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A Tale of Hybrid Identities: Notes on Ibn Taghrībirdī's Textual and Authorial "Self-Fashioning"

Introduction

The life trajectory of Ibn Taghrībirdī and his career has stirred considerable curiosity and interest among medieval historians and modern researchers. Through their biographical depictions and pointed analysis, they all endeavor to construct a comprehensive rendering of his various historiographical undertakings. Only a few decades after his death in 874/1470, a number of medieval historians began to trace his life-story and career. Among them were al-Sakhāwī (830–902/1427–97) and al-Ṣayrafī (819–900/1416–95), who shed a critical light on his works and his whole venture in history writing.¹ The subsequent generation of sixteenth-century historians, conversely, showed a more positive assessment of his achievement in the field. Thus, under the pen of Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī,² Ibn Taghrībirdī appears as one of the greatest historians of his time. His accounts on Egypt's rulers, filtered through his courtly and somewhat Turkish perspective, even earned him the appreciation of the Ottoman sultan Selim I (1470–1520) who, during his conquest of Egypt in 1517, commissioned a Turkish translation of two of his works: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah* and *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*.³ Some centuries later, the 1792 publication of a first edition of his *Mawrid al-Laṭāfah* sparked renewed interest in Ibn Taghrībirdī.⁴ His other works came thence to the attention of European scholarship through a series of annotated editions and translations, increasing his profile among modern researchers who strove to interpret his narrative represen-

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¹ See respectively: al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw' al-lāmi' li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsi'* (Beirut, 1992), 10:305–8; al-Jawharī al-Ṣayrafī, *Inbā' al-ḥaṣr bi-abnā' al-ʿaṣr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 2002), 175–82.

² Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, ed. ʿAbd al-Qādir and Maḥmūd al-Arnāʾūt (Beirut, 1986), 9:472–73.

³ The Turkish translation of *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi* has survived to the present day. See: William Popper, tr., *History of Egypt, 1382–1469 A.D.: Translated from the Arabic Annals of Abu l-Maḥasin ibn Taghrī Birdī* (Berkeley, 1954), 1:xxiii, n. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xxii.



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tations of premodern Egyptian rulers.⁵ To better ascertain the value of his historiographical works, several attempts to contextualize his writings were made. In 1929–30 Gaston Wiet published “L’Historien Abul-Maḥāsin.”⁶ William Popper composed a biographical notice on Ibn Taghrībirdī in his translated edition of the *Nujūm*, which considered the latter’s social background, training, and achievements as a historian. Several studies followed, in some cases coming from different perspectives, like Aḥmad Darrāj’s article “La vie d’Abū L-Maḥāsin Ibn Tagrī Bardī et Son Œuvre”⁷ and Hani Hamza’s survey, which approaches the author’s life and career through the study of *waqf* documents.⁸ Despite decades of extensive research involving Ibn Taghrībirdī, few studies have evolved beyond treating his historiographical works as mere “containers of facts” or contextualizing the man and his oeuvre against a complex socio-political background. We are left with a wide-open lane for inquiry to bring a new impetus to his life-story and achievements in historical writing. To help plot a new way forward, the current article will question “dominant narratives” related to Ibn Taghrībirdī’s life and historiographical contributions. What we mean by “dominant narratives,” in this particular context, is the bulk of medieval, stereotyped representations and the modern assumptions that engage with his individual trajectory and career, and in which he was regarded as a member of the *awlād al-nās* or else as a semi-official court historian.

By relying on a textual and narratological analysis of his chief historiographical works—his biographical dictionary, *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, and his annalistic and dynastic histories, *Ḥawādith al-duhūr* and *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*—the present study will engage with his multi-layered narrative of identity. In order to move beyond pre-established apprehensions of his life and writings, this study will utilize a literary textual-oriented approach that acknowledges the importance of texts as an alternative resource for reconstructing the author’s social and cultural milieu. It will hence appropriate some theoretical outcomes from literary studies, mainly Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of “self-fashioning.” The latter concept was devised and first employed in Greenblatt’s 1980 volume *Renaissance Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* to denote the process of identity-making/formation in Re-

⁵Ibid. Some sections referring to the Crusades in his *Nujūm* appeared in 1841. Complete editions of his chronicle began to appear at the end the nineteenth century, such as Theodor W. J. Juynboll’s volumes (1855–61) or the subsequent editions published by the University of California Press (1909) and the Egyptian National Library in Cairo (1929).

⁶Gaston Wiet, “L’Historien Abul-Maḥāsin,” *Bulletin de l’Institut d’Égypte* 12, no. 1 (1929–30): 89–105.

⁷Aḥmad Darrāj, “La Vie d’Abū L-Maḥāsin Ibn Tagrī Bardī et Son Œuvre,” *Annales Islamologiques* 11 (1972): 163–81.

⁸Hani Hamza, “Some Aspects of the Economic and Social Life of Ibn Taghrībirdī Based on an Examination of His Waqfiyah,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2008): 139–72.



naissance literary writings. This particular notion of self-fashioning as “a sense of personal order, a characteristic mode of address to the world, a structure of bounded desires and always some elements of deliberate shaping in the formation and expression of identity,”⁹ will be considered in our analysis of Ibn Taghribirdī’s narrative construction of his authorial identity. Recent appropriation of the concept in medieval historical scholarship, notably in Laura Delbrugges’ collected essays, presents it as a compelling lens through which one can approach medieval historiography.¹⁰ Drawing on this, our study will focus on the individual intentions and agency in Ibn Taghribirdī’s self-representation. Eventually, this will facilitate a more thorough understanding of how the author engaged with his texts and with the practice of historical writing as whole.

Ibn Taghribirdī in the Eyes of Historians

Among the obvious questions that arise when we start dealing with Ibn Taghribirdī’s life and career are the following: how was he portrayed in contemporary and later medieval accounts? Is it possible to discern the distinguishing features that characterized his varied representations? To what extent were these depictions effective in shaping our understanding of his individual path and career trajectory? Answering these questions will, in fact, enable us to disentangle the compound and intricate narrative that was steadily built around the author and his historiographical projects. Furthermore, this appears to be an unavoidable step that we must go through to arrive at a better understanding of Ibn Taghribirdī’s identity-making process and self-fashioning maneuvers.

An obvious place to start would be the biographical sketches devoted to him in various historiographical compendia. With regard to this it should be noted that we derive the bulk of our information about Ibn Taghribirdī’s life and career from references in the following biographical dictionaries and chronographies: *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, within which we have a sort of autobiography of the author written by his presumed student Aḥmad Ibn Ḥusayn al-Turkmānī al-Marjī; al-Ṣayrafī’s *Nuzhat al-nufūs* and *Inbā’ al-ḥaṣr*; al-Sakhāwī’s *Al-Daw’ al-lāmi’*, *Al-Tibr al-masbūk*, and *Al-Dhayl al-tāmm*; al-Malaṭī’s (844–920/1440–1514) *Nayl al-amal*; Ibn Iyās’ (852–930/1448–1524) *Badā’i’ al-zuhūr*; and Ibn al-‘Imād al-Ḥanbalī’s (1032–89/1623–79) *Shadharāt al-dhahab*.¹¹ When examining the biographical data related

⁹Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), 1.

¹⁰For further details see Laura Delbrugge, *Self-Fashioning and Assumptions of Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia* (Leiden, 2015), 1–7.

¹¹Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi wa-al-mustawfā ba’da al-wāfi*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo, 1984–2009); al-Jawharī al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-nufūs wa-al-abdān fī tawārīkh al-zamān*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1970–94); idem, *Inbā’ al-ḥaṣr*; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw’ al-lāmi’*; idem, *Al-Tibr al-masbūk fī dhayl al-sulūk*, ed. Najwā Muṣṭafā Kāmil and Labībah Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā (Cairo,



to Ibn Taghrībirdī in these compilations, the first observation to be made is that they differ in terms of tone, form, and length. Thus, aside from factual details spread over numerous pages, such as the account given in al-Ṣayrafī's *Inbāʾ al-haṣr*, which is the most detailed and lengthy biographical account that came down to us—not counting the author's autobiography in *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*¹²—one can find some brief obituaries, such as the one dedicated to him in the *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr* of Ibn Iyās,¹³ as well as information scattered across individual chronicles (e.g., *Al-Tibr al-masbūk* by al-Sakhāwī) that report particular anecdotes about his life or mention certain figures from his entourage.¹⁴ Considered from a chronological standpoint, these biographical reports could be classified as follows: contemporary accounts compiled during the author's lifetime, near-contemporary accounts written in the decades after his death by historians who had known him, and late accounts produced almost a century after his death. With regard to the contemporary accounts, a particular mention must be made of the biographical note written by Ibn Taghrībirdī's otherwise unknown student—and likely personal scribe—Aḥmad al-Turkmānī al-Marjī.¹⁵ The latter's account was appended to a manuscript copy of *Al-Manhal* written at his master's request, in which he states:

When I was called to serve the author of this book, his excellency the virtuous and the right honorable amir [Ibn Taghrībirdī], the most exceptional of all time, the noblest of men and the dean of historians, and [when] he kindly tasked me with copying this splendid *Tārīkh*, which was indeed a great benefaction that he conferred upon me.... I thought it necessary to include his biography, for usually historians do not write their autobiography.¹⁶

In terms of its structure, al-Marjī's account conforms with common patterns used in other contemporary scholars' biographies. It begins with a section high-

2002–7); idem, *Al-Dhayl al-tāmm ʿalā Duwal al-Islām lil-Dhahabī*, ed. Ḥasan Ismāʿīl Marwah and Maḥmūd al-Arnaʿūt (Kuwait, 1992); al-Malaṭī, *Nayl al-amal fī dhayl al-duwal*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmurī (Sidon-Beirut, 2002); Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʿ al-duḥūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Beirut, 1975–92); Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī, *Shadharāt al-dhahab*.

¹²*Inbāʾ al-haṣr*, 175–82; for further comparison see *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 12:375–81.

¹³*Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr*, 3:45–46; *Nayl al-amal*, 6:415–16.

¹⁴For instance, in his annal for 849/1445 al-Sakhāwī reports that Ibn Taghrībirdī went on hajj and was appointed as *bāshā al-maḥmal* in the pilgrimage convoy. Later he makes allusions, in the obituary sections, to Ibn Taghrībirdī's niece Sāra bint al-Ātabik Āqbughā al-Timrāzī and to his servant Badr al-Dīn as well. See: *Al-Tibr al-masbūk*, 1:262–63; 2:201; 4:77.

¹⁵The biographical dictionaries and chronicles of the time do not reveal any trace of Aḥmad al-Turkmānī al-Marjī or even any evidence that connects him with the Cairene scholarly circles. This suggests that he was a relatively unknown personal scribe employed by Ibn Taghrībirdī.

¹⁶*Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 12:375.



lighting Ibn Taghrībirdī's social background, followed by a second section providing evidence of his thorough training in different religious and literary disciplines through a detailed listing of his different masters,¹⁷ his numerous *ijāzahs* (a license or authorization to transmit certain texts),¹⁸ and *samā'āt*, or listening certificates.¹⁹ This section is followed by one notifying readers of the author's training in horsemanship and related arts like archery, the art of hurling palm sticks, and playing polo.²⁰ The following section is, however, devoted to his personal profile and individual qualities. He is portrayed as an exceptional figure in whom all virtues, such as humility, decency, ineffable charity, and erudition, are projected.²¹ In the closing section of this biographical record, al-Marjī presents Ibn Taghrībirdī's works, which cover, he argues, a vast array of fields related to history, literature, and music.²² The account ends with the quotation of verses composed by Ibn Taghrībirdī himself. Another contemporary biographical account is by al-Ṣayrafī, whose chronicle *Nuzhat al-nufūs* presents a sketch on Ibn Taghrībirdī inserted in the obituary of his father, the *atābak* Taghrībirdī al-Yashbughāwī. Having extolled the latter's virtues as a righteous governor and learned man who "made contributions in some legal matters and other issues,"²³ al-Ṣayrafī declares that:

[Ibn Taghrībirdī's father]'s shining name is still spoken since he left a good and virtuous son, who is a great master of history and several other disciplines like the art of archery, lance hurling, and music, who has penned eminent works, and whose bearing is splendid. He is currently the go-to person in the field of history...and he is my most esteemed as my great master in that trade.²⁴

Both accounts demonstrate that the earliest depictions of Ibn Taghrībirdī put a special focus on his personal qualities. Many skills and virtues were attributed to him by contemporaries who preserved an image of him as the "master of all trades." This eulogistic representation of the author stands in striking contrast to a decidedly darker and more derogatory image of him that appears in some biographical depictions composed after his death.

