IBN ZUNBUL
Ahmad b. Ali
(d. > 1574)

LIFE

Ahmad b. Ali, who bears the nicknames al-Mahallî (with reference to his native town al-Mahalla al-kubra in Lower Egypt), al-Shâfi’î, al-Munajjîm (the astrologer), and al-Rammâl (the geomancer), is commonly referred to “Ibn Zunbul.” However, many manuscripts suggest the reading “Ibn Zanbal.”

An old historiographical tradition depicts I.Z. as a member of the inner circle of Mamluk sultan Qânsûh al-Gawrî (r. 906-922/1501-16) and as a witness of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 923/1517. C. Brockelmann refers to I.Z. as a “civil servant at the war division” indicating that he was receiving a salary from the diwan al-jaysh under al-Gawrî. F. Babinger and, following him, S.M. Es-Seyyid and E. İhsanoğlu depict him as the astrologer of the sultan, who attended the latter’s military campaigns. M.M. Ziyâdeh describes him as a contemporary of Ibn Iyâs (d. shortly after 29 Zilhicce 930/28 October 1524) and states that he received a salary from the Ottoman army office (diwan al-jaysh) in 951/1544. Although all these authors agree that I.Z. must have died after 960/1552, D. Behrens-Abouseif argues that he lived much later and composed his chronicle at the beginning of the 17th century.

Since Brockelmann, Babinger and Ziyâdeh do not cite their sources, it is difficult to ascertain the origins of their arguments. The idea that I.Z. followed al-Gawrî at war certainly comes from the fact that his chronicle describes in detail the sultan’s expedition in 922/1516, even though there is no proof that he was then following the Mamluk army, especially since he was clearly not the geomancer whom, in his chronicle, al-Gawrî consults in order to know who will rule after himself. The first person narrative style he employs on at least one occasion in the text does not imply that he was an eye-witness to the events but is intended to give more authority to his own account. Moreover, the reference in his great encyclopedia Qânûn al-dunyâ to a dream in which the ghost of al-Gawrî appears to him and justifies his political deeds can be considered a hint that the sultan never actually spoke to him. Finally, one should not trust the later Turkish chronicles depicting I.Z. as a contemporary of al-Gawrî. In his Turkish adaptation of I.Z.’s chronicle, completed in 1038/1628 or shortly thereafter, Ahmed Süheylî depicts him as the geomancer and astrologer of al-Gawrî, and it is him that the sultan consults in order to know who will be his successor. Ta’rîh-i Miṣr, which Hallâq completed in 1130/1717 or shortly after, argues the same way. The idea that I.Z. was a contemporary of al-Gawrî, therefore, appears to have developed during the 17th-18th centuries, although it did not appear in 16th-century sources.
On the basis of the general character of the account as well as the attribution of the title of qā‘immaqām to ʿOṣmān Beg, who was the provisional governor of Egypt in 1012/1604, D. Behrens-Abouseif dates the chronicle to the beginning of the 17th century. However, the fact that the first argument is vague, and the reference to ʿOṣmān Beg is a later addition to the original text leaves no reason to think that I.Z. was still alive at the beginning of the 17th century. Yet, Behrens-Abouseif is right in suggesting that I.Z. practiced divination after the rule of al-Šawr: she refers to a passage from Ḥallāq’s Taʾriḥ-i Miṣr in which Mahmūd Paṣa, the governor of Egypt (gov. 973-975/1566-67), consults I.Z. after a terrible nightmare. Although Ḥallāq gives I.Z.’s Qānūn al-dunyā as his source, the fact that the latter was written before 970/1563 makes it more likely that his source was the Turkish adaptation of the text completed by qāṭī ʿAbdurrahmān in 983/1575.

Mahmūd Paṣa was not the only governor of Egypt I.Z. served. His employers included Ḥusrev Paṣa (gov. 941-943/1535-36) as well as others in much later periods. Both in Qānūn al-dunyā and Kitāb al-maqālāt fī [or: wa ḥall al-mushkilāt, one of his geomancy treatises, he states that he sojourned in Istanbul on two occasions. During his first stay (Rebiʿevel 944/August-September 1537 until 945/1538), I.Z. displayed his talent as a geomancer to the chancellor (niṣān) Celâldez Muṣṭafā (d. 975/1567). His entrance in the Ottoman power circles was probably facilitated by his good relations with al-Ǧawrī’s son Muḥammad, who had developed a friendship with Selīm I (r. 918-926/1512-20) in Egypt in 923/1517, and was brought to Istanbul by him. Although Muhammad returned to Egypt in the company of the Grand Vizier İbrāhīm Paṣa (d. 942/1536) in 931/1525, he was again in Istanbul in 945/1538, giving the two Egyptians the opportunity to see each other in the Ottoman capital.

