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**True, Untrue, False?
Deciphering Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī's Biography of Qalāwūn**

The aim of this article is to analyze some aspects of Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī's¹ biography of sultan Qalāwūn titled *Al-Faḍl al-Ma'tūr min Sīrat aṣ-Ṣultān al-Malik al-Manṣūr*, in the collection of the Bodleian Library MS no. Marsh 424.² The analysis will concentrate on the question of historical truth and the author's credibility. It will consist of studying certain parts of the work in which facts are represented differently than in other historical sources of the time.

To define historical value of a given work, the question of the author's credibility has to be considered. As a royal biographer Šāfi' could not be, and was not, an outside observer. This obviously influenced contents of the information he conveyed. The author's choice of topics and their presentation evidently serve the guiding principle of the royal biographer, namely portraying his hero as an example of perfection among Muslim rulers.³ This

¹ On Šāfi' b. 'Alī, see: P. M. Holt, *Some Observations on Šāfi' ibn 'Alī's biography of Baybars*, JSS, xxix/i 1984; A. Khawaiter, *Baibars the First: His Endeavors and Achievements*, London 1978, pp. 175-179; Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī, *Ḥusn al-manāqib as-sirriyya al-muntazi'a min as-sīra aṣ-ṣāhibiyya*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Ḥuwaytīr, Riyadh 1989, 2nd ed., pp. 24-25; Ibn aṣ-Ṣuqā'i, *Tālī Kitāb waḥayāt al-a'yān*, ed. and tr. J. Sublet, Damascus 1974, no. 184; Al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-waḥayāt*, Beirut 1974, ii, pp. 93-95; Aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Al-Wāfi bi-l-waḥayāt*, xvi, Wiesbaden 1982, pp. 76-85. Ibn Ḥaḡar al-'Asqalānī, *Ad-Durar al-kamīna*, Hyderabad 1929-1932, pp. 381-383.

² Nāṣir ad-Dīn Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī Ibn 'Abbās al-'Asqalānī, *Al-Faḍl al-ma'tūr min sīrat as-Ṣultān al-Malik al-Manṣūr*, MS no. Marsh 424, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

³ Cf. P. M. Holt, *The Virtuous Ruler in Thirteenth-Century Mamluk Royal Biographies*, "Nottingham Medieval Studies", vol. 26 (1980), pp. 27-35. An attempt to answer the question of why Arab historiographers did not arrive at a higher level of writing coherent biographies, which would explain the development of the individual's personality, but merely glorified the ruler, was undertaken by E. Ashtor, *Some Unpublished Sources for the Bahri Period*, "Scripta Hierosolymitana" IX (1961), pp. 11-29.

principle excludes objectivity of the author and puts in question his will to convey the truth: to record the true information Šāfi' not only had to reach it—he also had to be willing to tell the truth.

For instance, among the data he gives on Qalāwūn's life before his assumption of power, at least three separate instances differ significantly from the information conveyed by other sources. And in at least two of the three cases the reason behind the differences is, clearly enough, the royal biographer's intention to introduce his patron in the most favorable light. First of falsifications consists of a presentation of untrue data. In the second case, it is an omission of important information. The third relation inconsistent with other sources requires the formulation of a hypothesis since it can be false or not.

The first doubts appear in connection with Qalāwūn's first owner. Most of the Mamluk chroniclers agree that before Qalāwūn was transferred to the service of sultan Aṣ-Šāliḥ Ayyūb, he had belonged to the category of mamluks later called *sayfiyya*, or mamluks belonging to amīrs. His first purchaser and owner was amīr 'Alā' ad-Dīn Aqsunqur al-Kāmili⁴ and it was him who paid 1,000 dinars for Qalāwūn. After his death Qalāwūn passed on to the service of sultan aṣ-Šāliḥ Ayyūb (637-647/1240-1249).

Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī, Qalāwūn's biographer, however, gives a different account of the events: according to him, it was sultan aṣ-Šāliḥ Ayyūb himself who bought Qalāwūn for 1,000 dinars directly from the slave merchant, choosing him "for magnificence of his genus and surmising that he would inherit the kingdom one day"⁵. We have good reasons to assume that Šāfi's information is not really true.⁶ What's more, Šāfi' goes on with his version say-

⁴ One of the mamluks of al-Malik al-Kāmil Muḥammad Ibn Ayyūb; the sources differ as to the name of Qalāwūn's first owner. Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Muḥtār al-aḥbār*, Cairo 1993, p. 70, Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, vol. i, p.347, Ibn Taḡrībīrdī, *An-Nuḡūm az-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-āl-Qāhira*, Cairo 1929-1972, vol. 7, p. 326, report it was 'Alā' ad-Dīn Aqsunqur (Qarāsunqur) al-Kāmili (i.e. the mamluk of Al-Kāmil Muḥammad). According to Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb as-sulūk li-ma'rifat duwal al-mulūk*, Cairo 1939, vol. 1, p.663, and an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, Cairo 1992, vol.31, p.7, it was 'Alā' ad-Dīn Aqsunqur as-Sāqī al-'Ādilī, one of the mamluks of Al-Malik al-'Ādil. Ibn Taḡrībīrdī quotes Ibn Kaḡīr, who reports that 'al-Malik aṣ-Šāliḥ Naḡm ad-Dīn Ayyūb bought Qalāwūn for 1,000 dinars from Al-Malik al-Kāmil Muḥammad (*Nuḡūm*, vol.7, p.329). For many reasons the first version is the most reliable. Šāfi' does not mention Qalāwūn's first owner at all, saying it was Aṣ-Šāliḥ Ayyūb himself who bought him for 1,000 dinars on the slave market.

⁵ *Al-Faql*, fol. 4a.

⁶ At least three records prove this: Ibn Taḡrībīrdī's (*Nuḡūm*, vii, p. 326) quotation of somebody, who said Qalāwūn had also been known as Qalāwūn Aqsunqurī al-Kāmili aṣ-Baḡrī an-Naḡmī (which indicates that 'Alā' ad-Dīn Aqsunqur al-

ing that Qalāwūn, 'notwithstanding his young age, gained significance in aṣ-Ṣāliḥ's state'—which is rather impossible, for Aṣ-Ṣāliḥ apparently died shortly after he had acquired and manumitted Qalāwūn.

The question appears, then, why Šāfi' misrepresents the facts and what conclusions can be drawn from his version? As for the question of the first owner of the slave, a prevailing conviction is that to become a Royal Mamluk a slave should have been sold directly to the sultan, because only the sultan's mamluks were sent to the Cairo military school⁷ and only the graduates of this school could become full-fledged members of the Mamluk elite of the Royal Mamluks. According to this opinion the purchase of a mamluk by an amīr practically precluded any promotion.⁸

Indeed, amīrs' mamluks could not acquire titles or posts, or participate in factional struggles, neither could they fulfill whatever personal or group ambitions they may have had. There was a way to break out of this closed circle, but it depended on good luck rather than on a mamluk himself (as W. Popper points out)⁹: in some circumstances, e.g. in the case of death or dismissal of an amīr, his mamluks were transferred to the service of the sultan or of other amīrs, or were divided between the sultan and the amīrs¹⁰; if a former amīr's mamluk was lucky enough to be acquired by the sultan,

Kāmili was his owner); An-Nuwayrī (*Nihāyat*, vol.31, p. 8) and Al-Maqrīzī (*Sulūk*, vol.1, p.663), who confirm there existed a group of former mamluks of Aqsunqur, who after being included into the Royal Mamluks were known as al-'alā'iyya; Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *At-Tuḥfa al-mulūkiyya fī ad-dawla at-turkiyya*, Cairo 1987, p.105, who quotes Baktāš an-Nağmī saying to Qalāwūn: "...and when the fate brought you two together to 'Alā' ad-Dīn Qarāsunqur as-Sāqī..."

