Qalāwūnid discourse, elite communication and the Mamluk cultural matrix: interpreting a 14th-century panegyric.

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Abstract

This article analyses a brief panegyric text from mid-14th-century Egypt, authored by the court scribe ʿIbrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī (d. 1352) and dedicated to the Qalāwūnid Mamluk sultan al-Malik al-Šāliḥ Ismāʿîl (r. 1342-5). It challenges this panegyric’s standard treatment as a work of history and as a product of court propaganda and connects it to wider issues of Mamluk literary production and social organisation. In doing so, a new understanding of this panegyric emerges within a specific context of Mamluk elite communication and social performance, demonstrating at the same time how such a social semiotic reading of Mamluk cultural expressions generates further insights into the symbiotic interactions between Mamluk culture and society.

Keywords

Mamluk literature - panegyrics - risālah - Qalāwūnid dynasty - ʿIbrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī - al-Šāliḥ Ismāʿîl - mujaddid - Mamluk cultural matrix - discourse - social performance - social semiotics

This article is about Arabic literary production in the Mamluk period (1250-1517), a historical period that on the one hand has been deemed no less than a ‘silver age of Muslim scholarship’, but that on the other has been and continues to be largely downplayed or even neglected as a valid subject for systematic research. This article aims to further contemporary understandings of this vast but as yet little understood production by applying a less conventional approach that focuses on its wider social semiotic rather than on its mere literary, artistic or aesthetic values. Whereas this consideration of the multilayered interplay between social organisation and literary forms, functions and meanings is hardly anything new, it will be shown how current understandings of this interplay and its constituents can be advanced in a highly rewarding manner when literary texts are conceptualised as one particular set of discursive modes of elite communication, semiotically linked to —even defined by— issues of social identity, elite integration, and their performance. This approach will be applied to one remarkable mid-14th-century panegyric in particular, demonstrating how this text should not just be understood as an unusual literary history of the early Mamluk sultanate nor simply as a surprising discursive token of court propaganda, but also as an intriguing performance of identity through belletrism within the specific context of mid-14th-century Mamluk social organisation.

Setting the scene: Mamluk Literature vs. Mamluk Society?

The as yet thin field of Mamluk literary studies generally assumes that by the Mamluk period literary culture in particular was more than ever before becoming an integral aspect of society’s public organisation. But despite this general consensus on the wider circulation of literary culture in the Mamluk period beyond the private circles of professional literati and their patrons, the debate on the effects of this transformation on the overall quality of Mamluk literary production remains both vehement and unresolved. Furthermore, the debate on the actual extent of this wider circulation and on its functionality has hardly begun. This latter issue will be the point of departure for the

1 This article originated as a paper to the 24th congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants, Leipzig, 24-28 September 2008; I am grateful to the organisers for accepting the paper, and to all participants to the session ‘Classical Arabic Literature’ for their feedback and comments. I am also grateful to my colleague Patrick Wing and to the journal’s anonymous reviewers for most valuable comments and suggestions.

In the present article, it will be argued that such a marginalisation of political elites and interests from current understandings of Mamluk literary culture is increasingly difficult to maintain, and that a more inclusive conceptualisation of Mamluk literature’s social importance may be more rewarding. The obvious reason for such an argument is this article’s main subject, as this concerns one particular panegyric literary product by a mid-14th century secretary that upon close inspection turns out to involve not just political elites, but also issues of social identity and asymmetric communication at the same time.

This brief panegyric has survived—by sheer luck, it would seem— in one manuscript only, which was preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. In the late 19th century, baron M. de Slane, in his posthumously published catalogue of the library’s Arabic manuscripts collection, provided an informative description of this manuscript, identifying quite clearly the asymmetric and political nature of the text it contained:

*Al-Nūr al-lāʾiḥ wa-l-durr al-ṣādiḥ fi ẓīfāʾ mawlāna l-sulṭān al-malik al-Ṣāliḥ.* ‘The Brilliant Light and the necklace of Pearls, demonstrating that our lord the sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ enjoys divine favour’, by Ibdrāhīm b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Qaysarānī, the Qurayshite, also known as al-Khālidī since he was a descendant of Khālid b. al-Walīd. This is a panegyric for the Mamluk sultan, al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl, the son of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muhammad and the grandson of Sayf al-Dīn Qalāwūn. The author was a secretary (kātib dast) of sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ. He gives a summary account, but with dates, of how sovereignty in Egypt passed on from Nūr al-Dīn Mahmūd, son of Zanjī, to Qalāwūn’s grandson. This volume, written with exceptional elegance and in the author’s own handwriting, has a double frontispiece, very artistically executed with gold and colour; the two final pages are similarly decorated in gold. The manuscript was created between the years 743 and 746 of the hijra (1342–1345 AD)...*

This brief text’s Paris manuscript consists of 45 text folia with seven lines on each page only, written in a fine, very clearly legible and fully voweled *thuluth* script. As de Slane already noted, its opening and closing pages are richly decorated, suggesting that it was a product of artisanship. Unfortunately, any reference to a date of production is

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lacking in the colophon, and a specialist study of the manuscript remains wanting, so that we know nothing about this manuscript’s origins and material history.7 As de Slane equally noted, the text’s author is known in full as Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Qaysarānī al-Khālidī (d. 1352), a professional scribe who made his career in the administrations of Mamluk Damascus and Cairo, and who is referred to in the text itself as writing it in the course of the hijrī year 743 (1342-3).8 As the title of the text —al-Nūr al-lā’îḥ wa-l-durr al-sāḥīfī fi ṣifâ’ maḥlānā al-sulṭān al-malik al-Sāliḥ (The Brilliant Light and the necklace of Pearls, [demonstrating] the divine election of our lord the sultan, al-Malik al-Sāliḥ)— makes amply clear, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī wrote it as an encomiastic literary text dedicated to the sixteenth Mamluk sultan al-Sāliḥ Ismā‘īl (known in full as al-Malik al-Sāliḥ ‘Imād al-Dīn Abū l-Fīdā’ Ismā‘īl b. Muhammad b. Qalāwūn), who was born in about 1320, who was enthroned in Cairo in June 1342, and who reigned relatively successfully over Mamluk Egypt and Syria until his death from natural causes three years later, in the summer of 1345. In this prose panegyric by one of his own chancery clerks, this Qalāwūnī or descendant of the illustrious Mamluk sultan Qalāwūn al-Sāliḥī al-Alfī (r. 1279-90) is presented as sent by God, his reign as the result of divine providence, and history as culminating in his rule over Mamluk Egypt and Syria.