I.Z. went to Istanbul for a second time in 962/1554-55. He states that he was, just like in 944-945/1537-38, hosted by Ahmed, who was the agha of the janissaries during I.Z.’s first visit and grand vizier during the second. This fact indicates that it was Qara Ahmed Paṣa, the “conqueror of Temešvar” (Temešvar fātihi), who was put to death on 14 Zilkade 962/28 September 1555.

The Turkish adaptation of the Qānūn al-dunyā indicates that I.Z. was still alive between 981-983/1573-75 when ʿAbdurrahmān composed it as the latter claims to have worked at the request of Murād, who was prince before ascending the Ottoman throne in 982/1574. I.Z. was obviously known in the Ottoman court since his first visit in Istanbul, and perhaps even from earlier on.

Works

1. Infiṣāl al-ʾāwān wa ittiṣāl dawlat Banī ʿUṣmān

Although it is not clear whether I.Z. began to work on Infiṣāl al-ʾawān in Egypt or in Istanbul, and when he finished it, it is known that he was working on it while in Istanbul in 945/1538. Devoted to the Ottoman-Mamluk war of 922-923/1516-17, Infiṣāl opens with the departure of the Mamluk army from Cairo (Qāhire) in Rebiʿu lahlir
922/May 1516, narrates the tensions within the Mamluk camp, describes the escalation of the conflict with the Ottomans, and culminates with the victory of Selim I and the death of al-Ğawrî in Marj Dâbiq (Mercidâbiq) in Receb 922/August 1516. This section constitutes approximately one-sixth of the text, while the description of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, defended by the new Mamluk sultan Ťomanbay (r. Ramazan 922-Rebiµlevvel 923/October 1516-April 1517) makes up two-thirds of the work. After the conquest, the description of events becomes much more succinct, even though the chronicle gives much detail about the 927/1520-21 revolt of Jânbirdî al-Ğazâlî (d. 927/1521), a Mamluk emir who had been appointed Ottoman governor of Damascus (Şâm). The Ottoman victory over the Knights of Rhodes in 929/1522, thanks to the help of Egyptian troops, is quickly related. This appears to be the original end of the work, although very short notes bring some manuscripts up to the governorship of ʿAli Paşa (956-961/1549-53). 21 Except for a very limited number of important events, such as al-Ğawrî’s departure for Syria, the Battle of Marj Dâbiq, the election and hanging of Ťomanbay, the death of Selim I, and the death of Jânbirdî al-Ğazâlî, İnfiṣâl almost never gives dates. Furthermore, the chronological organization is shaky: on various occasions the text returns to the past or jumps into the future.

The chronological weakness is not surprising if one considers that the text concerns itself with “high deeds” rather than events: it is a “romance of chivalry.” 22 İnfiṣâl tells with unending detail of the heroic charges of the Mamluk cavalry and of the Ottoman counterattack with the use of artillery. Solemn proclamations, sometimes insulting the enemy, are made on the battlefield. Combat carries over to the Ottoman imperial council and turns into debate, where brave Mamluks, such as the amirs Shâdbâk (d. 923/1517) and Kurtbay al-Wâlî (d. 923/1517), and Sultan Ťomanbay, who were held prisoners by the Ottomans and were awaiting their upcoming death, then face Selim I in a last confrontation, this time a verbal one: the debate centers on the legitimacy of war and power. Thus the epic feeds political polemic. İnfiṣâl opposes two methods of fighting, two political systems, two civilizations; the confrontation is awe-inspiring and total. 23 I.Z. takes neither the Mamluk nor the Ottoman side, but rebukes at length the Mamluk amirs Ḥâyrbak (d. 928/1522) and Jânbirdî al-Ğazâlî as traitors responsible for the Ottoman victory.

