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The Political Thinking of the “Virtuous Ruler,” Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī

What follows is an essay on the politics of high culture. Historians have tended to present the politics of the Mamluk Sultanate and in particular its factional fighting, as ideology free. Apart from a commitment to Islam and the jihad, the Mamluks seem curiously bereft of any form of idealism, role models, or political programs. Modern historians often portray the political strategies and goals of the Mamluk sultans as being almost invariably driven by hunger for power, greed, arrogance, and, in some cases, fear. They have been encouraged in such cynical readings of Mamluk politics by the way in which the medieval ulama, who were effectively the custodians of Mamluk historiography, wrote about the sultans and amirs. Generalizing very broadly, their narratives tended towards the positivist and uninterpretative. But it seems worth considering whether there was at least the pretence of ideology and idealism on the part of the ruling elite.

Most of the ulama did not frequent the court, and consequently they were not party to the way decisions were made and the reasons for those decisions. Shihāb al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Ibn Iyās (1448–ca. 1524) is a case in point. Despite being the grandson of a mamluk, his chronicle, the *Badāʾiʿ al-Zuhūr fī Waqāʾiʿ al-Duhūr*, is effectively an outsider’s chronicle, based on public proclamations, gossip, and personal sightings of processions and departing military expeditions. While he is prepared to concede that the Mamluk sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī had some good qualities, nevertheless his account of that sultan’s reign (906–22/1501–16) is a hostile one and, in his obituary of the sultan, he condemns him for his injustice, confiscations, and greed.¹ Obviously the *Badāʾiʿ* is not a neutral source. Ibn Iyās, a student of al-Suyūṭī’s, was an Egyptian *ʿālim* who shared the hostility of the ulama toward the favor shown by Qānṣūh to immigrant Persian and Turkish scholars. (Prominent amongst the incoming Turks was the heterodox Khalwatī Sufī, Shaykh Ibrāhīm Gulshani.) Ibn Iyās disapproved of the favor shown by the sultan to certain Sufis and the sultan’s alleged sympathy for the ideas of the Ḥurūfī poet, Nasīmī, who had been flayed alive for heresy in 820/1417.² When the Ottoman prince Qorqud turned up as a refugee at the Mamluk court, Ibn Iyās also seems to have regarded the honor with which that prince was treated as excessive.

As the grandson of a mamluk and son of a member of the *awlād al-nās*, Ibn Iyās resented Qānṣūh’s contempt for this increasingly redundant and notional military

¹ Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-Zuhūr fī Waqāʾiʿ al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafá (Wiesbaden-Cairo, 1961–75), 5:85–93.

² *Ibid.*, 86.



group. Qānṣūh treated them merely as a fiscal resource.³ Though no soldier, Ibn Iyās had inherited an *iqṭāʿ* from his father, and when the sultan confiscated this *iqṭāʿ*, Ibn Iyās had a long fight in the courts to reclaim it.⁴ And, despite his Mamluk descent, Ibn Iyās shared the fairly general ulama prejudice against the Mamluks. With his traditional cast of mind he disapproved also of Qānṣūh's raising of the Fifth Regiment of musketeers. Moreover, it seems that as a civilian, Ibn Iyās was not fully aware of the growing military threats posed to the Mamluk regime by the Portuguese, Safavids, and Ottomans, and consequently he regarded all the sultan's emergency exactions as being driven by personal greed, rather than by harsh military necessity. Furthermore, it is plausible that his account of Qānṣūh's reign is colored by hindsight and Ibn Iyās's knowledge that that sultan had led the Mamluks to defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at Marj Dābiq.⁵

Though Ibn Iyās was not a neutral observer and his deficiencies as a historian are clear, it must be admitted that we have scarcely any other sources on what was going on in Egypt during the reign of Qānṣūh. However, two literary sources from the time have survived that shed some light, however dim, flickering, and partial, on the culture and thinking of the sultan. The first of these is the *Nafā'is al-Majālis al-Sultānīyah*. This is a record of the sultan's *majlises* or soirees during 910/1505. It was compiled by the Iranian Turkophone Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, also known as Sharīf. In the *Nafā'is* he logs some of the people who attended and gives an account of the highlights of the evening's debate, which was usually opened by the sultan posing a question. The matters debated included religious, literary, political, and social issues and there were also riddles, jokes, and mathematical problems. The debates, which took place several evenings a week, were normally held in the Duhayshah, a hall within the Cairo Citadel. Quite a few of the ulama seem to have attended.