⁷ The question of Qalāwūn's military education remains unclear. In all likelihood he received some training in his first master's (i.e. amīr 'Alā' ad-Dīn Aqsunqur's) barracks; later this could come to mean that he was less well trained than the Royal Mamluks who grew up and studied in the first-rate Cairo military school. But it seems that on the eve of the Mamluk era the education system had not been completely established (the earliest information on the subject concerns the reign of sultan Az-Zāhir Baybars, who was to build aṭḥāq barracks in the Citadel (*Nuḡūm*, vol.7, pp.190-191; Al-Kutubī, *Fawāt al-wafayāt*, Cairo 1954, vol.1, p.113). See D. Ayalon, *L'Esclavage du Mamelouk*, Jerusalem 1951, p.9) and the differences in the level of training between the sultan's and the amīrs' mamluks might not have been as significant as in the following decades.

⁸ See D. Ayalon, *Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army*, BSOAS, 15 (1953), pt.I, pp. 220-222 and p.II, pp.459-462; *The System of Payment in Mamluk Military Society*, JESHO, 1 (1957-58), pp.61-65.

⁹ W. Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Mamluks*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1955, pt.I, p.4.

¹⁰ D. Ayalon, *Studies...*, pt. II, p. 461.

he would become one of the Royal Mamluks.¹¹ There is a conviction, however, that even after being transferred to the sultan's service, the former amīrs' mamluks position among the Royal Mamluks was insignificant, their status inferior and their career prospects next to none.¹²

It is clear then that his biographer tries to place Qalāwūn in a different category of mamluks than the one to which he really belonged: he places him among *muštarawāt*, or those directly purchased, educated and liberated by the sultan.

As a royal biographer, he probably wanted to portray his sovereign in a more favorable light—his version of events may confirm that the position of an amīr's mamluk who passed to the sultan's service was less honorable than that of the rest of the Royal Mamluks. But, on the other hand, Qalāwūn's example and his future career (as well as that of some of his comrades in slavery¹³) contradict the conviction that the position of former amīr's mamluks among the Royal Mamluks was inferior and hopeless.¹⁴ It seems such an opinion may be valid for the Circassian period only: in the Baḥrī state the situation of the amīr's mamluk transferred to the sultan was generally not that bad and being bought by an amīr probably did not facilitate a successful career, but did not preclude it either.

Trying to clarify what happened to Qalāwūn after his manumission we encounter some further ambiguities. It took Qalāwūn thirty years from the year of his liberation to become a ruler. He witnessed the rise of the Mamluk sultanate and lived through the reigns of six Mamluk sultans. Of these 30 years, he spent the last 17 serving sultan Baybars and his sons. It is not clear, however, what exactly happened to him during the turbulent 13 years before Baybars's accession. Like other sources of the time, Šāfi's biography is not rich in details concerning Qalāwūn's life before the reign of Baybars, either; and, again, the data he provides must be treated with caution.

What appears from Šāfi's further narration is that all the sultans ruling Egypt after Aṣ-Šāliḥ Ayyūb, from Šağar ad-Durr to Aḏ-Ḍāhir Baybars, respected Qalāwūn, gave him precedence over the others and granted him the highest position in their states. Though Qalāwūn's biographer eulogistic spirit is exceptionally clear here, it is quite probable that generally Qalāwūn was indeed continuously promoted; it is, however, not the whole truth. As it was almost impossible to survive in the Mamluk sultanate with-

¹¹ The term *sayfiyya* signifying the amīr's mamluks who passed on to the service of the sultan was probably used in the Circassian sultanate only; see *ibid.*, pp.220, 222, n.2.

¹² See, e.g., D. Ayalon, *Studies...*, p.220-21.

¹³ Sunqur ar-Rūmī and, above all, Sunqur al-Ašqar.

