SHIHĀBADDĪN AḤMAD IBN BUDAYR
al-Ḥallāq
(fl.1762)

LIFE

Shihābaddīn Aḥmad Ibn Budayr was a practicing barber living in Damascus around the middle of the 18th century. Despite his unusual achievement of writing a chronicle, I.B. was not seen as deserving of a place in the famous biographical dictionary of the 18th-century scholarly (and military) elite by Muḥammad Ḫalīl al-Murādī (d. 1206/1792).[1] Hailing from a family of porters working on the pilgrimage route to Mecca, I.B.'s origins may have been too modest for such recognition. Given his family's business, it is no coincidence that I.B. was born in a neighborhood located on the pilgrimage route outside the city walls (al-Qubaybāt quarters). Instead of inheriting his family's trade, however, I.B. apprenticed with a barber master, a certain Aḥmad al-Ḥallāq b. al-Ḥashīsh, whose shop was located in Bāb al-Barīd, the center of the city where, significantly, most of the city's educational institutions stood.

I.B.'s physical move from the city's periphery to its center seems to have evinced a parallel social move from the world of porters to that of scholars. It is with much pride that I.B. notes that his master barber coiffed personalities no less glorious than ᶜAbdalġanī al-Nābulusī (d. 1144/1731) and Murād Afandī al-Kasīḥ (d. 1132/ 1720), the two most important scholars and sufis of 18th-century Damascus.[2] Thus, one may surmise that I.B.'s new location has afforded him not only a better means of living, but also access to eminent scholars and education. I.B. mentions having studied various works on religious sciences, including jurisprudence at the hands of various scholars, some of whom were quite well known in the Damascene academy of the time. His pride to have entered the new cultural world of scholars is apparent in his frequent mention of his friendships with them. Particularly interesting is I.B.'s companionship with the Damascene chronicler, Muḥammad b. Jumᶜa al-Maqār (d. 1157/1744), author of *al-Bāshāt wa al-quḍāh fī Dimashq* (The Governors and Judges of Damascus), who was both I.B.'s neighbor and a fellow member of the Qādiriyya sufi order.[3] His friendship with al-Maqār may have prompted and encouraged I.B. to write his own history.

WORK

① [*Ḥawādiṯ Dimashq ash-Shām al-yawmiyya min sanat 1154 ilā sanat 1176*]

The chronicle includes events which occured during I.B.'s own lifetime and covers the years 1154-75/1741-62. To the best of our knowledge, this chronicle is the only text known to have been composed by a barber in Arabo-Islamic literature. The barber's literary achievement seems to have gone unnoticed until the late 19th century

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when the scholar Muḥammad Sa^{c}īd al-Qāsimī (d. 1318/1900) stumbled upon the chronicle and took it upon himself to edit and revise it. A scholarly edition of this latter, bowdlerized version was published in 1959 and became known under the title *Ḥawādiṯ Dimashq al-yawmiyya* (The Daily Events of Damascus) with the author given as Aḥmad al-Budayrī al-Ḥallāq.[4] Believed to have been lost, a unique manuscript of I.B.'s original has been recently located.[5] The following exposition is culled from this singular manuscript.

Without preamble, the chronicle commences abruptly. Immediately after he fixes the first day of the year 1154/1741, I.B. paints an image of the voice of the "common people" raised aloud in an apocalyptic prophecy about imminent devastation in Damascus.[6] This sets the tone for the rest of the chronicle, which is fraught with anxiety and expressly written in the name of the "small people" (*al-aṣāġir*) and the "commoners" (*al-^{c}awāmm*). I.B. sees his time as one of unusual change, when the undeserving are able to attain position and status while the poor and honest remain destitute and without succor. Such a posture of alleged injustice may be seen as a standard literary trope found not only in contemporary Ottoman writings (such as the diary of Seyyid Ḥasan (fl. 1075/1665) or in the elite genre of the *naṣīḥatnāme* literature),[7] but also in early Arabo-Islamic historiography. Yet, these complaints about undeserved hardships should not be seen as a mere fulfillment of a literary tradition, but rather a discursive deployment betraying sincere unease about actual change taking place in the author's environment.

