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How to Make it in Cairo: The Early Career of Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī

Introduction

How it all went wrong for Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī (809–85/1406–80), a fifteenth-century Quran exegete and historian active in Cairo, has been well covered. Modern scholarship has discussed in detail the downward trajectory of his later career from 868/1464, in which his embroilment in two controversies—respectively on the use of the Bible in *tafsīr* and the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ—so eroded his position in Cairene society that he was forced to flee to Damascus in 880/1475. A third controversy—on the theodicy of al-Ghazālī—incensed the Damascene populace, and he died destitute in 885/1480.¹ While charting his declining fortunes reveals much about the religio-intellectual environment in which he operated, these three episodes all date from after al-Biqā'ī had succeeded in securing himself a position in Cairo as the resident Quran exegete at the Zāhirīyah Mosque, and also as first the personal tutor of Sultan Jaqmaq and then as a confidant of Sultan Īnāl. The issue, however, of how it all went *right* for al-Biqā'ī is relatively overlooked.

This article is aimed at two complementary purposes. Firstly, it will provide an overview of how al-Biqā'ī sought to increase the social and cultural capital

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¹ For the Bible controversy, see in particular Walid A. Saleh, “A Fifteenth-Century Muslim Hebraist: Al-Biqā'ī and His Defense of Using the Bible to Interpret the Qur’ān,” *Speculum* 83, no. 3 (2008): 629–54. For an edition of al-Biqā'ī’s treatise in defense of the Bible, see Walid A. Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to Al-Biqā'ī’s Bible Treatise*, Islamic History and Civilization, v. 73 (Leiden, 2008). For the controversy over the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, see Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse, and His Shrine*, Studies in Comparative Religion (Columbia, SC, 1994), 55–75. For al-Biqā'ī’s involvement in the debate on the best possible world, see Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazālī’s “Best of All Possible Worlds”* (Princeton, 1984), 135–60.



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resources which he had at his disposal to build and expand the social network that underpinned his career in Cairo, and which subsequently crumbled under the weight of the later controversies. In doing so, it will outline in more detail al-Biqā'ī's origins, before moving to discuss the key relationships—particularly his patron-client relationships—he established and how these facilitated his making his way in Cairo. Having done so, it will turn to its second purpose: namely, it will argue that the descriptive reconstruction of al-Biqā'ī's life and career should be read against the interpretative frameworks employed by the authors of our sources, and that doing so leads to a deeper understanding of not only al-Biqā'ī himself, but of the social contexts in which he operated.

A Fruitful Tension

When discussing the life of al-Biqā'ī, invaluable testimony is provided by his *Unwān al-zamān bitarājim al-shuyūkh wa-al-aqrān*, a biographical dictionary of his shaykhs and peers.² The *Unwān al-zamān* contains biographies of his father, 'Umar ibn Ḥasan al-Rubāt,³ one of his uncles, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan al-Rubāt,⁴ and an autobiography.⁵ This can be supplemented by al-Biqā'ī's chronicle, the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*, which contains considerable autobiographical material.⁶ Aside from al-Biqā'ī's own writings, the following discussion also relies heavily upon *Al-Daw' al-lāmi' li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsi'* of al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497).

²Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān bi-tarājim al-shuyūkh wa-al-aqrān*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 2001), 2:61–85. This edition of the *Unwān al-zamān* is incomplete, and it is not clear upon which manuscripts it is based. In the preparation of this article, I have therefore relied primarily upon two manuscripts of the *Unwān al-zamān*—Köprülü Kütüphanesi MS Köprülü 1119, and Maulana Azad Library MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40—which date from the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries respectively. Nevertheless, I have included references to the edition, which is more readily available. MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40 includes additions by al-Biqā'ī, which are otherwise absent in both the edition and the MS Köprülü 1119. On the problematic nature of the edition, see Muḥammad Ajmal Ayyūb al-Iṣlāḥī, *Fihrist muṣannafāt al-Biqā'ī: 'an nuskhaḥ maṅqūlah min khaṭṭih* (Riyadh, 2005), 171.

³MS Köprülü 1119, fols. 184r–v; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 4:116–18.

⁴MS Köprülü 1119, fols. 7v–8r; MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fols. 12v–13r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 1:66–67.

⁵MS Köprülü 1119, fols. 71v–79r; MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fols. 96r–107r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 2:61–85. On the autobiography, see Kenneth A. Goudie, "Al-Biqā'ī's Self-Reflection: A Preliminary Study of the Autobiographical in his *Unwān al-Zamān*," in *New Readings in Arabic Historiography from Late Medieval Egypt and Syria*, ed. Jo Van Steenberg and Maya Termonia (Leiden, forthcoming).