¹⁷Ibid., 376–77.

¹⁸Ibid., 378–79.

¹⁹Ibid., 377–78.

²⁰Ibid., 379.

²¹Ibid., 379, 380.

²²Ibid., 380–81.

²³Al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-nufūs*, 2:320.

²⁴Ibid., 321.



Examining obituaries of him in later, near-contemporary works (al-Sakhāwī's *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*,²⁵ al-Ṣayrafī's *Inbā' al-haṣr*,²⁶ and al-Malaṭī's *Nayl al-amal*),²⁷ we can observe a marked stream of criticism leveled at Ibn Taghrībirdī. Several critical comments address perceived inaccuracies in his historiographical works and take aim at his even undertaking the field. The most scathing among these is al-Sakhāwī's notorious criticism of Ibn Taghrībirdī that has piqued the interest of some modern scholars.²⁸ While it is unnecessary to reiterate al-Sakhāwī's full litany of charges and accusations of error, which have been amply discussed by William Popper,²⁹ it is worth noting that al-Sakhāwī devoted more than half of his biographical account of Ibn Taghrībirdī to listing and rectifying these "errors," thereby casting serious doubts on the author's legacy as a historian. Al-Sakhāwī underscores his meticulous list with an emphatic closing declaration: "I was told by many prominent Turks and by knowledgeable experts among them that [Ibn Taghrībirdī] was even quite deficient in Turkish affairs. Seeing that, one definitely cannot rely on what he presents" (*wa-ḥīna'idhin famā baqiya ruknun li-shay'in mim mā yubdīhi*).³⁰

Following a similar pattern, al-Ṣayrafī's account in the *Inbā' al-haṣr* was in its bulk devoted to pointing out not only Ibn Taghrībirdī's errors but also a number of his deficiencies. From the standpoint of a seasoned scribe, al-Ṣayrafī starts his critical comments by underlining the author's poor handwriting, which he found unworthy even of minor scribes (*ṣiḡhār al-kuttāb al-muta'allimīn*).³¹ He then makes some additional remarks about his awkward writing style and distorted use of Arabic words. In that regard he states:

He [Ibn Taghrībirdī] went so far in doing ludicrous things that he added an *h* at the end of *ḥattā*. This kind of error is frequent in his autograph compilations to such an extent that one is unable to fix

²⁵ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 10:305–8.

²⁶ Al-Ṣayrafī, *Inbā' al-haṣr*, 175–82.

²⁷ Al-Malaṭī, *Nayl al-amal*, 6:415–16.

²⁸ William Popper and later Aḥmad Darrāj have pointed out that al-Sakhāwī's criticism of the author was biased and resulting from his resentment towards him. As they argued, Ibn Taghrībirdī's social privileges and familiarity with the Cairene court were among the main reasons behind the criticism of his contemporaries. See respectively: Darrāj, "La Vie d'Abū L-Maḥāsīn," 173–74; William Popper, "Sakhāwī's Criticism of Ibn Taghrī Birdī," in *Studi Orientalistici in Onore di Giorgio Levi Della Vida II* (Rome, 1956), 377–78, 387–89.

²⁹ For further details see Popper, "Sakhāwī's Criticism," 371–89.

³⁰ *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 10:308.

³¹ *Inbā' al-haṣr*, 179.



them; for his works overflow with perverted prose and distorted expressions.³²

Apart from that, al-Ṣayrafī evokes other types of errors frequently made by the author, such as mistaken uses of scholars' names and titles, which led him often to confuse *shaykh* with *tālib* and vice versa.³³ He accuses Ibn Taghrībirdī of favoritism and indulgence toward members of the military elite, a claim that was raised against him by al-Sakhāwī as well.³⁴ The numerous inaccuracies and errors found in Ibn Taghrībirdī's works show, he argued, both his ignorance and the unreliability of his reports. To go even further than al-Sakhāwī in belittling Ibn Taghrībirdī's experimentation in history writing, al-Ṣayrafī claims that he was little more than an ignorant commoner (*āmmīyun dāṣ*).³⁵ Interestingly, this contemptuous depiction stands in sharp distinction from the eulogistic image of "the master of all trades" that he drew of him in earlier writings, notably in *Nuzhat al-nufūs*.

In the same vein, 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ Ibn Khalīl al-Malaṭī confirms that Ibn Taghrībirdī received training but was unsuccessful.³⁶ Commenting upon his works he then states that: "[Ibn Taghrībirdī] compiled several works of history (*tawārīkh*), though in very poor language and style and overflowing with inaccuracies and misinformation."³⁷ This note employs the same arguments used by al-Sakhāwī and Ibn al-Ṣayrafī to belittle his achievement in history writing: a second-rate historian, whose writings are no more than middling. Another common feature among the near-contemporary accounts is the concentrated focus on Ibn Taghrībirdī's writings. In terms of a comparison with earlier accounts we noticed that the focus has shifted away from depicting the author's personal qualities or training. Such a change of textual perspective can be regarded as an attempt to portray him in a negative light, as he was intentionally placed in the light of his supposedly "poor" writings rather than of his "noble" origin or personal virtues, as had been the case in contemporary accounts.

Quite the opposite, in later accounts Ibn Taghrībirdī is again presented in a more positive light. He is portrayed in the sixteenth-century chronicles as an accomplished historian and an exceptional figure of his time. Some later biographical depictions of Ibn Taghrībirdī emphasize his numerous virtues and achieve-

³²Moreover, he confirms that Ibn Taghrībirdī actually resorted to some experts in the Arabic language to amend his works: *ibid.*, 180.

³³*Ibid.*, 181.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 180–81.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 179.

³⁶Al-Malaṭī, *Nayl al-amal*, 6:416 (*qara'a shay'an lakinnahu lam yanjub*).

³⁷*Ibid.*



ments in history writing. In Ibn Iyās' account, for instance, he is described as the son of a notable amir and a learned man "keen on history writing" (*mashghūfan bi-kitābat al-tārīkh*)³⁸ and as a prolific writer who penned several "tawārīkh" and many other works.³⁹ On these grounds, he was considered "an exception among his fellows" (*nādiratan fī abnā' jinsihi*).⁴⁰ Correspondingly, he is presented by Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī in glowing terms as an authoritative and accomplished historian:

Then he [Ibn Taghrībirdī] grew fond of the discipline of *tārīkh*. Thus, he followed the renowned historians of his time like al-Maqrīzī and al-ʿAynī. The great diligence that he has shown in that respect and his sharp wit, which he combined with a great sense of discernment, helped him to succeed in his undertaking.... Thus, he became the greatest master of the trade in his time.⁴¹

Two main points emerge from these accounts: first, a recognition of Ibn Taghrībirdī's exceptional achievement compared to his fellows from the Turks and the sons of the elites, expressly underscored by Ibn Iyās; second, his successful undertaking in history writing, since he was regarded as the greatest historian of his time. What can be inferred here is that Ibn Taghrībirdī's contrasting representations were fixed in the stereotypical image of the notable son of the elites and the historian. Despite biased or contrasting depictions by contemporaries and near-contemporaries, Ibn Taghrībirdī was essentially viewed from two perspectives: that of his Turkish background and that of his legacy as a historian. The two-sided story that was made up about his life and career in medieval accounts rehearses in fact the classic story of the military elite scion who embarked on a scholarly career, which can be paralleled with the life patterns and careers of many of his predecessors, like Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (696–764/1297–1363), Ṣārim al-Dīn Ibrāhīm Ibn Duqmāq (d. 809/1407), and Abū Bakr Ibn Aybak al-Dawādārī (fl. 709–35/1309–35).

The prevailing and pre-existing narrative of the author's life went on to shape, in some measure, modern assessments of his historiographical venture. Thus, modern scholarship tends to approach Ibn Taghrībirdī from this two-fold perspective. Based on explorations of his texts, a number of studies endeavored to engage with his life and works, of which three examples in particular ought to be mentioned here: Émile Amar's "La valeur historique de l'ouvrage biographique intitulé al-Manhal al-Ṣafī par Abū-l-Maḥāsīn Ibn Taghrī-Birdī," published in 1909;

³⁸Ibn Iyās, *Badāʿiʿ al-zuhūr*, 3:45–46.

³⁹Ibid., 46.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī, *Shadharāt al-dhahab*, 9:472–73.



Gaston Wiet's article "L'Historien Abul-Maḥāsin," published in *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Égypte* in 1930; and William Popper's survey on "Sakhāwī's Criticism of Ibn Taghrī Birdī," published in 1956.⁴² Aside from highlighting his historical method⁴³ and the importance of his historiographical works, especially in dealing with the ruling elite and political affairs,⁴⁴ or else their critical receptions by contemporary historians, these investigations set out in detail his social background and *cursus studiorum*.⁴⁵ Particular attention was also given, in Gaston Wiet's article and in Muṣṭafā Ziyādah's chapter "Abū al-Maḥāsin wa-mu'āṣirūhu," to his father's career and achievements.⁴⁶

The impact of his social background on his writings and particularly on his reception by contemporary historians was surveyed in Popper's study.⁴⁷ In line with this, Ulrich Haarmann addressed Ibn Taghrībirdī, in a series of surveys devoted to members of the *awlād al-nās*, as one of the prominent representatives of these "mamluk scions" who ventured into scholarly careers and who became not only cultural brokers/interpreters but also important protagonists in the intellectual life of their own time.⁴⁸ These attempts at contextualization were furthered by other surveys, like Aḥmad Darrāj's 1972 article "La vie d'Abū L-Maḥāsin Ibn Taghrī Bardī et Son Œuvre," in which the author sheds more light on Ibn Taghrībirdī's social network, more precisely on his relationships with different sultans' courts and influential state officers and on how he leveraged this to maintain his financial privileges and social standing.⁴⁹ In the same vein, Hani Hamza proposed a new reading of the author's life through his *waqfiyah*. By examining the layout of Ibn Taghrībirdī's mausoleum and its financial outlay, more specifically its yearly expenses, which were compared with royal foundations, Hamza tried to clarify

⁴²See respectively: Émile Amar, "La valeur historique de l'ouvrage biographique intitulé al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi par Abū-l-Maḥāsin Ibn Taghrī-Birdī," in *Mélanges Hartwig Derenbourg* (Paris, 1909), 245–54; Wiet, "L'Historien Abul-Maḥāsin"; Popper, "Sakhāwī's Criticism."

⁴³Wiet, "L'Historien Abul-Maḥāsin," 96–97, 100–3; Popper, "Sakhāwī's Criticism," 381–87.

⁴⁴Popper, "Sakhāwī's Criticism," 385–86.

⁴⁵Wiet, "L'Historien Abul-Maḥāsin," 91–95; Popper, "Sakhāwī's Criticism," 378–80.

⁴⁶Wiet, "L'Historien Abul-Maḥāsin," 90–91; Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah, "Abū-l-Maḥāsin wa-mu'āṣirūhu," in *Al-Mu'arrikhūn fī Miṣr fī al-qarn al-khāmis 'ashar milādī* (Cairo, 1949), 26–27.

⁴⁷Popper, "Sakhāwī's Criticism," 377–78, 381, 388–89.

⁴⁸Ulrich Haarmann, "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage: Mamluks and Their Sons in The Intellectual Life of Fourteenth-Century Egypt and Syria," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33, no. 1 (1988): 112–14; idem, "Joseph's Law: the Careers and Activities of Mamluk Descendants before the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge, 1988), 81–82; idem, "The Writer as an Individual in Medieval Muslim Society," in *Individu et Société dans le Monde Méditerranéen Musulman: Questions et Sources*, ed. Robert Ilbert and Randi Deguilhem (Aix-en-Provence, 1998), 85–87.

⁴⁹Darrāj, "La vie d'Abū L-Maḥāsin," 168–72.



some aspects of his life. He pointed out that Ibn Taghribirdī enjoyed a high social standing and a considerable fortune that somehow supported his scholarly undertaking.⁵⁰ Overall, to varying degrees, the bulk of modern studies of Ibn Taghribirdī put much emphasis on his social background, particularly on his familiarity with the ruling circles and sultans' courts, which researchers considered the real motive behind the criticism of his contemporaries and simultaneously the key to his success as a historian.