The second source, the *Kawkab al-Durrī*, completed in 919/1513–14 by an unknown hand, is similar but different, in that it is record of what was said at various *majlises* of the sultan, but it is organized according to subject matter, rather than chronologically. Qorqud, an Ottoman prince in exile, attended several

³ On the collection of substitute money from the *awlād al-nās*, see Carl F. Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamluk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (New York, 1994), 86–87.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ On Ibn Iyās, see Eliyahu Ashtor, "Etude sur quelques chroniques mamloukes," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971): 272–97; David J. Wasserstein, "Tradition manuscrite, authenticité, chronologie et développement de l'oeuvre littéraire d'Ibn Iyas," *Journal Asiatique* 280 (1992): 81–114; William Brinner, "Ibn Iyās," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 3:812–13; Carl Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamluk Sultans al-Ashraf Qaytbay and Qansuh al-Ghawri in Egypt* (Seattle and London, 1993), 9–10.

of these sessions. Here are some of the topics covered in both these sources, to give a sense of their diversity: Was Adam the first man to speak Arabic? How can prayers and fasting be managed in the land of the Bulgars where there is no sunset or sunrise? Can one recite the *fātīḥah* in Persian? Why do people avoid wearing red or yellow? Who built the pyramids? Why do people beat on cups when there is an eclipse? What is the function of the *maṣḍar* in grammar? How old is the world? And there are also chess anecdotes, mathematical problems, jokes about Kurds, a joke featuring Naṣr al-Dīn Khwājāh, stories about thieves, the beauty of Joseph, the death of the poet Mutanabbī, praise for the narcissus, and the story of the commissioning of the *Shāhnāmah* and how Firdawsī was rewarded.⁶

Qānṣūh was famous (or notorious) for the favor he showed to Persian and Persian-speaking religious figures and literati.⁷ Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī was only one of several Persians who received patronage from him. Moreover, Persian was one of the several languages in which Qānṣūh was fluent.⁸ In 906/1500–1 he commissioned a translation of Firdawsī's *Shāhnāmah* into Turkish, not for his own benefit, as he could read the original, but for his Turkish-speaking amirs. The manuscript was illustrated in the Turkman style of the courts of Baghdad and Shiraz. (The vast project took ten years.)⁹ Qānṣūh himself composed poetry in Persian as well as Turkish.¹⁰ The early Mamluk sultans did not compose poetry (and very likely they would have thought the practice sissy), but Qāyṭbāy, Yashbak min Mahdī, and Qānṣūh did, as did several of the Ottoman sultans as well as the Timurid princes Bāysunghur and Iskandar in Fars. By the fifteenth

⁶ The *Nafā'is* and the *Kawkab* were edited and published together (with independent pagination) by 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām under the title *Majālis al-Sulṭān al-Ghawrī: Ṣafahāt min Tārīkh Miṣr fī Qarn al-Āshir Hijrī* (Cairo, 1941). On these books, see Mohammed Awad, "Sultan al-Ghawri: His Place in Literature and Learning (Three Books Written under His Patronage)," *Actes du XXe Congrès des Orientalistes, Bruxelles, 1938* (Louvain, 1940), 321–22; Barbara Flemming, "Aus den Nachtgesprächen Sultan Ġauris," in *Folia Rara: Festschrift für Wolfgang Voigt*, ed. Herbert Franke, Walther Heissig, and Wolfgang Treue (Wiesbaden, 1967), 22–28; Robert Irwin, "Mamluk Literature," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7, no. 1 (2003): 28.

⁷ Barbara Flemming, "Šerif, Sultan Ġavri und die 'Perser,'" *Der Islam* 45 (1969): 81–93.

⁸ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 132–33.

⁹ Awad, "Sultan al-Ghawri," 321–22; Nurhan Atasoy, "Un Manuscrit Mamluk Illustré du Šahnama," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 37 (1969): 151–58; Mohammed Mostafa, "Miniature Paintings in Some Mamluk Manuscripts," *Bulletin de l'Institut de l'Égypte* 52 (1971): 5–15; Esin Atıl, *The Renaissance of Islam* (Washington, 1981), 264–65; on the cultural patronage of the sultan more generally, see Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "Sultan al-Ghawrī and the Arts," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 71–94.

