IBN IYĀS
Muhammad b. Ahmad
(b. 1448; d. > 1522)

LIFE

Ibn Iyās (also Ayās) was a chronicler of the late Mamlük and early Ottoman periods in Egypt. In the absence of any known biography, the information about I.I.’s life is limited to that provided by the few passing references in his principal historical work Badā’i’i‘ al-zuhūr. I.I. belonged to the fourth generation of a Mamlük military family, whose origins go back to the first quarter of the 8th/14th century. I.I. writes that his father, Shihābaddin Ahmad b. Iyās, was among the awlād al-nās (Sons of Mamlūks), and therefore not eligible for military career. Yet, he associated with emirs and powerful men of the state.

According to his own account, I.I. was born on 6 Rabi I 852/8 June 1447 and performed the hajj in 882/1477. Not known to hold any official position, he seems to have devoted his time to study and writing. He had considerable income from revenues from land holdings (iqṭā‘) granted by the Mamlük state to its military personnel and their families. The date of his death is not known. Judging by the fact that the last (i.e. eleventh) part of Badā’i’i‘ was completed at the end of 928/1522 and that I.I. intended to write the twelfth part, one can conclude that he must have died after this date.

I.I.’s most distinguished teachers were the jurist and historian ewnętr b. Ḥalīl al-Ḥanafi (d. 920/1514) and the polymath Jalāladdin al-Suyūtī (d. 911/1505). Well-read in the Egyptian historiography, I.I. was influenced by it in terms of his choice of subject matter as well as the organization of his chronicle.

WORKS

1. Badā’i’i‘ al-zuhūr fi waqā’i‘ al-duhūr

Even though I.I. refers to his masterpiece as Badā’i’i‘ al-zuhūr fi waqā’i‘ al-duhūr (“The Beautiful Flowers about the Events of the Times’), he also uses the title Badā’i’i‘ al-umūr fi waqā’i‘ al-duhūr and Marj al-zuhūr. I.I.’s importance lies in his direct, sensitive, detailed, and usually reliable reporting of events that took place in Egypt, particularly in Cairo, during the last decades of the Mamlük sultanate and the first five years of Ottoman rule. I.I.’s chronicle is the only historical source written by an eyewitness to the occupation in 923/1517 and the establishment of the new regime until 928/1522.

In the Introduction to Part Four I.I. states that he started to write the Badā’i’i‘ in 901/1495-96. I.I. was 20 years old when Sultan Qāyībāy (d. 901/1495-96) assumed power in 872/1468. I.I. planned to write his comprehensive history of Egypt in twelve parts (juz‘) from the earliest times until his own day. Nothing is known about the first
three parts of the work, but it seems that he intended to write the pre-Islamic history of Egypt and also a section on general cosmology. Such elements are included in the first volume of the later edition of Badā‘i‘ and in other works of the author. Only six parts of Badā‘i‘c survived as autographs or as other reliable copies. The parts break down as such:

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<td>1-741</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>901/1495-96</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>857-890</td>
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<td>891-912</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>922/1516</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>922-928</td>
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As the above list indicates, the parts of the work constituting I.I.’s original contribution are much more detailed than his accounts based on previous chroniclers from the Mamlûk period, such as Ibn Kathîr (d. 774/1373), al-Maqrîzî (d. 845/1442), Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalânî (d. 852/1449), Ibn Faḍlallâh al-‘Umarî (d. 842/1439), and Jalâl-ad-dîn al-Suyûtî (d. 910/1505). I.I.’s work provides continuity in the historical coverage in that this part of Badā‘i‘c starts when another chronicle, Abu‘l-Maḥasin b. Taḥrîrî’s (d. 874/1470) al-Nu‘um al-Zâhirî fî mulûk Miṣr wa’l-Qâhirî, ends. After the reign of Qâyîţbây I.I.’s chronicle is virtually the only source.

In volumes 1 and 2, I.I. describes the history of the Mamlûk Empire: its civilization, the ceremonies and processions of the sultans, and the reception of ambassadors. The plagues that hit the country are also described, including estimates of the dead. He shows interest in the poets, scholars and ascetics. Some of the strongest and the most touching rhymes of political poetry that are scattered in the chronicle were composed by the historian himself. He also wrote about the scholars in Islamic sciences, and poets, ascetics, and other distinguished persons who lived in Egypt.