⁶Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr: Tārīkh al-Biqā'ī*, ed. Muḥammad Sālim ibn Shadīd 'Awfī (Riyadh, 1992). On the autobiographical material in the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*, see Li Guo, "Al-Biqā'ī's Chronicle: A Fifteenth Century Learned Man's Reflection on His Time and World," in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt, C.950–1800*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden, 2001), 121–48; idem,



Al-Sakhāwī had both a dislike of and obsession with al-Biqāʿī: his biography of al-Biqāʿī veritably drips with invective, and he also includes the biographies of many people who crossed paths with al-Biqāʿī. This, coupled with the scope of *Al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmiʿ*, makes it an invaluable resource in reconstructing the network of connections that al-Biqāʿī made.

Of course, these sources cannot be treated as disinterested and innocent witnesses that mimetically reproduce the historical reality of al-Biqāʿī's career. Rather, they should be understood as carefully crafted literary works in their own rights, which served as a means through which their authors could mediate their own perspectives and understandings of that reality. What this means for our present purpose is that we are ultimately not in the process of reconstructing al-Biqāʿī's social advancement as it actually happened, but rather how and in what ways his social advancement was perceived by both al-Biqāʿī himself and by his greatest rival. To do so requires a deeper understanding of the interpretative frameworks employed by al-Biqāʿī and al-Sakhāwī.

Turning first to al-Biqāʿī's writings, the *ʿUnwān al-zamān* is essentially a record of al-Biqāʿī's intellectual development: it was designed to emphasize his membership in the intellectual elite by memorializing and stressing those links he had established with other scholars. In this regard, the autobiography—the core of which was written in 841/1437, shortly before he secured his first appointments as the *mufasssīr* of the Zāhirīyah Mosque and as Sultan Jaqmaq's personal tutor—is a distillation of the *ʿUnwān al-zamān*: it stresses those relationships and links that al-Biqāʿī prized over all others. Yet this is only one way in which we can read the autobiography: as I have argued elsewhere, it can be read not merely as a description and justification of his membership amongst the intellectual elite, but also as an attempt to semiotize his life.⁷ In the autobiography, al-Biqāʿī frames his life as fundamentally guided by God and defined by trial and hardship, particularly the death of his father and the opposition that he faced in Cairo; he overcomes these with the assistance of God, and it is through God's will that he achieves his successes.

This sense of divine immanence continues in al-Biqāʿī's *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*, which Li Guo has argued was fundamentally eschatological, being concerned with the internal turmoil and self-destruction that al-Biqāʿī saw as endemic in fifteenth-century Cairene society.⁸ He further argues that al-Biqāʿī interpreted his own life within the context of this eschatological outlook. Simply put, al-Biqāʿī saw the

“Tales of a Medieval Cairene Harem: Domestic Life in al-Biqāʿī's Autobiographical Chronicle,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 1 (2005): 101–21.

⁷Goudie, “Al-Biqāʿī's Self-Reflection: A Preliminary Study of the Autobiographical in his *ʿUnwān al-Zamān*.”

⁸Guo, “Al-Biqāʿī's Chronicle,” 139.



trials and tribulations he underwent as parallels to the trials and tribulations of the Muslim community-at-large: just as the Muslims would be triumphant, so too would he triumph over his opponents and detractors. In both cases, Guo argues, this is because the eventual triumph of al-Biqā'ī and the Muslim community-at-large was predictable in accordance with God's divine plan.⁹ Thus, when approaching any of al-Biqā'ī's more historically-minded works, we need to recognize that these works—the autobiography in a more explicit way, but the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr* also—are not simply descriptions of al-Biqā'ī's life, to be mined uncritically for biographical information, but attempts to reify the very story they purport to describe: they are not merely witnesses but actors in their own right.

The same can be said about al-Sakhāwī's *Al-Daw' al-lāmi'*. The writing of biographical collections is fundamental to the formation and maintenance of group identities: the periodic updating and compilation of these works is an attempt to assert continuity between the present and the past, because the present gains its authority by virtue of the weight of memory. More than this, however, biographical collections of contemporaries are attempts to direct the transition from communicative memory to cultural memory. Where communicative memory exists in the everyday and has a relatively short time depth, stretching back no further than eighty years, cultural memory is preserved and re-embodied to subsequent generations through mnemonic institutions such as monuments, museums, and archives—like biographical dictionaries. Further, where communicative memory is diffuse and egalitarian, cultural memory is specialized and tends towards elitism: it requires specialists for its preservation and transmission.¹⁰ While both are shared by a group of people, cultural memory conveys to these people a collective *cultural* identity. Thus, biographical collections sought to control the continued maintenance and development of the group's identity by setting the boundaries of the imagined community: inclusion in such works was the means whereby an individual had his position within the imagined community substantiated.

