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The Politics of Place in the Works of Ibn Taymīyah and Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī

It is well known that from its inception Arabic geographical writing was linked to political power. Among the earliest geographers in the Islamic world were career administrators for the Abbasid regime, and their works reflected—and at times facilitated—the monitoring, taxation, and general control of an empire.¹ This role of geographer-administrator continued well into the Mamluk period, and one of the two individuals whose writing will be analyzed below, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī, fits easily into this category. However, other kinds of writing were devoted to representations of territory, sometimes in ways that were not so directly connected to political power or that were meant to challenge such power. Even though the notable religious scholar Ibn Taymīyah is not usually associated with geography, some of his works explicitly invoke the geographical imagination in order to exhort political leaders or question their authority. In this article, I argue that the representation of territory was a useful strategy for promoting particular agendas, adopted equally by scholars of such contrasting orientations and backgrounds as Ibn Taymīyah and Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī. This argument also allows me to show that what I have called a “discourse of place” was not only alive and well but also a potent mode of political expression in the early eighth/fourteenth century.

The discourse of place is a conceptual framework that brings together texts devoted in whole or large part to representing a plot of land, often at the scale of a city or region, and is meant to transcend conventional bounds of genre by illuminating patterns among works that are often categorized separately, such as world and regional geographies, topographical histories, religious treatises, literary anthologies, and travelogues. In other words, by treating these texts as a discourse, I maintain that they demonstrate a distinct intertextuality and a shared reservoir

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¹On the significance of “administrative geography” in the early Abbasid period, see André Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman jusqu’au milieu du 11e siècle*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1967), especially chapter 3.



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of conventions, sources, and vocabulary that make it possible to assess dynamics of production, reproduction, and transformation over time, an exercise that is possible for the Islamic world from as early as the third/ninth century on.² Thus, a comparative and historical analysis of works in the discourse of place illustrates the flexible ways in which authors could draw from similar sources for different purposes and employ representations of territory to express a variety of loyalties and agendas over the centuries.

To get a sense for how the discourse of place operated in the early Mamluk period, I will analyze selected works by Ibn Taymīyah and Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī, two well-known and prolific authors and near contemporaries, though the younger al-ʿUmarī came of age in a much more politically stable and peaceful climate, a contrast that is reflected in their writing. These two authors make for an illuminating comparative case because of their different backgrounds and attitudes toward the Mamluk regime. Although both of them occasionally clashed with members of the ruling elite, Ibn Taymīyah's career reflects the anxieties and concerns of the would-be independent member of the *ʿulamāʾ* constantly negotiating his distance from the regime. By contrast, al-ʿUmarī came from a family of career administrators and was groomed from an early age to work directly for the state. These differences make possible a fruitful comparison of the ways in which they each participated in the discourse of place as a means of accommodating, addressing, or assessing Mamluk power.

Ibn Taymīyah as Syrian Patriot

Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymīyah's family fled the vicinity of Ḥarrān (near present-day Urfa, formerly known as Edessa, in Turkey) for Damascus when Ibn Taymīyah was six years old in 667/1269. Educated in Hanbali madrasahs in Damascus, Ibn Taymīyah was qualified to issue fatwas, or religio-juridical opinions, by the age of seventeen, and in his twenties he had already occupied prominent teaching posts and delivered public lectures at the Umayyad Mosque. He was active as a local leader in Damascus during the invasions of Syria by the Ilkhanid ruler Ghāzān in 699/1299–1300 and 700/1300–1, urging people to stay in the city and resist the Mongols. Again, during Ghāzān's third invasion of Syria in 702/1303, he exhorted the Mamluk army to defend Damascus, and he and his students joined the combatants. Over the next two decades, he wrote hundreds of fatwas and religious treatises, some of which gained him considerable notoriety and caused him to come into conflict with other religious scholars, Sufis, and members of the Mamluk administration on more than one occasion. Having spent time in and

²For more on the "discourse of place" and its early development, see Zayde Antrim, *Routes and Realms: The Power of Place in the Early Islamic World* (New York, 2012).



out of prisons in both Cairo and Damascus, he finally died in a Mamluk prison in Damascus in 728/1328.³

As mentioned before, Ibn Taymīyah is not generally thought of as a geographically-oriented scholar. As far as his interest in territory goes, he is most known for his strong stance against *ziyārah* (“pious visitation”) of a variety of sites thought to bring *barakah* (“blessings”) to the visitor, such as mountain tops, caves, and tombs, most famously the tomb of the Prophet Muḥammad in Medina and various loci of devotion in and around Jerusalem.⁴ Although I will not deal directly with his stance on *ziyārah* here, I do consider his writings on *ziyārah* to engage the terms and conventions of the discourse of place, if only in order to reject them, and that this rejection had immense political resonance—in fact, it was the reason for his final incarceration. I will return to this briefly at the end of the article. The other major territory-related concern in his oeuvre is a consideration of the *faḍā’il* (“merits”) of the region of “al-Shām,” a toponym meant to convey the area sometimes referred to as geographical or Greater Syria, which is my focus here.⁵ While his stance against *ziyārah* constituted a dissenting voice, his representation of Syria as meritorious was much more in line with the way in which the discourse of place had evolved by his time. That is, in a handful of essays and fatwas, he uses source material and conventions that would have been familiar to his audience from a proliferation of other *faḍā’il* treatises in circulation on Syria and Syrian cities—not to mention the many on other towns and regions in the Islamic world—composed over the past several centuries.⁶

³The biographical literature on Ibn Taymīyah is copious. For prominent examples, see Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Jād al-Ḥaqq (Cairo, 1966–67), 1:154–70; Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah fī al-Tārīkh*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwad et al. (Beirut, 1994), 14:7–11. See also Henri Laoust, “La biographie d’Ibn Taymīya,” *Bulletin d’Etudes Orientales* 9 (1942–43): 115–62.

⁴See Niels Henrik Olesen, *Culte des saints et pèlerinages chez Ibn Taymiyya* (Paris, 1991); *Ibn Taymiyya’s Struggle against Popular Tradition*, ed. and trans. Muḥammad ʿUmar Memon (The Hague, 1976); Christopher S. Taylor, *In the Vicinity of the Righteous* (Leiden, 1999), 168–218; Josef Meri, *The Cult of Saints among Muslims and Jews in Medieval Syria* (Oxford, 2002), 125–40; C. D. Matthews, “A Muslim Iconoclast (Ibn Taymiyyeh) on the ‘Merits’ of Jerusalem and Palestine,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 56, no. 1 (1936): 1–21.

⁵In the English translations from Ibn Taymīyah’s works that follow, whenever I use “Syria,” the corresponding Arabic term is “al-Shām.” Like many authors from this period, Ibn Taymīyah uses the toponym “Dimashq” when he wants to refer to the city of Damascus and the toponym “al-Shām” when he wants to refer to a greater regional entity, which is, nonetheless, only vaguely delineated, but which certainly includes multiple cities, towns, and rural areas, among them Damascus and Jerusalem. In other words, “al-Shām” is not often used as a synonym for Damascus in this period, as it is in modern usage.