More recent studies, however, have considered his authorial voice and agency with increased interest. In a series of articles devoted to Ibn Taghribirdī's accounts of the first Turkish rulers, Irmeli Perho undertakes to examine the narrative spin of his different stories and to explore some aspects of his authorial voice.⁵¹ Her attempts to track Ibn Taghribirdī's voices sheds some new light on his storytelling techniques and on the didactic import of his stories, which were managed, as she points out, to fit the broader scope of his court-centered chronicle *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*. Also of note is Li Guo's "Songs, Poetry, and Storytelling: Ibn Taghribirdī on the Yalbughā Affair,"⁵² in which he examines Ibn Taghribirdī's manipulation of poetry, particularly *ballīq* ballads, and how he employed this to provide performativity and agency to his stories.

On the whole, Ibn Taghribirdī's appearance in modern scholarship was shaped, at least in the earliest studies, by the stereotypical pattern of the son of the elites who engaged in the career of a historian, and his works were considered in this light. The interest of modern historians in the man and his writings was largely due to his familiarity with the ruling circles of Cairo. Even though important efforts have been made, in the latest studies, to unearth his authorial voice and the way he constructed his stories about the Turkish rulers, we still know very little about how he crafted *his own* story. Questions regarding Ibn Taghribirdī's self-representation through his writings and the social stakes that guided and determined his undertaking as a historian remain uncharted.

⁵⁰Hamza, "Some Aspects of the Economic and Social Life of Ibn Taghribirdī," 139–72.

⁵¹Irmeli Perho, "Ibn Taghribirdī's Voice," in *Traveling Through Time: Essays in Honour of Kaj Öhrnberg*, ed. Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, and Inka Nokso-Koivisto (Helsinki, 2013), 135–47; idem, "Ibn Taghribirdī's Stories," in *Mamluk Historiography Revisited: Narratological Perspectives*, ed. Stephan Conermann and Bethany J. Walker (Göttingen, 2018), 137–52.

⁵²Li Guo, "Poetry and Storytelling: Ibn Taghribirdī on the Yalbughā Affair," in *Developing Perspectives in Mamluk History: Essays in Honor of Amalia Levanoni*, ed. Yuval Ben-Bassat (Leiden, 2017), 189–200.



The Split “Self-Fashioning” of Ibn Taghrībirdī

Aspects of Ibn Taghrībirdī’s Authorial “Self-Fashioning”

To track the manifold ways in which medieval authors introduce themselves to their learned audiences, a modern researcher can often mine clues from the introductory prologues of historiographical works. Indeed, such prefatory sections of many fifteenth century historical writings showcase the varied strategies and the performative modes that authors employed to ingratiate themselves with their readers.⁵³ They likewise illustrate how authors crafted their identities and constructed their authority as writers. With this in mind, we can begin an inquiry into Ibn Taghrībirdī’s self-fashioning maneuvers by exploring the opening sections of his main works, *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi* and *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*. It is clear from a cursory reading that the construction of his prologues, in both *Al-Manhal* and *Al-Nujūm*, reproduces common patterns often utilized by his predecessors and contemporaries.⁵⁴ Aside from being elaborated in a sophisticated prose style, these introductions typically start with a laudatory section that consists of a doxology praising God and the Prophet Muḥammad. This section is followed by eulogistic statements about the utility of history as a repository of every type of life-experience, and ends with an explicit reference to the purpose and the title of the volumes that follow. The concluding section provides a general outline on the time span, the layout, and the author’s way of proceeding.⁵⁵ With regard to their broad features, these preambles seem unoriginal and stylized insofar as they embody the characteristic elements of the “prefatory topoi,” used in medieval historiographical works, like doxologies, statements about the utility of history, and the “topos of commission.”⁵⁶ However, underneath their conventional aspects and stereotypical structure we can identify some textual cues that attest to Ibn Taghrībirdī’s purposeful and deliberate shaping of his authorial persona. For instance, as conventional as it may seem, the fact that he engages in a sophis-

⁵³For further details about the structure of prologues in medieval historiographical works, their formulaic nature, and their relevant role as key sources for understanding authorial intention see: Justin Lake, “Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography,” *History Compass* 12, no. 4 (2014): 350–51.

⁵⁴By examining the opening sections of a number of historiographical works dating from the fifteenth century, we can observe that they were arranged according to a predefined pattern which often includes these elementary sections. See for instance: Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Al-Durar al-kāminah fī aʿyān al-mīʾah al-thāminah* (Beirut, 1993), 1:4–5; idem, *Inbāʾ al-ghumr bi-anbāʾ al-ʿumr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī, (Cairo, 1969–98), 1:3–5; al-Maqrīzī, *Durar al-ʿuqūd al-farīdah fī tarājīm al-aʿyān al-mufīdah*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Jalīlī (Beirut, 2002), 1:62; idem, *Al-Sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut, 1997), 1:101–4; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Tibr al-masbūk*, 1:33–39.

⁵⁵See: Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 1:17–19; idem, *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah fī mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, ed. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl and Muḥammad Fahīm Shaltūt (Cairo, 1963–72), 1:1–3.

⁵⁶Justin Lake, “Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography,” 350–51.



ticated writing style in these sections reveals his desire to be properly introduced to his audience. In other words, using such a rhetorical mode is basically meant to make a good first impression.

More than that, the notable changes that he makes to the “topoi of commission,” especially when he claims not to be writing for any dedicatee or addressee but himself, seem revealing. Ibn Taghrībirdī states in his *Manhal al-ṣāfi* that the numerous and informative life-experience stories that he came across in history books are actually the main things that inspired him to compile his own biographical dictionary. Interestingly, the author claims no patron or any fellow for his work.⁵⁷ Almost the same intentions and the same structure are reproduced later in his *Nujūm al-zāhirah*, though with a slight shift regarding his motives for writing, which are more focused on the merits of Egypt.⁵⁸ By excluding a dedicatee and mentioning no explicit request to write the work, he evinces his clear intention to compose historical works that transcend conventional expectations. Assigning a dedicatee or a particular occasion to literary and historiographical compilations was a common practice among writers in these times. More than that, it was a “strategic device” often used to ensure the author attention and increased influence.⁵⁹ Considering this, Ibn Taghrībirdī’s first aim appears to have been to ward off any potential charges of arrogance or presumption by his possible detractors or opponents. Beyond that, his particular claim of individual fulfillment and a search for companionship behind this undertaking may represent his attempt to feature himself as the decent learned man who always took solace in books as his best companion.⁶⁰

How Ibn Taghrībirdī introduces himself to his audience seems less sophisticated than the assertive and arguably more ostentatious manner used in the

⁵⁷*Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 1:18–19 (*ghayra mustad’an ilā dhāka min aḥadin min a’yān al-zamān wa-lā muṭallab bi-hi min al-aṣdiqā’ wa-al-ikhwān wa-lā mukallaf li-ta’līfihi wa-tarṣīfihi min amīr wa-lā sulṭān*).

⁵⁸As to affirming the absence of any dedicatee or any addressee for his current compilation Ibn Taghrībirdī declares explicitly: “*wa-lam aqul ka-maqālati al-ghayri innanī mustad’an ilā dhālika min amīrin aw sulṭān wa-lā muṭalabin bi-hi minā al-aṣdiqā’i wā-al-ikhwān*”: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 1:2. In line with this, he does not specify any dedicatee or addressee for his other works: *Mawrid al-laṭāfah* and *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*. Moreover, he does not mention, in their respective prologues, his previous works, his peers, or even his masters except for *Ḥawādith al-duhūr* or his continuation of al-Maqrīzī’s *Sulūk*, in which he, of course, refers to him as his master. See respectively: Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Mawrid al-laṭāfah fī man waliya al-salṭanah wa-al-khilāfah*, ed. Nābil Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Aḥmad (Cairo, 1997), 1:3–4; *Ḥawādith al-duhūr fī madā al-ayyām wa-al-shuhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Kamāl al-Dīn ‘Izz al-Dīn (Riyadh, 1990), 1:51–52.

⁵⁹Thomas Bauer, “Mamluk Literature as a Means of Communication,” in *Ubi sumus? Quo vademus? Mamluk Studies, State of the Art*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen, 2013), 29.

⁶⁰*Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 1:19, and *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 1:2 (*li-yakūna lī fī al-wiḥdatī jalīsan*).



same context by his master, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (773–852/1372–1449), or his contemporary, al-Sakhāwī. References to their masters and their achievements in the field, especially through intertextual references to their previous works, along with references to a notable dedicatee, often utilized by the latter historians, appear more authoritative and convincing than Ibn Taghrībirdī's claim to be merely writing for his own pleasure (*allaftuhu li-nafsi*).⁶¹ This may suggest that he was not thoroughly engaged, or at least less concerned than his peers, with his authorial image in the opening section of his works. On the whole, what can be inferred from the above is that Ibn Taghrībirdī did proceed differently and that he may have opted to display his credentials as a historian, in more pragmatic terms, throughout the body of his works and not in their introductory parts. In any case, the idiosyncratic way in which he introduces himself to the audience in the prologues of *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfī* and *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah* provides a hint at his self-fashioning maneuvers. A diachronic reading of his writings offers some additional clues to this subtle shaping of his authorial persona. As we came to notice, Ibn Taghrībirdī's self-representation varied markedly throughout his compilations. These variations, basically stemming from his shifting self-positioning in his texts and in different historical narratives, may point to both his maturation as a writer and the evolving aspects of his self-fashioning. Before going through a diachronic analysis of the author's self-depiction, we want to elucidate a few points regarding the timeline of his works. By so doing, we aim to gain a better grasp of the multiple and shifting representations of his authorial persona. First it should be noted that we still know very little about when Ibn Taghrībirdī began his career as a historian or when he began compiling his earliest work, *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfī*. Save for a casual and vague reference, in which al-Sakhāwī reportedly states that Ibn Taghrībirdī started recording events (*i'tanā bi-kitābati al-ḥawādithi*) in 840/1436–37, we have no other clear indications about the dating of his works.⁶² In addition, we cannot nail down exactly which compilation al-Sakhāwī was referring to, whether *Al-Manhal* or *Al-Nujūm*. His allusion to “*ḥawādith*,” or events, which implicitly evokes some sort of chronicle, suggests that he was perhaps

⁶¹By looking in the prefatory sections of several historiographical works dating from the fifteenth century we noticed a number of disparities, in terms of style and the nature of data provided, between the condensed prologues of Ibn Taghrībirdī and the more extended preambles of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, al-Maqrīzī, al-Sakhāwī, or ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ Ibn Khalīl al-Malaṭī. For further comparison see respectively: Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbāʾ al-Ghumr*, 1:3–5; al-Maqrīzī, *Durar al-ʿuqūd al-farīdah*, 1:61–62; idem, *Al-Sulūk*, 1:101–4; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Tibr al-masbūk*, 1:33–39; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl al-amal*, 1:77–78.

⁶²Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Dawʾ al-lāmiʿ*, 10:306. Seemingly, al-Sakhāwī drew this dating reference from Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Manhal al-Ṣāfī*, more precisely from the brief note he makes in al-Maqrīzī's biography and in which he states that he began compiling a continuation of his master's chronicle in 840/1436–37. See: *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfī*, 1:418.



referring to the *Nujūm*.⁶³ Also of note, Ibn Taghrībirdī's biography, written by his presumed student Aḥmad al-Marjī, and the prologues of his works do not help much, for they often do not provide date references or other indications of when he began or stopped working on a given compilation.⁶⁴

References to the time span or the coverage of his works, usually made in the prologue, and particularly allusions evoking the sultan under whose rule the current compilation should end, cannot be considered as conclusive. Likewise, the dates that can be inferred from the yearly records in his chronicles, or even from the listing of the sultans to whom he devoted a biographical note in *Mawrid al-laṭāfah*, do not represent, in any respect, concrete time limits that would indicate when he stopped working on individual compilations. Regarding the *Nujūm*, for instance, while Ibn Taghrībirdī states that the coverage of his chronicle would run until Sultan Īnāl's rule (r. 857–65/1453–61) and the yearly record indicates Rajab 872/January 1468 as the ultimate date, textual evidence shows that the last note was probably added after Rabī^c I 873/September 1468.⁶⁵ The same holds true for *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, considering that its coverage supposedly goes to 855–56/1451–52,⁶⁶ whereas the most advanced date which we came across points to Rabī^c II 868/December 1459.⁶⁷ However, overlaps and shadings related to the timeline of Ibn Taghrībirdī's works can be cleared up if we attend to his frequent allusions to his previous compilations or to date references throughout his writings. Cross-referencing these scattered data can be somewhat insightful as regards both the time-

⁶³ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 10:306.

