

Notes and Brief Communications

A New Source on the Social Gatherings (*majālis*) of the Mamluk Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī

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Since Mohammad Awad's pioneering work in 1940, the learned social gatherings (*majālis*) of the penultimate Mamluk Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906-922/1501-1516) have helped produce a small, but lively scholarship on the courtly life of the late Mamluk period.¹ Doubtless, such interest has been fueled largely by 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām's 1941 edition of two Arabic sources that focus on the *majālis*: *Nafā'is majālis al-sulṭāniyya fī ḥaqā'iq asrār al-Qur'āniyya* (sic) of the little known author al-Sharīf Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī (fl. early 10th/16th c.), and *al-Kawkab al-durrī fī masā'il al-Ghawrī* of unknown authorship.² Both texts include the purported proceedings of al-Ghawrī's *majālis* and focus primarily on

learned discussions taken up at these gatherings pertaining to law, Quranic exegesis, history, literature, theology, philosophy and the natural sciences, among others. Given their rich and varied contents, these two texts have received considerable attention from numerous authors including Barbara Flemming, Jonathan Berkey, Doris Behrens-Abouseif, Stephan Conermann, Robert Irwin and Yehoshua Frenkel.³ Even so, they still await a

1. Awad, M., "Sultan al-Ghawri. His place in literature and learning (three books written under his patronage)," in *Actes du xxe Congrès International des Orientalistes, Bruxelles 5-10 Septembre 1938*, Leuven 1940, 321-322.

2. 'Azzām, 'Abd al-Wahhāb (ed.), *Majālis al-sulṭān al-Ghawrī*, Cairo 1941.

3. Flemming, B., "Šerīf, Sultan Ġawrī und die „Perser“," *Der Islam* 45 (1969), 81-93; Flemming, B., "Literary Activities in Mamluk Halls and Barracks," in M. Rosen-Ayalon (ed.), *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, Jerusalem 1977, 249-60; Flemming, B., "Aus den Nachtgesprächen des Sultan Ġaurīs," in H. Franke et al. (eds.), *Folia Rara. Wolfgang Voigt LXV. Diem Natalem Celebranti*, Wiesbaden 1976, 22-28; Berkey, J., "The Mamluks as Muslims. The military elite and the construction of Islam in medieval Egypt," in T. Philipp and U. Haarmann (eds.), *The Mamluks in Egyptian politics and society*, Cambridge 1998, 163-173; Behrens-Abouseif, D., "Sultan al-Ghawrī and the Arts," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6 (2002), 71-94;

thorough and comprehensive analysis as literary texts and historical sources on late Mamluk court life.⁴

In addition to these two relatively well known sources of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī's reign, the Aya Sofya collection of the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul preserves another important *majālis* work in two volumes entitled *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya fī ʿl-nawādir al-Ghawriyya*. In early 2013, Christopher Markiewicz encountered these manuscripts while conducting research on the life and work of Idrīs Bidlīsī (861-926/1457-1520), an itinerant scholar and statesman best known as a historian of the Ottoman dynasty, who spent several months in Cairo in 918/1512. As Bidlīsī later recalled the scholarly and social gatherings of the Mamluk sultan to which he was invited, *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya*, with its near contemporaneous recounting of similar gatherings promised to offer an exceptional window into the court culture which Bidlīsī observed.⁵ Working

Conermann, S., "Es boomt! Die Mamlūkenforschung (1992-2002)," in S. Conermann and A. Pistor-Hatam (eds.), *Die Mamlūken. Studien zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur. Zum Gedenken an Ulrich Haarmann (1942-1999)*, Schenefeld 2003, 1-69; Irwin, R., "The Political Thinking of the "Virtuous Ruler," Qānsūh al-Ghawrī," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12 (2008), 37-49; Frenkel, Y., *Is there a Mamlūk culture?*, Schenefeld 2014; Frenkel, Y., "The Mamluks among the nations. A medieval Sultanate in its global context," in S. Conermann (ed.), *Everything is on the move. The Mamluk Empire as a node in (trans-) regional networks*, Göttingen 2014, 61-79.