⁶For more on *faḍā’il* literature, see Rudolf Sellheim, “Faḍīla,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (hereafter *EI2*), 2:728–29; Ernst August Gruber, *Verdienst und Rang: Die Faḍā’il als literarisches und*



Because texts enumerating the *faḍā'il* of cities and regions were so popular by his time, it will be useful to paraphrase Niels Henrik Olesen's important discussion of Ibn Taymīyah's attitude toward this enterprise more generally. Olesen persuasively establishes Ibn Taymīyah's reluctance to endow any locality with permanent *faḍā'il*.⁷ According to Ibn Taymīyah, *faḍā'il* reside in people, not places, and at any given time the *faḍā'il* of a locality may only be expressed in terms of the *faḍā'il* of its inhabitants. Furthermore, Olesen observes that Ibn Taymīyah recommends residence in a particular locality only if it provides the best conditions for an individual believer's obedience to God (*tā'ah*) and performance of good works (*ḥasanāt*).⁸ According to Ibn Taymīyah: "Residence in any spot that provides the conditions for someone to be the most obedient to God and His Prophet and to perform the most good works and charitable deeds, inasmuch as he or she is the most aware, most capable of, and most enthusiastic about doing so, is preferable to a spot in which the circumstances for obedience to God and His Prophet are other than that."⁹ Since the best conditions for such piety might vary from time to time and from believer to believer, no single locality could possibly provide such conditions to all believers and for all time.¹⁰ Nonetheless, temporary *faḍā'il* might accrue to a place if a particular historical context made it a physical setting that nurtured faith and stimulated righteous action in its residents.¹¹

Despite this reluctance to attribute *faḍā'il* directly and indefinitely to territory, he seems to do just this to Syria.¹² In an essay on the *manāqib* ("virtues") of Syria,

gesellschaftliches Problem in Islam (Freiburg, 1975).

⁷Olesen, *Culte des saints*, 193–211.

⁸*Ibid.*, 206–8.

⁹Ibn Taymīyah, *Majmū' Fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymīyah*, 35 vols., ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Qāsim al-Āṣimī al-Najdī al-Ḥanbalī and Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad al-Āṣimī al-Najdī al-Ḥanbalī (Riyadh, [1961–66]), 27:39. This work will be hereafter referred to as "MF." Compare with MF, 18:283; translated in Yahya Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule* (Oxford, 2006), 80: "That is why the best land, for what is of merit for any man, is a land where he is more obedient to God and His Messenger. This varies as situations (*hāl*) vary, and by no means is the land identified where it would be better for one to settle."

¹⁰Olesen, *Culte des saints*, 207.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 208.

¹²This discussion is based primarily on the following two texts: "Faṣl thabata lil-Shām wa-ahlihi manāqib bi-al-kitāb wa-al-sunnah wa-āthār al-'ulamā'" (Essay on the virtues attached to Syria and its people in the Quran, the Sunnah, and scholarly traditions) in MF, 27:505–11; and "Mas'alah: hal tufaddalu al-iqāmah fi al-Shām 'alā ghayrihi min al-bilād? (Question [introducing a fatwa]: is residence in Syria preferable to other countries?)" in MF, 27:39–47. These texts are not dated, but, as will become clear in the discussion below, the former postdates Ghāzān's first invasion of Syria in 699/1299 and the latter probably does too. Olesen argues that few of Ibn Taymīyah's writings regarding the *faḍā'il* can be dated with precision, but that they display considerable



Ibn Taymīyah starts by claiming that “blessings reside in it” (*al-barakah fīhi*).¹³ This is a remarkably unqualified statement for Ibn Taymīyah to make in representing a plot of land, and he justifies it on the basis of an exegesis of five Qurānic verses (7:137, 17:1, 21:71, 21:81, 34:18), each of which contains some variation on the phrase “the land that [God] blessed” (*al-arḍ allatī bāraknā fīhā*).¹⁴ The first of these verses refers to “the land both east and west” that God blessed for the Israelites; the second to the area around al-Masjid al-Aqṣā blessed by God, which acted as the destination for Muḥammad’s “Night Journey” (*isrāʾ*);¹⁵ the third to the land that God blessed and to which He sent Abraham and Lot; the fourth to the land blessed by God for Solomon’s kingdom; and the fifth to the towns that God blessed and to which He instructed the people of Sheba to migrate.

In all five verses, Ibn Taymīyah interprets the land that God blessed as Syria.¹⁶ Furthermore, Ibn Taymīyah points out that Syria is home to Mount Sinai, on the summit of which Moses received his revelation, as referred to in Sūrat al-Ṭūr (52:1) and Sūrat al-Tīn (95:2).¹⁷ Thus, Ibn Taymīyah situates Syria’s blessings in the context of sacred history, or the unfolding of God’s plan for humankind punctuated

consistency and it is likely their numbers increased toward the end of his life; Olesen, *Culte des saints*, 11.

¹³MF, 27:505. Olesen suggests that he uses the term *manāqib* on purpose, as it connotes the virtues of people whereas *faḍāʾil* connotes the merits of things or places; Olesen, *Culte des saints*, 192, note 1. Others have argued that the two terms are used interchangeably; see Asma Afsaruddin, “In Praise of the Caliphs: Re-creating History from the *Manāqib* Literature,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 329–50.

¹⁴MF, 27:505–6. See also *ibid.*, 27:41.

¹⁵This leaves no doubt as to the exegesis of the “Night Journey” verse (17:1) that Ibn Taymīyah favors; he considers al-Masjid al-Aqṣā a site in Syria rather than heaven. For more on this, see B. Schrieke [J. Horowitz], “Miʾrādī,” *EI2*, 7:97–100.

¹⁶Ibn Taymīyah does not mention Quran 5:21, in which Moses urges the Israelites to enter “the holy land” (*al-arḍ al-muqaddasah*), a verse that was quoted frequently in the discourse of place to refer to Syria; see, for instance, Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Damascus, 1951), 1:129–30; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Faḍāʾil al-Quds*, ed. Jibrāʾil Sulaymān Jabbūr (Beirut, 1979), 67–69; and below in the discussion of al-ʿUmarī. It is unclear why Ibn Taymīyah is willing to assign blessing but not holiness to land, though in one place he refers to an exchange between Abū al-Dardāʾ (d. 32/652) and Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 35/655 or 36/656) in which the former’s exclamation, “Onward to the holy land,” is met by the latter’s criticism, “Truly the land does not sanctify anyone; it is only a man’s actions that sanctify him” (MF, 27:45). See also MF, 18:283; translated in Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule*, 80–81. For a similar exchange relating to Syria, see Ibn al-Faqīh, *Mukhtaṣar Kitāb al-Buldān*, vol. 5 of *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1967), 115.

¹⁷MF, 27:506. This is a very unusual attribution. Most representations of Syria in the discourse of place up to Ibn Taymīyah’s time consider Syrian territory to stretch from the town of al-ʿArīsh to the Euphrates. These borders would put Mount Sinai in Egyptian territory, not Syrian. Furthermore, Sūrat al-Tīn is commonly quoted in representations of Syria in the discourse of place, but



by moments of prophecy and divine intervention to guide the faithful from Creation until the Final Judgment. It could be argued that in each of these Quranic verses God's endowment of the land of Syria with blessings was an instrumental phase in the onward march of sacred history, not a timeless, eternal endowment. Ibn Taymīyah does not, however, suggest that these blessings expired with the conclusion of the historical episode they were meant to accompany. In fact, the sense is that the repetition of this blessing over so many centuries, from the time of Abraham to Moses to Solomon to Muḥammad, solidified it as an attribute of the land itself.