In spite of Bauer’s aforementioned observations regarding the remarkable transformations of literary culture in the Mamluk period, this first superficial encounter with Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī’s panegyric for sultan al-Sāliḥ Ismā‘īl already suggests that at least in the panegyric case the emergence of more symmetrical forms of elite communication should not be taken for granted as a general rule. It has been well established by now that throughout the Mamluk period social organisation was asymmetrical and inclusive, with different Mamluk social groups, including scholars and political and military elites, all being integrated into one social system that was defined first and foremost by relationships of power across social roles.9 It is also well-known that cultural patronage, most notably by political elites, was an equally defining feature of the Mamluk social environment, resulting amongst others in architectural landscapes and artefacts that continue to remind of the importance that was attached to these cultural expressions by late medieval Islamic elites such as those of Mamluk Egypt and Syria.10 In fact, there exists yet another emerging scholarly consensus that throughout the Mamluk period elite groups of whatever background indeed operated within a cultural matrix of highly integrated political, religious and socio-economic interests.11 The increased social importance of Mamluk literature, and Mamluk panegyrics in particular, should not be considered an exception to this integrative process. After all, Arabic panegyric prose and poetry always represented one of those cultural forms that

7 By lack of a proper colophon, it is unclear whether de Slane had any material evidence to suggest that this manuscript was written by the author himself between the hijrī years 743 and 746, but it is not unlikely that it is indeed an autograph produced towards the end of 743 AH (Spring 1343) (see below). Further study of the marginal notes (mutālā‘āt) on the opening and closing pages (including a 15th-century amir’s emblem [rank], composed of a penbox and a cup flanked by two napkins) may prove helpful in this respect, even though most of them are hardly legible.


are most illustrative of the intimate relationship between culture and social organisation.\(^{12}\) They should therefore rather be conceptualised within this same epistemological perspective of the integration into one asymmetric social system of different social groups, including political and military elites. As already suggested above, ibn al-Qaysarānī’s panegyric for sultan al-Sāliḥ Ismā’īl presents a graphic illustration of this integrative process, which actually enables—as will be pursued in this article—to further current considerations of the increased social importance of Mamluk literature and of its meanings for Mamluk social organisation.\(^{13}\)

The following pages will therefore be devoted to a close reading of this panegyric text, moving from the more traditional approaches of political history and literature to a more novel one that focuses on the text’s wider social semiotic value and on the manner in which it allowed for its author to engage with social realities.\(^{14}\) More precisely, it will be shown how the author of this text applied prevalent historiographical and literary modes of communication within a performative context of social identity, patronage and Mamluk social organisation.

The historical dimension: Al-Nūr al-Lā’īh as an exponent of Qalāwūnid discourse

In 1992, Otfried Weintritt convincingly applied the perspective of Ulrich Haarmann’s ‘Literarisierung’ of Arabic historical writing in the later medieval period to an analysis of four pseudo-historical texts from the late 14\(^{th}\) and early 15\(^{th}\) centuries. Despite Weintritt’s emphasising of the literary rather than the mere historical character of these texts—each of them being built up around a historical case, either a single event (the 1365 sack of Alexandria by the Cypriot king Peter I and his Latin allies) or an individual sultan (al-Nāṣir Ḥasan [r. 1347-51; 1354-61]; al-Mu’ayyad Shaykh [r. 1412-21]; al-Zāhir Ṭaṭār [r. 1421])—, he yet also had to concede that there was a fundamental layer of historicity that should not be ignored and that the panegyrics of Shaykh and Ṭaṭār in particular also have to be understood within a larger context of the performance and communication—even propaganda—of a ruler’s legitimate authority.\(^{15}\) Peter Holt had actually nurtured this approach,\(^{16}\) and he furthered it in his own 1998 study of seven literary texts from Mamluk and Ottoman Egypt, all of which were defined as panegyric offerings in the form of a book to the ruler of the time. Holt stated that the most conspicuous points these variegated ‘literary offerings’—as

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\(^{13}\) Apart from Hirschler’s, there are within the small field of Mamluk literary research more and more studies that take into account Mamluk literature’s engagement with specific social realities, including, for example, contributions by Geert Jan van Gelder, Thomas Bauer, Everett Rowson, Muhsim al-Musawi, Thomas Herzog, Amila Buturović, Li Guo and Emil Homerin to Mamlūk Studies Review 7 (2003), a special thematic issue dedicated to the literary culture of the Mamluk era.

\(^{14}\) This specific way of looking at Mamluk literature—and at cultural practice in general—is to a large extent grounded in Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ and in the performative turn in the social sciences; it is heavily indebted to, amongst others, various contributions to Social Performance. Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual, eds. J.C. Alexander, B. Giesen & J.L. Mast (Cambridge Cultural Social Studies) (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), and to The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis, ed. Carey Jewitt. London: Routledge, 2009. Within the field of Mamluk studies, suggestions for an understanding of the interaction between society and literature along such performative and social semiotic lines may be found in Hirschler’s Authors as Actors and in Thomas Herzog, Geschichte und Imaginaire: Entstehung, Überlieferung und Bedeutung der Sirat Baibars in ihrem sozio-politischen Kontext, (Diskurse der Arabistik 8) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

\(^{15}\) O. Weintritt, Formen spätmittelalterlicher islamischer Geschichtsdarstellung. Untersuchungen zu an-Nuawaiḥ al-Iskandarānīs Kitāb al-Ilmān und verwandten zeitgenössischen Texten (Beiruter Texte und Studien 45) (Beirut-Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992), 183-200 (185-6: “Ihre Hauptintention ist auf eine affirmative Rechtfertigung der Herrschaft der Sultane angelegt, um den Nachweis des berechtigten Anspruchs auf das Sultanat zu erbringen.”).

he coined them— had in common, were their timing and authorship, considering that “they were all produced at, or shortly after, the time at which the ruler assumed power” and that “the role of patronage, even of participation in the composition of these works is indicated.” As a result, Holt similarly concluded that the seven texts of his study also shared the more specific historicising characteristic that each of them was carefully geared towards the justification and legitimisation of a recent transition of power. In Holt’s view, this was certainly true for Ibn al-Qaysarānī’s panegyric to sultan al-Šāliḥ Ismā’il, al-Nūr al-Lā’īh, which was one of these seven ‘literary offerings’, in this particular case “commemorating the accession of al-Šāliḥ Ismā’il” to the Mamluk throne in June 1342, “the body of the work” at the same time being identified as a rather poor “piece of historical writing”. 17

To a large degree, a close reading of this text indeed offers many reasons to follow Holt’s analysis of this text as a mediocre work of history with a legitimating cause. 18 In this prose panegyric, compiled —as stated in the text 19— in the year following al-Šāliḥ Ismā’il’s accession, this Qalāwūnīd Mamluk ruler “is hailed as ruler by hereditary right, ‘the sultan, son of the sultan, son of the sultan; the imam, son of the imam, son of the imam’, who will bring in better times; ‘he reassures the alarmed hearts of Islam, and gives stability to the distracted minds of men’. ” 19 As Holt thus rightly summarised, al-Nūr al-Lā’īh clearly presents this sultan as sent by God, his reign as the result of divine providence, and history as culminating in his legitimate accession to rulership over Mamluk Egypt and Syria. The tone of this message, permeating the entire text, is already set in the opening paragraph:

**In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate.**

Praise to God, who mended the decay of the Islamic community by [installing] the most powerful sultan, one that made its face blossom and its eye smile.