4. Christian Mauder is currently preparing a detailed study of these works and the wider culture of late Mamluk court life in his dissertation: "In the Sultan's Salon: Learning, Religion and Rulership at the Mamluk Court of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501-1516)" to be defended at the University of Göttingen, Germany, in early 2017.

5. Christopher Markiewicz, "The Crisis of Rule

independently at the same time, Christian Mauder pursued a doctoral dissertation on this court culture through an examination of the extant oeuvre of *majālis* works from the reign of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī. In late 2012, he came across a passing reference to *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* in an earlier publication that described the text as a "universal history" written for al-Ghawrī and therefore decided to travel to Turkey to examine the manuscript in person.⁶ We met in Istanbul in the spring of 2013, where we exchanged notes on several manuscripts, including *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya*.

This work is preserved in a unique two-volume manuscript held today in the Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul, Turkey as MSS Aya Sofya 3312 and 3313. The title of the text is given in the introduction and in a slightly different form as *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya fī ʿl-maḥāsin al-dawla al-ashrafīyya al-Ghawriyya* at the beginning of the second volume.⁷ According to their colophons, the first volume was finished in mid-Ṣafar 921/April 1515⁸ and the second in mid-Rabīʿ al-Awwal 921/May 1515.⁹ Neither of the two volumes of the work includes the names of its author or its scribe.

The paper of both volumes, which consist of 111 and 113 folios respectively, is finished, of creamy color and uniform in

in Late Medieval Islam: A Study of Idrīs Bidlīsī (861-926/1457-1520) and Kingship at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago), 2015, 170-180.

6. Eckmann, J., "The Mamluk-Kipchak Literature," *Central Asiatic Journal* 8 (1963), 310-311.

7. Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* I, fol. 4a; II, fol. 1b.

8. Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* I, fol. 111a.

9. Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* II, fol. 113a.

size. There are seventeen lines per page. Modern pencil foliation in Arabic script numerals has been added to both volumes from the second folio onwards. Catchwords are found in the lower left corner of every other page. The main text of the entire manuscript is written by a single scribe in a rather regular and clear *naskh*. *Thuluth* is used sparingly for the purposes of highlighting, especially at the beginning of both volumes. Most of the text is in black ink, while gold and red inks are used for textual dividers, rubrications and for words written in *thuluth*. The manuscript includes no painted decorations or illustrations. Secondary entries on its first folios indicate that the two volumes were bequeathed to Aya Sofya during the reign of Maḥmūd I (r. 1143-1168/1730-1754).¹⁰

As with the other works of this small genre, the anonymous author of *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* organized his work around several topical gatherings (*majālis*): 1) on certain noble questions and the stories of the prophets, 2) on kings and sultans, 3) on the wisdom of the philosophers (*fī ḥikmat al-ḥukamāʾ*), and 4) on the schemes and duplicity of women.¹¹ The two extant manuscripts only cover the first two topics. While the presentation of these discussions places Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī – his questions, responses, and views – at the center of each subsection, the compiler, on a few occasions, mentions the sultan’s interlocutors by name. The participants in the *majālis* occasionally reference authoritative sources, such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) or al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad

al-Nīsābūrī (d. 406/1015-16), yet, as a whole, the extant parts of the work present a kind of brief universal history of the world from creation up until the reign of Qānṣawh.¹² Accordingly, the noble matters taken up in the beginning of the first section often focus on basic cosmological and cosmographical questions such as whether light preceded dark, but include other basic investigations, such as whether Alexander is the same as Dhūʿl-qarnayn of the Qurʾān and the reason for the seven canonical readings of the Qurʾān.¹³ These thorny matters are followed by a recounting of the lives of the prophets from Adam to Muḥammad, while the final folios of this first *majlis* are devoted to the caliphates of the first four caliphs and Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī.¹⁴ The second *majlis* mentions the various kings and sultans who have ruled since the prophets. It begins with the caliphate of Muʿāwīya and the subsequent Umayyads, follows with the Abbasids, briefly mentions the Mamluk sultans of the Baḥrī period (*fī dhikr al-dawla al-turkiyya*), before offering relatively detailed discussions of all of the sultans of the Burjī period beginning with Barqūq (d. 801/1399).