Next, Ibn Taymīyah summarizes Syria's virtues on the basis of God's revelation, with an eye to both the sacred past and the sacred future, before presenting hadith as further evidence:

In [the land that God blessed] is al-Masjid al-Aqṣá and the place to which the prophets of the Israelites were sent; Abraham's immigration (*hijrah*) was to it, as was the "Night Journey" (*masrá*) of our Prophet, and His ascension (*mi'rāj*) was from it; in it is His dominion and the buttress of His religion and His book, as well as a victorious band from within His community (*tā'ifah manṣūrah min ummatihi*); in it will be the place of the [final] congregation (*maḥshar*) and of the [final] return, just as Mecca was the place of beginning. For Mecca is the "Mother of Towns" (*umm al-qurá*) from which the earth unfolded, while it will be in Syria that the people will be assembled [at the end of time].

He continues by explaining why Syria in fact could be seen as rivaling Mecca in virtues: "The place of the emission and emanation of His religion was Mecca, while the place of the appearance, perfection, and completion of His religion until the Kingdom of the Mahdī (*ḥattá mamlakat al-mahdī*) is Syria, for Mecca was the first but Syria will be the last."¹⁸ This passage could have come out of any of the works devoted to the representation of Syria in the discourse of place since the third/ninth century, so similar is it in tone and emphases, especially its eschatological dimension and the rivalry it suggests with Mecca.¹⁹ Furthermore,

not because it refers to Mount Sinai in its second verse. Rather, its first verse, "By the fig and the olive," is interpreted in these works as referring to Damascus and Jerusalem respectively.

¹⁸ *MF*, 27:507. Compare with *ibid.*, 27:43–44.

¹⁹ On the *fadā'il al-Shām* composed by al-Raba'i, see Paul M. Cobb, "Virtual Sacrality: Making Muslim Syria Sacred before the Crusades," *Medieval Encounters* 8, no. 1 (2002): 35–55. On the *fadā'il al-Shām* composed by Ibn 'Asākir, see Zayde Antrim, "Ibn 'Asakir's Representations of Syria and Damascus in the Introduction to the *Ta'rikh Madinat Dimashq*," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006): 109–29. For other examples, see al-Muqaddasi, *Kitāb Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma'rifat al-Aqālīm*, vol. 3 of *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, ed. M. J. de Goeje



it belies Ibn Taymīyah's reluctance to attribute *faḍā'il* directly and indefinitely to territory. If Syria will be the place of the perfection and completion of religion until the coming of the Mahdī—a messianic figure whose appearance heralding the end of time had long been associated with Syria—then the region's blessings are projected into the future, destined and eternal.²⁰

Following Olesen, who points out that Ibn Taymīyah's treatment of Syria as a region is markedly different from his treatment of its constituent parts, such as Jerusalem or Mount Lebanon, I argue that he departs from his usual stance on the *faḍā'il* of places, which is linked to his concerns about *ziyārah*, and reproduces material already well known in the discourse of place without critique or qualification to promote a pressing political agenda.²¹ In other words, his willingness to ascribe virtues directly to Syria is due to his historical context and his commitment to activism. The key to this agenda can be found at the opening of his essay on the *manāqib* of Syria where he states outright that “these [virtues] are among the things I depend on in my inciting the Muslims to fight the Mongols and commanding them to stay in Damascus and prohibiting them from fleeing to Egypt and calling upon the Egyptian army to come to Syria and to strengthen Syrians in this.”²² Thus, Ibn Taymīyah celebrates Syria as a territory because it was *Syrian territory* that needed defending from a military assault by the Mongols. If it was simply the Syrian people who were virtuous, then they could flee to Egypt and remain virtuous, ceding the land to the Mongols. However, Ibn Taymīyah was calling for the defense of the territory itself, as well as the people in it, and he does

(Leiden, 1967), 157; Abū al-Ma'ālī al-Musharraf ibn al-Murajjā al-Maqdisī, *Faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis wa-al-Khalīl wa-Faḍā'il al-Shām*, ed. Ofer Livne-Kafri (Shafā 'Amr, 1995), 309–27; Yāqūt al-Rūmī, *Mu'jam al-Buldān* (Beirut, 1995), 3:311–15.

²⁰For more on the connection between Syrian territory and apocalyptic prophecies, including those that mention the Mahdī, see Wilferd Madelung, “Apocalyptic Prophecies in Ḥimṣ in the Umayyad Age,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 31, no. 2 (1986): 141–85; idem, “The Sufyānī between Tradition and History,” *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986): 5–48; David Cook, “Muslim Apocalyptic and *Jihād*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 20 (1996): 66–104.

²¹Making an exception for Syria may have been more palatable to him because it was a region, the larger scale of which distances it from practices of *ziyārah* and *mujāwarah* (settling down in a holy city) which were usually more target-specific (a mosque, shrine, cemetery, or cave) and associated with cities like Mecca or Jerusalem or remote sites like mountaintops rather than regions. While he does mention Jerusalem in these texts, it is only as an example of what Syria contains in the way of blessings. For Ibn 'Asākir's similar de-emphasis on Jerusalem in favor of a greater regional sanctity for Syria, see Antrim, “Ibn 'Asākir's Representations.”

²²*MF*, 27:505. This statement suggests that these texts were composed at some point after Ghāzān's first invasion of Syria in 699/1299. For a recent discussion of his attitude toward the Mongol invasions and those of his writings that directly address them, see Denise Aigle, “The Mongol Invasions of Bilād al-Shām by Ghāzān Khān and Ibn Taymīyah's Three 'Anti-Mongol' Fatwas,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 89–120.



so by representing it as a privileged destination for immigration and a divinely favored battlefield for the struggle against disbelief, past, present, and future.

The hadith material that Ibn Taymīyah presents in these texts reinforces the notion that his intention is to incite martial activity on behalf of Syria itself. One of the key traditions quoted by Ibn Taymīyah is quite possibly the most frequently quoted hadith in the written corpus of representations of Syria up to his time. In this tradition, the Prophet Muḥammad predicts the future: “Armies (*ajnād*) will be dispatched, one to Syria, one to Iraq, and one to Yemen.” This foreshadowing of the incipient conquest period draws an enthusiastic response from the Companion ‘Abd Allāh ibn Hawālah al-Azdī (d. 58/678 or 80/699): “O Messenger of God, choose one for me!” At this, the Prophet replies: “Go to Syria.” Then he adds: “Truly, it is God’s best of His lands and for it He chooses the best of His servants. May whoever refuses stay in his Yemen and draw water from its streams; verily, God has vouchsafed Syria and its people to me.”²³ Wilferd Madelung has interpreted the extent of the circulation of this tradition as evidence of Umayyad-era support for the continuing obligation among Muslims to perform the hijrah and thus to join the ranks of recruits in Syria for wars against the Byzantine Empire.²⁴ Similarly, the context in which Ibn Taymīyah cites this hadith suggests its immediate political relevance, its function as a call to arms in and on behalf of Syria at the turn of the eighth/fourteenth century.

Another major hadith quoted by Ibn Taymīyah combines this emphasis on Syria in the past as a privileged destination for armies fighting in the name of God with an emphasis on Syria as the ultimate destination for the struggles of the faithful at the end of time: “A band from my community (*tā’ifah min ummatī*) will remain victorious in the name of the truth, not impaired by those who disobey nor those who desert them, until the Final Hour (*al-sā‘ah*).”²⁵ Ibn Taymīyah describes this “victorious band,” with reference to a number of early religious authorities, as variously “in Syria,” “in Damascus,” or “in the environs of Jerusalem,” firmly establishing the last stand of the righteous against the forces of infidelity on Syrian soil.²⁶ Did Ibn Taymīyah see this apocalyptic destiny as a reality

²³MF, 27:41, 508–9. See also al-Rabā‘ī, *Faḍā’il al-Shām wa-Dimashq*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Damascus, 1950), 4–6; Abū al-Ma‘ālī, *Faḍā’il Bayt al-Maqdis*, 310, 313; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 1:47–90.