Though it might be cliché to posit the known and much researched 18th-century phenomenon of "the rise the notables" as a backdrop for I.B.'s text,[8] its presence in the chronicle is inescapably noticeable. The chronicle traces the rise of al-^{c}Aẓm family as the quasi-dynastic rulers of the province of Damascus and leaders of the annual pilgrimage caravan. Special, often interrogatory, attention is given to the long career of the governor As^{c}ad Pasha al-^{c}Aẓm (r. 1156-71/1743-58).[9] Alongside visiting the pasha's achievements, failures, abuses, and feuds, I.B. registers each annual renewal of the Pasha's governorship noting its unusually long and uninterrupted tenure as an "unprecedented occurrence."[10]

While I.B. is ambivalent about As^{c}ad Pasha's rule, the thrust of his text is a condemnation of the notables (*al-akābir*, literally "the big people"), including high officials appointed from Istanbul. He portrays them as opportunists preoccupied with their own enrichment and conspicuous consumption to the detriment of the "small people". The author squarely blames these officials for ever-rising prices and rampant moral corruption. In short, for I.B., the state is responsible for what he sees as a general condition of disorder, which is perhaps the most recurrent theme throughout his text.

A considerable part of this condition of disorder, according to I.B., are what he views as transgressions of social codes by certain groups, whose violations he may have seen as infringements on his own few privileges as a Muslim male. I.B. notes

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what he considers to be new social vogues or trends such as women going out on picnics and smoking in public, or Jews sitting on stools higher than those of Muslims in a coffeehouse. Interestingly, the breakdown of observable signs of social demarcations is something that modern scholars have recently associated with the Ottoman 18th century,[11] and one that is seen as characteristic of early modern social change.[12]

What is remarkable and ironic is that I.B. himself is not aware of the transgressive nature of his own conduct: that a practicing barber felt the confidence to associate with scholars and to write a scholarly work demonstrates that there were apertures in the social system that allowed the barber to have such ambitions. His complaints about the unfairness of life notwithstanding, I.B.'s work is evidence of the author's upward and center-ward mobility. However, as we shall see presently, despite his attempts to take on an "academic" tone, I.B.'s popular roots permeate the text.

The chronicle proclaims itself to be a *ta'rīḫ*, or history, which is by definition a scholarly subject.[13] However, the barber's history differs significantly from its *ᶜulamā'*-authored counterparts making it a hybrid text that is inspired by the authorless oral popular epic (*sīra*). In conformity with the scholarly form, the text displays some standard features: it is arranged annalistically, has an identified authorial voice, and teems with obituaries (*tarājim*). In terms of content, the chronicle offers the usual fare of appointments, depositions, abuses, achievements, and general conduct of high officials; natural disasters, epidemics, and unusual occurrences; prices of basic foodstuffs; street skirmishes; and the news of the progress of the annual pilgrimage caravan. However, the chronicle's emphasis on social news and especially gossip, including talk of sexual scandals, sets it apart from its more "respectable" counterpart composed by members of the *ᶜulamā'*. Similarly, I.B. is less discriminating in his choice of subjects for his obituaries, usually reserved for scholars and notables. For example, he devotes an obituary for the illiterate storyteller, whom he calls "an ocean of knowledge," thus, writing into history one who had not customarily occupied textual space.[14]

It is in the dramatization of some events that the chronicle comes closest to the popular epic form. The Arabic epic usually treats a real historical personality but subjects him/her to an edification process rendering it mythical, and hence, no longer recognizable. I.B.'s text attributes fictional (often rhymed) speech to real personalities, and adds fictional details to real situations resulting in a narrative bearing mini-mythical episodes. For example, in his account of the encounter between the rebel al-Ẓāhir al-ᶜUmar and Sulaymān Pasha al-ᶜAẓm, the governor of Damascus, I.B. reports a rhymed exchange where al-ᶜUmar, portrayed as the rebel-hero, causes fatal depression to the governor by the mere power of his speech[15]