⁶⁴ When he draws up the list of Taghrībirdī's different compilations, whether historical or literary, Aḥmad al-Turkmānī al-Marjī only mentions that he compiled them during his youth, without providing any further details “*kullu dhālika fī 'unfuwāni shabībatihī*”: *ibid.*, 12:380.

⁶⁵ The death of the deposed sultan al-Zāhir Yalbāy on the first of Rabī^c I 873/19 September 1468 represents the most advanced date that we came upon in the *Nujūm*. See: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 16:371. Regarding the time references made, whether in the prologue of the latter compilation or in its last volume, see: *ibid.*, 1:3; 16:395.

⁶⁶ The manuscript held in Paris, which represents the earliest copy of *Al-Manhal* handed down to us and the basic copy-text used in modern editions, refers to 855–56/1451–52 as the latest date retained for the work. For further details see: *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 1:12; William Popper, “Abu 'l-Maḥāsin Djamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf b. Taghrībirdī,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 1:138.

⁶⁷ As suggested by William Popper then by Julien Loiseau, Ibn Taghrībirdī stopped engaging with his biographical dictionary in the opening years of sultan Īnāl's rule (r. 1453–61): Popper, “Abu 'l-Maḥāsin,” 138; Julien Loiseau, “L'émir en sa maison: Parcours politiques et patrimoine urbain au Caire, d'après les biographies du Manhal al-Ṣāfi,” *Annales Islamologiques* 36 (2002): 122–23. This seems to be in line with what we came upon through our textual analysis. More precisely, exploring the biographical sketches of the bulk of the figures who died after 855–56/1451–52, like Sa'd al-Dīn Ibn al-Dīrī, pushes this time limit slightly to the end of Īnāl's rule, notably to Rabī^c II 868/December 1459. The latter represents roughly the most advanced date referred to in *Al-Manhal*. See: *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 5:395.



line of his works and his working method. By and large, intertextual references to his previous works and date indications interspersed in his writings suggest that Ibn Taghrībirdī started his career as a historian by the end of Sultan Barsbāy's rule (r. 1422–38) with the writing of his biographical dictionary *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*. Later, during Sultan Jaqmaq's reign (r. 1438–53), he concurrently engaged in a new project that consisted of compiling a monumental court chronicle, *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, dedicated to the latter's son and heir, Muḥammad. Simultaneously, he penned other works like *Al-Dalīl al-shāfi 'alā Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi* and *Mawrid al-laṭāfah fī man waliya al-salṭanah wa-al-khilāfah*, summaries of *Al-Manhal* and the *Nujūm* respectively, and a continuation of his master al-Maqrizī's chronicle *Al-Sulūk*, which he titled *Ḥawādith al-duhūr fī madā al-ayyām wa-al-shuhūr*.

It has to be said that Ibn Taghrībirdī's working method, as projected through the timeline of his works, and especially the fact that he juggled several projects at once, makes it difficult to chart the evolving aspects of his authorial self-fashioning. Nonetheless, the exploration of different sections of *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*, and the *Nujūm*, and more specifically of the author's variant self-positioning in the course of events that he reports or else in relation to some figures from his entourage, reveals gradual developments in his self-consciousness and accordingly in the shaping of his authorial persona.

A fine example of this is his self-positioning in relation to his father throughout his writings. Indeed, the shifting of Ibn Taghrībirdī's word choices for "father" pointedly shows how he passed from a diffident son of an amir, who first sought to preserve his father's memory in his earliest writings, to an assertive court-historian. In fact, by peering through his writings one can observe that he moved from using "wālidi" to refer to his father in his earliest writings—specifically in *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*—to a more neutral "al-wālīd," which he extensively employed in later works like the *Nujūm*, *Mawrid al-laṭāfah*, and *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*.⁶⁸ If considered linguistically, the variants of "father" can be revealing as regards the author's state of self-awareness. For example, the term "wālidi" uses the possessive ending "my" as in "my father," which may connote a more immature or juvenile connotation of "daddy," whereas "al-wālīd" uses the definite article "al-" "the" as in "the father," which establishes distance and sets Ibn Taghrībirdī apart as an individual. Such changes document, indeed, the narrative distance that he deliberately created between himself and his father in his subsequent compilations.

⁶⁸An analysis of the occurrence of both terms in his writings has shown that Ibn Taghrībirdī employed exclusively the term "wālidi" to refer to his father in *Al-Manhal* in its first seven volumes. Then he shifted gradually to the use of "al-wālīd" which co-occurred with "wālidi" from volume 8 to 12. In *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*, however, the latter term is used only once and "al-wālīd" twice. When it comes to *Al-Nujūm* and *Mawrid al-laṭāfah* the author employs exclusively the term "al-wālīd." For further details see for instance Ibn Taghrībirdī's shifting use of "father" in the biography of al-Nāṣir Faraj: *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 8:380–81.



These variant word choices provide some further clues as regards the timeline of his works. Upon close reading of his biographical dictionary we noticed that Ibn Taghrībirdī's exclusive use of the term "wālidī" to refer to his father in the first seven volumes represents a distinctive feature of his very early writings. Eventually, the latter writings were marked not just by the utilization of the possessive form "wālidī" but also by frequent more general references to his own father. This could make some sense if we consider that Ibn Taghrībirdī initially wrote the dictionary to commemorate the memories of his father and his fellows from the Zāhirīyah faction.⁶⁹ Furthermore, he may possibly have intended, not least in his early career, to leverage his father's legacy to ingratiate himself with his audience.

Among other important instances that showcase Ibn Taghrībirdī's changing self-representation across his different works, are the varying depictions that he provides for some events which he witnessed at Barsbāy's court. For example, when he reports in Shāh Rukh's (d. 1447) biography in *Al-Manhal* the arrival of the latter's emissaries to Cairo and how they were harshly beaten under sultan Barsbāy's orders and eyes, he casts himself as a mere witness or passive attendant. His descriptive depiction of the event, which focuses on the sultan's brutal response to Shāh Rukh's request to provide the ceremonial covering for the Ka'bah and subsequently on the caning of the convoy members, shows that he was astounded by the sultan's attitude.⁷⁰ The image of himself as the overwhelmed witness stands in sharp contrast to the portrait he draws of Sultan Barsbāy as a rigorous and powerful man.

In his subsequent writings, when he relates for instance in the *Nujūm* the events that occurred during the latter sultan's second campaign against Cyprus (829/1426), Ibn Taghrībirdī portrays himself as an active participant. According to him, shortly after the departure of the army from Cairo Sultan Barsbāy was informed that when they reached Rosetta (Rashīd) four ships were wrecked and ten men drowned.⁷¹ After hearing this news, "he was extremely disturbed so that he almost died; he wept bitterly and became so restless that the Citadel became too confining for him, and he decided that the campaign should not be continued."⁷² With regard to this event, Ibn Taghrībirdī depicts himself as a self-controlled man who intervened to break the tension that prevailed among the sultan's entourage and announced a forthcoming victory. He therefore states that "Emir Jarbāsh left to journey to them, leaving the Sultan confused like all the men, but I announced victory from that day and said, 'After the fracture comes only the setting'; and so

⁶⁹ As pointed out by Julien Loiseau, Ibn Taghrībirdī tried in his biographical dictionary to reconstruct his father's network of fellows from the Zāhirīyah faction: "L'émir en sa maison," 117–37.

⁷⁰ *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfī*, 6:201–2.

⁷¹ *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 14:289.

⁷² Popper, *History of Egypt*, 4:34.



it happened later.”⁷³ Interestingly, the roles are reversed in this account since the sultan is depicted as confused and distressed and Ibn Taghrībirdī is portrayed as self-assured and wise. To sum up, Ibn Taghrībirdī’s self-positioning in relation to Sultan Barsbāy, in both accounts, conjures some aspects of his self-fashioning. More particularly, it suggests how he evolved, throughout his writings, from a passive court attendant to an assertive actor who would openly express his views about affairs of governance.

Along with these notable shifts in his self-depiction we noticed, upon a careful reading of *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi* and *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, that Ibn Taghrībirdī’s deliberate shaping of his authorial persona correlated with multiple and varied claims of identity that ostensibly engage with a multilayered and encompassing narrative. Performing within “the psychology of a middleman,” to borrow Haarmann’s words,⁷⁴ Ibn Taghrībirdī developed a discrete mode of self-fashioning. Thus, he tended to claim a volatile authorial identity which he carefully negotiated along contrasted cultural platforms. These appeared in particular as the Sunni-Islamic identity, the Turkish alien identity, and the litterateur/highbrow identity.

The Sunni-Islamic Identity

With a view to fit the patterns of an Islamic framing narrative, Ibn Taghrībirdī reached for specific rhetorical and literary devices such as interspersing his writings with hadith quotations,⁷⁵ introducing the theme of the sacred in his historical narratives through stories about the first Islamic community (the companions of the Prophet), and presenting tales of dreams, particularly visions of the Proph-

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ulrich Haarmann, “The Sons of Mamluks as Fief-Holders,” in *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in The Middle East*, ed. Tarif Khalidi (Beirut, 1984), 144.

⁷⁵It has to be underlined, in this respect, that the author engaged in quoting hadith especially in his early accounts of the Islamic caliphate. Almost the same narrative technique is used later (though without the same balance) in other works such as *Mawrid al-laṭāfah* and *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*. Furthermore, a diachronic analysis focused on the frequency of hadith quotations in his historiographical works shows that he was more engaged with hadith issues in his earliest compilations—particularly in *Al-Manhal*. That might hint at his intention to display his religious training before the reading public at the beginning of his career: *Mawrid al-laṭāfah*, 1:27, 58, 95; *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 2:181, 186, 4:32, 120, 181, 5:115; *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 4:112, 163, 5:68. Regarding the influence of hadith sciences in the practice of historical writing and how it relates to an established traditionalism in Islamic historiography see: Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, 2003), 83–97. Concerning the use of hadith as a legitimating device in historiography see: Mimi Hanaoaka, *Authority and Identity in Medieval Islamic Historiography: Persian Histories from the Peripheries* (New York, 2016), 10, 118–21, 137.



et Muḥammad.⁷⁶ In dealing with the theme of the sacred, Ibn Taghrībirdī resorted to the literary topoi used by his predecessors. Following the common patterns of medieval historians, his sacred stories clustered basically around the vision of the Prophet and his healing power and miracles, and around the *barakah* embodied by certain saintly figures. One such example is his report about a violent dust storm that struck the coasts of Damietta and the whole country in 826/1423, in which he ends his detailed “tableau” with a tale of a dream. According to him, during the terrifying disaster a renowned holy man received a vision in which an oracle dissipated his fears and told him that Egypt has been preserved due to the Prophet’s intercession.⁷⁷ In the same vein, he recounts elsewhere the gripping story of Amir Ṣardāḥ’s miraculous recovery. Reportedly, it all started when this amir from the Hijaz was imprisoned and blinded (*kuḥḥila*) on Barsbāy’s order. Having undergone such tribulation, the amir visited the Prophet’s tomb and asked for his blessings. Shortly after this he miraculously recovered his sight.⁷⁸ To all this should also be added references made in Ibn Taghrībirdī’s writings to legal norms and practices, to the Sunni-Shi’i struggle (especially in the accounts of the Meccan sharifate) and to inter-*madhhab* rivalry, as related aspects of his engagement with this central “Sunni-Islamic” narrative.⁷⁹ All too often Ibn Taghrībirdī’s accounts on events and figures of the distant past are interspersed with various allusions and analogies deliberately chosen to evoke theological controversies and dogmatic issues focused on heresy.⁸⁰

Correspondingly, his attempt to fashion a scholarly identity, or at least to share the orthodox stance of religious scholars, can be seen in his fierce condemnation

⁷⁶For more details about the use of dreams as a narratological device in medieval Islamic historiography, see Konrad Hirschler’s study on the tales of dreams of Abū Shāmah and how he utilized them to fashion his authorial identity: *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors* (London, 2006), 39–40. See also: Hanaoaka, *Authority and Identity*, 14, 20, 76–78, 82–84.

⁷⁷*Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 14:252.

⁷⁸*Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 6:340.

⁷⁹See respectively: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 5:109, 15:52, 9:267, 283, 11:139–40; *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 2:43, 12:313. For further details about the Sunni-Shi’i struggle and its key role in the formation of the sectarian Sunni identity see: Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge, 2003), 141–43.