²⁴Madelung, “Has the Hijra Come to an End?” *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 54 (1986): 228.

²⁵MF, 27:43, 507. Other examples of this hadith in representations of Syria and Syrian cities include Abū al-Ma‘ālī, *Faḍā’il Bayt al-Maqdis*, 159–60, 319, 323; al-Wāsiṭī, *Faḍā’il al-Bayt al-Muqaddas*, ed. Isaac Hasson (Jerusalem, 1979), 26; Emmanuel Sivan, “La genèse de la Contre-Croisade: un traité damasquin du début du XIIe siècle,” *Journal Asiatique* 154 (1966): 210, 218; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 1:250–57, 292–95.

²⁶MF, 27:43, 507–8. Elsewhere he uses this same hadith to suggest that it is the Mamluk regime or the Mamluk army that is the “victorious band”; see Yahya Michot, “Textes Spirituels d’Ibn



of eighth/fourteenth-century Syria, which would be confirmed upon the successful conclusion of “our jihad with the Mongols”?²⁷ At the very least, Ibn Taymīyah contends that “the religion of Islam and its shari‘ah are more visible in Syria these days than anywhere else” and implies that “these days” are sufficiently like the Last Days to merit such a representation.²⁸

He concludes his essay on the *manāqib* of Syria with the following double prediction, victory in the present as a mirror image of victory in the future: “God will show the Muslims the truth of what I have promised them and the blessing with which I have charged them, and that is a great victory the like of which Muslims have not seen since the Kingdom of Mongols, which oppresses the people of Islam, set out [against us]. For truly, they will not flee, and they will be victorious, just as they will be victorious at the gate of Damascus (*bāb Dimashq*) in the Great Battle (*al-ghazwah al-kubrā*).”²⁹ The phrase “gate of Damascus” is an allusion to another version of the aforementioned hadith, mysteriously not included in the essay but certainly familiar to Ibn Taymīyah’s audience because of its frequent mention in other works from the discourse of place, which describes the “victorious band” as “fighting at and around the gates of Damascus.”³⁰ Thus, Ibn Taymīyah takes advantage of the intertextuality of the discourse of place to put a resonant phrase like “gate of Damascus” to work for his agenda, not only to galvanize support for the present struggle against the Mongols, which happened to be taking place at the gates of Damascus, but also to characterize it as a kind of dress rehearsal for the successful stand of the faithful at the end of time.

Though he repeatedly reminds his audience that merits may accrue to people, and specifically to people’s actions, and not to places as such, he seems to have made an exception for Syria. In enumerating its divine blessings and asserting its status as a theater of righteous struggle in the past, present, and future, Ibn Taymīyah was communicating a political agenda, even a wartime statement of patriotism—a representation of a territory as inherently meritorious, the purpose of which is to inspire its defense from aggressors. Ibn Taymīyah’s well-known student ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) reports that Ibn Taymīyah confronted the Mamluk sultan in 700/1300–1, declaring: “If you renounce Syria and its protection, we will proclaim for Syria a sultan who will guard and protect

Taymiyya XIII,” 2 (<http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/works/ITA%20Texspi%2013.pdf>); Aigle, “The Mongol Invasions of Bilād al-Shām,” 111.

²⁷ *MF*, 27:510.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 27:41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27:510–11.

³⁰ See Abū al-Ma‘ālī, *Faḍā’il Bayt al-Maqdis*, 158; al-Rabā‘ī, *Faḍā’il al-Shām*, 75–76; Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 1:240–49; Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Bughyat al-Ṭalab fī Tārīkh Ḥalab*, ed. Suhayl Zakkar (Beirut, n.d.), 1:40.



and will derive profit from it in times of security... If it was decreed that you were not the rulers or the kings of Syria and if Syrians asked for your help, you would [still] be obligated to help them. How [much more is this the case] since you are their rulers and their sultans and they are your subjects and you are responsible for them?”³¹

While Ibn Taymīyah certainly defended the Mamluks from the charges of infidelity launched at them by the Mongols,³² the important thing here is not whether he would have actually advocated rebellion against the Mamluks if they failed to protect Syria,³³ but that his representation of Syria should be seen in the context of a particular political agenda, and perhaps what Yahya Michot has called his “profound utilitarianism.”³⁴ Thus, even if he did not believe that *faḍā’il* resided in places, he was willing to risk a bit of inconsistency and to reproduce selectively the rhetoric of Syrian particularism already widely familiar from the discourse of place as a means to the pressing end of defending the region from the Mongols.

Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī as a Political Geographer

Born in Damascus in 700/1301, just after the second of Ghāzān’s invasions of Syria, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Faḍl Allāh al-ʿUmarī was educated specifically for service in the Mamluk sultan’s chancery.³⁵ After his father was appointed head of the chancery (*kitābat al-sirr*) in Cairo by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn in 729/1328, al-ʿUmarī reportedly worked closely with his father and enjoyed regular contact with the sultan. However, when he criticized the appointment to the

³¹Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah*, 14:13.

³²Michot, “Textes Spirituels d’Ibn Taymiyya XIII,” note 34. See also Aigle, “The Mongol Invasions of Bilād al-Shām.”

³³Henri Laoust interprets Ibn Taymīyah on the basis of this statement as “l’avocat de la légitimité d’un véritable séparatisme syrien”; see Laoust, “La biographie,” 127. Reuven Amitai suggests we should take Ibn Kathīr’s portrayal of Ibn Taymīyah’s defiance with a grain of salt, since there is evidence that he was willing to compromise with the Mongols in 699–700/1299–1300 in order to avoid further hardship on the people of Damascus. However, this quote supposedly came in anticipation of the second invasion, and it seems likely that at this point he would adopt a more militant posture in order to avoid a situation in which he might have to compromise again. See Amitai, “The Mongol Occupation of Damascus in 1300: A Study of Mamluk Loyalties,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni (Leiden, 2004), 34–35, note 56.

³⁴Michot, *Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule*, 20.