¹⁰ *The Dīvān of Qānsūh al-Ghūrī*, ed. Mehmet Yalçın (Istanbul, 2002); *Kansu Gavrî'nin Türkçe Dīvānı*, ed. Orhan Yavuz (Konya, 2002). For a review of both of these editions, see Robert Dankoff, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (2004): 303–7.

century the composition of poetry was seen as a desirable accomplishment for a prince. Incidentally Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī had previously been in the entourage of the fugitive Ottoman prince Jem.¹¹ It is possible that, during his time at the Mamluk court in the reign of the sultan Qāyṭbāy, Jem had been instrumental in introducing various Turkish and Persian cultural activities.¹²

There is little precedent for the holding of soirees in Mamluk cultural history, though in the early fifteenth century Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad, the son of the Sultan Jaqmaq, presided over soirees.¹³ It seems likely that in holding such cultural soirees, Qānṣūh was inspired not by the past practice of earlier Mamluk sultans, but by literary and philosophical sessions presided over by the Timurids and by the various successor regimes that were established as the Timurid empire fell apart.

Qānṣūh's court culture was a Persianate one, and it looked East for most of its role models—to Shiraz, Baghdad, Tabriz, Samarkand, and Herat. The court of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā (r. 873/1469–70, 875–911/1470–1506) had enormous prestige. The sultan presided over *majlises* in a garden pavilion outside Herat, where courtiers mingled with singers, poets, and musicians.¹⁴ Subsequently Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā's rule and patronage were idealized and taken as models by the Uzbeks. Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā was fond of the *mu'ammah*, those who posed riddles, and, to judge by his sessions, Qānṣūh was similarly fond of riddling. Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā also held *majlises* in Herat and a record of these, the *Badāyī' al-Vaqāyī'*, was made by Zayn al-Dīn Vāṣifī. When the Uzbek Muḥammad Shībānī Khan took over Herat, he presided over *majlises*, which were mostly devoted to poetry, though the riddling craze continued. Later the Persian writer Vāṣifī gave the Uzbek Kildī Muḥammad tutorials on the model rulers of past centuries. These included Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā, Bāysunghur, Anūshirvān, Ulugh Beg, Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna, and Sultan Ismā'il Sāmānī. Like Qānṣūh, Muḥammad Shībānī Khan commissioned a translation of the *Shāhnāmah* into Turkish.¹⁵ In Muzaffarid Shiraz, the prince posed questions such as whether *'aql* or *'ishq* came first? Or who was Burāq? His scholars wrote letters giving their replies.¹⁶

¹¹ Al-ʿAzzām, *Majālis*, introduction (separately paginated), 43.

¹² Flemming, "Aus den Nachtgesprächen," 23.

¹³ Irwin, "Mamluk Literature," 27–28.

¹⁴ Maria E. Subtelny, "Scenes from the Literary Life of Timurid Herat," in *Logos Islamikos: Studia Islamica in Honorem Goergi Michaelis Wickens*, ed. Roger M. Savory and Dionysius Agius (Toronto, 1984), 143–44.

¹⁵ Maria E. Subtelny, "Art and Politics in early 16th Century Central Asia," *Central Asiatic Journal* 27 (1983): 124–35, 139–42; Thomas Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles and Washington), 256–58.

¹⁶ Jean Aubin, "Le Mécénat Timouride à Chiraz," *Studia Islamica* 8 (1957): 78.

Qānṣūh's preoccupation with his magnificent garden also had Timurid, Aqqoyunlu, and Ottoman precedents. Timur had held court in a series of elaborately planned gardens in Samarkand and these gardens were later rivalled by those established by Shāhrukh in Herat. Later in 1470 Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā began laying out the Bāgh-i Jahān-Ārā, "the World-Adorning Garden," also in Herat. Mehmed II's "paradise-like" gardens and Chinli Kiosk were derived from Timurid prototypes.¹⁷ Josafò Barbaro has described Uzun Ḥasan's garden, the Hasht Bihisht ("Eight Paradises") outside Tabriz.¹⁸ As Doris Behrens-Abouseif has observed, Qānṣūh "worked carefully at constructing his image as poet and scholar and a patron of the secular arts, pursuing the kind of princely image that was cultivated by the Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman princes, but was unfamiliar in the culture of the Mamluk court. Moreover, there is an undeniable Iranian flair to al-Ghawri's cultural life, which is evident in his entourage of *a'jam* and his preoccupation with the *Shāhnāmah*."¹⁹

Qānṣūh, like Qāyṭbāy and Yashbak min Mahdī before him, wrote poetry and he presided over a literary court culture. At some of his soirees young mamluks were brought before the sultan so that they could be tested on their reading.²⁰ On another occasion young mamluks were brought in to be taught singing and poetry by a certain Ibn Ifrīt.²¹ There is evidence from elsewhere that young mamluks were also assigned exercises in copying manuscripts.²²