This work is one of fiction as much as of history, and U. Haarmann saw it as the end product of the Literarisierung process taking place in Arabic historiography during the last centuries of the middle ages. 24 In a recent study Robert Irwin went further and considered I.Z. not as a historian proper, but as a historical novelist, maybe the Arab world’s first true one: he noted İnfiṣâl’s “readiness to sacrifice factual accuracy to narrative drive.” 25 I.Z.’s imagination no doubt played an essential part in the composition of the text. I.Z. does obviously not rely on any written source, but claims to have been inspired by Muhammad b. al-Ğawrî, when he states in Qânûn al-dunyâ that “It is because of Sayyîdî Muhammad, son of the sultan al-Malik Qânsûh al-Ğawrî that I wrote” İnfiṣâl al-âwân. 26 It is in the same text that I.Z. states that he paid
little attention to the testimony, which is hostile to al-Ǧawrī, of ʿAlī, son of the sultan al-Muʿayyad Ahmad (r. 865/1461), whom he met during his first visit to Istanbul. 27 However, in Infiṣāl, he mentions as informants the qāḍī Aṣīl al-Ṭawīl, who knew ʿOmanbay, and the Mamluk amir Arazmak Nāshif (d. 930/1524), 28 besides, of course, Muḥammad b. al-Ǧawrī (d. ?). 29

I.Z.’s text was a major success. No other narrative of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt had such an audience during the Ottoman period, and it is only in the 20th century that Ibn Iyās’s Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr exceeded its fame. There are eight manuscripts of the chronicle in Paris, five in Gotha and, in total, dozens of manuscripts copied between the 17th and the 19th centuries. There seems to be no manuscript clearly datable to the 16th century, or any manuscript bearing the title Infiṣāl al-āwān wa ittiṣāl dawlat Banī ʿUṯmān (Separation of the Moments and the Advent of the Fortune of the Ottoman Family), which is only known through I.Z.’s encyclopedia. The manuscripts bear various, and even contradictory, titles: Taʾrīḫ Miṣr al-maḥrūs (History of the Well-Protected Cairo); Faṭḥ Miṣr (Conquest of Cairo); Taʾrīḫ Ǧaẓawāt sulṭān Salīm Ḥān maʾ al-sulṭān al-Ǧawrī (Wars of Sultan Selīm Khan against Sultan al-Ǧawrī); Wāqīʿat al-Ǧawrī huwa waʾl-sulṭān Salīm (War of al-Ǧawrī and of Sultan Selim); Wāqīʿat al-sulṭān Salīm (War of Sultan Selim); Kitāb ʾSirat al-Jarāʾkisa wa mā waqaʿa baynahum maʾ al-sulṭān Salīm Ḥān (Romance of the Circassians: What Happened Between them and Sultan Selim Khan). Such contradictions should be attributed to the strength of a text that is both history (taʾrīḫ) and romance (sīra), depicting both the Mamluk and the Ottoman sides.

The number of the manuscripts gives only a partial idea of the text’s popularity, as it was also orally transmitted. I.Z. appears in the text on many occasions: “the historian said” (qāla al-muʿārīḫ), “the author said” (qāla al-muʿallīf), “the narrator said it excellently” (wa laqad ajāda al-qāʿīl), “the transmitter reported” (qāla al-rāwī, qāla al-nāqīl). These are probably the words of professional storytellers. Furthermore, the language of the work is not literary, but rather stands halfway between written and spoken language. Action is often expressed not with verbs, but rather through active participles, following the practice of Arabic dialects. It is likely, therefore, that the extant manuscripts are oral versions which were written down in order to be, at a later point, once again used for the oral performance of the story. The conditions of transmission of this chronicle are probably similar to those, in the 18th century, of the “military” chronicles (or “chronicles of al-Damurdashī group”), and the latter indeed share some of the stylistic characteristics of Infiṣāl. 30 Yet it would be a mistake to consider Infiṣāl as the first “military” chronicle, since it is the work of a very cultured man of letters who had ties with the Egyptian Paṣas and the Ottoman court, rather than that of a low-ranking officer.

I.Z.’s chronicle has been used by Arabic Egyptian chroniclers Ibn Abīʾl-Surūr and al-Jabarti (d. 1241/1825-26). 31 Ahmed Süheyli adapted it into Turkish, adding a very short extension (ṣeyl) down to 1038/1628. The Turkish adaptation by Süheyli, under
the title Ta’rīḥ-i Miṣr-i cedīd, was printed by İbrāhīm Müteferriqa in Istanbul in 1142/1730. Hallâq’s Ta’rīḥ-i Miṣr, the most complete manuscript of which brings the narrative down to 1130/1717, gives a Turkish adaptation of I.Z.’s chronicle when it discusses the Ottoman conquest of Egypt. Babinger points out one further Turkish adaptation of I.Z.’s chronicle, that of Yūsuf Milev, although it is quite possible, as J. Hathaway suggested, that Hallâq and Milev (or Mallawî, or Mallawani) are indeed the same man. One should finally point out that the narrative of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt the Jewish Cairene chronicler Yosef Sambari provides in his Hebrew chronicle, which he completed in 5433 anno mundi/1673, is a shortened version of İnfişāl.