³⁵He also received a fairly traditional religious education, counting among his teachers many of the notable ‘*ulamā*’ of Damascus, including Ibn Taymīyah; see, for examples among his earliest biographers, Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafādī, *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi-al-Wafayāt*, ed. Aḥmad al-Arnā’ūt and Turkī Muṣṭafā (Beirut, 2000), 8:163–75; Muḥammad ibn Shākir al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut, 1973), 1:157–61.



chancery in Damascus of a Coptic convert supported by both the sultan and the powerful governor of Syria Sayf al-Dīn Abū Saʿīd Tankiz, he fell into disfavor and was replaced in the chancery by one of his brothers. A relatively quick reversal of fortunes, prompted by the execution of Tankiz in 741/1340 and the death of the sultan not long afterwards, returned him to public service and to his hometown of Damascus. He worked in the chancery there for some time before retiring to private life until his death in 749/1349.³⁶ Both during his years in the Mamluk chancery and after his retirement, al-ʿUmarī wrote scores of works, the most famous of which, and the one under study here, is his *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār*, a voluminous work combining geography, biography, and history in the style, as many have noted, of Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Masʿūdī’s fourth/tenth-century *Murūj al-Dhahab wa-Maʿādin al-Jawhar*.³⁷

While Ibn Taymīyah singles out Syrian territory in his writings on the basis of divine favor, al-ʿUmarī regards a plot of land worthy of singling out if it can be shown to be a major unit of political jurisdiction. In other words, for him the exercise of dividing the world into regions is one of what could be called political or administrative geography, an exercise to which he devotes the first four “books” (*sifr*, pl. *asfār*) of the *Masālik al-Abṣār* before shifting to biographical and historical material.³⁸ In the introduction, al-ʿUmarī criticizes geographical works that describe “the conditions of the regions and what is in them” (*aḥwāl al-aqālīm wa-mā fihā*), but do not include any account of “who has determined their condi-

³⁶For summaries of the extant biographical information about al-ʿUmarī, see D. S. Rice, “A Miniature in an Autograph of Shihāb al-dīn Ibn Faḍlallāh al-ʿUmarī,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13, no. 4 (1951): 856–67; and the editor’s introduction to al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār*, ed. Kāmil Salmān al-Jubūrī (Beirut, 2010), 1:5–66.

³⁷Al-ʿUmarī’s *Masālik al-Abṣār* was not the only early eighth/fourteenth-century work of its type. The Egyptian civil servant Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī (d. 732/1333) authored a universal history, geography, and administrative manual entitled *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab* modeled on the earlier *Mabāhij al-Fikar wa-Manāhij al-Ibar* by the Maghribī book dealer Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Waṭwāṭ (d. 718/1318). These works are longer and more encyclopedic than the *Masālik al-Abṣār*, and though they include sections on the geography of Egypt and Syria, they do not represent the imperial ordering of the Mamluk territories as comprehensively as al-ʿUmarī’s work does. For more on al-Nuwayrī and Mamluk encyclopedism, see Elias Muhanna, “Why Was the 14th Century a Century of Arab Encyclopaedism?,” in *Encyclopaedism from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Jason König and Greg Woolf (Cambridge, 2013), 343–56; and idem, “Encyclopaedism in the Mamluk Period: The Composition of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nuwayrī’s (d. 1333), *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab*” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2012).

³⁸He divides the work into two parts, the first (books 1–4) on “the earth and what it comprises” and the second (books 5–27) on “the inhabitants of the earth.” For a complete list of contents, see the volume of indices published as al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār*, vol. 28, ed. Fuat Sezgin (Frankfurt am Main, 2001).



tions” (*man qannana/bayyana aḥwālahā*) in the past and in the present.³⁹ The term he favors for a plot of land that may be subjected to such analysis is *mamlakah*, which connotes not merely a region, for which the more neutral term *iqḷīm* would suffice, but a “political realm,” or a territory delineated by the political power that controls it.⁴⁰ Accordingly, he explains that the *Masālik al-Abṣār* will catalog “what is comprised by the *mamlakah* of each sultan,” defining “sultan” as someone who can lay claim to a *salṭanah*, i.e., extensive territory and substantial armies and wealth, which may include semi-autonomous city-states (such as Ḥamāh in the Mamluk Sultanate and Mardīn in the Ilkhanate).⁴¹ In addition, he warns the reader that he will not provide extensive commentary on territories under the control of non-Muslim political powers (*mamālik al-kaffār*).⁴²

Thus, his vision of a plot of land worthy of written representation is one that is under the control of what he would consider a major Muslim political regime. He concludes his introduction with a fitting dedication for a work so focused on the way in which political power shapes territory: “I entered into [the composition of this work] during the days of he who sustained us with his beneficence and safeguarded us in his [capacity as] sultan,” i.e., during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (709/1310–741/1341), whom he addresses as *mālik al-baḥrayn khādīm al-ḥaramayn ḥāmī al-qiblatayn*, among other lofty titles in rhymed prose. This title, “king of the two seas (meaning the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean), protector of the two sanctuaries (meaning Mecca and Medina), and guardian of the two qiblas (meaning Mecca and Jerusalem),” explicitly constructs the sultan’s sovereignty in terms of geography, both in its great extent

³⁹ Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yaḥyá al-Sariḥī (Abu Dhabi, 2003), 1:28. Until recently with the 2010 publication of the aforementioned Beirut edition, there had been no published critical editions of the entire work. In this article, I will refer to different editions for different parts of the work.

⁴⁰ This is significant because even the third/ninth and fourth/tenth-century geographers of what has become known as the “classical school” or the *masālik wa-al-mamālik* (“routes and realms”) tradition do not regularly use the term *mamlakah* to designate plots of land at the regional scale, preferring instead the more generic terms *iqḷīm* (pl. *aqālīm*) or *bilād* (pl. *buldān*). The most well known of these geographers, al-Iṣṭakhrī, Ibn Ḥawqal, and al-Muqaddasī, use the term *mamlakah* only in reference to the *mamlakat al-Islām* (“realm of Islam”), which they then divide into regions called *aqālīm*. See al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Al-Masālik wa-al-Mamālik*, ed. Muḥammad Jābir ʿAbd al-ʿĀl al-Ḥīnī (Cairo, 1961), 15–19; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*, ed. J. H. Kramers, vol. 2 of *Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1967), 9–17; al-Muqaddasī, *Kitāb Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm*, 62–66. On the *masālik wa-al-mamālik* tradition, see Miquel, *La géographie humaine du monde musulman*, vol. 1, chapter 8.

⁴¹ Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. al-Sariḥī, 1:30. On Ḥamāh, see also al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār: Mamālik Miṣr wa-al-Shām wa-al-Hijāz wa-al-Yaman*, ed. Ayman Fuʿād Sayyid (Cairo, 1985), 66–67.

⁴² Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. al-Sariḥī, 1:31.



(encompassing two major bodies of water) and its sacred sites (including the cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem).

Nevertheless, al-ʿUmarī devotes the first and second books of the *Masālik al-Abṣār* to other methods of dividing and depicting the world well-established in the discourse of place by his time, such as the system of latitudinal climes adapted from pre-Islamic Hellenistic geographical traditions, which inspired the maps preserved in one of the extant manuscripts of the work.⁴³ Fuat Sezgin claims that this manuscript, an author’s copy dating to 745/1345, contains the earliest surviving map created on the basis of a set of geographical coordinates inherited from Claudius Ptolemy’s *Geography* and revised under the command of the Abbasid caliph al-Maʿmūn in the early third/ninth century, a project known as “al-Ṣūrah al-Maʿmūniyah.” Al-ʿUmarī’s world map, Sezgin argues, furnishes evidence of the unprecedented strides in mathematical geography and cartography made by scholars in Baghdad over 500 years earlier.⁴⁴ Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact that al-ʿUmarī includes not only a discussion of the latitudinal clime system, but also a world map, regional maps, and various diagrams that illustrate it, demonstrates the continuing importance of graphic along with written depictions of territory in the discourse of place.⁴⁵ It also allows him to exhibit his mastery over the rich heritage of geographical knowledge accumulated in the Islamic world by his time. However, apart from providing a context within which he could argue that the realms ruled by Muslim sultans were located in the most geographically and cosmologically central, and thus climatically favored, portions of the inhabited world, this discussion is relatively incidental to the divisions of the world in which he invests the most value in the work, the “realms of Islam” (*mamālik al-Islām*).