In this context, al-Sakhāwī's biography of al-Biqā'ī, as voyeuristic and vitriolic as it is, is not merely the invective of a man against his erstwhile arch-rival, but an attempt to write *his* opinion of al-Biqā'ī as *the* opinion of al-Biqā'ī. This is, in many ways, more invidious than a simple attempt at *damnatio memoriae*, for rather than simply exclude al-Biqā'ī, al-Sakhāwī instead opts to defame. He paints a portrait of a vainglorious and deceitful man who was “ruined by his pride, his vanity, and his desire for rank and reputation,”¹¹ all of which led him to overreach and go far

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰The demarcation of two conceptual categories of collective memory arises from the research of Jan Assmann. On this, see Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, 2010), 109–18.

¹¹Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw' al-lāmi' li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsi'* (Beirut, 1966), 1:103.



beyond the limits of his intellect: according to al-Sakhāwī, al-Biqā'ī composed no works at all and failed even to complete his studies of the six canonical collections of hadith. In short, al-Biqā'ī was no scholar, merely a scribe and a children's tutor, a peasant interloper who could not even read Arabic correctly.

Much of this is, of course, half-truth, which reveals a tension between what we might consider the historical reality of al-Biqā'ī—that he was an accomplished scholar whom Ibn Ḥajar patronized—and al-Sakhāwī's hatred of al-Biqā'ī. Indeed, this biography was but one of a number of tools with which al-Sakhāwī sought to discredit his arch-rival: al-Sakhāwī also composed a work titled *Aḥsan al-masā'ī fi idāḥ ḥawādith al-Biqā'ī*,¹² which was devoted to enumerating and outlining the scandals in which al-Biqā'ī was involved. Unfortunately the work does not survive, but the fact that it was written in the first place speaks to the depths of al-Sakhāwī's feelings. Read in this way and in this context, al-Sakhāwī's *Al-Daw' al-lāmi'* is not merely a description of fifteenth-century society, but al-Sakhāwī's attempt to define how that society—and members of that society—should be remembered.

The contention of this article is that the tension and contradiction between these two emplotments of the historical reality of al-Biqā'ī, between al-Biqā'ī's divinely-ordained self and al-Sakhāwī's shameless charlatan, is not an insurmountable obstacle in the recovery of the historical reality of al-Biqā'ī. Rather, by recognizing how thoroughly entangled our authors and texts are and by appreciating their discursive strategies and intentions, we can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of al-Biqā'ī's life. What follows is an interpretation of these sources, after which we will return to the issue of their historicity.

From Humble Origins

Turning first to al-Biqā'ī's origins, he was born into humble circumstances, with neither impressive genealogy nor wealth to ease his social advancement. In his autobiography, al-Biqā'ī begins with an extended discussion of his genealogy. After providing his full genealogy—Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar ibn Ḥasan al-Rubāṭ ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Bakr—al-Biqā'ī positions himself within the Banū Ḥasan, which comprised three branches: the Banū Yūnus, the Banū 'Alī, and the Banū Makkī. Although the Banū Ḥasan originated in the village of Khirbat Rūḥā in al-Biqā' al-'Azīzī, where al-Biqā'ī himself was born, the three branches were broadly dispersed through al-Shām and Egypt, though the largest contingent seems to have resided in Khirbat Rūḥā.¹³ Al-Biqā'ī's immediate family, however—including both his father and his uncle—were uncertain of their genealogy beyond Abū Bakr, al-

¹²Ibid., 8:17.

¹³MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 71v; MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 96r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 2:61.



Biqā'ī's great-great-grandfather. Al-Biqā'ī surmises that they were members of the Banū Makkī. He reached this conclusion by comparing his genealogy with those of two of his relatives, whom he calls his *ibn 'amm*. As his relatives—Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan ibn Makkī ibn 'Uthmān ibn 'Alī ibn Ḥasan and 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn 'Alī ibn Yūnus ibn Ḥasan—both count only four generations between themselves and Ḥasan, and that because they claim descent from 'Alī ibn Ḥasan and Yūsuf ibn Ḥasan respectively, al-Biqā'ī argues that he must be descended from Makkī ibn Ḥasan.

