

Notes and Brief Communications

Can Doctoral Dissertations Disappear? A Look at Ibrahim al-Hafsi's "Correspondance officielle et privée d'al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil" and its Prospects in a Digital Age

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I have recently had the opportunity to examine a remarkable doctoral dissertation completed in 1979 under the supervision of Prof. Charles Pellat and now housed at the Bibliothèque Orient - Monde arabe of the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris III. Dr. al-Hafsi's dissertation is, according to his title and introductions (French and Arabic), a study of the "official and private correspondence" of Mūḥyī al-Dīn Abū 'Alī 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Lakhmī al-Baysānī al-'Asqalānī "al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil" (529-596/1135-1200), secretary and private scribe (*kātib al-sirr*) for the Fāṭimid caliph, Nūr al-Dīn ibn Zankī's deputy in Egypt, and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, founder of the Ayyūbid Dynasty. Al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil wrote his letters in such a florid and intricate style that excerpts made their way into medieval

biographical dictionaries, chronicles, and manuals on the secretarial arts. Many of al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil's poems and letters also survive in *dīwān* collections, compiled to showcase the secretary's finest literary achievements.

Dr. al-Hafsi undertook the gargantuan effort of collecting and collating al-Qāḍī's works. Accordingly, volumes 2-4 of his dissertation, comprising 1265 pages, contain some 430 letters and 44 entries from al-Qāḍī's diary, the *Mutajaddidāt*—all transcribed by hand (!). He also provides manuscript sources in the first footnote of every document and notes variants in the manuscript witnesses, or editions, in the case of published texts, in subsequent footnotes. The footnotes were also handwritten. Dr. al-Hafsi actually adds eleven additional sources for fragments of

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al-Qāḍī's letters to Adolph Helbig's list of twenty-one manuscript sources. In effect, he has carried out major steps towards completing the desideratum announced by Claude Cahen and Carl Brockelmann in their 1998 *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article on al-Qāḍī.

Exceeding the proposed aims of his dissertation, Dr. al-Hafsi generously provides a biography of al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil's life, analyzes his political thought in the context of the *jihād al-Ifranj* (*jihād* against the Franks), and explores his social network. More in line with his main focus, he devotes a lengthy chapter to an analysis of al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil's writing style, covering his use of motifs and a range of literary devices. Only in recent years are we beginning to appreciate the use of literary devices such as *tawriyya* (double entendre) in literature from the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk periods, thanks to the perceptive work of Thomas Bauer and other experts.

Since Adolph Helbig's pioneering work, only one dissertation and one monograph on the life of al-Qāḍī have appeared, both written by Hadia Dajani-Shakeel.

Her dissertation was completed at the University of Michigan in 1972 under the supervision of Profs. James A. Bellamy and Andrew S. Ehrenkreutz. Her monograph is entitled *Al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil 'Abdar-Raḥīm al-Bisānī al-'Asqalānī (526-596 h, 1131-1199 m): dauruhu at-taḥṭīṭī fī daulat Ṣalāḥ-ad-Dīn wa-futūḥatih* (*Al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil: His Role and Administration in the State of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn and his Conquests*). Dajani-Shakeel's works are the most comprehensive and authoritative studies of al-Qāḍī to date but no corresponding study of the secretary's works is available to students and scholars. The editing and publication of al-Hafsi's monumental dissertation would undoubtedly fill this gap. It is hoped that in the meantime his dissertation will be digitized and made more accessible to historians of the Ayyūbids and Mamlūks, literary historians, and historical linguists. On a final note, although the multilingual marginalia scattered throughout the dissertation may be of historical interest one day, the digitization of the thesis would also ensure its preservation.

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Note: at present a project of editing and publishing the letters of al-Qāḍī is being headed under the supervision of Prof. Stefan Leder, Dr. Sabine Dorpmüller, and Dr. Muhammad Helmy at the Orient Institut Beirut: “Chancery and Diplomats Exemplified by the Correspondence of al-Qadi al-Fāḍil”, Current Projects, Orient Institut Beirut. Accessed June 2015. www.orient-institut.org/index.php?id=93.

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