In the third and fourth books, he turns to these avowedly political units, which include, of course, the territories controlled by the Mamluk sultans. First, he establishes the centrality of the “realms of Islam” within the world as a whole as a

⁴³This manuscript, including its maps, has been reproduced in facsimile in al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār*, vol. 1, ed. Fuat Sezgin (Frankfurt am Main, 1988).

⁴⁴Fuat Sezgin, *Mathematical Geography and Cartography in Islam and Their Continuation in the Occident*, trans. Guy Moore and Geoff Sammon (Frankfurt am Main, 2000–7), 1:71–137; 3:2–3 (map 1a). Other scholars have argued that the maps designed as part of “al-Ṣūrah al-Maʿmūniyah” have been lost and that al-ʿUmarī’s maps were based on those of al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī (d. 560/1165); see, for example, Gerald R. Tibbetts, “Later Cartographic Developments,” in *The History of Cartography*, vol. 2/book 1, *Cartography in the Traditional Islamic and South Asian Societies*, ed. J. B. Harley and David Woodward (Chicago, 1992), 150–51. For a further contrasting view on al-ʿUmarī’s maps, see David A. King, *World-Maps for Finding the Direction and Distance to Mecca: Innovation and Tradition in Islamic Science* (Leiden, 1999), 23–49, especially 34–37.

⁴⁵On the various methods of dividing the world and the depiction of these divisions in written and graphic form in the early discourse of place, see Antrim, *Routes and Realms*, chapters 4–5.



justification, it is suggested, for their centrality within his work: “The realms of Islam are situated, by the grace of God, in the best parts of the inhabited world, from east to west and from north to south; these are the best parts because they do not stretch beyond the limits of extreme heat or of extreme cold, but stay within the bounds of a pleasant climate.”⁴⁶ However, even within his description of the “realms of Islam,” which he arranges in sequence from east to west, it is possible to discern a further focal point, Egypt (*Miṣr*) and Syria (*al-Shām*), the heartland of the Mamluk Sultanate. In fact, al-ʿUmarī explains that the research he conducted for the *Masālik al-Abṣār* would have been impossible if it were not for his experience in the Mamluk chancery, which afforded him the opportunity to meet the ambassadors, merchants, and travelers from the other “realms of Islam” who also recognized the Mamluk Sultanate as a political, economic, and cultural center.⁴⁷ Thus, he explains that it was through the lens of imperial administration that he was able to see and describe the diverse and distant lands, from India and Iran, to Mali and Ethiopia, to Morocco and Spain, that together constituted the “realms of Islam.”

He opens his section on Egypt, Syria, and the Hijāz (book 3, chapter 6) by defining these territories as “a single realm” (*mamlakah wāhidah*), most of which is located in the third clime, though some portions, such as Aleppo, fall in the fourth.⁴⁸ This is significant for two reasons. First, he is explicitly differentiating his division of the world into realms from the latitudinal clime system, as a single realm might clearly overlap two or more climes. Second, by representing Egypt, Syria, and the Hijāz as a “single realm,” he is challenging what had been the dominant system for regional divisions within the Islamic world up to that point, a division in which Egypt and Syria were not only separate regions, but often competitors.⁴⁹ Al-ʿUmarī continues his description of this single political and geographical unit, a plot of land coterminous with the extent of Mamluk power in the eighth/fourteenth century: “It is a large, prosperous realm, and its seat of government is the Citadel of the Mountain [in Cairo] and then Damascus.”⁵⁰ Thus, Cairo is the first city of the realm, politically speaking, and Damascus the second. Although al-ʿUmarī was from Damascus, and although Damascus was often the staging ground for challenges to the authority of the reigning sultan in the Mamluk period, he does not characterize it as a rival to Cairo, but as a complementary, albeit secondary, urban node within the same realm.

⁴⁶ Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁹ On this, see Antrim, *Routes and Realms*, chapters 4–5.

⁵⁰ Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 11.



After a lengthy explanation of the administrative and political infrastructure that maintained Cairo's control over its subordinate territories, including a lexicon of royal titles, religious appointments, military posts, bureaucratic offices, and categories of landed property and taxation, al-ʿUmarī embarks on his representation of Syria, a representation that focuses on the social, economic, and political structures that integrated the region fully within the realm. This representation also leaves little doubt that al-ʿUmarī's loyalties were to the Mamluk sultans and the territories they controlled in their entirety, rather than to the region of Syria or his hometown of Damascus. Nonetheless, the pages devoted to Damascus, which feature detailed topographical descriptions of its gardens, palaces, suburbs, and water systems, are prefaced by a passage that reveals the significant political and administrative status of the city both within Syria and within the realm more broadly: "All the administrative posts that exist in Cairo also exist in Damascus. This is not the case for the other cities of Syria. For example, [Damascus has] four chief magistracies (*qadāʾ al-qūdāh*) for the four schools of law, a magistrate of the army, a treasury from which to withdraw disbursements and robes of honor, armories and arsenals, and accommodations for the sultan's immediate attendants, such that, if the sultan visited Damascus without retinue, there would be in the city all of the officials necessary for his government."⁵¹ Damascus in al-ʿUmarī's representation was an understudy for the role of imperial capital held by Cairo. The sultan could make an unplanned visit to Damascus without interrupting the smooth operation of state affairs. Nowhere does al-ʿUmarī reveal any tension between the interests of Damascus and Cairo, nor any hint that the Mamluk sultan might not be willing or able to mount a sufficient defense of his Syrian territories if they were threatened with invasion. Rather he portrays Damascus as critical to the power and security of the realm as a whole.

He maintains this emphasis on administrative organization through the rest of his representation of Syria, underlining its status as an integral part of a well-functioning political realm. One of al-ʿUmarī's strategies in this section is to include apt quotations from another Syrian-born bureaucrat who spent most of his career serving a sultan in Cairo, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1199), the senior chancery official under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn ibn Ayyūb over a century earlier.⁵² These quotes evoke a parallel between the effective administration of joint Syrian and Egyptian territories past and present and provide colorful details for his topographical survey of the twenty-eight districts (*ʿamal*, pl. *aʿmāl*) falling within the four hinterlands

⁵¹Ibid., 111. For more on the administrative organization of the Mamluk Sultanate, see William Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955), 81–115; Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *La Syrie à l'époque des Mamelouks* (Paris, 1923), xix–cxix.

⁵²Indeed, his biographers tend to compare him to al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil; see al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-Wafī bi-al-Wafayāt*, 8:163; al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-Wafayāt*, 1:158.



or marches (*ṣafaqāt*) of Damascus: the southern territories of the Ḥawrān and the Ghawr, the southern coastal territories of Palestine, the northern coastal and mountain territories of Lebanon and the Biqāʿ Valley, and the northeastern territories in and around Homs and Palmyra.⁵³ He also highlights the five other Syrian cities that acted as centers of formal administrative units and to which were assigned dependencies: Ḥamāh, Aleppo, Tripoli, Ṣafad, and al-Karak.⁵⁴ This careful delineation of the administrative divisions of Syrian territory contrasts markedly with the vaguely rendered Syria to which Ibn Taymiyah ascribes virtues. Whereas for al-ʿUmarī political power brought land into sharp focus, for Ibn Taymiyah maintaining a soft focus on land was necessary not only to demand intervention in what was an unstable and shifting wartime situation but also to keep from contradicting his strict stance against the practice of visiting specific sites believed to be holy or blessed.