⁸⁰The layout and the selected materials used in the accounts of the Fatimid Caliphate and the Sunni-Shi’i struggle during Ayyubid times provide insightful examples of how Ibn Taghrībirdī engaged with the scholarly intellectual mainstream. Moreover, the biographies of some heretic figures such as a Sufi shaykh named Ibn Sab’īn show even better his attempts to be a strong proponent of orthodoxy and the values of Sunni Islam. See respectively: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 5:11–12, 6:250, 7:133–34, 232–33; *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 1:377, 5:333, 7:144–47. With regard to this, Jonathan Berkey points out that condemnation of innovation “*bid’ah*” and different forms of heresy constituted a theme of predilection in medieval Islamic religious writings and a distinctive feature of its marked traditionalism: *The Formation of Islam*, 149, 202.



of the appointment of Christians to high offices. In that regard, he states that one of the greatest achievements of Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, which might in fact be considered his sole merit, was the eviction of Christians from state positions.⁸¹ Thus, he says:

The scholars conferred a long time with the Sultan on the subject, until it was decided that no Christian should fill any position in the Sultan's bureau or under any of the emirs ... I say: Perhaps God (Who is praised and exalted) will forgive for this action all of al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad's sins, for it was one of the greatest measures for the supremacy of Islam, while the-administration of these Christians in the bureaus of Egypt is one of the greatest evils from which results the magnification of Christianity.⁸²

Willing to push the stakes even higher, Ibn Taghribirdī vehemently criticizes the way Coptic viziers, like 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Aslamī called al-Khaṭīr, were given the official title of qadi and accordingly equated with prestigious scholars.⁸³

Al-Khaṭīr was a recent convert to Mohammedanism who had been of high rank in Christianity, administering offices for al-Malik al-Ashraf when al-Ashraf was an emir; then al-Ashraf promoted him to this office, and after having been addressed as "Shaikh al-Khaṭīr," he began to be called "Cadi." This was one of the greatest disgraces, that one who is a Christian and is forced to become a Mohammedan (or professes to be one) for one reason or another, is soon called "Cadi," and in this designation is a partner with Cadis of the great religious law; but this wrong has been current of old and anew in the realm. I do not blame the rulers for advancing such men, for they need them on account of their knowledge of all branches of administration, but I hold that a ruler when he raises one of them to some rank could avoid using the title "Cadi" of him, and characterize him as "Head" or "Secretary," or give him such an honorific name as "Walī ad-Daula" or "Sa'd ad-Daula", leaving the title "Cadi" for the judges of the religious law, the confidential secretary, the controller of the army, and the Mohammedan scholars.⁸⁴

⁸¹ *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 14:82.

⁸² Popper, *History of Egypt*, 3:68.

⁸³ *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 14:275.

⁸⁴ Popper, *History of Egypt*, 4:23–24; *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 14:275; Elsewhere, Ibn Taghribirdī provides a quite original depiction of another Christian high officer, namely the Armenian vizier and *ustadār* Fakhr al-Dīn Ibn Naqūlah. Interestingly, he states that this vizier was a man of abusive deeds, which was expected from a person who inherited the tyranny of the Armenian



How he engages with the shared Islamic norms and values is further highlighted in his historical narratives and more specifically in the way he uses religious references to craft his moralizing stories about Turkish rulers. His account on sultan Īnāl is a case in point here. In fact, when trying to appraise this sultan's eight-year rule, and in particular his chief deficiencies in terms of governance, Ibn Taghrībirdī points first to his great ignorance and indifference regarding religious matters and shari'ah laws. Thus he affirms that:

[Īnāl] probably would not have known how to read well the first chapter [al-fātiḥah], or any other passage, of the precious Koran. His prescribed prayers were astounding prayers, curious sounds which he uttered and to which God paid no attention; and with this wonderful manner of praying he did not like the embellishment or prolongation of supplications after the formal prayer, but often forbade the one praying to prolong his prayer... In general his commands and his decrees were contrary to the religious law, particularly in what his purchased mamlûks started; for they turned legal decrees [*aḥkāmah al-sharī'ati*] upside down, while he permitted this to them although by all means he could have deterred them therefrom, and anyone who says differently can be refuted. One of the words of rebuttal is that someone might say, "what is the power of the sultanate if it lacks the ability to turn back this small group when the world hates them and they are too weak to confront even a part of the populace?"—and how much more would this be true if he had sent against them one of the many other groups of mamlûks? And there are many arguments of this import.⁸⁵

Considering the above, Ibn Taghrībirdī arguably tried throughout his writings to evince his keen commitment to Islamic religious norms and culture. The handful of instances that we were able to discuss here illustrate how he tended to cast himself as a Sunni scholar or at least one who shared the same "orthodox" point of view and values as Sunni scholars.

What is in an Alien Identity?

One of the salient features that distinguishes Ibn Taghrībirdī's writings, specifically his *Manhal* and *Nujūm*, is the particular focus they lend to Turkish culture

people, the deceit of the Christians, and the evilness of the Copts "*kān 'indahū jabarūtu al-arman wa-dahā'u al-našārā wa-shayaṭanatu al-aqbā'*": *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 153.

⁸⁵Popper, *History of Egypt*, 6:109–10.



and to its representative group.⁸⁶ The fact that these compilations are primarily concerned or suffused with the Turkish and military culture of the ruling elite is noticeable to even a casual reader. This is perhaps not surprising, since we already know that Ibn Taghribirdī himself was a son of a notable amir and a member of the military elite. What matters, though, is to see how commitment to that culture is displayed in his writings and how he represents the identity of the social group of which he claims to be a fierce exponent. At the outset, it is important to stress that Ibn Taghribirdī's commitment to the Turkish culture is displayed in different ways, whether in *Al-Manhal* or in the *Nujūm*; accordingly, it was expressed through varied textual and narrative strategies.

At the linguistic and semantic level, for instance, when reading the biographical sketches devoted to Turkish figures or else the yearly records of events we immediately notice the particular attention and concern that Ibn Taghribirdī shows for the signification and the applications of Turkish words. Indeed, regardless of whether it is a name or an expression, references to Turkish words in his writings are often followed by brief notes that provide phonetic transcriptions, Arabic translations, and plausible explanations of their meaning.⁸⁷ His keen interest in Turkish languages can be also seen in the critical comments that he often makes about the ignorance of local scholars regarding Turkish matters and language. He states that the great ignorance shown by Arab historians regarding the Turkish language is actually the main cause behind their confused and distorted accounts of rulers and court affairs.⁸⁸ Among the numerous examples he mentions is Ibn Ḥajar's account about Sultan Barsbāy. He declares that his master Ibn Ḥajar was actually mistaken when he reported that Barsbāy was manumitted by the amir Duqmāq al-Muḥammādī, which he excuses as understandable for someone who knows little about the Turkish language and who was poorly acquainted with Turks (*ma'dhūrun fī mā naqalahu li-bu'dihi 'an ma'rifat al-lughah al-turkīyah wa-mudākhalat al-atrāk*).⁸⁹ Ignorance of Turkish constitutes a basic argument upon which Ibn Taghribirdī rests his vehement criticism of Arab scholars, whose ac-

⁸⁶Regarding the representation of the Turks and Turkish identity in medieval Arabic sources see: Ulrich Haarmann, "Ideology and History, Identity and Alterity: The Arab Image of the Turk from the Abbasids to Modern Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2 (1988): 175–96.

⁸⁷See for example the lexicographic annotations that he devoted to some Turkish names such as Qarāwish or Ṭughrilbik, to some expressions like "yāghā qashtā" or "kukšū," and to political terms like "al-Tūrā" and "al-Yasaq": *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 5:49, 6:135–36, 268–69, 7:167; *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 4:108.

⁸⁸See for instance his comments on Barqūq's name, in which he criticizes the distorted accounts reported by Arab historians, specifically al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Khaṭīb al-Nāṣirīyah, and Abū Zur'ah al-'Irāqī: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 11:224–25.

⁸⁹Ibid., 14:243–44.



counts of Turkish rulers, he argues, overflow with inaccuracies and misinformation.⁹⁰

Such criticism was, interestingly, not restricted to Arab scholars, since he levelled similar criticisms against members of the military elite. For instance, following a brief commentary on the great alterations that affected several languages, like Arabic or Persian, and their distorted uses at the present time, he declares that the Turkish language, particularly the Mongol tongue (*lisān al-mughul*), experienced similar distortions. For, as he affirms, military troopers (*jund*) have lost their knowledge of that language. According to him, they not only stopped speaking the Mongol tongue but would also not understand it if they heard it.⁹¹ Elsewhere, he goes on to blame state officers and high-ranking amirs for their lack of proficiency in Turkish. One example is his critical statements about the great *dawādār* Arikmās al-Zāhirī. With respect to this, he maintains that among other reasons that made the latter amir ill-suited for the office is his barbarous speech (*ghutmīyan*) and ignorance of Turkish.⁹² It has to be underlined, though, that Ibn Taghrībirdī's close interest in Turkish, being the official language of the ruling elite and the Cairene court for centuries, was mostly centered on individuals' names. As we came to notice, after a careful reading of his writings, most of the instances that discuss the accurate use and significance of Turkish words were concerned with amirs' names. The detailed story of sultan Barqūq's name is a case in point here. Following a brief review of this sultan's enthronement and career trajectory, which was set as an introduction to the account of his reign in the *Nujūm*, Ibn Taghrībirdī evokes the bulk of misinformation circulated in contemporary chronicles about his original name. Regarding these distorted accounts he states that

when I read these curious statements which have been transmitted concerning Barqūq's name, I personally questioned the older men among Barqūq's mamlūks about them, and each one whom I questioned answered: "This assertion has never come to my ears before this day" One of them, in fact, said to me: "It is a Circassian name, while Yalbughā is Tatar, of unknown meaning." Then he told me what the meaning of Barqūq is, saying: "The name was originally Malī Khuq, meaning in Circassian 'shepherd,' malī in that

⁹⁰See *Mawrid al-laṭāfah*, 2:27.

⁹¹*Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 1:61. For further details about the different Turkish dialects, whether those spoken in the Golden Horde or by the military elite of Egypt, see: Julien Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks XIIIe–XVIe siècle: Une expérience du pouvoir dans l'Islam medieval* (Paris, 2014), 188–89.

⁹²Thereupon he says: "This was because Arikmās had no knowledge of the laws, and was little-experienced in affairs; his speech was barbarous, he did not know Turkish and much less Arabic." Popper, *History of Egypt*, 4:130; *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 15:69.



language being a word for ‘sheep’; the name Malī Khuq was then, for ease in pronunciation, changed to Barqûq.” He mentioned also many other names the original form of which differs from what it is at present; e.g., Bâizîr, which has become Bâizîd and is by some made into a name compounded with abû, Abû Yazîd; or such as Âl Bâi, become now ‘Alî Bâi; and others too numerous to explain.⁹³

To end his detailed enquiry about Barqûq’s name, he calls the reader’s attention to his treatise on the matter, stating that he has “treated this and similar subjects at length in a separate work dealing with the alteration, by the Arab-speaking population, of Turkish and Persian personal names and names derived from place names.”⁹⁴ As can be seen from the above, Ibn Taghrîbirdî’s concern about the alteration of Turkish names was not limited to those of sultans, even though he used the story of Barqûq (r. 1382–89, 1390–99) as a foremost example. Such concerns seem to be related to what individuals’ names represented for the military elite and in their culture. More particularly, they hint at a particular perception and understanding of their shared identity, which are brought into focus through Ibn Taghrîbirdî’s critical statements. Briefly put, what can be inferred from the above is that the “Turkish-ness” of the military and ruling elite displays, *inter alia*, through personal names.⁹⁵

Among other identity markers that stand out even more markedly in Ibn Taghrîbirdî’s writings are horsemanship and martial arts. Allusions to military arts, to practices of warfare, and to the chivalric codes of the ruling elite are frequent in his historical narratives. More than that, they appear to be consistent with his particular claim of a “Turkish-martial” identity.⁹⁶ With a view to

⁹³ Popper, *History of Egypt*, 1:4–5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. The compilation in question here is entitled *Tahârîf awlād al-‘Arab fî al-asmâ’i al-Turkiyah*.