Apart from commissioning a Turkish version of the *Shāhnāmah*, Qānṣūh had several Persian versions of it in his library. The *Shāhnāmah* was an epic romance celebrating the ancient Persian kings and heroes, but it "was also a political treatise, as it addressed deeply rooted conceptions of honor, morality and legitimacy." It "reflected the attempts of various dynasties to assimilate themselves into the Iranian monarchical tradition."²³ Qānṣūh was no exception and the translated version of the *Shāhnāmah* that he commissioned was given an extended addendum with a discussion of important later sultans, beginning with Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna and ending with Qānṣūh, whose court, soirees, palaces, and madrasahs

¹⁷ Lentz and Lowry, *Timur*, 38, 108, 257, 317.

¹⁸ Barbaro in *Il Nuovo Ramusio VII: I Viaggi in Persia degli Ambasciatori Veneti Barbaro e Contarini*, ed. L. Lockhart, R. Morozzo della Rocca, and M. F. Tiepolo (Rome, 1973), 120–21.

¹⁹ Behrens-Abouseif, "Sultan al-Ghawri," 84–85.

²⁰ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 107, 116.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²² Barbara Flemming, "Literary Activities in Mamluk Halls and Barracks," in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Jerusalem, 1977), 249–60.

²³ Lentz and Lowry, *Timur*, 126. See also on political messages in the text and illustrations of the *Shāhnāmah*, Oleg Grabar and Sheila Blair, *Epic Images and Contemporary History: The Illustrations of the Great Mongol Shahnama* (Chicago, 1980), 15–17, 19–20.

were all lavishly praised.²⁴

Political theory produced by the ulama in the Mamluk period was sparse, sententious, and uninspiring. It was also somewhat pusillanimous. Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Jamā'ah (639–733/1241–1333) has been described by Henri Laoust as "the theoretician of the Mamluk state."²⁵ According to Ibn Jamā'ah, "the tyranny of a sultan is preferable to the flock being left without a master for a single hour." Ibn Jamā'ah adjusted the preoccupations and vocabulary of earlier political thinkers who had flourished under the Abbasid Caliphate to fit the realities of the early Mamluk regime. He stressed the role of the ulama in advising the sultan and the sultan's duty to protect the ulama. The Muslim people must be led by an imam, but the imamate could be acquired by force (implicitly therefore by a Mamluk sultan). Such an imamate, acquired by force, could obviously be lost by force. Even if the imam was a sinful man, it was generally preferable to obey him, for fear of the anarchy that might ensue if obedience was withdrawn.²⁶ Ibn Taymiyah (661–728/1262–1328) echoed Ibn Jamā'ah when he stated that "Sixty years with an unjust imam is better than one night without a sultan." He denied that it was necessary for a Muslim community to be governed by a caliph, and he rejected the idea that the imam must be of Qurayshī lineage.²⁷ According to Ibn Taymiyah, people are enjoined to "patient endurance of the injustice and tyranny of leaders."²⁸ He accepted the de facto situation in which the military authority had usurped for its own jurisdiction a large number of criminal cases.²⁹

In contrast, as we shall see, the kind of material produced by and for the sultan at his soirees belongs in the category of what Patricia Crone has termed *naṣīḥah*, or advice literature.³⁰ Much of it can also be categorized as mirrors-for-princes. The advice offered was essentially secular, and expedient justice took precedence over the shari'ah. The literature focused on kings and how they could maintain their rule and administer justice, and was Persian in origin (where it went under the name of *andarz*).³¹ Often the precepts were delivered in the guise of a last will and testament, a *waṣīyah*, which offered guidance to the succeeding son. A manuscript full of *naṣīḥāt* entitled *A Book Containing Wise Sayings and Literary*

²⁴ Atīl, *Renaissance*, 264–65.

²⁵ Henri Laoust, "Le Hanbalisme sous les Mamlouks Bahrides," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 28 (1960): 21.

²⁶ Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (Oxford, 1981), 139–43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 143–51.

²⁸ Ibn Taymiyah, *Public Duties in Islam: The Institute of the Hisba*, tr. Muhtar Holland (Leicester, 1982), 125.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁰ Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh, 2004), 149–64.

³¹ S. Shaked and Z. Safar, "Andarz," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2:11–22.