[Praise to God, who] saved the case of the sultanic kingdom by [raising] the firmest king, one that delayed [the end of] its life for the benefit of its partisans and that speeded up its destruction of its enemies. 21

After this and similar telling invocations of God’s providence, the text begins with a long series of prose encomia, praising the qualities of this yet unnamed saviour sultan and, eventually, introducing its main theme: the divine election of that sultan, identified as al-Šāliḥ Ismā’il. In Holt’s summary of these opening pages, “al-Qaysarānī stresses the divine election of al-Šāliḥ Ismā’il as sultan, and proceeds to give his titulature at considerable length.” 22 Amongst many others, the latter list of titles includes wide-ranging epithets that stress Ismā’il’s far-reaching claims to religious and territorial authority, such as sultan of Islam (sultān al-islām) and of Arabs, Persians and Turks (sultān al-‘Arab wa-l-‘Ajam wa-l-Turk), imam of mankind (imām al-anām), elevator of the head of the faithful (= the Abbasid caliph) (rāfī’ ra’s al-ma’minīn), reviver of justice in the worlds (muḥyī al-‘adl fi l-‘alamīn), God’s shadow on earth (ṣill allāh fi l-ard), ruler along the length and breadth of the regions (al-hākim fi l-tāl mina l-aqtār wa-l-ard), Alexander of his age (Iskandar al-zamān), lord of the two prayer directions (i.e. the ḥaram in Mecca and al-Aqṣā in Jerusalem) (sāḥib al-

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18 See also the editor Tadmuri’s afore-mentioned explicit assessment of the text as a “history of the Ayyubids and Mamluks” (Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lā’īh, 12-3), and Brockelman’s reference to the text as a historical biography (Brockelman, Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur. Zweiter Supplementband. 24)

19 Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lā’īh, 55.


21 Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lā’īh, 47.

qiblatayn), and servant of the two holy places (i.e. Mecca and Medina) (khādim al-haramayn al-sharifayn).

Despite its apparently audacious claims, by the mid-14th century such a lengthy inflated list of worldly and otherworldly titles seems to have become rather standard official epithets for Mamluk royals, confirming first and foremost Ismā‘īl’s rightful place among his predecessors and forefathers.

This long, encomiastic introduction of the text then ends by suggesting a rationale for this divine election, revealing the work’s central argument and the angle from which the author, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī, is to tackle the theme of divine election. In fact, he derives this rationale from the following explicit statement about al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl:

أَعْلَمْ بِعَدْلُهُ وَفَضْلِهِ أَنَّهُ الَّذِي يُبَذِّلْ لَهُ هَذَا الْجَنَّةُ عَلَى رَاسِ هِذَهَا الآتِيَةِ لَجُدُّ لَهَا دِينًا

Through his justice and excellence, it became known that he is the one who is sent to this community at the beginning of this century to renew its faith.

In Ibn al-Qaysarānī’s view, al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl was chosen by God, but not just as the new sultan of the Mamluk realm. He rather was the centennial renewer or mujaddid of the Islamic community, a concept well-known from Islamic tradition, but quite unusual as an explicit legitimator of 14th-century Mamluk political authority.

The remaining three quarters of Ibn al-Qaysarānī’s ‘literary offering’ focus entirely on elaborating and providing ‘evidence’ (dalīl) for this thesis. According to the text, such evidence is to be found in the Quran, in the Sunna of the Prophet, and in the history of the sultanate; or, as Ibn al-Qaysarānī phrased it:

[God] made him excel by appointing him over His creatures […]

[as is evident] from what the lucid Quran and solid Hādīth say about his case, history turning in his favour through the good fortune and on account of his grandfather [Qalāwūn].

The text then quotes from the Quran, sūrat al-Ḥājj (22), verse 75:

الله يُصَلِّفُ مِنَ المَلَائِكَةِ رَسُولًا وَيَمَسُّهُ الْمَلَأِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعُ يُصِيرُ

God elects from the angels messengers, as [he does] from the people; truly, God hears and sees [everything].

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23 Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lā’īh, 49.

24 For a detailed descriptive listing of the many single and composed epithets that were in use in Mamluk chancery practice, including most of those found here in al-Nūr al-Lā’īh, see the early 15th-century manual of court protocol by Ahmad al-Qalqashandī (1355-1418), ṣuḥūḥ al-Aʾshā fi sīnāʿat al-ḥināḥ (Cairo, 1910-20 [repr. 1985]), VI: 5-75. Ismā‘īl’s grandfather Qalāwūn’s titulary, including such titles as ‘sultan of Islam and the Muslims’, ‘lord of the two qiblas’, ‘servant of the two harams’, ‘reviver of justice in the world’, ‘sultan of the whole earth in its length and breadth’, and ‘sultan over the Arabs, Persians and Turks’, has been analysed in some detail in Linda S. Northrup, From Slave to Sultan. The Career of al-Mansūr Qalāwūn and the Consolidation of Mamluk Rule in Egypt and Syria (678-689 A.H./1279-1290 A.D.), (Freiburger Islamstudien 18) (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), 173-7. Northrup also refers to how already by the later 13th century such titles reflect newly emerging realities of sovereignty, that of the sultan increasingly being appreciated as transcending by far that of the ‘Abbāsid caliph as a result of divine providence (pp. 172-4) (see also Holt’s observation, in a footnote, that “the salutation of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl (and also by implication of his father and grandfather ...) as imam is in line with a tendency in the Mamluk sultanate to transfer the caliph’s prerogatives to the sultan.” [Holt, “Literary offerings”, 8, fn. 15]).


Furthermore, the text repeats the well-known saying of the Prophet that

الله يبعث لِهذِه الأمة على رسول كُل مائة سنة مُنْ يَجْدَدُ لَهَا دِينَهَا

God will send to this community at the head of every century someone to renew its Faith.29

After establishing these scriptural credentials for divine election and for the status of centennial renewer, the text quickly turns to the more challenging issue of fitting into a centennial time schedule al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl’s reign, in particular his accession in the year 743 of the Muslim calendar. Ibn al-Qaysarānī only manages to do so by leaving the traditional view that the Prophetic saying refers to a century of the Muslim lunar calendar, proposing the following alternative instead:

Between the beginning [of the regime of the Turks in Egypt] and the passing of our lord and master, the sultan, the martyr, al-Malik al-Nāṣir [Muḥammad, the father of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl] … there are 100 years; for, the initial start of the regime of the Turks was in the sultanate of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayūb. So this century started with al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ and it ended with our lord and master, the sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ.30

Thus, quite inventively, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī identified the start of the Mamlik sultanate with the last of its Ayubid predecessors in Egypt: al-Ṣāliḥ Ayūb, who reigned between 1240 and 1249, or, indeed, about 100 years before al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl. Ibrāhīm further justified this—in Holt’s words—“neat literary turn, but a slight blurring of chronology”31 by explaining that