Significantly, the work is a valuable resource for the biography and self-cultivated image of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī. In a number of asides beginning in the section on the prophet Yūsuf, the compiler offers detailed discussion of the origins and history of the Circassians (*jarkas/jarākisa*) and the early life, career, and reign of

10. See chapter three of Christian Mauder’s dissertation (as note 4) for a detailed codicological description of the manuscript and a reconstruction of its history.

11. Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* I, fol. 4a.

12. For mention of al-Ṭabarī, see Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* I, fol. 5a; for al-Nīsābūrī, see I, fol. 12b.

13. On the discussion of light and dark, see Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* I, fol. 4b; on Alexander, see I, fol. 7a; on the canonical readings of the Qurʾān, see I, fol. 8a.

14. Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* I, fols. 8b-66b,

the sultan himself.¹⁵ Such details include the sultan's birth date (848/1444-1445), family background, and adolescence and offer valuable information for historians of the Mamluk period on the life of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī.¹⁶ Central to the presentation of this biography is the image of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī as a divinely ordained ruler, the circumstances of whose life from its earliest moments offer parallels with prophets (especially Yūsuf) and indications of future greatness.¹⁷

In this regard, *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* offers valuable insights into how al-Ghawrī and those around him sought to legitimize his rule. Noteworthy in this regard are *inter alia* al-Ghawrī's lofty titles enumerated in the introductory section of the work; in addition to forms of address typical for late Mamluk rulers, we find here formulas such as caliph of the Earth, inheritor of the rule of the prophet Yūsuf, commander of the faithful (*amīr al-mu'minīn*) and caliph of the Muslims (*khalīfat al-muslimīn*).¹⁸ These titles indicate that the author of *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* – and possibly also al-Ghawrī himself – claimed for the Mamluk ruler a supreme religio-political status. Moreover, *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* presents Sultan al-Ghawrī as caliph, thus crediting him with – at least juridically – the highest level of authority any Muslim ruler could aspire to. According to present

knowledge, this step is without precedent in Mamluk political history and hence deserves intensive further study.¹⁹ Finally, through references to al-Ghawrī as “*imām* of the tenth century” and citation of the prophetic *ḥadīth* on centennial religious renewal (*tajdīd*), *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* also suggests al-Ghawrī's status as the centennial renewer (*mujaddid*).

These titles – most of which had garnered widespread usage in Timurid, Turkmen, and Ottoman domains over the course of the fifteenth century – as well as the participation of Bidlīsī in similar gatherings in Cairo a few years earlier, suggest the involvement and immersion of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī's court in an ecumenical Islamicate cultural mode that, in some measure, cut across linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Indeed, the structure of the work reflects a universally recognized and cultivated cultural form, namely, the polite gatherings of refined and learned men, the etiquette and expectations of which were embraced across the lands of Islam. In this regard, further study of this work and related works of its genre promises not only to illuminate of the cultural impulses of late Mamluk Egypt, but to connect such impulses with the broader currents of a clearly discernible Islamicate ecumene in the sixteenth century.

15. On the origins of the Circassians, see Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* I, fol. 34b.

16. See especially, Anonymous, *al-ʿUqūd* II, fols. 51b-111a.

17. Markiewicz, “The Crisis of Rule,” 178-179.

18. Anonymous, *ʿUqūd* I, fols. 2a-2b.

19. See chapter five of Christopher Markiewicz's dissertation (as note 5) and chapters five and six of Christian Mauder's dissertation (as note 4) for discussions of the context and the significance of the political and religious claims raised with regard to al-Ghawrī in *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya*.