Anecdotes has survived in a copy made for Qānṣūh's library.³²

So now to the actual content of the *Nafā'is* and *Kawkab*. Right at the beginning of the *Nafā'is* in the *muqaddimah*, or introduction to the records of the soirees, a political question is posed and answered in various ways: "Alexander was asked, 'What man is fit to be king?' 'Either a wise man (*ḥakīm*) who is king of wisdom, or a king seeking wisdom,' he replied." Then other ruler-sages, the Faghfur of China, the Caesar of Rome, the Fur of India, and so on, give their pronouncements on the importance of wisdom and the disgrace of ignorance and so on, ending up with Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna and Qānṣūh, who pronounces that "there is nothing better in the world than *adab* [which I take in this context to mean literature], as *adab* adorns wealthy men and conceals the poverty of the poor."³³ Recurrent reference throughout the *Nafā'is* and the *Kawkab* is made to the gnomic sayings of the wise rulers of past centuries. Alexander is a favorite source of sagacious advice, but Anūshirvān (Chosroes) and Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna also feature frequently.

The Alexander who features in Qānṣūh's soirees is not the Macedonian world conqueror familiar to modern historians, but rather a half-Persian legendary seeker of knowledge and eternal life as portrayed in the *Shāhnāmah*. According to the *Nafā'is*, "Alexander was asked, 'What is the best state of the people?' He said, 'When their king has a brilliant mind, sound judgement, and is knowledgeable about government.' He was asked, 'And the worst?' 'When their king lacks all these things.'" And al-Ḥusaynī goes on, of course, to add that, thank God, all these qualities are found in the sultan Qānṣūh.³⁴ Again, "Alexander said, 'The best of kings is he who keeps justice in his mind and whose excellent qualities inspire those who come after him,'" and once again al-Ḥusaynī is swift to point out that this characterization fits Qānṣūh perfectly.³⁵ There are many more (not particularly interesting) examples of Alexander's wisdom.

Perhaps such precepts derive from the *Naṣā'ih-i Iskandar*, or "Counsels of Alexander," a manuscript of which had been copied for Bāysunghur. Or perhaps they come from Niẓāmī's treatment of the Alexander romance. Although Alexander features prominently in Firdawsī's *Shāhnāmah*, the *Shāhnāmah* does not seem to be the source for the precepts of Alexander as relayed in the soirees. For example, Firdawsī included a version in verse of the letter that Alexander wrote to his mother on his deathbed. The *Nafā'is* also quotes a deathbed letter from Alexander to his mother in prose, but it is full of pietistic platitudes about the acceptance

³² Geza Féheravari and Yasin Safadi, *1400 Years of Arab Art: A Catalogue of the Khalili Collection* (London, 1981), 42.

³³ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 3–4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

of death that are not found in Firdawsī.³⁶ Or, to take another example, according to the *Nafā'is*, "Alexander was told that there were 300,000 men in the army of King Dārāb, but Alexander replied, 'So many sheep do not frighten the butchers.'"³⁷ Dārāb, Alexander's great foe, does feature prominently in the *Shāhnāmāh*, but this particular exchange is not found in Firdawsī's poem.

Farīdūn, a king in ancient Persia who features in the *Shāhnāmāh*, is quoted in the *Nafā'is* to the effect that besides having all the virtues, the ideal ruler must have perfect physiognomy, great strength, and a loud voice. Happily again, Qānṣūh happened to have all these characteristics.³⁸ And here al-Ḥusaynī adds that Persians paint images of their kings and their battles on the walls of their houses so as to perpetuate the memory of those kings, before he goes on to lay out the shari'ah's stipulations for an imam. According to the shari'ah, it is preferable that the ideal imam should be of the Banū Ismā'īl, or, if not from the Banū Ismā'īl, then from the Persians or the Banū Ishāq. Again it is fortunate that the Circassians are descended from the Banū Ishāq.³⁹ Qānṣūh and his panegyrist subscribed to the legend that the Circassians descended from the Arab Ghassanids.⁴⁰ Incidentally the more orthodox Sunni position is narrower than that suggested by al-Ḥusaynī, as most medieval Sunnis held that the imam should be of Qurayshī descent.⁴¹

There are fewer allusions to previous Mamluk sultans, though al-Ḥusaynī records that at one *majlis* Shaykh Ibn 'Amm Abī al-Ḥasan arrived with two books, one of which was the *Sīrah* of al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars and the story of his invasion of the land of the Franks, which he proposed to read in its entirety, but al-Ḥusaynī argued against this, saying that if Baybars were alive today he would want to hear the story of the *majlis* of our Lord the Sultan.⁴² Presumably the *Sīrah* in question was the history by Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, rather than the anonymous folk epic.