فِيِ الْعَسَرَةِ الْمُحْرِمَةِ سِنَاتِ كُلٍّ وَرَبَّ عَشَرَ عُمُورًا مُعَدَّةَ عَدَّةً مِنْ مَمْلِكَةِ وَسَمَّىَهُمْ فِي النَّاسِ وَسَمَّىَ حُكْمَ الْعُلُوْكَ إِلَى الأَنْ بِالْمَدِيْرَةِ

in the year 643 [1245], [al-Ṣāliḥ Ayūb] had made several of his mamluks amir, he had appointed governors from among them, and he had enabled them to rule the provinces. The rule of the Turks in Egypt and Syria continued until now. Before, the rule and reign there had been for the awlād al-nās, and the polity of the Turks, belonging to the mamluks [of al-Ṣāliḥ], was only established in the year 643, and it has continued until this blessed year, the year 743, the [entire] period [being] 100 years.32


Having thus established his centennial historical scheme, Ibrāhīm expresses his intention to devote the remainder of his text to brief discussions of the different rulers that preceded al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl during these one hundred years.⋅ From that point onwards the text mainly discusses those rulers, from Ayyūb and his son Tūrān Shāh, over Shajar al-Durr, Aybak, Qutuz and Baybars and his two sons, to Qalāwun and his two sons, Khalīl and Muḥammad, ending in a gloriously culminating sequence with

Indeed, it is becoming more and more evident that in the explanation of their sovereignty to various audiences, 14th-century Qalāwūnids and their representatives increasingly used to rely on these two sets of legitimating ideas, combining in their turn to two supplementary sets of legitimating ideas: divine sanction and royal lineage, at one instance jointly evoked by the author as follows:

The noble sultanate remained with the royal house of al-Manṣūr [Qalāwun] from Rajab of the year 678 (December 1279) until now,…

64 years and 10 months after God, the exalted, had assigned the sublime kingship to this noble house, God, the exalted, gave our lord the sultan royal authority over the regions, executing through the continuance of royalty in him and in his offspring the divine decree, ensuring the execution of his commands and prohibitions in all the cities, and assisting him with supporters from his favourite angels, for as long as night and day succeed each other.⋅⋅

In fact, the invocation of divine sanction and fortunate lineage to support al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl’s accession was hardly anything exceptional in the period’s public representations of the authority of the Qalāwūnid dynasty (1279-1382). Indeed, it is becoming more and more evident that in the explanation of their sovereignty to various audiences, 14th-century Qalāwūnid rulers and their representatives increasingly used to rely on these two sets of ideas, combining in the best of post-Seljuq traditions Islamic with Turco-Mongol precedents and thus producing nothing less than a pervasive discourse of Qalāwūnid authenticity, specialty and entitlement that became a crucial element in the

period’s system of kingship. As Holt already surmised, the discursive argument developed in al-Nūr al-Lā’īḥ by Ibn al-Qaysarānī clearly partook in this Qalāwūnid system.

The literary dimension: Al-Nūr al-Lā’īḥ as an exponent of belletrist prose

This 14th-century Qalāwūnid discourse informing al-Nūr al-Lā’īḥ’s substance suggests that it represents no less than a prime example of Holt’s interpretation of such literary offerings as factors of propaganda and the performance of royal authority. Nevertheless, there are quite a few peculiarities that set this text apart from the other royal panegyric books identified as such by Holt and Weintritt, and that in fact hint at its functioning at other levels of interaction and communication.

First of all, in the majority of panegyric books identified by Holt as royal offerings, prophesies from revered shaykhs, prophetic dreams, astrological predictions, and the symbolic meanings of letters and numbers are appealed to as topical devices of legitimisation and political propaganda. However, is the only one of these texts in which none of these “specimens of a literary form favoured by the encomiasts of Mamluk sultans” can be found. Rather than appealing to such ‘popular’ beliefs, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī seems to have sought and found his inspiration in the Quran and Sunna, and thence in a specific interpretation of divinely ordained political history. From this, al-Ṣāliḥ Iṣmā’il emerges not just as the rightful, providential political ruler of the Syro-Egyptian sultanate, but also as a universalist leader with legitimate claims to universal authority, sent by God to follow in the Prophet’s footsteps and to lead the Islamic community at the end of the first century of Turkish rule back to a purified, revived version of its faith. This mujaddid-paradigm is really the key argument and organising principle of the text, and it is in this context of Qalāwūnid discourse quite a remarkable one, indeed. Whereas from the perspective of its regular recurrence in later, 15th-century Turkic legitimating practices it would prove a very powerful concept, it is found here for the very first time explicitly in the framework of explaining Turco-Mongol royal authority to internal audiences.

Moreover, as far as could be established at this point, it is entirely unique for the genre of panegyrics to rulers, and — as detailed above— its attachment to a ruler’s accession in the year 743 of the Muslim calendar is quite challenging from the perspective of Islamic tradition, to say the least. Thus, beyond tapping into standard Qalāwūnid discourse, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī’s panegyric for sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Iṣmā’il features even more prominently the more specific, unique and therefore striking theme of the mujaddid, which joins the text’s different historical data into one more or less coherent argument.

But this axial topos is not all that distinguishes al-Nūr al-Lā’īḥ from Holt’s other “literary offerings in the form of a book”, as he identified them. What first and foremost catches the attention of any observer really should be al-Nūr al-Lā’īḥ’s disappointing briefness —630 lines in the manuscript, or a mere 18 pages in the 1982 edition—, whereas other extant contemporary royal offerings, like the Rawd al-Zāhir by Ibn ’Abd al-Zāhir, the Sukkādān al-Sūltān by Ibn


37 Holt, “Literary Offerings,” 4, 9, 10, 11; also Weintritt, Formen spätmittelalterlicher islamischer Geschichtsdarstellung, 185-200.


39 See Broadbridge, Kingship and Ideology, pp. 10-11, 65-66, 113, 198-9, demonstrating how the Ilkhan Ghāzān (r. 1295-1304) and the sultan al-Nāşr Muhammad b. Qalāwūn after him only implicitly toyed with this powerful idea in their diplomatic correspondence, and how in her view this only changed in the course of the 15th century, when “rulers after Temūr like the Aq Qoyunlu Uzun Hasan (r. 1457-78/861-82) began to use the Islamic concept of the ‘Centennial Renower (mujaddid)’ at which both Ghazan and al-Nāşr Muhammad had once hinted.”