¹⁴ See, e.g., D. Ayalon, *Studies...*, p.220-21.

out being at least once arrested or banished¹⁵, Šāfi's specific omission, or rather misinformation, must be pointed out here. He goes on to say that it was also sultan Al-Mu'izz Aybak's state (648-655/1250-1257) in which Qalāwūn had 'the highest position'. Indeed, in 650 he led, together with amīr Baybars, an expedition against the rebel nomad Arabs of the Upper Egypt.¹⁶ He is also mentioned among the most prominent Baḥrī amīrs in the year 652.¹⁷ But what the chroniclers also say is that this group of amīrs (including Qalāwūn al-Alfī, Baybars al-Bunduqārī, Sunqur al-Ašqar, Badr ad-Dīn Baysarī) fled to Syria after Al-Mu'izz Aybak had killed their leader, Aqṭāy.

The 'Syrian episode' of the fugitive Baḥrīyya lasted six years.¹⁸ This misinformation does not need to be discussed further—the reason why Šāfi omitted this episode seems to be rather obvious: it is always better to say that the patron had "the highest position" than to report he fell into disgrace and was banished. But this had a flip side, too: by deciding to hide a "shameful" story, the author not only deliberately rewrote history and tried to make it serve his purpose. By doing this, he unwillingly deprived himself of a possibility to transmit a lot of valuable information that constitute generally positive element of Qalāwūn's biography. Without dealing with the complicated details of the Baḥrīyya's exile, the records concerning it indicate that:

- 5 years after his liberation Qalāwūn was an eminent, and thus high-ranking, amīr (i.e. amīr of ten or amīr of forty); this in turn indicates that he must have excelled in the service¹⁹ and that his wealth was by then considerable (which is not insignificant if we consider that before the manumission he owned nothing);

- Qalāwūn actively participated in factional struggle;

- among Qalāwūn's comrades and his fellow faction members were the most prominent of the Baḥrī amīrs, who were to play an important role in his future career;

- from the very beginning Qalāwūn threw in his lot with amīr Baybars, a future sultan.

The third record whose details differ from other sources concerns events

¹⁵ For details see D. Ayalon, *Discharges from Service, Banishments and Imprisonments in Mamluk Society*, IOS, vol.li (1972), pp.25-50.

¹⁶ *Tuhfa*, p. 33.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.35.

¹⁸ In 658 (1260) sultan Qutuz, endangered by the Mongol invasion, welcomed them back.

¹⁹ According to Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī Qalāwūn excelled in chivalric arts (*furūsiyya*); see *Al-Faql*, fol. 2b.

that took place after accession of Baybars' son, Al-Malik as-Sa'id Baraka Hān (6767/1277). His two-year reign was quite turbulent, even in Mamluk terms. The factional struggle combined with the sultan's unstatesmanlike behaviour, caused considerable chaos in the sultanate. During his short reign three major groups struggled for influence: the old Šālihiyya guard, including the leading amīrs of az-Zāhir Baybars: Qalāwūn, Baysarī, Sunqur al-Ašqar; the *zāhiriyya* guard, or the mamluks of az-Zāhir Baybars, who split up at the critical moment; and the Royal Mamluks of sultan Baraka Hān, including the young unit of his *ḥaṣṣākiyya*, under whose immense influence the sultan was.²⁰ All of them were jostling one with another, dividing and uniting, trying to influence the sultan, win something for themselves, or just survive.

Qalāwūn, already in his fifties, was by then an experienced commander, who not only had participated in all major expeditions against Crusaders, Mongols and Armenians, but also had a deep understanding of internal politics of the Mamluk court. From what Šāfi' relates it is clear that Qalāwūn was by then an indisputable leader of the Baḥrīyya.

