrasah. Ibn Rajab relates only a few of his wonders (all demonstrating *firāsah*) and emphasizes that he was admired by both scholars and ascetics (“*akthar mashāyikh al-arḍ, min al-‘ulamā’ wa-al-zuhhād*”).⁶⁹

Tales of the wondrous deeds of ulama may be found also in Mamluk pilgrimage guides to the cemetery of al-Qarāfah. Christopher Taylor, who worked on a collection of such manuscript guides, retells some of these stories. He mentions the jurist Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Raslān (d. 571/1175–76), who made a wheat merchant’s business prosperous by touching his merchandise (until a Jew touched the wheat and ruined everything!), helped a woman in difficult childbirth by giving her a mirror with a line of his writing, and turned water into honey.⁷⁰ The Hanbali jurist Abū ‘Amr ‘Uthmān ibn Marzūq (d. 564/1168–69) made the Nile rise when it was too low, or recede when it was too high, just by performing his ritual ablutions at the river’s bank.⁷¹ The jurist Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Marzūq Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Rudaynī (d. 1145–46) is reported to have flown like a bird to a disputation with a colleague. After his death, he answered the fervent prayers of a poor man who visited his tomb and miraculously supplied him with the 10,000 dirhams he needed in order to pay his creditor.⁷² A house was robbed in a Cairene neighborhood and the frightened neighbors went to the jurist Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm, also known as Ibn Khallās al-Anṣarī, and asked him to pray on their behalf. Thanks to his prayer, local inhabitants were spared from beatings by the police; the robber confessed, repented, and was also spared.⁷³ The tombs of all these saintly ulama, so we learn from Christopher Taylor, were popular sites for visitation. Men wished to be buried in their proximity in pursuit of the *barakah* they believed would help them in this world, and ease their way to the hereafter.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 1:292–93.

⁷⁰ Christopher Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyāra and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt* (Leiden, 1999), 119, 134, 137.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 138, 144.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.



CONCLUSIONS

From the tenth century onwards, comments such as “he was [a man] of wonders (*kāna dhā karāmāt*),” and anecdotes that relate the wondrous doings of learned men, some of whom were madrasah professors and authors of scholarly volumes on jurisprudence, commentary, and theology, are integrated into biographical dictionaries and chronicles. Such a mixture of hagiography and supposedly realistic historical data about jurisconsults and theologians may be disturbing to our understanding of the world,⁷⁵ despite recent scholarship that repeatedly deconstructs previously assumed dichotomies between religion and magic, scholars and saints,⁷⁶ learned versus vulgar, or “high” culture versus “low” or popular culture.⁷⁷ As I have attempted to illustrate in this paper, this mixture of the miraculous and the mundane was perfectly congruent with the sensibilities of men of the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, learned and unlearned. In their minds—as mirrored in the biographical and theological works they have produced—knowledge of religious lore (*ʿilm*), successful intercession with God and with secular powers (*shafāʿah*), and spiritual metaphysical powers (*barakah*) were interconnected, intertwined, and even organically tied to each other.

At this stage, I would like to offer some further thoughts on the issue of hagiographies of scholars, in an attempt to enhance our understanding of the roles and images of ulama in Mamluk society from a rarely posed perspective. As we have seen, the discourse of ulama about themselves reflects the appropriation of Sufi terminology and the employment of the characteristic traits of ascetics and mystics. In Michael Chamberlain’s words, “The learned associated themselves with other forms of ritual power [other than *ʿilm*] by linking their *ʿilm* to Sufism . . . by casting themselves as ‘true’ Sufis, and by using Sufi terms.”⁷⁸ The impetus, I would like to add, could also have come from below. Namely, the disciples of ulama—ranging from the humble yet popular imam of a neighborhood mosque to a renowned jurist and author—and their admirers from among commoners attached some of the attributes of Sufi shaykhs onto them. The gatekeeper of the mosque Ibn Qudāmah used to frequent at night, the Muslim soldiers at al-Manṣūrah, and the crowd at the funeral of ʿImād al-Dīn Ibn Qudāmah (all

⁷⁵ As expressed in Stefan Leder’s interpretation of ʿAbd al-Ghanī’s rejection of his own saintliness, namely “that any other attitude would probably have been inconsistent with his serious, down-to-earth and toilsome work as a scholar” (Leder, “Charismatic,” 299).

⁷⁶ See Cornell’s refutation of Gellner’s oppositional pairs: Cornell, *The Realm*, xxvii, 106.

⁷⁷ Regarding the inappropriateness of these dichotomies in Islamic context see Savage-Smith, *Magic and Divination*, iii. She contends that boundaries are indistinct and shifting.

⁷⁸ Chamberlain, *Knowledge*, 128–30.



of whom are mentioned as the informants of the biographers and compilers of written biographical material) certainly did.