Abī Ḥajala, or the *Sayf al-Muḥammad* by al-ʿAynī, are all ten to twenty times longer. In fact, as far as this formal issue is concerned, rather than being such an offering in the form of a book (kitāb), al-Nūr al-Lāʾiḥ displays many of the characteristics of the widely popular *risālah*-genre, as defined by Hāmeen-Antilla “as artistic prose of medium length, mainly in rhymed prose (ṣaj) with a heavy emphasis on literary tropes and figures of speech, while the plot is of varying importance.” Following Hāmeen-Antilla’s references to the classification of literary *risālahs* by the Mamlūk secretary and belletrist al-Qalqashandi (1355-1418), Ḥāris ibn al-Ḥusayn’s 1343 *risālah* obviously falls within the subgenre of “panegyrical letters (mā farid minah):”42 Such a new classification of al-Nūr al-Lāʾiḥ as a literary, panegyrical *risālah* is not only supported by its briefness and by its being written to eulogise al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl, the axial *muqaddid*-paradigm functioning as a literary trope that could also be interpreted as a figure of speech and that allowed the author first and foremost to make his encomiastic enterprise stand out. It is also suggested by stylistic elements, such as the prolific but irregular application of rhymed and rhythmic prose (ṣaj) throughout the text. A fine example of this is in the passage below, in which rhymes in psalm form (lines 3-7: ‘ibādih ... bilādih ... tilādih ... ‘ajdādih ... ‘amir) and varied lengths of lexical units create two rhythmic entities (lines 4-7 and 8-9), the two first sentences of each (lines 4 and 8) mirroring each other and linking these two investments of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl with worldly and religious authority respectively to their grammatical subject *allâh* (line 3) and to the general idea of incontestable royal authority (lines 1-2):

![Image of the text](https://www.example.com/image.png)

No one should dispute that,

nor should his reign ever—God the Exalted willing— be removed from his ownership,

because God the Exalted has chosen him [to rule] over His servants:

He has given him sovereignty over His domains,

giving him wide-ranging authority over new and old things,

preserving through his sound dominion the reign of his honourable fathers and forefathers,

and awarding him the reign purely and spontaneously, not by aggrandising and advancing him;

He has empowered him over His land,

installing him so as to set up His Sunna and His command.44


44 Ibn al-Qaysarānī, *al-Nūr al-Lāʾiḥ*, 48-49. In this quotation, the organisation of the Arabic text into separate lexical units is directly copied from the text’s manuscript version, to which rosette-like figures have been added throughout to visually indicate and separate those units (Ms. BN arabe 1708, fol. 9v.)
Apart from such regular occurrences of *saj*, other stylistic aspects include the occasional appearance of materials from Quran and *hadith*, as in the case of the above mentioned recitations to establish the scriptural credentials for divine election and for the status of centennial renewer. These bellettrist aspects finally also include poetry, as *al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ* contains three poems in three different meters (*kāmil*, *basīt*, *tawīl*), two of which appear to have been produced by Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysārānī himself eulogising al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl’s father Muḥammad and grandfather Qalāwūn.45 These different characteristics that suggest to formally consider *al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ* a panegyrical literary *risālah* are amply demonstrated in the text’s concluding paragraphs.

May our lord, the almighty sultan—may God the Exalted make his reign everlasting—benefit from the kingship in this world and the blessing in the next that have been awarded to him, and [from] the great fortune of good tidings that He has granted to him; for, God the Exalted endows him with an astute eye for what He has commissioned to him, He offers him guidance in what He has charged him with, He cares for him in what he has been asked to take care of, and He protects him, guarding him with “attendant angels, before him and after him, watching over him by God’s command” [Quran 13, 11].

[This is in agreement] with the words of God’s messenger—God bless him and grant him salvation—to Muʿādh b. Jabal—may God be pleased with him—:

“O Muʿādh, never ask for leadership:
if it is being awarded to you by appeal, you will be obliged to assume it,
but if it is being awarded to you without appeal, you can always turn it down.”

The standing of our lord the sultan—may God the Exalted assist him—vis-à-vis the noble kingship is now being appealed to, his leadership is being relied upon, and his righteousness is being hoped for.

45 ʿīb al-Qaysārānī, *al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ*, 60 (Qalāwūn, in *basīt*), 64 (Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn, in *kāmil*). The third poem, in the *tawīl* metre and consisting of one verse only, was quoted as coming from an anonymous poet (*qāla l-shāʿir*) and referred to two of the author’s own forefathers (p. 54).
May the affairs of Islam revert to his noble gates and may all affairs revert to them until the end of time
—God the Exalted willing.46

In this specific passage, truly representative for the entire text, there is indeed not just the eulogising of al-Ṣāliḥ Iṣmāʾīl as the object of divine providence and guidance and the exhortation for his new rule to go well. This discursive plot is cast in the artistic prose form that comes with the risālah genre, as is evident from the irregular application of saj, particularly the rhythmical play with final rhymes (al-ukhrā ... al-bushrā [lines 3 and 4] versus awlāḥ ... starāḥ [lines 5, 6 and 7, in pausal form], and al-masʿālū ... al-maʿmūlū [lines 12 and 13]) and from the surprising connections made between the Quranic “attendant angels” verse and the Prophet’s advice to the Companion Muʿādh.

The social semiotic dimension: Al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ as an exponent of symbolic communication

Addressing a leading member of the political elites—aḥ-Ṣāliḥ Iṣmāʾīl—using familiar discursive and literary modes, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī’s al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ was clearly couched in belletrist forms that transcend the common characteristics that were defined by Holt for Mamluk ‘literary offerings’. Somewhat paradoxically, these belletrist forms of al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ were actually wide-spread in Mamluk elite’s literary practices. As amongst others Thomas Bauer’s reading of a contemporary prescriptive text by Ibr Nubātāh (1287-1366) makes clear, epistolography (inshā) —including the literary risālah genre, but also correspondence emanating from the sultanate’s chanceries— fully participated in that increased social importance of literature, having become a wide-ranging skill that was a defining aspect of elite identities and a predominant channel for verbal elite communications. More in particular, any belletristic utterance that sprouted from those skills acted as a social performance, the functionality of which defies modern conceptions of aesthetics, originality and literature, and the meaning of which has everything to do with the dynamic social order which it helped to communicate, mediate or even create in the interactions between its participants.47 As far as Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī’s panegyric risālah is concerned, this opens up yet another dimension for its consideration, beyond its purely historiographical and literary capacities and towards its social functionality, as a conveyor of meanings and a performer of identities in the Mamluk social environment of the 1340s.

The key issue to finally look at, then, is whether al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ’s functionality indeed revolved around issues of royal propaganda and the communication of legitimate authority, as Holt claimed, the text and its author in that case representing nothing but passive instruments in a performance that emanated from al-Ṣāliḥ Iṣmāʾīl’s court.48 In view of al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ’s legitimating message, it would be quite tempting to suggest so, implying at the same time that such powerful legitimating devices as the axial mujaddid-paradigm originated with the new sultan and his entourage.

There certainly are some factors that could support this, such as the fact that Iṣmāʾīl was the first ruling sultan since the last of the Egyptian Ayyubids one century before to take the royal style of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, which tallies in remarkably well with al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ’s revision of the origins of Mamluk history and its suggestion of a centennial link between the Ayyubid and Mamluk al-Ṣāliḥ.49 There also is the historical context of the early 1340s, when the end of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s longstanding reign in June 1341 had been followed by a year of extremely destructive, almost

46 Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ, 65-66. In this quotation, again the organisation of the Arabic text follows the text’s manuscript version (Ms. BN arabe 1708, fol. 46v-47v).