I.I. provides important information about the battles between the Mamlûks and the Ottomans in Anatolia during the reign of Qâyîţbây as well as the diplomatic relations between the two powers. He tells about the reception of the Ottoman prince Qorqud (919/1513) in the Mamlûk court and reports the exact size of the Mamlûk force that was sent to Syria to fight the Ottomans. We owe him the fullest description of the battle of Marj Dâbiq (Mercidabªk) which sealed the fate of the Mamlûk sultan and annexed Syria to the Ottomans and of how Selîm I (918-926/1512-1520) took the Mamlûk treasury from the Citadel of Aleppo (Haleb) by sending his weakest servant.

According to I.I.’s account, the Ottoman conquest of Cairo was traumatic. He compares it to the invasion by Nebuchadnezzar in antiquity and to the Mongol conquest of Bağdîd in 1258. Despite the shock of the invasion with such a huge army, by the chronicler’s own admission, the number of civilian casualties was low. Even though Selîm I ordered the execution of the Mamlûks at first, he later changed his de-
cision and integrated the Mamlûks into the Ottoman army as a separate unit. I.I. recounts how later the Sultan even used the Mamlûks to discipline unruly janissaries.

As a member of a family of awlād al-nās, I.I.’s pain is understandable. He often expresses his anger at the injustice of the Mamlûks, and even writes that their fall was God’s punishment for their crimes. But in his judgment, the new masters were much worse. He describes the Ottomans as bad and ignorant Muslims who disregard the injunctions of the shari‘a. This includes Selîm I, his qadis and his troops, who are accused of being pederasts and drinkers, who do not pray and do not fast during Ramadan. Similar to many of his Arab contemporaries, I.I. considers Ottoman qanûn (administrative law) as un-Islamic. He regards the yasaq tax on marriage contracts as particularly unjust and contravening the Prophet’s sunna. I.I. describes the Ottoman army as a rabble in which one could not tell an officer from a soldier.

The fifth volume of Badā‘i‘ is full of criticism of the innovations in the administration of Cairo that were introduced by the Ottomans. I.I. expresses the feelings of dismay in Cairo caused by the banishment to Istanbul of groups of people, notables and craftsmen, and relates that the exile of the last Abbâsid caliph was seen as a symbolic blow to Cairo despite his political irrelevance. He also describes as oppressive and unjust the rule of Ha’ir Bey (d. Dhulqada 928/October 1522), the Mamlûk governor of the Aleppo who had betrayed Sultan al-Ghawrî and was awarded with the governorship of Egypt.

Although I.I. does not mention his sources, his reports indicate that he was knowledgeable about the politics and diplomacy of the state and must have received inside information about developments in the center of Mamlûk power. His descriptions of the sultans are credible and cannot have been based on popular rumors alone. Employed by the state in respectable positions, I.I.’s father, brother and brother-in-law could have been the source of such inside information. As a typical member of the awlād al-nās class, I.I. was well-positioned to understand both the ruling elite and the common people and shared these qualities with previous historians of the Mamlûk period.

I.I. mentions 37 historical works upon which he relied for the composition of the earlier parts of Badā‘i‘. Among the historians of the Mamlûk period whose writings he had consulted, he names his teacher al-Suyûṭî. Yet unlike his teacher, who was a man of adab (belles-lettres), I.I. wrote in non-literary, sometimes colloquial language, and used a concrete and straightforward style, narrating the day-to-day events with some personal comments.

Like other chroniclers of the period, I.I. organized his chronicle as a diary, dividing his report by years and months. Each year begins with the names and positions of the heads of the state: the caliph, the sultan, the commanders of the army, the four chief judges (one for each madhab), etc. The events are then told chronologically, without an effort to tell a whole story uninterrupted. At the end of the year I.I. often summarizes the main events and expresses his personal attitude, sometimes in mo-
ralistic terms. Upon the death of a sultan (particularly strong ones such as Qāyītbāy or Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī) I.I. wrote moving and insightful obituaries, weighing the ruler’s good and bad qualities.