Of all that happened during al-Malik as-Sa'id's reign only one major event will be analyzed here, namely his sending amīrs Qalāwūn and Baysarī on an expedition to Cilician Armenia. According to Ibn al-Furāt²¹, it was on the instigation of his young *ḥaṣṣākiyya* mamluks that the sultan sent the army to Armenia; what the sultan's mamluks planned was to seize the Baḥrī amīrs on their way back from Armenia and confiscate their *iqṭā'* fiefs, which the sultan, in the meantime, had already distributed among them. From Šāfi's narration, however, a different picture emerges: what he says is that it was Qalāwūn himself who proposed to go with the expedition to Armenia and this took place after some serious argument between the sultan and the Baḥrī amīrs; the argument was connected with unstatesmanlike and unsoldierlike behaviour of the sultan who, instead of fighting, was having fun in the Damascus citadel.²²

Whatever version is true, all the authors, including Šāfi' Ibn 'Alī, generally agree as to what happened next: Qalāwūn and Baysarī, while on the expedition, were informed about the sultan's hostile design by Kūnduk az-Zāhiri, Baraka Hān's viceregent, who after a dramatic conflict with the sultan's *ḥaṣṣākiyya* guard decided to warn Qalāwūn of the conspiracy and to join the latter's party. During the fruitless negotiations Qalāwūn demanded

²⁰ The *ḥaṣṣākiyya* were an elite corps of young royal Mamluks who served in the Citadel as sultan's bodyguard and pages.

²¹ Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīḥ*, Beirut 1942, vol.7, p.140; see also *Nuğūm*, vol.7, p.265, n.3.

²² See *Al-Faḍl*, fol. 15b, 16a.

from the sultan to remove his *ḥaṣṣākiyya* from the offices and to return them to the old Baḥrī amīrs. The conflict between the Baḥrīyya amīrs and the sultan ensued and, after almost all followers had finally deserted him (including a number of his *ḥaṣṣākiyya* mamluks²³), Baraka Ḥān, surrounded in the Citadel, agreed to Baḥrī's conditions: he abdicated and left for Karak.

Most of the facts speak for Ibn al-Furāt's version of events, which might be just one more proof of Baraka Ḥān's shortsightedness and the influence his *ḥaṣṣākiyya* had upon him. On the other hand, Šāfi' was close enough to the events to know the truth, so two questions arise:

- one, assuming his version is not true, why would Šāfi' deliberately misrepresent facts;
- two, if Šāfi's version is true, what does his story signify? In other words, why would Qalāwūn propose to go to Armenia?

The answer to the first question can be that Qalāwūn's biographer wanted to create another context in which to stress yet again his master's position and virtues: the fact that he advised (or in fact ordered) the sultan and spoke on behalf of other amīrs, and that he despised drinking and fun, giving priority to war and the affairs of state.

The answer to the second question is not that obvious and requires the formulation of a hypothesis. First, it can be asserted with much probability that Qalāwūn preferred war to having fun and that he was indeed in a position to advise, or insist on, the sultan. At the same time it is also possible that it was he, and not the sultan, who had masterminded the plot: Qalāwūn, who suggested his own and his army's departure for Armenia, might have planned to gather as much military power as he could behind the borders of Egypt²⁴ so that he could challenge the sultan from outside.

This version of events is not quite impossible, since in fact his plan, if there indeed was such, finally worked, only slightly hampered by the sultan's attempt to use the opportunity to arrest his adversaries and multiply his mamluks' property. If this hypothesis is indeed valid, it would mean that Qalāwūn's deposition of Baraka Ḥān was not an accidental use of opportunity, but a planned coup. In other words, if Šāfi's account were true in this case, it may mean that the version of events that has generally been acknowledged is not valid any more. But the question of correctness of this

²³ Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz ad-durar wa-ḡāmi' al-ḡurar*, Cairo 1971, vol.9, p.229.

²⁴ It was probably him who urged the sultan to write a circular note (*muṭlaq*) obliging all the Syrian governors to obey and help Qalāwūn and Baysarī (*Al-Faql*, fol.16b-17a).

hypothesis will most probably remain unsolved. With the author's lack of objectivity and unreliability on the one hand, and his chances to know the truth on the other, we are not able to find any decisive proof for or against either of the versions.