49 However, the circumstances and intentions of the actual awarding of this royal style remain vague, as it is only summarily referenced in the sources, as with the contemporary chronicler Shams al-Dīn al-Shujāʾī (d. after 1356) stating that “[the senior amirs] awarded him the royal style of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ (lāqšāḥu al-malika l-ṣāliḥa)” (al-Shujāʾī, Tārīkh al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn al-Ṣāliḥi wa-awlādīhi, ed. Barbara Schäfer, Die Chronik al-Ṣuǧāʾīs(Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977), l: 230.
apocalyptic political turmoil and social upheaval in all corners of the sultanate, so that his son Ismā‘īl was enthroned in June 1342 in the genuine hope that he would be able to restore the order and prosperity of his father’s reign, after his three brothers’ failure to do so in the preceding twelve months.50

Nevertheless, unlike in the other literary offerings that were studied by Holt, no specific reference is made at any point in this work to any commissioning authority, nor to any sort of supervision. On the contrary, the only individual who figures prominently and actively in the text, is the author himself, who seems to be quite pleased with himself and with his inventiveness. Thus, immediately after the first reference to the mujaddid-paradigm, the text states that:

When that was realised by the servant in need of almighty God’s amnesty, the lofty and eminent Ibrāḥīm b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qaysarānī al-Qurashī al-Khālidī, scribe of the noble bench of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ —God, the exalted, have mercy upon them—, compiler of this noble biography and the one who prides himself on gathering the glorious deeds of our lord the sultan (...), he understood that that was one of Almighty God’s secrets which He confided to him [Ibrāḥīm] and that He would not have given him [al-Ṣāliḥ] the regions to rule, nor would have been favourably disposed towards him regarding this matter, nor would have made His choice, if He had not singled him out for this world and the next and [if He had not] selected him.51

The text then continues by making it very clear that no one but Ibrāḥīm himself provided the afore-mentioned scriptural and historical evidence for this view, after he “had scrutinised the chronicles and found that they are in agreement with what he had made clear in this biography.”52

Clearly, it was Ibrāḥīm b. al-Qaysarānī who could openly purport to be the original author of this work and of its discursive twists and turns, without any external involvement, royal or otherwise. And this then leads to a final revealing difference with Holt’s other literary offerings. In spite of Ibrāḥīm’s just mentioned characterisation of his work as a biography (sīrah) of sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl and as a collection of his glorious deeds (mānaqīb), no such historical information whatsoever can be found in the text. When Ibrāḥīm’s historical chronology reaches its culmination point, the glorious renewer al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl, he contents himself with a brief belletrist repetition of his legitimating message, summarily finishing off the work by repeating once more that “all that was said and written by


51 Ms. Paris BN arabe 1708, fol. 12v (In the manuscript, the first two lines [wa-lammā ... al-kabīr] are indented and written in a large, bold and gilded script, leaving no doubt that the author intended to stress this, and thus his own astuteness; unlike the manuscript text quoted here, the edition has the author’s name as ‘Ibrāḥīm b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qaysarānī [Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lā‘īh, 50]).

52 Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lā‘īh, 50 (wa-staqarra l-‘abd al-tawārīkh fa-wajadāhā mutābiqatān limā wudhahahā ft ḥadhīhi l-sīrah). Again, in the autograph manuscript the first line (wa-staqarra l-‘abd) is tellingly stressed, by indention and the use of large, gilded script (Ms Paris BN arabe 1708, 14v).
the humble servant Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī al-Qurashī al-Khalīdī, secretary of the bench of al-Malik al-Šāliḥ.53 Obviously, Ibrāhīm lacked either the intention, or the access to suitable information, or both, to include a proper biography, despite the standards of the biographical genre, and even despite his own statement to the contrary. Most surprising, however, is the fact that al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ does yield some peculiar information of a biographical nature, not on the sultan, but on some illustrious members of Ibrāhīm’s own long-standing Syrian family of the Khalīdīs.54 And in order to do so, the author saw no objections against transgressing his own tight centennial schedule, adding a substantial discussion of the Zengids and Ayyubids as a sort of lengthy prequel to the reign of the last Ayyubid al-Šāliḥ Ayūb. Clearly, within the framework of the axial mujaddid-paradigm, there was no need for this. But from the perspective of introducing Ibrāhīm’s own pedigree, there was. This digression not only enabled him to refer to a well-known patriarch from the early 7th century, Khalīd b. al-Walīd, the Sword of Islam; it also allowed him to discuss at some detail the career of another of his forefathers, Khalīd b. al-Qaysarānī, who acted as a vizier to the legendary Syrian ruler Nūr al-Dīn Mahmūd b. Zankī (1146-1174).55 Further on in the text, a similar digression occurs when the discussion of the reigns of the Mamluk sultans allowed the author to devote some space to his grandfather, Fath al-Dīn ʿAbd Allāh b. al-Qaysarānī, who served under at least three sultans, again as a vizier in Syria, and eventually also as a chancery clerk in Cairo.56

As markers for the social semiotic dimensions of the text, these more striking topos—the frank appropriation of the mujaddid-paradigm by the author and the references to three of his illustrious forefathers—can also be interpreted as unequivocal claims to social status, demonstrating not just Ibrāhīm’s historiographical and belles lettres skills but also his fine administrator’s pedigree.57 When this obvious reference to this chancery clerk’s own ḥasab wa-nasab (rather than just to a politico-religious discourse that underpins al-Šāliḥ Ismā’īl’s legitimacy) is linked to Ibrāhīm’s biography, as preserved by one of his colleagues in Cairo’s chancery, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl b. Aybak-al-Ṣafāḍī (ca. 1297-1363), an entirely new picture emerges on this rīsālah’s micro-historical social context. Ibrāhīm was known to al-Ṣafāḍī as a very skilled administrator, who, indeed, couple his impressive pedigree to substantial secretarial skills, and who had managed to make a career in Cairo’s chancery with the support of such great political patrons as Tankiz al-Ḥusāmī, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s viceroy in Syria for more than 20 years until his arrest and death in 1340, and the Qalāwūnid magnate Bahādūr al-Tamurtāshī, married to al-Šāliḥ Ismā’īl’s full sister and an important power broker in the early days of this sultan’s reign.58 This amir Bahādūr, however, died soon after his son-in-law’s accession, in March 1343, depriving Ibrāhīm of all known bonds that were to secure his position and status at court. Al-Ṣafāḍī, at least, suggests how this loss badly affected him when he states that


54 See also Holt, “Literary Offerings”, 6; Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ, 11-12 (for a brief discussion of the three prominent members of his family that appear in the text, by the editor ʿUmar Tadmuri). For a contemporary reference to “the Qaysarānī family” (banī l-qaysarānī), listing six names, including Ibrāhīm’s, see Khalīl b. Aybak-al-Ṣafāḍī, Aʾyān al-ʿArṣ wa-Aʿwān al-Nāṣr, eds. A. Abū Zayd et al. (Beirut & Damascas: Dār al-Fikr, 1998), IV: 142; for a reference to a 19th-century member of this long-standing and prominent Syrian family, see S. Moreh, “al- Khālidī, ṭūḥī,” Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, 4:936.