Later, when Qānṣūh was preoccupied with preparations for the hajj, the dispatch of an army down to the Hijaz, and the fortification of Jedda, he asked if the hajj was ever suspended. In answer a fairly lengthy account is given of the rivalry between Baybars and Hulagu for the control of Mecca and the hajj.⁴³

At one point Qānṣūh tells a most curious story of Muḥammad Qalāwūn (*sic*, but presumably Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn is meant) summoning a group

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴¹ Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 224–25.

⁴² Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73–74.

of his beloved and telling them that if they loved him they would throw themselves out of the palace, whereupon they said “*bismillāh*” and threw themselves from the first floor to the ground. As they lay there they shouted up to the sultan, “Our love for you extends this far, and he who can go further, let him be the favored one.”⁴⁴

Another story not featured in conventional history books is the story of the fate of an Ottoman fleet sent against the Mamluks during the reign of Qāyṭbāy. The *amīr kabīr* had advanced out of Egypt to counter the threat. He proposed to some of his retinue they recite the *fātiḥah*. They recited it that afternoon and all of the enemy were drowned by the decree of fate that night. In the morning the Mamluks sent out small ships to seek out those who had tried to save themselves by clinging to bits of wood and cut off their hands. This happy event was all due to the *fātiḥah*.⁴⁵ The reference here would be to the Ottoman fleet under the command of Hersek-oğlu Ahmed Pasha, many of whose ships were indeed sunk in a great storm in 893/1488. The *amīr kabīr* in question was the Atabeg Uzbek.⁴⁶

On the one hand, secular and legendary Persian figures are used both to denounce tyranny and to justify kingship. For example, Bahrām ibn Bahrām said, “A lion that crushes everything he devours is better than an unjust king, and he in turn is better than persistent disorder.”⁴⁷ But on the other hand, Qānṣūh’s rule is also justified on religious grounds, for, according to a hadith, “The sultan is the shadow of God upon earth and he who is sincere before him is rightly guided, but he who deceives him errs.”⁴⁸ The sultan’s rule is preordained by fate and sanctioned by God. In one *majlis*, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Maḥallī relates a dream he has had in which a band of armored men looking like Turkmans advanced to invade Egypt, but the Prophet appeared flanked by Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī, and the Prophet declared himself the protector of Egypt. Al-Maḥallī’s dream prompts the sultan to recall how thirty years previously, when he was just an amir, he entered the house of Yashbak the *dawādār*, where he encountered an amir who hailed him and told him that he had had a dream in which Qānṣūh had appeared with a ring of iron round his neck. He had taken this dream to Yashbak. They interpreted it as meaning that great power would come to Qānṣūh, and that it was inevitable that he should become sultan.⁴⁹ (This, in turn, leads to a silly story about a man who dreamt that Shāhrukh was wearing a pearl the size of a watermelon in his ear.)

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24–25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁶ Shai Har-El, *Struggle for Domination in the Middle East: The Ottoman-Mamluk War, 1485–1491* (Leiden, 1995), 181–82.

⁴⁷ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā’is*, 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 79.

The sultan should be generous. The story is told that Jahānshāh, the Qaraqoyunlu ruler of Tabriz, had very poor-quality black bread distributed at his madrasah, but when threatened by a *faqīr* with retribution in the afterlife, he repented. Qānşūh claimed that he had resolved to be as generous as the repentant Jahānshāh.⁵⁰ The sultan should avoid behaving tyrannically and should offer redress to those who had suffered tyranny. The tale is told of a king of Hind who, when he became deaf, gave orders that plaintiffs who appeared before him who were victims of tyranny should wear red, so that he would not miss their complaints.⁵¹