The contents of his work should be treated with caution not only because of the author's lack of objectivity. Besides its shortcomings, there are also some mistakes in *Al-Faḍl* that most probably result not from the author's deliberate falsification, but from his negligence in verifying the data. For example, Šāfi' is wrong about some details concerning the battle of Albistan (675/1277): "when the army reached the river Euphrates, they saw 10,000 Mongol troops from its banks" he writes and adds that Qalāwūn, who then commanded the expedition, "jumped against the enemy without delay, and his troops followed him".²⁵ In fact banks of the Euphrates are too distant (ca. 100 km.) not only to attack from them the army that camped on the plain of Albistān but even to see it at all. It is the river Goksu, a tributary of the Ġayhān, that immediately borders the plain of Albistān; it is mentioned by other chroniclers in this context, and most probably should be mentioned in Šāfi's account as well.²⁶

Further, while relating affairs of the Franks, Šāfi' completely confuses persons and names of the Christian nobles in the Holy Land: he mentions the name of John of Montfort, senior of Tyre and Toron, as the Grand Master of the Hospitallers (who was then Nicolas Lorgne)²⁷; then he mentions Nicolas Lorgne, the Grand Master of the Hospitallers, as William Lorgne and gives him the title of the Great Master of the Teutonic Order²⁸ (who was then Burchard von Schwanden). He also mis-states that the Great Master of the Teutonic Order was a member of the Akkan delegation that came to sign the treaty with Qalāwūn, while in fact it was frère marshall Conrad who represented the Teutonic Order in this delegation.²⁹

Šāfi's credibility, so reduced by the above instances, is on the other hand significantly increased by his significant opportunity to know the truth. Throughout Qalāwūn's reign as well as before his assumption, Šāfi' had almost unlimited access to information indispensable to write a royal biog-

²⁵ *Al-Faḍl*, f.13a.

²⁶ There is also river Goksu a tributary of the Euphrates, hence probably Šāfi's mistake.

²⁷ *Al-Faḍl*, f.104a (insertion on the margin) and 118a.

²⁸ *Al-Faḍl*, f.118a (insertion on the margin)

²⁹ See, e.g., Ibn 'Abd az-Zāhir, *Tašrīf al-ayyām wa-āl-'uṣūr fī sirat al-Malik al-Manṣūr*, ed. M. Kāmil, Cairo 1961, p.35; *Tārīḥ*, op.cit., VII, p.262.

raphy. It is evident from the contents of the MS in question that he not only was in touch with state officials and had a possibility to draft and use official documents but, being frequently present in the sultan's circle, he was himself an eyewitness of many events.³⁰

Thus, notwithstanding all the shortcomings, it must be admitted that the author's personal experience, together with his direct access to, and use of, oral and written sources, give his work value and importance of a documental source. This value is further increased by the fact that Šāfi' was the only one to convey certain information and that *Al-Faḍl* is the only biography of Qalāwūn of which the whole is extant.³¹ Thus some of the misinformation dealt with above, particularly resulting from the author's lack of objectivity, can in fact be considered a valuable source for history of the Early Mamluks.

³⁰ Šāfi' does not try to be modest and quite frequently says "I", thus stressing his participation in the events and in editing state documents.

³¹ Of another existing biography of sultan Qalāwūn, *Tašrīf al-ayyām wa-āl-uṣūr fī sīrat al-Malik al-Manṣūr* by Ibn 'Abd az-Zāhir, (Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms no 1704; ed. M. Kāmil, Cairo 1961), only the second part is extant (namely this dealing with the years 680/1281-689/1290, i.e. from assumption of power by Qalāwūn until his death). Despite what Claude Cahen says, *Al-Faḍl* does not seem to be an abridgment of the latter (as is the case of Ibn 'Abd az-Zāhir's biography of Baybars, whose abridgment Šāfi' did write); cf. C. Cahen, *La Syrie du Nord à l'époque des croisades et la principauté franque d'Antiochie*, Paris 1940, p.78.