Alternatively, or simultaneously, the discourse about wonder-working scholars may have been tied to a competition that took place within the ranks of the ulama, rather than between them and Sufis (who, according to most contemporary researchers, were separated from scholars by rather porous boundaries, with a significant overlap between the two categories).⁷⁹ In this context, *karāmāt* were the signifiers of impeccably pious and ethical men, scholars who thanks to their righteousness enjoyed the grace of unusual intimacy with God. The identity of ulama was first and foremost constructed on the acquisition and dissemination of *‘ilm*, of course.⁸⁰ The unusual authority scholars had in medieval Muslim societies drew also upon the *shafā‘ah* and *barakah* (in varying combinations and degrees) that was attributed to them. *Karāmāt* were the “special ingredient” of the depiction of the saintly scholar, who outdid his peers in piety and good works.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Emil Homerin, “Sufis and their detractors in Mamluk Egypt,” in *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, 226–27.

⁸⁰ I thank Yaacov Lev for stressing this for me.



APPENDIX

Selected anecdotes about wondrous doings of scholars from Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, Ibn Rajab, and al-Subkī:

1. The Prophet appears in a dream of an anonymous *muḥaddith*, who had spent years in search of an answer to some peculiar theological question that bothered him, and refers him to Shaykh Abū Bakr ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn Jaʿfar, better known as Ghulām al-Khalāl (d. 363/974). The *muḥaddith* hastily departs for Baghdad, enters Jāmiʿ al-Khalīfah (as instructed), and easily recognizes the shaykh by his particular eyebrows and especially loud voice. Shaykh ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz approaches him first, and discreetly asks him if he is the fellow sent by the Prophet.⁸¹ In a second anecdote the shaykh himself is the narrator. He tells of a wonder he had witnessed when accompanying his shaykh on a visit to the keeper (*nāṭūr*) of Bāb al-Ḥarb: the transformation of food into gold (supposedly, for his own sake). More interestingly, the scene depicted by the narrator is that of a group of people telling *karāmāt al-awliyāʾ*. After his death, a ray of light (*ʿamūd nūr*) was seen rising from his grave to the sky.⁸² A Muslim who lived in the vicinity of the grave heard the Prophet in his dream, promising that a visit to shaykh Abū Bakr’s grave secures God’s forgiveness.⁸³ He is said to have foreseen the exact day of his own death: a Friday at the age of 78, just like Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and Abū Bakr al-Murūdī. Ibn Abī Yaʿlā notes that “*hādhihi karāmah ḥasana la-hu*.”⁸⁴

2. Abū al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Ibn Samʿūn (d. 387/997), known for his *zuhd fī al-dunyā*, tells the following story: on a visit to Jerusalem, after a sojourn in Medina, his *nafs* craved for fresh dates. He admonished it, and took out the dry dates he had put aside for his meal. To his great surprise, they were fresh! He did not touch them. By suppertime, he found that they had been restored to their former, dry, condition, so he ate some of them.

According to an anecdote told by a student of his, Abū al-Ḥusayn could read thoughts and predict the future. Thanks to his advice, the student did not sell his last belongings, despite his stressful economic situation, and waited patiently for God’s succor. It indeed came. Another informant recalls that the shaykh had paused for an hour in the middle of one of his

⁸¹ Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:122–23.

⁸² Ibid., 2:124–25

⁸³ Here the editor, Muḥammad al-Fiqī, adds a footnote, commenting in a typically modernist fashion that it is a shame that such pagan mausolea and sanctuaries were built.

⁸⁴ Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:126–27.



sermons, so as not to disturb a student who had dozed off, explaining that the latter was enjoying the apparition of the Prophet in his dream.⁸⁵ Finally, Abū al-Ḥusayn predicted that some time after his death his body would be taken out of its grave, and then reburied. When this indeed happened, his shrouds were found intact.⁸⁶

3. Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Jaʿfar al-Radhānī (d. 494/1101) was an ascetic *muqriʿ* and *faqīh* whose prayers were answered (“*mujāb al-daʿwah*”). He was also a wonder-worker (“*ṣāhib karāmāt*”). One of his wonders is spelled out: a deer came over to play with his little son one morning, in accordance with a promise he had given the child on the night before.⁸⁷

4. The Bedouin shaykh (*baʿḍ ahl al-bādiyah*) Abū Ṭālib al-ʿAshārah, Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn al-Faṭḥ (d. 451/1059), who was an ascetic and an expert on hadith, was known to pray for rain effectively in times of drought. Ibn Abī Yaʿlā adds: “*wa-la-hu karāmāt kathīrah*.”⁸⁸

5. Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-ʿUlthī (d. 503/1109–1110), a student of Abū Yaʿlā, restored the health of a sick little boy (with the recitation of Quranic verses, and his saliva), and “not few of his [other] wonders became known.”⁸⁹

6. ʿUthmān ibn Marzūq al-Qurashī, known also as Abū ʿUmar al-Zāhid (d. 564/1168–69), described as “*al-faqīh, al-ʿarīf al-zāhid*,” who taught both law and mysticism, was involved in theological debate (regarding *khalq al-afʿāl*) and had “*karāmāt wa-aḥwāl wa-maqāmāt wa-kalām ḥasan ʿalā lisān ahl al-ṭarīqah*.” Once, he stopped the Nile from flooding agricultural land, and in another year, he prevented a severe drought.⁹⁰

7. Al-Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad Abū al-ʿAlāʾ, known as al-ʿAṭṭār Shaykh Hamadhān (d. 569/1173–74), is described as a prominent scholar of hadith, author of works on different branches of hadith studies and devotional treatises (*zuhdiyyāt wa-al-raqāʾiq wa-ghayr dhālika*). He was popular among scholars and commoners, including Muʿtazilis and Jews(!), and inclined towards asceticism. The preacher Nāṣiḥ al-Dīn ibn al-Ḥanbalī is quoted saying about him: “and his standing in the eyes of the common people and the elite is

⁸⁵ Ibid., 2:157.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 2:161–62.