57 On the social importance of these aspects of chancery practice, see al-Musawī’s reading of al-Qalqashandī’s māqāma on secretariship, in his Pre-Modern Belles Lettres Prose,” 111-3.

“[İbrâhîm] had Turkish mamluks and exquisite apparel. He bequeathed extended benefit and acquired standing with the governors. If the amir Sayf al-Din Bahâdur al-Tamurtâshih would have lived longer, [İbrâhîm] would have obtained high rank and status.”

Nevertheless, despite the fact that İbrâhîm failed to translate his many merits into further career advancement until his own death a decade later, in May 1352, he still managed to maintain his prestigious position in the hierarchy of the court’s administration, as kâtip al-dast, one of the handful of scribes of the sultan’s public bench, who handled the administration of royal justice. Within such a specific personal context of remarkable high-profile continuity in spite of that sudden loss of his patron, al-Nâr al-Lâ’îh —written in the year 1343 and quite peculiar in nature— can also be read as an attempt by İbrâhîm b. al-Qaysarânî to demonstrate his wit, his skills and his credentials to a potential new patron: either the new sultan al-Malik al-Şâlih Ismâîl or someone from his close entourage. In the latter case, the function of the work was not so much to communicate the legitimacy of the new ruler’s accession with undefined audiences, as Holt implied, but rather to try and use effective cultural forms for the symbolic communication of individual claims to identity and status with that ruler and his entourage. It was a leading secretary’s attempt to communicate and establish new bonds with his overlords, embedding such a functionality in an established belletrist literary form that enabled the performance of this secretary’s social identity, status and entitlement in a semiotic interaction with his intended audience of courtiers and peers.

Conclusions: al-Nâr al-Lâ’îh as an exponent of a Mamluk cultural matrix

İbrâhîm b. al-Qaysarânî’s brief panegyric text al-Nâr al-Lâ’îh represents a surprisingly complex combination of different historical, literary and social semiotic dimensions. Considering the afore-mentioned assertions and assessments by Holt and Weintritt, their focus on the legitimating functionality of Mamluk panegyrical works in particular, this specific re-assessment of al-Nâr al-Lâ’îh throws some interesting new light on the wider workings of Mamluk ideologies of kingship in the 14th century. In a sense, one could claim that that legitimating discourse in al-Nâr al-Lâ’îh had so far been quite misleading for the modern reader, as it was in reality used and understood as a means to communicate and perform authorial identity rather than to justify, support or merely record al-Şâlih Ismâîl’s June 1342 accession. First and foremost, therefore, the occasionally even apocalyptic Qâlîwûnî discourse of al-Nâr al-Lâ’îh should be deemed a functionally coded vocabulary, a specific language register, or even a lingua franca of elite communication, formally derived from dominant 14th-century political ideology, but not necessarily party to

59 al-Şafâdî, A’yân al-‘Aṣr, I: 84. Another biography, detailing that İbrâhîm had been a kâtip al-dast in Damascus and in Cairo and that he indeed was the author of risâlahs and poetry (lahu tarassul wa-nazm), was preserved in Ahmâd b. Ḥâjar al-‘Asqâlâni, al-Durar al-Kâmine fi A’yân al-Mî’a al-Thâminî, ed. H. al-Nâdîwî (Beirut: Dâr al-‘Ilî, 1993), I: 37.


it. In other words, this specific type of elite communication had gratefully tapped into a powerful ideological current that dominated the middle of the 14th century, that was built up around ideas of Qalāwūnid leadership’s divine sanction and dynastic legitimacy, and that had resulted in the formation of a wide-spread discourse of Qalāwūnid authenticity, specialty and sovereignty. As Holt surmised, this discursive engagement with that Qalāwūnid lingua franca allowed for al-Nūr al-Lā‘īh’s integration into the Qalāwūnid ruling system. But in reality this was only a means to another, far more concrete, end: the author’s own continued integration in and engagement with the Qalāwūnid elites of the 1340s. This turning upside down of Holt’s interpretation of al-Nūr al-Lā‘īh’s performative effect, prioritising the individual agency of the author and the malleability of the Qalāwūnid discourse, undoubtedly also necessitates a re-assessment of the other panegyrics that were included in his study. In spite of all the afore-mentioned differences, from their length to their application of rather more standard “specimens of a literary form favoured by the encomiasts of Mamluk sultans”, a re-appraisal of their authorial agency may well result in similarly more nuanced insights into the social semiotics of these works of literature. Doing so will at the very least already offer a new heuristic way into the dynamics of political ideology in the late medieval and early modern eastern Mediterranean, into the dynamic subjectivity of the resultant lingua franca of elite communication in particular, transcending by far the Qalāwūnid 14th century. Only one other of the historical ‘literary offerings’ studied by Holt actually pertained to that Qalāwūnid era and subscribed to its lingua franca: al-Tūḥfah al-mulākiyyah fī l-dawlah al-Turkiyyah, honouring the sultans Qalāwūn and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn and ascribed to no other than Egypt’s mamluk viceregent, Baybars al-Manṣūrī (ca. 1245-1325). The other offerings, such as the afore-mentioned panegyrics to the sultans al-Mu‘ayyad Shaykh and al-Zāhir Ṭārīq, pertained mostly to the 15th century, but also included a 16th-century and a 17th-century panegyric. A further study of these post-Qalāwūnid texts may therefore yield similarly telling insights into the winding roads taken by the complex ideas of legitimacy by which various audiences continued to be integrated into the region’s systems of sovereignty. And just as al-Tūḥfah al-mulākiyyah and al-Nūr al-Lā‘īh present “the history of the Mamluk sultanate as proceeding to its glorious culmination in the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn” and of his son al-Ṣāliḥ Iṣmā‘īl respectively, so must there be other works of history and historical biography from the Mamluk period that are consciously and unconsciously tapping into such dominant political discourses and that remain to be mined for similar insights into this aspect of the region’s “histoire des mentalités”. Returning finally to al-Nūr al-Lā‘īh itself, and to the conclusion that it was instrumental in its author’s pursuing of continued integration into the elites of the 1340s, it should be noted that this re-assessment also transcends the

62 See useful parallels in Wansbrough’s identification of a Mediterranean lingua franca in the format of chancery practice, representing—whatever the languages employed in diplomatic communication across the Mediterranean—“a meta-language which dictated the arrangement of the text and identified the equivalent items to be employed... The conventional form of the document, the sequence of its elements, the syntax, the phraseology and the vocabulary, all combined to produce a standard vehicle for the authoritative record of what had actually been agreed: ... the medium was at least three-quarters of the message.” (J. Wansbrough, Lingua Franca in the Mediterranean (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1996); M. Brett, “Lingua Franca in the Mediterranean: John Wansbrough and the Historiography of Mediaeval Egypt”, in The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c. 950-1800), ed. H. Kennedy (The Medieval Mediterranean. Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400-1453 31) (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1-11 [quote from p. 3]). Another useful related parallel may be found in Sanders’ employment of the term in the context of 12th-century Fatimid ritual, when “the Fatimids deliberately created a ritual lingua franca that was systematically articulated through ceremony, which emphasized those aspects of ritual that could be conceived of as broadly Islamic and that were not explicitly embedded in Islam’sism. Cairo became the site on which this ritual lingua franca operated as an urban language, thus blurring the boundary between Isma‘ili and Sunni and mitigating urban religious tensions.” (Paula Sanders, Rituals, Politics and the City in Fatimid Cairo [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994], 39-40)