Although Badā’ī is I.I.’s only work of significance as an original historical source for Egypt, he has several historical or pseudo-historical works written before Badā’ī. According to David Wasserstein, I.I.’s six works before Badā’ī were composed between a date before 891/1486 and 922/1516.11

2. Badā’ī al-zuhūr fi waqā’ī al-duhūr: Bād’ al-ḥalq wa-sīrat al-anbiyā’

There is some confusion about his other works primarily since he wrote another work under the same title Badā’ī al-zuhūr fi waqā’ī al-duhūr. Yet, this work also has a subtitle Bād’ al-ḥalq wa-sīrat al-anbiyā’ (‘The Beginning of the World, and the Lives of the Prophets’) and is an entirely different book, a survey of the sacred history from Adam until Jesus, and some eschatological elements. Clearly expressing his deep attachment to Egypt, I.I. discusses among other things, the Nile, Alexandria, the pyramids and the sphinx.

3. Nuzhat al-umām fi’l-‘ajīb wa’l-ḥikām

Written before 891/1486, this is a work about the characteristics, advantages and marvels of Egypt, the customs of the Egyptians, the Muslim conquest, and the Coptic calendar and festivals.

4. Jawāhir al-sulūk fi (aḥbār) al-ḥulafā’ wa’l-mulūk

A historical treatise on the Muslim rulers of Egypt down to the reign of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī (904-905/1499-1500).

5. Marj/Badā’ī al-zuhūr

A history of Egypt up to 2 Muharram 909/25 June 1503.

6. ‘Uqd al-juman fi waqa’ī al-azman

Completed on 17 Rabi I 905/23 September 1499, the work is the history of Egypt from 654/1256 until 904/1499 and is a separate work, unrelated to Badā’ī al-zuhūr or to the abridged versions based on it.

7. Nashq al-ażhar fi ‘ajā’ib al-aqṭār

A cosmography with special reference to Egypt’s antiquity and kings. Much attention is devoted to the Coptic calendar and feasts, owing to their importance to Egyptian agriculture. The contents and the organization of the material are similar to Nuzhat al-umām.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

1 Badāʾiʾ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʾ al-duhūr

Manuscripts: Although P. Kahle mentions 33 manuscript copies of the work in his Introduction to the 1931 Istanbul edition of the chronicle (P. Kahle, M. Muṣṭafā and M. Sobernhein (eds.). Part Four of Badāʾiʾ al-zuhūr fī waqāʾiʾ al-duhūr), more manuscripts have been located since then. The most important ones are listed below:


Miscellaneous other manuscripts of Badāʾiʾ, which are less complete than those previously mentioned:

4199. [See Reynold A. Nicholson, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (1899), 909]


© Copyright by the editors of the Historians of the Ottoman Empire (http://www.ottomanhistorians.com/)
Editions: (1) Bülq, 1311-12/1893-94. An unsatisfactory edition based only on manuscripts found in Cairo. The 15 years prior to the Ottoman conquest are missing. Some periods are reported in detail, whereas others are very short. It seems that they are excerpts of a fuller version. The editors were unaware of the existence in Fatih Mosque Library in Istanbul of the 4 volumes penned by I.I. himself. (2) Istanbul, 1931-32. Ed. by Paul Kahle, Muhammad Muṣṭafā, and Moritz Sobernheim. The first critical edition. Annemarie Schimmel prepared the indices which were published in 1945. This edition includes Part Four (covering the period 906-921/1501-1516) and Part Five (covering the period 922-928/1516-1522). The editors of the Istanbul edition used the autographs and two manuscript copies located in Paris and St. Petersburg, which were copied from other autographs that are lost. (3) Safahāt lam tunshar min Badā’i’i’c al-zuhūr fi waqā’i’i’c al-duhūr. Cairo, 1951. Ed. by Muhammad Muṣṭafā. A part of Badā’i’i’c which had not been published before, namely period between 857-872/1453-1468, the 15 years before the reign of Qāyītbāy. (4) The next edition of Badā’i’i’c was published in stages as several editions and printings by Franz Steiner Publishing House in Wiesbaden and Cairo from 1960 until 1992:

Vol. 1, part one: from the beginning of the book until 764/1363.
Vol. 5: 922-928/1516-1522.
Vols. 6-9: indices: names; officeholders and offices, trades; place-names and buildings; technical terms.