Additionally, al-Biqā'ī notes that while no one in the Banū Ḥasan could outline their genealogy beyond Ḥasan, he had been told that they “traced their genealogy to Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ al-Zuhrī, one of those who will witness Paradise,” and that the uncle of Muḥammad ibn Ḥasan believed that they had a *nisbah* which confirmed this.¹⁴ That the Banū Ḥasan were descended from Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ was likely a family myth or legend, but the attraction to him is nevertheless obvious. He was one of the first Muslims and—as al-Biqā'ī himself tells us—one of those to whom paradise had been promised.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Prophet was reported to have acknowledged him as his maternal uncle; Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ and the Prophet's mother, Āminah bint Wahb, were both members of the Banū Zuhrah, a clan of the Quraysh.¹⁶ Al-Biqā'ī's attempts to discover this *nisbah*, however, were confounded. While traveling toward Āmid with Ibn Ḥajar as part of the 836/1433 campaign of al-Ashraf Barsbāy against Qarā Yulūk, he asked a group of his relatives in Damascus about the *nisbah*; although they deemed it credible, the *nisbah* itself was unknown.¹⁷

Turning to al-Biqā'ī's immediate kin, although no member of his family beyond his father's generation is included in the *'Unwān al-zamān*, the biographies of his father and uncle allow us to reconstruct to some extent the context of his family. His father, 'Umar ibn Ḥasan al-Rubāṭ, was born after 780/1378–79 in Khirbat Rūḥā and had six brothers: three of these—Abū Bakr, Dāwūd, and Muḥammad Suwayd—were full brothers; the other three—Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad, Yūsuf, and 'Alī—were paternal brothers. Concerning his grandfather, Ḥasan al-Rubāṭ, al-Biqā'ī explains that he earned his *laqab*, al-Rubāṭ, because he was very tall and people compared

¹⁴MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 71v; MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 96r–v; al-Biqā'ī, *'Unwān al-zamān*, 2:62.

¹⁵Al-Tirmidhī, *Al-ġāmi' al-kabīr*, ed. Bashshār 'Awwad Ma'rūf (Beirut, 1996), 6:100, no. 3747; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, ed. Bashshār 'Awwad Ma'rūf (Beirut, 1998), 144, no. 133; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūṭ and Muḥammad Kāmil Qarah Balilī (Damascus, 2009), 7:46, no. 4649.

¹⁶Al-Tirmidhī, *Al-ġāmi' al-kabīr*, 6:104, no. 3752.

¹⁷MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 71v; MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 96v; al-Biqā'ī, *'Unwān al-zamān*, 2:62. For more on his genealogy, see Goudie, “Al-Biqā'ī's Self-Reflection: A Preliminary Study of the Autobiographical in his *'Unwān al-zamān*.”



him to a rope: the *ḍammah* in place of the *kasrah* was due to their speech being ungrammatical.¹⁸ Otherwise, all Biqāʿī knew about his grandfather was that “he was the bravest of the people of that country, the most persistent in wounding, and the most attractive in appearance.”¹⁹

The biography of his father is essentially a laudation of the man, wherein al-Biqāʿī praises him as a paragon of virtue, intellect, and martial ability. It reads as a touching tribute to his father, though in terms of factual—and I use the term loosely—material, it is somewhat lacking. The main impression that emerges from it is how close to violence the family lived: one story describes how his father faced sixty mounted men, all of whom were afraid of him.²⁰ The main value of his father’s biography, however, is the detail it provides concerning the formative event of al-Biqāʿī’s childhood. In Shaʿbān 821/September 1418, his family was attacked by an unnamed group who murdered his father, two uncles, and six other relatives.²¹ The event comes into sharper focus through his father’s biography: although the perpetrators are still unnamed, we are told that it was his uncles ʿAlī and Muḥammad Suwayd who were killed, and that the killers dumped their bodies in a well near the village of al-Shamsiyah in “the lands of the Rāfiḍah.”²² This led to two years of wandering until his mother and maternal grandfather took him to Damascus in 823/1420, whereupon he embarked upon his *riḥlah fi ṭalab al-ʿilm*.