63 For this discourse’s performance in the context of Qalāwūnid rituals of power, see Jo Van Steenbergen, “Ritual, Politics and the City in Mamluk Cairo: the Bayna l-Qaṣrayn as a dynamic ‘lieu de mémoire’”, in Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in the Medieval Mediterranean, eds. Alexander Bellemier et al. (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

64 Holt, “Literary Offerings,” 10


insights offered into the individual agency of authors and into the workings of Qalāwūnīd political ideology. In fact, such a re-assessment also suggests how current considerations of the increased social importance of Mamluk literature and of its meanings for Mamluk social organisation may be furthered. In pursuing his elite integration, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī did not just actively engage with the dominant discourse of Qalāwūnīd legitimacy, wittingly contributing with the innovative religious imagery of the mujaddid that was slowly establishing itself as a functional legitimating device. He tried to couple this with literary elegance, with demonstrations of intellectual and practical competence in the skills required from a secretary of his status (including knowledge of history, Quran and ǧadīth, and the art of epistemology), and with reminders of the longstanding links that connected his family to what Musawi termed the “scribal hierarchy [of] ... epistolary scribes or chancery secretaries”.

These complex ways in which an author like Ibn al-Qaysarānī could effectively mobilise cultural forms, ideas and symbols suggest an interconnected field of meaning shared by Mamluk elites and others that may usefully be called a Mamluk cultural matrix. Such a concept does then not just refer to culture being a common interest of all Mamluk elites, but to the acknowledgement that Mamluk social reality always was expressed culturally and that Mamluk culture always was a social construction, meaningfully being shaped by and shaping the public organisation of Mamluk society as that emerged from the interaction among social groups.

As a result, also in this respect the horizon may be widened beyond al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ’s engagement with that Qalāwūnīd lingua franca and with other forms, ideas and symbols, applying this cultural matrix perspective to other Mamluk cultural activities, to other literary products from the Qalāwūnīd era in particular. Considering the increased social importance of belles-lettres, there appear to be many good reasons to do so, enabling to contemplate within one integrative epistemological framework the social dimensions of the ‘Literariserung’ of verbal communication as well as the cultural dimensions of Mamluk social organisation. For the wider literary production of Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī himself—said by one of his biographers to have authored an undefined number of letters and poetry—this social semiotic approach to literature certainly makes much sense. Apart from al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ, there only remains one other of his epistolographic creations, which has again been preserved in a unique manuscript that, however, still awaits edition and further study. What can and should already be said about it here is that it has an almost identical what can and should already be said about it here is that it has an almost identical -clerk. Among the five, history tops all as the crown jewel. (”The well-preserved pearl, demonstrating the divine election of the noble lord Sayf al-Dīn Qawṣūn.” Although briefer (360 lines spread over 40 pages) and less elaborate than al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ, this al-Durr al-Maṣūn, written during the short reign of al-Manṣūr ʿAbū Bakr b. Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (r. 1341) for the strong man behind his throne Qawṣūn al-Naṣīrī (ca. 1300-1342), demonstrates upon a first inspection striking discursive, textual and stylistic parallels with the panegyric to ʿAbū Bakr’s brother al-Ṣāliḥ Iṣmāʿīl. In fact, these unmistakable parallels suggest no less than that al-Durr al-Maṣūn simply was an earlier draft version of al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ, differing in object of praise, but not in discursive and literary forms, nor

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67 See Musawi, “Pre-modern Belletristic Prose,” 110-3. On the importance of knowledge of history for a secretary, see also Li Guo, “Mamluk Historical Rajaz Poetry: Ibn Dāniyyāl’s Judge List and Its Later Adaptations,” Mamlūk Studies Review 14 (2010): 58 (“Al-Nuwayrī [d. 1332]... names five “arts” [fīṇūn], or expertise in five areas, as the qualifying requirements for a candidate applying for lucrative state jobs, such as the kāṭīb-clerk. Among the five, history tops all as the crown jewel.”)

68 As it is used in Berkey, “Culture and Society during the late Middle Ages,” 386-411.


70 See Tadmuri’s reference in Ibn al-Qaysarānī, al-Nūr al-Lāʾīḥ, 12, to this title.

undoubtedly in performative intended meanings. As such, it demonstrates remarkably well the working of the Mamluk cultural matrix, socio-political changes affecting the semiotic framework within which the author had to operate—hence the encomiast’s change of subject from Qawṣūn to Ismā‘īl—but not the semiotic tools that he had at hand.

In view of such shared semiotic tools and easy switching between semiotic frameworks, it is—just as with the discursive nature of that lingua franca—extremely difficult to imagine that Ibrāhīm was creating these very peculiar sorts of performative panegyrical risālahs in some form of splendid isolation. After all, his case was hardly unique within the clientelistic structure of Mamluk society, where just as al-Šāliḥ Ismā‘īl or Qawṣūn all political elites inherently took on social roles of symbiotic engagement with cultured men of social standing and functional capacity such as Ibrāhīm. Considering the ubiquitous, standard nature of bellestristic prose and poetry in Mamluk elite communication, Ibrāhīm’s literary production arguably represents an extremely graphic example of a fundamental aspect of elite interaction that also warrants further research, both synchronically and diachronically. Just as in this specific case, dominant discursive and literary modes of Mamluk social communication may well have been used by many others in similarly semiotic ways, the meaning of which would have been very clear to contemporary participants to this type of elite interaction. For modern scholars that have to operate outside of a Mamluk cultural matrix, it means that literary products such as these historicising works of praise remain occasionally enigmatic, are always multi-dimensional, and should certainly never be taken at face value.

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72 According to Holt, the same was apparently true in the case of the literary offerings to the sultans Mu‘ayyad Shaykh and Taṭar, both produced by the same author, the judge and historian Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-ʿAynī (1361-1451), who “had a model ready to hand in his own ...[offering to Shaykh], the plan of which he follows closely [in the subsequent offering to Taṭar], sometimes even plagiarizing himself, with of course such adaptation as was necessary to suit the new ruler” (Holt, “Literary Offerings,” 11).

73 For interesting parallels, involving a contemporary Arabic mirror-for-princes dedicated to an Ilkhanid vizier, and al-Qalqashandi’s maqāma on secretaryship from 1389, dedicated to the chief secretary of the time, see L. Marlow, “The Way of the Viziers and the Lamp of Commanders (Minḥāj al-wuzarā‘ wa-sirāj al-umarā‘) of Ahmad al-Isfahbādī and the Literary and Political Culture of Early Fourteenth-Century Iran,” in Gruendler & Marlow, Writers and Rulers, 169-89, esp. 187-9; al-Musawi, “Vindicating a Profession or a Personal Career,” esp. 115-22.