Al-ʿUmarī’s attention to holy sites in Syria is as much a part of his appreciation of and loyalty to the Mamluk-controlled *mamlakah* as his delineation of its administrative divisions. He inserts a paean to the combined *fadāʿil* of Egypt, Syria, and the Ḥijāz at the beginning of his discussion of the realm as a whole: “[This *mamlakah*] is among the most sublime of the realms because of what it encompasses in the way of revered districts, such as the holy land (*al-ard al-muqaddasah*), and the mosques on the strength of which was established the [hadith of] the three mosques to which alone you may saddle up your riding beasts, and the tombs of prophets, may God bless them, and Mount Sinai (*al-Ṭūr*), and the Nile and the Euphrates, which are both [rivers] of paradise.”⁵⁵ This brief sacred geography serves to emphasize the great extent of the realm as well as its coherence and unity. In particular, by mentioning the Euphrates River, al-ʿUmarī establishes a clear eastern boundary, the dividing line between the Mamluk Sultanate and the Mongol Ilkhanate, and gestures to the recurrence of this boundary in the corpus

⁵³ Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 118–22.

⁵⁴ Unlike another Mamluk-era geographer, Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī (d. 727/1327), al-ʿUmarī does not refer to each of these units as a *mamlakah*, perhaps because, as mentioned above, al-ʿUmarī’s use of the term *mamlakah* in this section is reserved for the combined territories of Egypt and Syria under Mamluk dominion. Rather, al-ʿUmarī indicates the status of capital city of a Syrian administrative unit by enumerating the dependent districts assigned to it. By naming Gaza and Homs as dependencies of Damascus, he reduces al-Dimashqī’s eight Syrian administrative units to six. Since al-ʿUmarī, unlike al-Dimashqī, was employed within the Mamluk administration, his division of Syrian territory was probably more accurate. Moreover, these are the same six administrative units into which another Mamluk bureaucrat, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), divides Syria several decades later in his *Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshā fī Ṣināʿat al-Inshāʿ*. See Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *La Syrie*, 32–134; Nicola Ziadeh, *Urban Life in Syria under the Mamluks* (Beirut, 1953), 13–14.

⁵⁵ Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 11.



of representations of Syria in the discourse of place up to his time.⁵⁶ Significantly, this was a dividing line that had been repeatedly breached during the numerous Mongol invasions of Syria that occurred over the first half of Ibn Taymīyah's lifetime, and his experience of this state of chronic insecurity may explain in part his more ambivalent attitude toward Mamluk power. Al-ʿUmarī's mention of Mount Sinai in this passage can also be contrasted with Ibn Taymīyah's specific attribution of Mount Sinai to Syria. For al-ʿUmarī, there is no competition between Egypt and Syria; Mount Sinai belongs to the realm as a whole. Finally, this passage features a reference to the "hadith of the three mosques," all three of which—the mosques of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem—were located in the realm, reinforcing Mamluk claims to the territory of the Ḥijāz as well as to Syria and Egypt.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, it is to Jerusalem in particular that al-ʿUmarī assigns the lion's share of the realm's religious virtues.⁵⁸ He identifies the destination of Muḥammad's "Night Journey" as Jerusalem⁵⁹ and "the land that God blessed" (in Quran 21:71, among others) as a circle around Jerusalem with a forty-mile radius.⁶⁰ He describes the holy land (*al-arḍ al-muqaddasah*, in Quran 5:21) as stretching "from the Jordan River known as al-Sharīʿah to Palestine known as al-Ramlah in longitude and from the Syrian Sea to the cities of Lot in latitude."⁶¹ Jerusalem also appears as the site of notable religious endowments, building projects, and infrastructural renovations—in particular the water system established by the Syrian

⁵⁶The Euphrates was frequently invoked as the eastern boundary of "al-Shām" in exegesis of the same Quranic verses that Ibn Taymīyah cites on "the land that God blessed"; see, for examples, al-Rabaʿī, *Faḍāʾil al-Shām*, 11; Abū al-Maʿālī, *Faḍāʾil Bayt al-Maqdis*, 317; Ibn ʿAsākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*, 1:129–30, 133; al-Sulamī, *Tarḥīb Ahl al-Islām fī Suknā al-Shām*, ed. Iyād Khālid al-Ṭabbāʿ (Damascus, 1998), 26; Ibn al-ʿAdīm, *Bughyat al-Ṭalab*, 1:41–44; Ibn Shaddād, *Al-Aʿlāq al-Khaṭīrah fī Dhikr Umarāʾ al-Shām wa-al-Ḥazīrah*, vol. 1, pt. 1, ed. Dominique Sourdel (Damascus, 1953), 8. It was also often mentioned as one of Syria's borders in earlier geographical literature, such as al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Al-Masālik wa-al-Mamālik*, 43; Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ*, 165; Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, 3:312.

⁵⁷On the "hadith of the three mosques," see M. J. Kister, "You shall only set out for three mosques," a study of an early tradition," *Le Muséon* 82 (1969): 173–96.

⁵⁸This also applies to the first section of the work as a whole, in which he lays out the divisions of the world and describes their contents, including prominent mosques and other loci of devotion, though Damascus comes in a close second. See al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. al-Sarīḥī, 1:130–66 (on the Kaʿbah and holy sites around Mecca), 167–79 (on the Prophet's Mosque and holy sites around Medina), 180–230 (on al-Masjid al-Aqṣā and holy sites around Jerusalem), 231–71 (on the Umayyad Mosque and holy sites around Damascus), 271 (on the mosque of Córdoba).

⁵⁹Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 63. See also his treatment of al-Masjid al-Aqṣā in the general introduction to the work as a whole: al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. al-Sarīḥī, 1:180–83.

⁶⁰Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 63. See also al-Muqaddasī, *Kitāb Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm*, 173.

⁶¹Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 136–37.



governor Tankiz—ordered or financed by the Mamluk ruling elite.⁶² This kind of investment suggests the importance of Jerusalem to the realm as a destination for *ziyārah*, especially since the city is not characterized as a particularly important administrative center. Al-ʿUmarī himself seems to have visited the city and its environs for devotional purposes, stating at one point: “I entered some of these places and saw an eyeful of the marvelous structures.”⁶³ Moreover, he indicates his firsthand knowledge of the exact layout of Jerusalem’s loci of devotion, noting changes taking place in his lifetime up to the year 743/1342.⁶⁴

However, al-ʿUmarī’s Jerusalem was not only a pilgrimage destination for Muslims; he also mentions Christian and Jewish holy sites in and around the city.⁶⁵ In fact, he stresses its attractions for pilgrims from all over the world: “Noble Jerusalem is venerated among all Muslims, Jews, and Christians and is a place of pious visitation (*ziyārah*) for all of them, the difference among them being only in the sites of visitation within Jerusalem. We have only pointed this out because in it is a lesson in the mutual agreement as to its veneration and its status as a destination for visitation (*ziyārah*).”⁶⁶ In the context of the *Masālik al-Abṣār*, the non-Muslim pilgrims flocking to Jerusalem from all “the corners of the earth and the limits of the sea”⁶⁷ reinforces the image of the Mamluk Sultanate’s centrality both in the “realms of Islam” and in the inhabited world more broadly.⁶⁸ A city of such widely understood sacred significance served to strengthen the claim of the Mamluk sultans to both temporal and spiritual legitimacy.⁶⁹ However, this was more than a matter of prestige for the Mamluk sultans; it was also a source of revenue. The traveler Ibn Baṭṭūṭah mentions direct taxes levied on Christian pilgrims in Jerusalem in the year 726/1326,⁷⁰ and Muslim pilgrims were, if not taxed, then certainly dependent on the foods and services provided locally over the course of their travels.