At one point the legitimacy of a Mamluk regime is raised. In 890/1485 Qāyṭbāy had sent one of his closest associates, the amir Jānībak Ḥabīb al-ʿAlay al-Īnālī, on a placatory but ultimately unsuccessful mission to the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II.⁵² According to the *Nafāʾis*, when Jānībak entered the Ottoman lands, the Ottomans tauntingly demanded to know by what right the Mamluks, who were sons of infidels, should govern the Bayt Allāh and the Ḥaram (in Mecca). That prerogative should surely belong to the Ottoman sultan, who is the son of a sultan, grandson of a sultan, and great-grandson of a sultan. But Jānībak retorted by pointing out that the father of Ibrāhīm was an infidel and so was the father of Muḥammad. Moreover, the nobility of a person depends upon knowledge and comportment (*adab*), not lineage and descent. Shaykh Kurānī (who was presumably in Jānībak's retinue) added that those present should not even discuss the legitimacy of the sultans of Egypt as they covered themselves with disgrace. Bayezid marvelled at this and he bestowed many precious gifts upon him.⁵³ Elsewhere in the *Nafāʾis*, ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib is quoted to the effect that a man's nobility, knowledge, and decorum are more important than his lineage and tribe, and it is soon after that the origins of the Circassians are discussed.⁵⁴

In the *Kawkab al-Durrī* another, more minor clash with Bayezid II is mentioned, when Bayezid allegedly wrote to Qāyṭbāy wanting to know why the latter prefaced his decrees with the words *bismillāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*. Qāyṭbāy replied that he did so because any important enterprise was defective without the *basmalah*. Why did Bayezid not preface his decrees with a *basmalah*?⁵⁵

In one *majlis* the sultan asked whether the sultan or the caliph took precedence in a funeral procession. Doubtless he was gratified to be told that the sultan did. This in turn led to reminiscences about the dispatch of robes of honor by the caliph

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵² Har-El, *The Struggle*, 128–30.

⁵³ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafāʾis*, 133–34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 84–85.

⁵⁵ *Kawkab*, 7–8.

in Egypt to Jahānshāh ibn Qarā Yūsuf, the Qaraqoyunlu ruler from 837/1434 until 872/1467, and to the Ottoman sultan Mehmed, presumably Mehmed II. In Jahānshāh's case, when the caliph's emissary explained the gift, Jahānshāh said: "If you were not a stranger, I would have cut out your tongue." Then he made the emissary wear the robe and gave him three hundred dinars for having entered the royal presence. In Mehmed's case, after the emissary had explained the robe in the sultan's council, Mehmed declared that he was himself the Caliph of the World and that every sultan in the world should don the robe. Then he gave orders for it to be cut to pieces.⁵⁶

On a separate occasion another aspect of the caliphate was debated. Did the glory of the sultan of Egypt derive from the fact that he was deputy of the caliph? Al-Ḥusaynī argued that this was not the case, since, if the sultan of the Yemen was independent and his status did not depend on his being the deputy of the caliph, *a fortiori* this must be true also of the sultan of Egypt and the two Holy Places. He was really only the deputy of the shari'ah law. Then al-Ḥusaynī was asked what was said about Baybars when he donned the caliph's robe. Al-Ḥusaynī replied that the caliph's glory derived from the sultan and not vice versa, whereupon one of al-Ḥusaynī's rivals and debating foils in the *majlis* observed that if al-Ḥusaynī had made such a remark in the days of Qāyṭbāy he would have had his head cut off. This talk of cutting off people's heads made the sultan angry.⁵⁷

The *Kawkab* includes yet another debate on the question of the caliphate. This arose when the Safavid Shāh Ismā'īl had sent Qānṣūh a book of Mongol history and in it there was an obituary of a certain Shāhīn-bak, where he was referred to as "Caliph of the Age." This raised the question whether it is ever permissible for a king to call himself Caliph. The verdict was that a king can be called Commander of the Faithful and Caliph of the Prophet, but it is not acceptable to call himself Caliph of God or Caliph of the Age.⁵⁸

Occasionally strictly contemporaneous matters cropped up. On one occasion, as the sultan's oxen were being led out to clover, their keepers had run amuck looting shops in Cairo—the sort of thing that had allegedly happened frequently under earlier sultans like Baybars and Qalāwūn. Qānṣūh issued a proclamation banning this *bid'ah*, and he made arrangements through Zaynī Barakat, the *muhtasib*, for the shopkeepers to be compensated. However, it would appear that during the disturbances some of the sultan's cattle were killed, and therefore four men were crucified and strangled and the rest were disgraced (Ibn Iyās does not mention this incident). In order to emphasize that this truly was royal justice,

⁵⁶ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 101–2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 111

⁵⁸ *Kawkab*, 73–74.

al-Ḥusaynī follows the mention of those executions with a tale about how Sultan Maḥmūd [of Ghazna], disguised as a *faqīr*, was wandering about at night when he was accosted by a sorrowful old woman. When he asked about the cause of her grief, she told him that a trooper (*jundī*) had fornicated with her daughter. Sultan Maḥmūd asked her to describe the man, which she did. Thereupon the sultan had the "trooper" killed, and only after that did he reveal that the executed man was his own son. The anecdote is then capped by a maxim from Anūshirvān to the effect that "rightness of judgement is better than many soldiers and kingship."⁵⁹