Translations: (1) [Into Turkish] Tercüme-i en-nüzhe es-seniyye fi ’zıkr el-ḫulefā ve’l-mühāl el-muşriyye (See Benjamin Lellouch’s article on Ābduṣḥamed Diyārbeḵrī in Historians of the Ottoman Empire and ibidem., Les Ottomans en Égypte. Historiens et conquérants au XVIe siècle (Paris, 2006)). This is a Turkish chronicle written by a qadi who arrived in Egypt with Selīm I’s army. The work consists of a translation of the last part of Badā’i’i’c with significant changes followed by an independent continuation of the narrative for two and a half years. The chronicle is important in that it provides an Ottoman perspective and also serves as a guide to the Ottoman usage of some Arabic terms. (2) [Into English] W.H. Salmon (trans.). An Account of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in the year A.H. 922 (A.D. 1516) (London, 1921; Reprinted: Westport, CT, 1981). Translation of the 3rd volume of Badā’i’i’c. (3) [Into French] Gaston Wiet (ed./trans.). Histoire des mamouks circassiens Ibn Iyās, Badā’i’i’c al-zuhūr fi waqā’i’i’c al-duhūr for the years 872-906 (1467-1500) (Cairo, 1945). (4) [Into French] Gaston Wiet (trans.). Journal d’un bourgeois du Caire: chronique

2 Badā’i’ al-zuhūr fi waqā’i’ al-duhūr: Bād’ al-ḥalq wa-sīrat al-anbiyā’
   Manuscript: According to Muḥammad Muṣṭafā’s introduction in Arabic to Kahle’s edition of Badā’i’ (p. wāw) this work is based on Istanbul, Sūleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Damad İbrahim Paşa, no. 887.
   Translation: Jamāl Aṣrî (trans.). Les meilleurs roses sur les évenements grandioses (Beirut, 1995).

3 Nuzhat al-umām fi‘l-‘ajā’ib wa’l-ḥikām

4 Jawāhir al-sulūk fi (aḥbār) al-ḥulafā’ wa’l-mulūk

5 Marj/Badā’i’ al-zuhūr:

6 ʿUqud al-juman fi waqa’i’ al-azman

7 Nashq al-azhar fi ʿajā’ib al-aqṭār

2 Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 393-6; vol. 5, p. 45.
3 Ibid., vol. 4, p. 157.
4 Ibid., vol. 5, p.44. Only 944 royal Mamlūks and 5,000 infantry.
5 Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 68-73.
6 Ibid., vol. 5, p. 75.
7 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 286; vol. 5, p. 220.
9 Muhammad Shamsaddin b. Tulun, of the “ulama’ of Damascus, who, like I.I., witnessed the occupation of his hometown by the Ottoman army, presents a much more balanced picture of Selīm and his army. Muʃakhaḥat al-hillān fī hawādī al-zamān (Cairo, 1962-64), vol. 2, passim.
autograph, but is not dated. It was copied from a manuscript completed at the end of 934/1528. A Turk who possessed the ms. added in the margins remarks expressing his anger at I.I.’s derogatory views of the Ottomans. I.I. describes the Ottomans soldiers as drug users and pederasts, and the Sultan as a drunk, unreliable, and not royal in his behavior. The Turkish man refutes I.I.’s version, which can be found in some sources, that the origin of “Osmān, the dynasty’s founder, was from the Arabs of the Hijaz, and cites the Ottoman traditional version. To the author’s claim that the qānūn is the worst law, he retorts that the Ottoman state is the most just and shari’a-abiding ever, whereas the Mamlūk Sultanate was the worst. He calls I.I. an ignorant and a lying Circassian. P. Kahle, Introduction to the 1931 Istanbul edition of Bada‘i‘, Part Four, pp. 10-12.


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April 2007