The oral epic as a source of inspiration is also noticeable in I.B.'s special use of language (colloquial vs. textual) and registers (prose, rhymed prose, and/or poetry). The chronicle often breaks into rhymed prose not in its accustomed places, such as in a preamble or to highlight a particularly important event. Rather, like in popular

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epics, the author uses rhyme to narrate the most quotidian and mundane, thus further enhancing the dramatic effect.[16] Particularly interesting is I.B.'s use of textual and colloquial Arabic, in that he uses both "languages" quite indiscriminately, seemingly for the purpose of satisfying rhyme. This use is also reminiscent of the oral popular epic whose language has been described by one scholar as "classicalized colloquial".[17]

The dramatization found in I.B.'s text, whether in terms of fictionalization, or in the use of registers and language gives the impression that the chronicle may have been meant for public performance. This is not an unlikely supposition given that the barbershop often functioned like the coffeehouse, as a place of social intercourse and entertainment where storytellers found a ready audience. Thus, the barber may have doubled not only as a scholar but also as a performer.

While I.B. may have been compelled to write history due to his education and association with scholars, the influence of the storyteller, whom the author immortalized in an obituary, seems to have left a mark not only on the barber's life but also in his text. The resultant chronicle is inter-text where the scholarly meets the popular, and the textual is juxtaposed with the oral. In short, it is a text that bridges the gap between the world of scholars and that of porters and barbers. It is perhaps this hybridity that went against the taste of scholars, who seem to have ignored I.B.'s history until its discovery more than a century later by an *ᶜālim* who had a penchant for the popular and a good sense of humor.

The Recension by Muḥammad Saᶜīd al-Qāsimī

Recasting the author's name as al-Budayrī al-Ḥallāq, Muḥammad Saᶜīd al-Qāsimī, the progenitor of a Damascene family that became distinguished for its learning and activism for generations, offered his own recension of the barber's history in which he "deleted the superfluous and kept the essence ... and refined (the language), correcting it to the extent possible".[18] Although al-Qāsimī, true to his statement, refrains from applying drastic changes to I.B.'s text, his interventions are critical in that they re-open the gap between the scholar and the barber.

Most telling is the manner in which al-Qāsimī re-orders the opening of the text, which the reader will remember, in the original version begins abruptly, announces devastation, and speaks in the name of the commoners. In contrast, al-Qāsimī's recension conforms to the standard *ᶜulamā'*-authored opening, which announces the Islamic political order, that is, the name of the Sultan and the governor of Damascus, and calling upon God to sustain that order.[19] By doing this, al-Qāsimī disrupts a certain unity between content and form in I.B.'s original text. In the original version, the disordered state of the world described by the author finds form in, or is reified by, the relatively disorderly nature of the text, which, though annalistically arranged, refrains from announcing the political order at every annual entry and is driven by random events. Moreover, when the representatives of the political order, i.e. high

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officials, are mentioned, the reference is more often than not unambiguously negative or derisive. Thus, al-Qāsimī's revised opening constitutes a restoration of sorts: a literary and, subsequently political, re-imposition of an order with which the barber was not particularly pleased.

Another one of al-Qāsimī's significant interventions is the near complete omission of I.B.'s personal voice. In the original version, especially in the obituaries, the barber speaks in his own voice of his own relationship to the deceased, whether a sufi, a scholar, or a storyteller. These advertisements by I.B. of his extensive social network, especially with scholars, may have served him as displays of "cultural capital" and showed him to be an organic member of that group. By deleting the barber's personal voice, al-Qāsimī not only deracinates I.B. from the world in which he had made himself comfortable, but also de-legitimizes his literary authority. In other words, by omitting the barber's personal voice, al-Qāsimī unwittingly undermines the significant fact of the barber's authorship.

Although al-Qāsimī's alterations may have disrupted the semantic unity of I.B.'s text and undermined the barber's authorship, his mere attention to I.B. and his chronicle allowed both the author and his text to be recognized. By editing the text and giving it a title, al-Qāsimī imparted the necessary authority for the barber's history to be acknowledged.

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Muṣṭafā H̱ān, may God support the throne of the state till the end of time," al-Budayrī, *Ḥawādiṯ Dimashq*, 82.

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