⁹⁵ The importance of Turkish names as a basic marker of the military’s elite identity has already been underlined by Julien Loiseau. As he points out in his chapter “L’identité Mamelouke,” names of Turkish amirs, whose signification often refers to animal figures, formed something like personal emblems that marked their singular identity and distinguished them from other social groups. Most importantly, they were part and parcel of the vocabulary of power of this military elite and of their hegemonic discourse of domination: *Les Mamelouks*, 152–53. For more details about the Turkish identity of the ruling elite and how it relates to a hegemonic discourse and perception of political domination see: Jo Van Steenberg, “Nomen est omen: David Ayalon, the Mamluk Sultanate, and the Rule of the Turks,” an essay produced within the context of the ERC project “The Mamlukisation of the Mamluk Sultanate” and presented in the April 2011 conference (“Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule: Political, Social and Cultural Aspects”) at the University of Haifa, https://www.academia.edu/4510845/_Nomen_est_omen_David_Ayalon_the_Mamluk_Sultanate_and_the_Rule_of_the_Turks_, 13–14.

⁹⁶ Concerning the significance of horsemanship and martial arts in the military culture of the Turkish ruling elite and their political meaning and ramification see: Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks*,



demonstrating his commitment to that culture, Ibn Taghrībirdī tried on every available occasion to remind his audience of his great mastery in military arts. This happened through recurrent references to his masters in the field and even through his critical and informative statements about military processions and hierarchy. When he mentions, for example, the meticulous and hierarchical ordering of the different troops during official parades or military campaigns, he intrudes upon the text to remind his audience that he was trained in this art by Ṭurunṭāy al-Zāhirī and the *atābak* Aqbughā al-Timrāzī, who himself learned it from his *ustādh*, Timrāz al-Nāṣirī.⁹⁷ Regarding this he states:

In thus drawing up the battalions he [Sultan Barqūq] changed in each case the previously customary formation; *I have retained in my memory most of its details as I learned them from my instructor [ustādh], Aqbughā at-Timrazī, commander-in-chief, who in turn had learned of it from his instructor, Timrāz an-Nāṣirī the viceroy* [emphasis added]; and were it not for the fear of prolixity and digression I would sketch the arrangement here by means of dots.⁹⁸

The *ijāzah*-like form that Ibn Taghrībirdī uses to refer to his military training seems somewhat original insofar as it equates the military arts and horsemanship with religious knowledge (*ilm*). Beyond bringing authority and legitimacy to the author's training, this simile can possibly be regarded as an attempt to extoll the military ethos and values of the ruling elite.

Ibn Taghrībirdī's close interest in martial arts and practices of warfare, of which he was seemingly a "great fan,"⁹⁹ is even more obvious in his historical narratives. In fact, the largest part of his stories about Turkish rulers and leading figures from their entourages was crafted with due reference to the chivalric codes and ethos of the military elite. More precisely, his narrative reconstructions of events and of characters' life trajectories were marked, in many cases, by a certain military-oriented outlook. A fine example of this is his account of the downfall of Qurqumās al-Sha'bānī (d. 1438) and the dramatic end of his high-profile career. When he draws the latter's story as a profile of a "transgressor" Ibn Taghrībirdī makes judgmental references invoking martial and horsemanship skills. One of the dominating arguments that he uses to discredit Qurqumās and

155–56.

⁹⁷ *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 12:53, 14:47.

⁹⁸ Popper, *History of Egypt*, 1:145.

⁹⁹ Jo Van Steenberghe and Stijn Van Nieuwenhuysse, "Truth and Politics in Late Medieval Arabic Historiography: The Formation of Sultan Barsbāy's State (1422–1438) and the Narratives of the Amir Qurqumās al-Sha'bānī (d. 1438)," *Der Islam* 95, no. 1(2018): 158.



to show how he deserved his dramatic fate—being decapitated—is his deficiency in certain horsemanship skills. Thus, he states that:

Despite his courage and fearlessness he [Qurqumās] was never very successful in combat (*fī l-ḥurūb*), because of the lack of coordination between his feet and his hands (*li-‘adam muwāfaqat rijlayhi li-yadayhi*): every time he entered combat (*al-ḥarb*), he stopped moving his feet to spur on his horse because of his pre-occupation with his hands—this is a grave handicap for a horseman, which is also known to have affected some predecessors among the horsemen of rulers.¹⁰⁰

This brief note shows how the life story and career of a leading amir like Qurqumās al-Sha‘bānī can be reduced, discredited, and even wiped out on the grounds of a deficiency in horsemanship. Judgmental references based on martial skills, as pointed out by Jo Van Steenberghe and Stijn Van Nieuwenhuyse, appear to be fundamental in the narrative construction of this amir’s story and even integral to Ibn Taghrībirdī’s discrete “politics of historical truth.”¹⁰¹

Whatever the case may be, Ibn Taghrībirdī’s keen commitment to the Turkish culture and his particular claims of a “Turkish-martial” identity tend to culminate when he proclaims himself to be “the memorialist and the censor”¹⁰² of the ruling elite. His attempts to perform as the “self-appointed” memorialist of “*Dawlat al-Atrāk*” and its political elite are displayed clearly in his dynastic history *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, and in particular in connection with courtly issues. For instance, his constant references to court customs in the work, and the meticulous attention that he gives to the court protocols and ceremonial in particular, as well as to the ranks of various amirs and military troopers, show how he engages with that “memorialist” persona. Also of note are the vivid descriptions that he draws of official ceremonies held in the citadel or of outdoor processions and the brief notes that he provides, in each annal record, about the sultans’ customary activities, such as the seasonal changing of clothing.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 157.

¹⁰¹In their study of the different narratives related to Qurqumās al-Sha‘bānī’s career and downfall story, the latter researchers demonstrate how references to horsemanship skills in Ibn Taghrībirdī’s account were “highly informative” to such an extent they would equate invocation of Quranic rulings used, in the same context, by al-Maqrīzī: *ibid.*, 158.

¹⁰²The latter expressions are the translation of the French “*mémorialiste et censeur*” which were used by Julien Loiseau to denote the importance of Ibn Taghrībirdī’s writings as regards the Turkish military elite and its affairs. See: *Les Mamelouks*, 158, 176–77; “L’émir en sa maison,” 119.

¹⁰³*Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 14:251, 15:69, 16:119, 133, 219, 227, 268, 297, 301, 307.



Furthermore, his critical comments about the noncompliance of the late Turkish rulers and their entourage with the courtly customs, which he often refers to as “the customs” (*al-ādah*) or “the royal customs” (*ādat al-mulūk*), betray his aim to play the “censor” of the ruling elite.¹⁰⁴ One example worth mentioning here is the critical note that he provides about the visit to Siryāqūs, in which he states the following:

The ceremonies of the visit to Siryâqaus had been like the ceremonies customary at the Race Course; the ceremonies of the Race Course were abolished by al-Malik aẓ-Zāhir [Barqūq], and those of Siryâqaus by al-Malik an-Nāṣir. Thereafter each succeeding sultan abolished some part of the institutions of Egypt, so that at the present time all the practices of former rulers have disappeared and the difference between the sultanate of Egypt and the vice-regency of Abulustān, for example, lies only in the title “sultanate” and the wearing of the cap—nothing more.¹⁰⁵

By and large, the examples discussed above show how important the “Turkish-martial identity” was to Ibn Taghrībirdī’s authorial self-fashioning and how it affected his practices as politics of historical writing.

Featuring the Erudite Historian

In examining how Ibn Taghrībirdī engaged with poetry in his writings some additional identity claims unfold. Conventional as it may seem, the frequent quotation of poetry, whether in the biographical sections of his works or in the yearly accounts of events, betrays his intention to appear as a polished man of letters. Apart from presenting his stories in a sophisticated style, in accordance with the dominant literary tastes, he actually intended to epitomize the image of the *adīb par excellence* before his audience. This self-positioning in an elite literary culture is expressed through a variety of textual and narrative forms. For instance, in his earliest writings, and especially in *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, the author seems more engaged in providing evidence of his training in literature. Thus, he frequently uses the *isnād* form to introduce his poetry quotations. The “*sanad*” of any given verses usually starts with “*anshadanā*” or “*wa-min naẓmihi anshadanā*” and explicitly refers to a particular *ijāzah* or “*samā*” that he attained from different masters.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 14:101, 15:10–11, 36, 303, 16:24, 55, 61, 306, 356, 387.

¹⁰⁵Popper, *History of Egypt*, 1:153–54.

¹⁰⁶*Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 1:142, 162, 2:27–28, 7:102–6, 248–49, 373.



Displaying the poems of his biographical subjects in some lengthy pages was another practice that he resorted to particularly in *Al-Manhal*.¹⁰⁷ In his annalistic account of events, Ibn Taghribirdī proceeds differently since he employs poetic quotations, as a rhetorical device, to forward some critical comments upon events and characters' deeds. Therefore, it is quite common to find that verses are preceded, in the *Nujūm*, by a number of expressions, such as “*ka-qawl al-qā'il*” or “*aḥsanu mā qāla fī hādhā al-ma'na*” or “*wa-lillāh darru al-qā'il*” or even “*wa-kān ḥāluhu ka-qawl al-qā'il*,” which operates as a connecting locution that links sections of poetry with narrative materials.¹⁰⁸ Among other instances that showcase the use of poetry for critical comments is the poetic jousting about the collapse of the minaret of the mosque of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh—in which notable scholars like Ibn Ḥajar and al-ʿAynī partook—that Ibn Taghribirdī reports.¹⁰⁹ However, it is important to note that quotation of poetry was not only used for making summary remarks on events and characters. Occasionally, quoted poetry is followed by literary commentary on the figures of speech and rhetorical devices displayed in these verses.¹¹⁰ Such comments were apparently intended by the author to be evidence of his literary credentials. On the whole, considering the general layout of the *Nujūm* and its narrative plot, it seems that poetry quotations were used to create breaks in the narrative that served both to soften the transitions between the author's intricate and entangled stories and to establish a *mise en scène* in which to place himself.¹¹¹ Poetic interludes, as can be seen from the above examples, gave Ibn Taghribirdī space to perform as a polished litterateur or *adīb*.

Tracking Ibn Taghribirdī's Narrative: The Tale of a Cairene Courtier

To reach a comprehensive reading of Ibn Taghribirdī's personal narrative one must start by defining how his various textual maneuvers performed together as a coherent ensemble within a broader set of representations. This entails

¹⁰⁷See for instance the biography of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ḥijāzī al-Miṣrī (d. 1470), a famous contemporary poet, in which Ibn Taghribirdī dedicates almost 18 pages to one of the latter's poetry collections “*Kurrās*”: *ibid.*, 2:193–209.

¹⁰⁸*Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 2:127, 189, 11:57, 13:174, 14:181, 313, 15:437, 528, 16:229, 248, 308.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 14:75–76.

¹¹⁰See for instance the explanatory notice that he provides for some poetry verses quoted about the different arts displayed in the *maḥmal* processions “*sawq al-maḥmal*”: *ibid.*, 7:312.

¹¹¹For further details about the role of poetry in the narrative plot and construction of events in Ibn Taghribirdī's chronicles see: Li Guo, “Poetry and Storytelling,” 189–200. For a broader idea about different uses of poetry quotations in Islamic historiography and how they lend authority to historical narratives see: Geert Jan Van Gelder, “Poetry in Historiography: Some Observations,” in *Problems in Arabic Literature*, ed. Miklós Maróth (Piliscsaba, Hungary, 2004), 1–13.



highlighting the distinctive aspects of his authorial self-fashioning as his way of proceeding. By examining the different maneuvers analyzed above, one can observe that Ibn Taghrībirdī's identity-shaping was performed through contrasts and criticism. Juggling multiple identities, from Muslim scholar to noble "knight" to erudite man, is one among many illustrative examples. Also of note is the way he uses criticism to shape a discrete authorial persona. In fact, the vehement criticism that Ibn Taghrībirdī directs either toward local scholars or toward his Turkish fellows is focused on their respective ignorance of Arabic or Turkish or of religious norms, and reveals his implied intention to stake out a singular identity.¹¹² His claim of singularity displays markedly when he speaks about his undertaking in writing history; not least when he declares in the prologue of the *Nujūm* that he, unlike some others, will not claim for his work any sultan, amir, or other.¹¹³ Additional contrasts unfold when we compare the self-effacement that Ibn Taghrībirdī shows in the preambles of both *Al-Manhal* and *Al-Nujūm* and the self-aggrandizement that then comes out in the bodies of these texts.¹¹⁴ The figure of the humble scholar that he tries to feature in the opening sections of these works, claiming no dedicatee and no addressee but himself, stands in sharp contrast to the image of the self-appointed writer that is displayed in the subsequent sections. His self-assured style comes into view especially clearly when he makes assertive statements via expressions like "for my part I say" (*wa-anā aqūl*).¹¹⁵

In brief, Ibn Taghrībirdī's method may hint at both his versatility as a writer and the melded nature of his personal narrative, which seems to be a perfect match with his background as a member of the sons of the elites, or *awlād al-nās*. One should remember that it was long assumed that scions of the military elite were a kind of "given middlemen," cultural brokers who stood between two classes and who allegedly found in writing and scholarship an alternative avenue

¹¹²See for instance the critical comments that he makes about the ignorance of notable scholars like Ibn Ḥajar and al-Maqrīzī, in dealing with the Turkish language and customs or about the distorted Arabic accent of some mamluk amirs and their nescience as regards the Islamic religion: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 11:171–72, 226, 14:20–21, 243–45, 15:69.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 1:2.