⁸⁷ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 1:92.

⁸⁸ Ibn Abī Yaʿlā, *Ṭabaqāt*, 2:192.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 2:255–56; Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 1:130–31. In Ibn Rajab’s version, Abū al-Ḥusayn (Ibn Abī Yaʿlā) precedes the story with the somewhat apologetic “*akhbarānī man athīqu bi-hi*.”

⁹⁰ Ibn Rajab, *Al-Dhayl*, 1:306–11.



well known, as are his *karāmāt*.”⁹¹

8. Ismāʿīl ibn Zafar Abū Ṭāhir al-Mundhirī al-Dimashqī (d. 639/1241–42) traveled extensively for the study of hadith. Little else is said of him, except that he was pious, righteous, chivalrous, and humble, as well as *ṣāhib karāmāt*.⁹²

9. Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Yūnīnī al-Baʿalbakī “*aḥad aʿlām wa-shuyūkh al-islām*,” (d. 658/1260), was a scholar versed in hadith and *fiqh*, and a Sufi, a disciple of shaykh ʿAbd Allāh al-Yūnīnī (also renowned for *karāmāt* and *aḥwāl*), who donned the Sufi mantle (*khirqah*) he had received from shaykh ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṭāʾiḥī. He had also attained mystical states and performed *karāmāt*, but he was reluctant to expose wondrous doing, claiming that: “God has commanded the prophets to exhibit their miracles (*muʿjizāt*), and the saints (*awliyāʾ*) to conceal their wonders.”⁹³

10. ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yaḥyā al-Suʿbī (d. 553/1158–59) was a pious Yemenite scholar and author. It was told about him that he was once attacked with swords (the circumstances are not revealed), but turned out to be immune to their edge. He himself recalled reciting *sūrat yāʾ sīn*, or according to another version, seven other specific verses. He claimed to have learnt of their protective power being a witness to a wondrous sight: a lamb playing at the side of a wolf, unharmed, thanks to a folded piece of paper which was tied around its neck, containing these very verses.⁹⁴

11. ʿAbd al-Malik al-Ṭabarī (d. in the 530s/1135–45), *ṣāhib al-aḥwāl wa-al-karāmāt wa-al-jidd fī al-ʿibādāt*, was a professor at the Niẓāmīyah, but resigned and settled in Mecca, where he spent the final forty years of his life in absolute poverty. A little pool or cistern would fill up with water exclusively for him, whenever he needed water for performing ablutions.⁹⁵

12. Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf al-Shaybānī al-Mawṣilī, known as al-Kawāshī (d. 680/1281–82), *al-mufasssīr, al-rajul al-ṣāliḥ, al-zāhid, al-warīʿ, dhū al-aḥwāl wa-al-karāmāt* (too many to tell!), resided in the mosque of Mosul for more than forty years. He was the author of a Quran exegesis in two versions, honored and sought by the sultan “and by his inferiors,” and known to master “the greatest name of God (*ism Allāh al-aʿẓam*).”⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ibid., 1:324–29.

⁹² Ibid., 2:224.

⁹³ Ibid., 2:272.

⁹⁴ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 7:140–41.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 7:190–92.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 8:42. The penetration of the mystery of the Greatest Name of God—who is known to possess ninety-nine of the most beautiful names—is considered to be the source of the highest bliss in this world and the next, and of miraculous powers (Annemarie Schimmel,



13. ‘Abd al-Ghaffār ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qazwīnī, Najm al-Dīn (d. 665/1267), author of *Al-Hāwī* and other works, including a book on arithmetic (*Kitāb al-Ḥisāb*), “*kāna min al-ṣāliḥīn arbāb al-aḥwāl wa-al-karāmāt*.” He could write his work at night thanks to a wondrous light glowing from his finger. Al-Subkī adds that two other Qazwīnīs were blessed by the very same wonder: ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Muḥammad al-Rafī‘ī and his father.⁹⁷ Al-Rafī‘ī’s powers are attested in a separate entry,⁹⁸ where he is described as exceptionally learned and pious, an author of important works in jurisprudence, *tafsīr*, and hadith, and highly praised by contemporary scholars. Al-Nawawī is quoted as saying that al-Rafī‘ī (d. 623/1226) was “one of the local righteous men (*al-ṣāliḥīn al-mutamakkinīn*), who had many *karāmāt*.”⁹⁹

Mystical Dimensions of Islam [Chapel Hill, 1975], 25, 177).

⁹⁷ Al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt*, 8:276–78. For al-Rafī‘ī’s light see *ibid.*, 284.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8:281–93.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:284.



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