I.Z. is the author of a geographical encyclopedia written in three stages. Having begun with the oldest and shortest version entitled Muḥtasar al-juġrāfiya, I.Z. later expanded this work into Tuḥfat al-mulūk wa’l-raḡāʾib li-mā fi l-barr wa-l-bahr min al-ʿajāʾib wa’l-ḡarāʾib, and finally wrote the most complete version, Qānūn al-dunyā. Bringing together a wide array of information, the work not only integrates geographical data with historical knowledge pertaining to the places described, but also devotes significant space to astronomy and the explanation of phenomena using geomancy. Among numerous treatises on occult sciences, primarily on geomancy, I.Z. composed Kitāb al-maqālāt fī [or: waḥall al-mushkilāt, which he completed before the death of Süleymān I in 974/1566.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Manuscripts: A list of more than 30 manuscripts is given by Carl Brockelmann, Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur (Leiden, 1937-49 [first edition: 1898-1902], vol. 2, 298, Supplementband 2, 409. The present writer omitted some references he could not check while adding others:


The Institute of Arabic Manuscripts of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (Cairo), has microfilms of several MSS from Dār al-kutub (Cairo), the Coptic Patriarchate and Raza Library (Rampur).

Editions:


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1 In his great encyclopedia, I.Z. indeed refers to al-Maḥalla al-kubrā as his “country” (balad). See Qānūn al-dunyā, Ms. Istanbul, Topkapı Saray Library, Revan 1638, f. 103a.

6 *Infißal al-awān* (Cairo, 1998), 82. (All references to this work are done to the 1998 edition of the work by Abūdußalm ‘Āmir under the title *Āhirat al-mamālik*.)


8 *Qānūn al-dunyā*, Ms. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı, Revan 1638, f. 410b.

9 *Ta’rīf-i Miṣr-i ced́ıd* (Istanbul, 1142/1730), f. 5b-6b.

10 *Ta’rīf-i Miṣr*, Ms. Istanbul, Istanbul Üniversitesi, TY 628, f. 5a. Firstly wrote his chronicle in Arabic (Barbara Flemming, “Drei türkische Chronisten im osmanischen Kairo,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 3-4 (1979-80), 231). It is thus not sure that he used the Turkish adaptation by Sühelıları.


12 *Ta’rīf-i Miṣr*, f. 81b-84a.

13 970/1563 is the terminus ante quem of the Istanbul manuscript of *Qānūn al-dunyā*, which is not an autograph copy.

14 *Tercüme-i Qānūn-ı dünvə*, Ms. Istanbul, Nuruosmaniye 2565/3000, f. 548a for the date of the text.

15 *Tercüme-i Qānūn-ı dünvə*, f. 344a-b.


18 *Qānūn al-dunyā*, f. 410a.

19 *Kitāb al-maqaλlāt wa halk al-mushkilāt*, f. 86a-86b.

20 *Qānūn al-dunyā*, f. 410a.


26 *Qānūn al-dunyā*, f. 410a.

27 *Qānūn al-dunyā*, f. 410a-b.


29 *Infißal al-awān*, 254, 256.


32 Franz Babinger, *Geschichtsschreiber der Osmanen und ihre Werke*, 58, 162.


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36 On these successive developments, see Qānūn al-dunyā, f. 1b and Kitāb al-mağālat wa ḥall al-mashkīlāt, f. 1b.
38 I could not consult the 1278/1861-62 edition. The 160-page 1962 edition, republished in 1998 as a 215-page edition with an index, relies on four Egyptian manuscripts. It is not a critical edition and shows some later additions as if they were part of the original text, such as the mentions of Ḍṣmān Beg as qāʾimmaqām, the reference to the death of the qādī Aṣīl al-Ṭawīl in 970/1562-63, as well as the reference to the length of the rule of Ṣüleymān I. Infīṣāl al-āwān, 111, 161, 257, 270. The 2004 edition is also not a critical one.

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