¹¹⁴Regarding Ibn Taghrībirdī's attempt to feature the humble learned man in the preamble of these works, see above.

¹¹⁵*Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 3:128, 5:306, 14:209, 15:307, 423, 504. It has to be underlined that Ibn Taghrībirdī performed the self-appointed writer especially through criticism and assertive statements about the sultans and the Cairene court in general. For further comparison see for instance the biography of sultan Jaqmaq in *Mawrid al-laṭāfah*, in which he pointedly asserts that the latter was the most virtuous among the Turkish rulers via expressions such as: "and I know what I am talking about" (*wa-anā adri mā aqūl*): *Mawrid al-laṭāfah*, 2:161.



to assert their identity and gain social visibility.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Ulrich Haarmann repeatedly pointed out in his surveys that the *awlād al-nās* were a marginalized group, squeezed between two firmly established classes: the local civilian elite and the Turkish ruling elite, with an informal status and with careers marked by frustration and blockades from both sides. As he underlined, their longing for acceptance and attempts to embrace the dominant culture are visible in both their writings and their careers.¹¹⁷ In short, if considered from this holistic perspective, Ibn Taghrībirdī's narrative may appear as a melded tale of a man with a "hybrid identity," constantly in pursuit of self-assertion.¹¹⁸ His claim of a multiple identity as well as the versatility that he shows in his writings can be read, in this light, as an attempt to comply with the expectations of both the Turkish ruling elite and the local scholars.

However, beyond this encompassing view, when we peer into his unstated assumptions about the Cairene court, the courtly entourage, and how things should be run in this particular context, we observe that his tale is perhaps not as "frustrated" as one might imagine and that meaning can be drawn out of its disparities. In other words, beneath this first layer of meaning that evinces the author's belonging to the sons of the elites or his presumed yearning for acceptance there is another layer that should be considered, notably the one referring to the Cairene court and to his unstated longing for courtly positions. In this regard, it should be stressed that Ibn Taghrībirdī's claim of the courtier's persona unfolds particularly in his chronicle *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*. In many respects, this work was, more than any of his other compilations, "a work by a courtier for courtiers."¹¹⁹ Actually, among his historiographical compilations, *Al-Nujūm* is the only one that was associated with a courtly figure, namely Sultan Jaqmaq's son and heir Muḥammad (d. 847/1444), who was declared to be its original dedicatee.¹²⁰ Moreover, as pointed out by Irmeli Perho, the basic structure of this chronicle, which was designedly divided into self-contained units corresponding

¹¹⁶Haarmann, "Joseph's Law," 61–62, 83; idem, "The Sons of Mamluks as Fief-Holders," 143–44; idem, "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage," 104–5, 109; idem, "The Writer as an Individual in Medieval Muslim Society," 85.

¹¹⁷See for instance Haarmann's survey of Ibn Aybak al-Dawādārī's writings: "The Writer as an Individual," 83–84.

¹¹⁸For further details see: Haarmann, "The Sons of Mamluks as Fief-Holders," 143–44.

¹¹⁹Donald P. Little, "Historiography of the Ayyūbid and Mamluk epochs," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 439.

¹²⁰*Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 15:504.



to different sultans' periods of rule, evinces how it was managed for the purpose of reading in courtly sessions.¹²¹

In addition to that, Ibn Taghrībirdī's assumptions about the didactic function of history in this chronicle further shows its courtly orientations. In particular, his assertions about the leading role of the historian in guiding sultans to righteous rule subtly reveals his aim to occupy the same position held by Badr al-Dīn al-Aynī (762–855/1360–1451) in Barsbāy's court as the sultan's private counselor. In that respect, Ibn Taghrībirdī explicitly states that:

He [al-Aynī] deterred him [Sultan Barsbāy] many times from acts of injustice, so that a remark made by al-Ashraf in public was often repeated, "*Had it not been for Cadi al-Ainī our Islam would not have been good and we would not know how to proceed in government.*" And because of what he heard through al-Ainī's reading of history to him, al-Ashraf could dispense with the council of the emirs in regard to important matters, for he became expert through listening to the experiences of past rulers. I say what al-Ashraf said in regard to al-Ainī is true; for al-Ashraf when he became Sultan was uneducated and young in comparison with the rulers among the Turks who had been trained in slavery; for at that time he was something over forty years old, inexperienced in affairs, had not been put to the test. Al-Ainī by reading history to him educated him and taught him matters which he had been incapable of settling previously... For this reason al-Ainī was his greatest boon companion and the one nearest to him, despite the fact that he never mixed in government affairs; on the contrary, his sittings with him were devoted only to the reading of history, annals, and the like, and from that day I, too, had a liking for history, preferred it, and made it my occupation [emphasis added].¹²²

As can be seen here, beyond demonstrating to us how Ibn Taghrībirdī converted to history writing, these excerpts also point to his longing to be the sultan's advisor. To follow from that, he recalls elsewhere the particular attention shown by some emblematic rulers, like Sultan Baybars (r. 1260–77), toward his-

¹²¹Irmeli Perho "Ibn Taghrībirdī's stories," 137. Concerning the structure of *Al-Nujūm* and its layout, Ibn Taghrībirdī makes clear statements on how he arranged it in self-contained sections devoted to Egypt's rulers. Therein he declares: "for I proposed, in arranging the work, with its mention of king after king, that if he [Muḥammad ibn Jaqmaq] should become Sultan this work would be concluded with an account of him, in the manner of a biography, relating in detail the circumstances and events of his life": Popper, *History of Egypt*, 5:192.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 4:158.



tory. Thus, he states that Baybars “was keen on learning *Tārīkh* and very partial to historians; and he often says: ‘hearing history is far more constructive than life-experiences.’”¹²³ Seemingly, the authoritative position in which history is held, in both excerpts, and the significant role assigned to the historian in terms of political guidance, was used to advance his claims. Ibn Taghrībirdī’s longing to be the sultan’s counselor comes into sight, more particularly, when he describes his close relationship with Jaqmaq’s son and heir Muḥammad and how he was affected by his early death. In the latter’s obituary Ibn Taghrībirdī openly expresses his regret about his passing, which he considers a salutary event and a misfortune. Therein he declares:

[Muḥammad ibn Jaqmaq] used constantly to question me about abstruse, confused questions of history concerning which no one after him to the present day has ever questioned me.... It was on his account that I composed this work [*Nujūm*], without any command from him to write it.... I hinted this to him, and he almost flew for joy; then while we were engaged in this he was transferred to the mercy of God the Exalted; and my relations with him were as Mas‘ūd ibn Muḥammad the poet has said:

As my father dear came my love to me, he was in
disguise,
but he saw the spies and he straightway turned and he
fled afar;
And to me it seemed as though I and he, and as also they
were a hope and gain and between them death to their
league was bar.¹²⁴

Aside from that, the critical statements that he makes in the *Nujūm* regarding some high amirs he rubbed shoulders with at Barsbāy’s court or about certain figures from the courtly entourage of Sultan Jaqmaq can be considered from this same perspective: as unstated claims for courtly positions. For instance, in his depictions of Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rūmī, a Hanafi scholar and close companion of Sultan Jaqmaq, Ibn Taghrībirdī lays a particular emphasis on his defects and worthlessness. According to him, although he was successful in gaining the favor of many sultans, al-Rūmī was nothing but a man devoid of knowledge and merit, and it was above all due to chance and the blindness of sultans that he achieved such an influential position. With regard to this he states:

¹²³ *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 7:182.

¹²⁴ Popper, *History of Egypt*, 5:191–92.



he had attained good fortune from the rulers of Egypt, particularly from al-Malik az-Zâhir Jaqmaq; in his reign he became extremely influential; prosperity came to him, and he was reckoned as one of the leaders, although he was not worthy of this. *But the rulers of our time are like the blind; one puts his hand on the shoulder of another and whatever moves the first one makes the second move in the same way* [emphasis added]. The first one who favored this Shams ad-Dîn was az-Zâhir Ṭaṭar; and all the Sultans who came after him copied him in favoring Shams ad-Dîn....”¹²⁵

It should be noted, however, that Shams al-Dîn al-Rûmî's portrayal in the *Nujûm* seems biased when compared to his depiction in *Ḥawādith al-duhûr* or in contemporary works like *Al-Ḍaw' al-lâmi'* of al-Sakhâwî. In the *Ḥawādith*, for example, he is presented in a far more neutral manner as an influential man who was favored by many sultans, and in particular by Sultan Jaqmaq, during whose reign he became the “go-to person” for state affairs (*al-mushâru ilayhi fî al-dawlah*).¹²⁶ Interestingly, in the latter chronicle Ibn Taghrîbirdî did not charge him with ignorance and instead confirmed that this al-Rûmî was skilled in writing the proportionated script (*al-khaṭṭ al-mansûb*) and conversant in history and literature.¹²⁷ In the same vein, this al-Rûmî was depicted in *Al-Ḍaw' al-lâmi'* as a man of many qualities. As reported by al-Sakhâwî, apart from being virtuous and decent al-Rûmî was quite familiar with the courtly etiquette and the art of addressing sultans (*dariban bi-ṣuḥbat al-mulûk*), not to mention his broad knowledge of history, literature, and other matters.¹²⁸ It is therefore clear that his depiction in *Al-Nujûm* was designed to serve Ibn Taghrîbirdî's personal agenda, most of all his claims for a similar career in the Cairene court. In another respect, this shows how he engaged with a different persona in the *Nujûm*, which appears distinct from the persona of the historian that he performed in *Ḥawādith al-duhûr*.¹²⁹

Among other instances that showcase his engagement with that discrete persona is the biographical depiction provided in *Al-Nujûm al-zâhirah* for Shihâb al-Dîn Aḥmad Ibn al-Aqṭa', the governor of Alexandria and one of the close companions of Sultan Barsbây.¹³⁰ Interestingly, when he sets forth the latter's life-trajectory and career, Ibn Taghrîbirdî goes somewhat beyond mere criticism to

¹²⁵Ibid., 5:233.

¹²⁶*Ḥawādith al-duhûr*, 2:347–48.

¹²⁷Ibid., 348.

¹²⁸Al-Sakhâwî, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lâmi'*, 10:112.

¹²⁹For further details about the disparities between both chronicles see: Donald P. Little, “Historiography of the Ayyûbid and Mamluk epochs,” 439–40.

¹³⁰See *Al-Nujûm al-zâhirah*, 15:170–71.



define, although implicitly, how a sultan's advisor and companion should be. Hence, he starts his accounts on Shihāb al-Dīn with pinpointing his low origin, specifically the fact that he was the son of a low ranking mamluk who served as a groom in the royal stables. His father's name, al-Aqṭa', refers, Ibn Taghrībirdī argued, to his humble background, since it suggests that "he was a man one of whose hands had been cut off and who made his living by begging."¹³¹ In addition to that, Ibn Taghrībirdī brings into focus Shihāb al-Dīn's complete ignorance in quite original ways. He confirms that Ibn al-Aqṭa' was not only devoid of any knowledge but not even able to pronounce words correctly, a fact that he came to notice upon his close acquaintance with him. He states that

Aḥmad also when he spoke pronounced words in the manner of the common market keepers; I often sat with him at the court services, and I did not find that he had a knowledge of any branch of science or any kind of learning. And when he undertook to use the niceties and subtleties of speech he would change the pronunciation of a word and say "bi-tisrad shai"; and I would tell him privately that he should say "tisrat," and make plain to him that it is an alteration of "tishrab"; he would understand it after much effort, then after a long time he would forget it and again enunciate it with *d*; and I do think that he continued this until he died.¹³²

Furthermore, when he traces the latter's career and his rise from serving troopers to holding high positions in Barsbāy's court,¹³³ he insinuates it was due to favoritism and to sultans' blind partiality for pretentious attendants¹³⁴ in their court. In this respect, Ibn Taghrībirdī declares:

I do not know for what reason this Aḥmad and 'Alī Ibn Fuḥaima as-Silākhūrī ["the fodderer"] won favor with the Sultan [Barsbāy] despite the fact that they both *combined in themselves extreme ignorance, an ugly appearance, and low origin* [emphasis added].¹³⁵

Beyond possible bias or personal claims, these statements highlight Ibn Taghrībirdī's conception of the proper comportment of a sultan's companion

¹³¹Popper, *History of Egypt*, 4:189.