The *Kawkab* includes a discussion of what could be done about Birkat al-Ratlī. The area round this Cairene pleasure lake had become a place of low repute where people were drinking alcohol and consuming drugs, and yet some important people, including several of the leading ulama, had acquired houses in the area. The sultan thought that this showed a lack of maturity (*murūwah*) on their part. The celebration of the mock marriage of the Birkah with the Khalij al-Nāṣirī at the time of the Nile's flooding with the throwing of henna, halva, and other stuff was particularly reprehensible. The crowds included riffraff (*awbāsh*), veiled women, and loose women displaying themselves at windows or on rugs. What should be done about this? The author of the *Kawkab* offers several possibilities, such as filling up the Birkah, without saying what, if anything, the sultan decided.⁶⁰ However, Ibn Iyās reports that in 917/1511–12 a decree was issued that none of the civil functionaries should dwell on the banks of the Birkah on pain of severe penalties. So the area became sad and deserted and there were indeed rumors that the sultan was going to close it to boats.⁶¹

Other incidents from recent times cropped up. In one *majlis* the sultan teased the qadi Shams al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, saying that this man had a vulgar intellect. Here the sultan was alluding to the rebellion of the amir Dawlatbāy against the sultan. (This short-lived affair started in Tripoli in Jumādā II 910/November–December 1504.)⁶² At that time the qadi had counselled Dawlatbāy against revolt, warning him that it would come to no good. Dawlatbāy angrily told him to shut up and declared that he had "a vulgar intellect." The qadi then fled from Dawlatbāy.⁶³

The sort of political theorizing offered to Qānṣūh was, in its own way, just as sententious as the theorizing of ulama like Ibn Jamā'ah. As Crone puts it in her discussion of advice literature in *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*: "They often seem to be written on the assumption that political problems could be solved by

⁵⁹ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 120–22.

⁶⁰ *Kawkab*, 64–66.

⁶¹ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, 4:234.

⁶² Petry, *Protectors*, 37.

⁶³ Al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafā'is*, 132.

moral precepts.”⁶⁴ If the ruler is morally perfect there can be no problem. But Qānṣūh was not really perfect.

In these soirees Qānṣūh appears as a vain, pious, prissy, quite witty, scholarly man with wide literary and cultural interests. Contrary to the impression given by Ibn Iyās, he seems to have spent a lot of time listening to the opinions of the ulama. The above has been a selection from an idealized account of what went on at the soirees. Doubtless the questions that were unanswerable, the ums and ers, as well as examples of the sultan’s stark ignorance and ugly spats between competitive courtiers, were erased from the record. The aim of both treatises was to glorify Qānṣūh. It may well be that the sultan only paid lip-service to the precepts of Ardashīr and Alexander or the example of Sulṭān-Ḥusayn Bāyqarā. But the point is that these were the models to which he thought he should be seen to be paying lip-service. This was Qānṣūh’s self-presentation. It was perhaps not a true one, but it was the fashionable one. And perhaps the sultan himself was as much deceived by this façade of high-minded debate as his courtiers pretended to be. This was the language of despotism in the early decades of the sixteenth century. That story about the deaf Hindu king instructing victims of tyranny to wear red so that their complaints might properly be addressed must have seemed laughable, or rather something to weep over, to those who had witnessed Qānṣūh’s licensing of brutal amirs like Qāyt Rajabī and professional torturers like Zaynī Barakat.

In 910/1504–5, the year of the sessions covered in the *Nafā’is*, while Qānṣūh and his courtiers debated obscure points of shari‘ah law and the literary merits of the *Shāhnāmah*, the qadi Badr al-Dīn Muzhir was subjected to prolonged and horrific torture under which he eventually died. The *nāẓir al-jaysh*, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad, had his carefully collected marble arbitrarily confiscated by the greedy sultan. Illegal taxes were levied. Extortion, torture, popular discontent, and threats of revolt were leitmotifs running throughout Qānṣūh’s reign. Perhaps the reports of the soirees tell us very little about the real political thinking of Qānṣūh (much less so than the table-talk of Hitler tells us about the mentality of Hitler), but they tell us a great deal about the language of political panegyric and obfuscation that prevailed at the time.

⁶⁴ Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 161.