⁶²Ibid., 137–39.

⁶³Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. al-Sariḥi, 1:219.

⁶⁴Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 64; idem, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. al-Sariḥi, 1:188–219.

⁶⁵Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 64, 138.

⁶⁶Ibid., 65.

⁶⁷Ibid., 64.

⁶⁸This representation of Jerusalem is mirrored in al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab* (Cairo, 1964), 1:325–39. For more on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem in this period, see Amikam Elad, *Medieval Jerusalem and Islamic Worship* (Leiden, 1999).

⁶⁹Part of the emphasis on Jerusalem as the major source of Mamluk prestige may also have been the fact that the holy cities of the Ḥijāz, Mecca and Medina, were not as fully under Mamluk control as the regime, or al-ʿUmarī, would have wished; see al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār*, ed. Sayyid, 65.

⁷⁰Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, *Riḥlah* (Beirut, n.d.), 59; idem, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, ed. and trans. H. A. R. Gibb (New Delhi, 2004), 1:80.



It is perhaps not surprising, then, that according to Ibn Kathīr the official pretext for Ibn Taymīyah’s arrest and imprisonment in the citadel of Damascus in the summer of 726/1326, where he was to die two years later, was his promulgation of judicial rulings against the pious visitation of sites in Jerusalem.⁷¹ In fact, by the early eighth/fourteenth century such practices had become a matter of considerable official pomp and ceremony. It has been speculated that the fêted visits of the governor of Syria, Tankiz, and of Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā’ah⁷² in 715/1316 prompted Ibn Taymīyah to write one of his most comprehensive critiques of the practice.⁷³ While he saw the defense of Syria as essential to Mamluk legitimacy, he did not see patronage of, or enrichment from, *ziyārah* as a source of prestige for the regime. Nonetheless, and despite his considerable popularity during his lifetime, there is no evidence that Ibn Taymīyah’s disapproval of *ziyārah* had much influence on the widespread recognition and celebration of Jerusalem as a pilgrimage destination or of the Mamluks as its righteous stewards. Al-‘Umarī’s writings, by contrast, reflect the considerable success the Mamluk sultans had achieved in associating the prosperity, security, and sanctity of their territories with their legitimacy as a political regime and in imposing the administrative, military, economic, and religious infrastructure necessary to maintain it.⁷⁴

In the introduction to her critical edition of the chapters on Egypt and Syria from al-‘Umarī’s *Masālik al-Abṣār*, Dorothea Krawulsky argues that the military successes of the first half-century of Mamluk rule against non-Muslim, or nominally Muslim, political powers, such as the Mongols and the Crusaders, generated a sense that the territories under Mamluk control constituted a renewed *Dār al-Islām* (“Abode of Islam”). Thus, according to Krawulsky, the intellectual production of Egyptians and Syrians in the first half of the eighth/fourteenth century was universalist and triumphalist, unlike, for instance, historical and geographical writing from Ilkhanid Iran, which was more focused on local issues.⁷⁵ The scope and ambition of the *Masālik al-Abṣār*—to describe the entire world, its inhabitants, and their history—serves to strengthen and contextualize its celebration of

⁷¹Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah*, 14:99.

⁷²Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā’ah (d. 733/1333) was the Shafi’i chief judge of Cairo and former preacher at al-Masjid al-Aqṣā in Jerusalem.

⁷³Laoust, “La biographie,” 157–58.

⁷⁴In fact, we might regard al-‘Umarī’s works as part of this infrastructure, a kind of intellectual infrastructure meant to solidify Mamluk control over the territories of Egypt and Syria in the imagination, just as it was solidified on the ground in the form of fortifications, renovations, armies, and tax collectors. For an earlier example of these parallel processes of legitimizing Mamluk rule both in texts and on the ground, see Zayde Antrim, “Making Syria Mamluk: Ibn Shaddād’s *Al-A‘lāq al-Khaṭīrah*,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2007): 1–18.

⁷⁵Al-‘Umarī, *Masālik al-Abṣār fī Mamālik al-Amṣār: Dawlat al-Mamālik al-Ūlā*, ed. Dorothea Krawulsky (Beirut, 1986), 31.



Mamluk power and certainly substantiates Krawulsky's thesis. However, it also displays al-ʿUmarī's preoccupation with the precise categorization of territory in relation to political and administrative realities.⁷⁶ Though he moves away from the kind of Syrian particularism exhibited in Ibn Taymīyah's work, the attention he pays to contemporary detail in the *Masālik al-Abṣār* reflects the experience of a worldly bureaucrat concerned less with universal Islamic unity than with the efficacy of the Mamluk state in its specifically rendered territories.⁷⁷

What I hope to have shown here is the flexibility and power of the discourse of place. Both Ibn Taymīyah and al-ʿUmarī select from established conventions in the representation of territory—quotations from the Quran and hadith, references to ancient methods of dividing the world, and attention to administrative practicalities—as a way of claiming for Syria political and military protection and belonging. Ibn Taymīyah uses a representation of Syria as an inherently meritorious region in order to demand that the Mamluks defend it against the Mongol invasion. Al-ʿUmarī uses a representation of Syria as an administratively rationalized and integral part of a broader realm to assert the power of the Mamluks and the prosperity and sanctity of the territories under their control. That they each choose to use representations of Syria as a territory to accomplish these political agendas is significant, for there would reasonably be other ways to claim legitimacy for the regime or protection for a group of people living under its authority. Instead, both authors draw from the widely-resonant reservoir of texts, strategies, and source material that made up the discourse of place. In Ibn Taymīyah's case, the decision to participate in the discourse of place was inconsistent with his dissenting stance on the *faḍā'il* of places and related issues of *ziyārah*, which suggests that he must have considered it a particularly effective means to an end,

⁷⁶Another work by al-ʿUmarī, *Al-Taʿrīf bi-al-Muṣṭalah al-Sharīf*, took this emphasis one step further. Belonging to the genre of *adab al-kātib* ("art of the clerk"), the *Taʿrīf* was intended as a handbook for the aspiring bureaucrat and provides an even more detailed, systematic survey of the administrative districts, bureaucratic offices, and postal routes assigned to Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks.

⁷⁷Al-ʿUmarī's works would serve as the basis for the better-known works on Mamluk history, geography, and administration by the early ninth/fifteenth-century Egyptians Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418) and Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1441). In particular, al-Qalqashandī's famous compendium, *Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshá fi Ṣināʿat al-Inshāʿ*, borrows wholesale from al-ʿUmarī on Egypt and, especially, Syria. The *Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshá* marks both a culmination of this trend in administrative geography and the beginning of the disintegration of the unity of the Mamluk-controlled territories that characterizes al-ʿUmarī's work. Among other differences, al-Qalqashandī's representation of Syria devotes much more space to the city of Aleppo and suggests the increasing decentralization of political power and the rising strategic importance of Aleppo in the second half of the eighth/fourteenth century. On this, see Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1967), especially 20–22.



and the end urgent enough to justify such means. Al-ʿUmārī, on the other hand, happily joined generations of administrators who had asserted the importance of their geographical knowledge to the consolidation and maintenance of political authority, generally dedicating their written work, as al-ʿUmārī does, to a particular ruler or regime. Despite their differences, both al-ʿUmārī and Ibn Taymīyah recognized the power of invoking the geographical imagination to promote a political agenda in the first half of the eighth/fourteenth century.



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