¹³²Ibid., 190.

¹³³Ibid., 189–90.

¹³⁴Regarding the pretentious attitude of Ibn al-Aqṭa' Ibn Taghrībirdī specifies that: "he was pretentious, made claims to knowledge and wisdom, especially when he would cite the proverbs of the lower classes, for the Turks would admire this, praise his taste, knowledge, extensive learning, and excellence in carrying on a conversation with him." Ibid., 190.

¹³⁵Ibid.



and court attendant. It is arguable that his criticism of Ibn al-Aqṭaʿ and ʿAlī Ibn Fuḥaymah may be an attempt to present himself, in juxtaposition to them, as the perfect candidate for court attendance and courtly offices.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the defects that he ascribes to them, such as ignorance, ugly appearance, and low origin, hint at a number of qualities which he presumably considers necessary for a court attendant. Read in reverse, these defects could indicate the ideal model that he propounds. Seemingly, from his point of view a court attendant, and in a more specific context the sultan's companion and counselor, should be a man of knowledge whose expertise covers varying fields. For as he demonstrates through the example of Ibn al-Aqṭaʿ, a court attendant ought to instigate and perpetuate constructive discussions with the sultan,¹³⁷ must be a physically attractive person who cares about grooming and manners, and, finally, should come from good stock and not be a commoner like Ibn Fuḥaymah.¹³⁸ On the other side of the coin, Ibn Taghrībirdī's statements about Ibn al-Aqṭaʿ may have some didactic bearing. We cannot discount the possibility that he tried to offer, through the latter's story with Barsbāy, an instructive example for subsequent sultans and perhaps even to indicate to them how to choose court attendants appropriately.

The courtier's persona that Ibn Taghrībirdī tried to set in broad strokes, or that he perhaps aimed to feature throughout the *Nujūm*, was not utterly absent from his other works. Though markedly more visible and quite entrenched in *Al-*

¹³⁶Yet al-Marjī's depiction of Ibn Taghrībirdī's personality and innumerable virtues invokes an opposite model. In fact, in stark contrast with the latter courtiers, he is said to be "a man of pleasant appearance, affable in companionship, and a good conversationalist; and with a reputation, besides, for piety and moral uprightness." *Ibid.*, 1:xviii.

¹³⁷Ibn Taghrībirdī demonstrates through this example how important it is for a court attendant to be practiced in conversing with sultans and a courtly audience. For further details see the author's reports of his private talks with Ibn al-Aqṭaʿ and the latter's middling discussions in court services and gatherings: *ibid.*, 190.

¹³⁸It should be noted that Ibn Taghrībirdī's assumptions about the chief qualities required in a court attendant have some common ground with the criteria established, in other contexts, by Renaissance courtiers, specifically by Baldesar Castiglione (1478–1529). In his "libro del cortegiano" (The Book of the Courtier) the latter evokes in more elaborate and sharp terms the defining features of the perfect courtier. Among other chief conditions and qualities that he mentions are: first, the noble origin of a courtier, who has to be well-born; second, he should be well-spoken and fair-languaged so that he can be wise and make a good appearance in his discourses upon political affairs; and third, he has to be good looking and cleanly in his apparel. Although Ibn Taghrībirdī's assumptions and ideals regarding court attendants appear less elaborate, they still share some common features or at least a similar conception that correlate with the sophisticated model propound by Castiglione. See: Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation*, ed. Daniel Javitch (New York, 2002), 21–30, 35. For further details about the profile and the ethics of rulers' counselors see: Stephen Kolsky, *Courts and Courtiers in Renaissance Northern Italy* (Farnham, 2003), 5–29, 34–60.



Nujūm, the author's courtly orientations did extend to his other writings, not least to his second chronicle, *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*. As a continuation of al-Maqrīzī's *Sulūk*, the latter chronicle actually retained the traditional annalistic format. In view of its general layout and the nature of the data it offers,¹³⁹ the *Ḥawādith* seems less court-oriented than *Al-Nujūm* or *Al-Manhal*. Being written in a different context and for a different audience, it followed other designs and purposes. It would appear that it was arranged to fit Ibn Taghribirdī's claim for his master's legacy. This is clearly displayed in its prologue, especially when the author positions himself as the legitimate heir of al-Maqrīzī (766–845/1364–1442).¹⁴⁰ However, while trying to epitomize the seasoned historian, Ibn Taghribirdī remained relatively swayed by the courtier's persona. His occasional references in *Ḥawādith al-duhūr* to Turkish names and their Arabic meanings (such as Bīnī Bāziq, which he renders as “the thick-necked man” [*ghalīz al-raqabah*]) betray close parallels to the court-oriented tone that prevails in his *Nujūm*.¹⁴¹ In addition, critical comments, such as the concerns he voices regarding the abolition of many courtly customs and offices by later sultans, show how he reverts, although occasionally, to that courtier persona. For example, when he reports in the yearly account of 855/1451 that Sultan Jaqmaq repealed the Thursday court service (*khidmat yawm al-khamīs*), he goes into great detail listing the bulk of court rituals that were abolished by different sultans from Barqūq to Jaqmaq and specifying how consecutive abolition measures taken by the latter sultan had impaired the prestige of the sultanate.¹⁴² With regard to this he states:

Since he [Jaqmaq] ascended the throne to this very day he, unlike other Turkish rulers, abolished many of the symbols of royal authority (*shī'ār al-mamlakah*). For indeed the last Turkish rulers

¹³⁹In the same vein as al-Maqrīzī's *Al-Sulūk*, the latter chronicle offers more details about the economic life in Egypt. Prices of goods and fluctuations in their production are included in almost each yearly account. For further comparison with *Al-Nujūm* see the yearly account of 859/1454 in both chronicles: *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*, 2:515–48; *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 16:84–94.

¹⁴⁰With regard to this, Ibn Taghribirdī states that after al-Maqrīzī's death the scene was left without any reliable master. Save for Badr al-Dīn al-Aynī, who himself became less proficient at recording events given his advanced age, there was no other reliable historian to mention. Seeing that, he decided to continue his master's project and to compile a chronography starting from 845/1441: *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*, 1:32.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, 1:106. The brief explanation that Ibn Taghribirdī provides for Bīnī Bāziq's name is one of the rare cases that we came upon in *Ḥawādith al-duhūr*. However, it remains a significant hint as it recalls similar and more frequent indications interspersed in the *Nujūm*, which represent some of its salient courtly features.

¹⁴²*Ibid.*, 2:339. It should be noted here that the abolition of the Thursday court service was exclusively mentioned in the *Ḥawādith*. In *Al-Nujūm* there is no allusion whatsoever evoking this event in the yearly record of 855/1451. For more details see: *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah*, 15:432–39.



abrogated some of the practices of former rulers. And the first who began to repeal these good features (*al-maḥāsīn*) was al-Malik al-Zāhir Barqūq, who abolished race courses a long time after his enthronement. Then al-Malik al-Nāṣir Faraj abolished the visit to Siryāqūs and then al-Malik al-Muʾayyad Shaykh abolished the vice-regency of Egypt, and so al-Malik al-Ashraf Barsbāy abolished the adornment of ships during the breaking of the dam (*kasr al-baḥr*), meaning during the Nile inundation; but what al-Malik al-Zāhir Jaqmaq has abolished was numerous.¹⁴³

Following that, Ibn Taghrībirdī specifies that among other important royal symbols Jaqmaq revoked is the guard of the lady (*nawbat khātūn*), which used to beat the drums at the Citadel at sunrise and sunset. According to him this daily ceremony lent the sultanate “pomp and greatness; also it spread fear and prestige among those who have no knowledge of the ascent to the Citadel. And all that has vanished.”¹⁴⁴ What can be observed here is that Ibn Taghrībirdī is, as suggested above, converting to the role of the “censor” of the ruling elite¹⁴⁵ that he often played in *Al-Nujūm*. Overall, these instances—even if they are sporadic and infrequent—further show how attached he remained to the courtier persona and its particular approach. Perhaps this is understandable if we consider that Ibn Taghrībirdī’s vocation as a historian was deeply affected by his personal experience in Barsbāy’s court and most importantly by al-ʿAynī’s achievement in that court. All in all, if considered from the inner perspective of his unstated intentions and in particular his longing for a courtly career, Ibn Taghrībirdī’s versatility as a historian can be read differently. Hence, we may regard the multiplicity of authorial voices and identities on display in his writings, particularly but not exclusively in the *Nujūm*, as an attempt to fulfill the expectations of the courtly audience he addressed.

¹⁴³ *Ḥawādith al-duḥūr*, 2:340. Similar instances and statements can be often found in *Al-Nujūm*. Regarding the abolition of the visit to Siryāqūs, for example, Ibn Taghrībirdī declares, in a similar vein and in almost identical words, that: “the ceremonies of the Race Course were abolished by al-Malik aḏ-Zāhir, and those of Siryāqūs by al-Malik an-Nāṣir. Thereafter each succeeding sultan abolished some part of the institutions of Egypt, so that at the present time all the practices of former rulers have disappeared and the difference between the sultanate of Egypt and the vice-regency of Abulustān, for example, lies only in the title ‘sultanate’ and the wearing of the cap—nothing more.” Popper, *History of Egypt*, 1:154.

¹⁴⁴ *Ḥawādith al-duḥūr*, 1:339–40. Regarding “*nawbat khātūn*” and court ceremonials in general see: Jo Van Steenberg, “Ritual, politics and the city in Mamluk Cairo: the Bayna l-Qasrayn as a Dynamic Lieu de Mémoire, 1250–1382,” in *Court Ceremonies and Ritual of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean*, ed. Alexander Beihammer, Stavroula Constantinou, and Maria Parani (Leiden, 2013), 227–77.

¹⁴⁵ Julien Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks*, 158.



Concluding Remarks

To consider Ibn Taghrībirdī's life and career in a new light, we shifted our attention away from the stereotypical representations constructed around him in medieval accounts and modern renderings concerned with his achievements as a historian. Instead, we examined his own narrative and highlighted particular circumstances as the individual intentions that determined his historiographical enterprise. By identifying and scrutinizing different narrative techniques and textual maneuvers that engage with his authorial identity, we are able to elucidate the development of Ibn Taghrībirdī's subtle though deliberate methods of historical writing, particularly the way he tended to negotiate multiple and contrasting identities and, accordingly, to cast himself in different roles, such as Muslim scholar, notable Turkish strongman *par excellence*, polished litterateur. These self-fashioning maneuvers made it possible to observe both how he created a powerful aura around his authorial persona and how he built up his authority as a historian.

Analysis of his identity-shaping maneuvers allows us to consider self-fashioning as an authorial practice that engages with a whole process of meaning-making that involves not only the production of the author's individual identity but also of the social and cultural environment within which he operates. By considering this we came to decipher the entangled meanings of Ibn Taghrībirdī's personal narrative, which appeared, on a first reading, as the tale of a *walad al-nās*, a "son of the elite," whose hybrid identity transpired through contrasting and diverse claims. However, when placed in a broader semantic context, this melded tale transforms into a coherent narrative: that of the Cairene courtier. Seen from that particular perspective, the versatility of Ibn Taghrībirdī as a writer and his whole undertaking as a historian can be read as an attempt to comply with the expectations of the highly competitive milieu of the constantly changing courts of several sultans. His self-fashioning can be regarded as artful maneuvers aimed at social advancement and mobility in the Cairene court. Beyond its entangled meanings and puzzling contrasts, the polysemic personal narrative of Ibn Taghrībirdī skillfully mirrors the cosmopolitan world localized and reflected by the medieval Cairene court.