Alongside this violence, however, we learn that his uncle, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad, was a *faqīh*. Born sometime after the year 770/1368–69 in Khirbat Rūḥā, Aḥmad devoted himself to the memorization of the Quran and developed beautiful handwriting: so beautiful was his handwriting that he became skillful in the art of letter writing and supported himself by penning letters for the Turkmen.²³ Before his death, which al-Biqāʿī places somewhat uncertainly before 820/1417–18, he taught al-Biqāʿī how to write: al-Biqāʿī describes the relationship as beneficial. Al-Biqāʿī returned the favor when, in 840/1437, one of Aḥmad’s sons, Yūsuf, traveled to Cairo: al-Biqāʿī taught him penmanship for roughly a month, before Yūsuf demonstrated an aptitude for bookbinding and returned to Damascus.²⁴

The impression that al-Biqāʿī gives is that his family lived a relatively common life, which makes his rise to prominence particularly striking. While previous scholarship, notably the work of Michael Chamberlain and Ira M. Lapidus, argued

¹⁸MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 7v; MS ʿArabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 12v; al-Biqāʿī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 1:66.

¹⁹MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 184r; al-Biqāʿī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 4:116.

²⁰MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 184r; al-Biqāʿī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 4:116.

²¹MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 184v; al-Biqāʿī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 4:118.

²²MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 184v; al-Biqāʿī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 4:118.

²³MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 7v; MS ʿArabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 12v; al-Biqāʿī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 1:66.

²⁴MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 8r; MS ʿArabīyah akhbār 40, fols. 12r–13v; al-Biqāʿī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 1:67.



that membership in the ulama was relatively open, with there being no strong barriers to advancement,²⁵ the more recent work of Irmeli Perho has demonstrated that Muslim society was not quite as egalitarian and open to social mobility as had previously been believed. Drawing upon Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's *Al-Durar al-kāminah fī a'yān al-mi'ah al-thāminah*, Perho demonstrates how a number of commoners advanced their position in life. While individual merits, particularly intelligence and literacy, were important ingredients in social advancement, they were not enough to guarantee it. Success stories like al-Biqā'ī's were few and far between: the trajectory of al-Biqā'ī's cousin, Yūsuf ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan al-Rubāṭ, wherein there was a gradual increase of status across generations, was likely the more typical.²⁶

While gradual mobility across generations was likely the experience of most people attempting to climb the social ladder, Perho provides examples of three ways in which this process might be accelerated: through the development of a network of contacts; through the combination of talent and patronage; and through the accumulation of wealth. Al-Biqā'ī relied upon his intellectual merits, which, as Perho notes, required a network of contacts if they were to be fully and profitably exploited.²⁷ The key relationships that al-Biqā'ī made and exploited to advance his situation can be divided into two broad and occasionally overlapping categories: intellectual and political.

A Supportive Shaykh

Al-Biqā'ī had many teachers, ranging from the fameless to the famous, the links with whom his *Unwān al-zamān* was designed to memorialize. In his autobiography, he focuses on a select few of these shaykhs. Thus, he describes relationships with Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mashārā'ī (d. 825/1422),²⁸ a pre-eminent scholar of the *qirā'āt*; with Tāj al-Dīn Ibn Bahādur al-Jalālī (d. 831/1428)—with whom he studied grammar, morphology, and *fiqh*—noting that he “did not profit from anyone as

²⁵Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge, 1994), 64; Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1967), 107–10.

²⁶For an example of this, see Irmeli Perho, “Climbing the Ladder: Social Mobility in the Mamluk Period,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 15 (2011): 23–25.

²⁷Ibid., 25–28. See also Irmeli Perho, “The Arabian Nights as a Source for Daily Life in the Mamluk Period,” *Studia Orientalia* 85 (1999): 139–62. For a more systematic discussion of social and political mobility, see Konrad Hirschler, “The Formation of the Civilian Elite in the Syrian Province: The Case of Ayyubid and Early Mamluk Ḥamāh,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2008).

²⁸MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 72r; MS ʿArabīyah akhbār 40, fols. 96v–97r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 2:62.



he profited from him”;²⁹ and with one al-‘Imād Ismā‘īl ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Sharaf, with whom he studied *ḥisāb* in Jerusalem.³⁰ Likewise, he tells us about his studies with two prominent scholars, Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429) and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah (d. 851/1448);³¹ these relationships do not, however, seem to have been particularly enduring.

From 834/1430–31, however, he focuses almost entirely on one relationship: that which he cultivated with Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), and which began when he traveled to Cairo in that year with the express purpose of studying with him. How and why Ibn Ḥajar accepted al-Biqā‘ī as a student is relatively unclear. We know, for example, that Ibn Ḥajar was in the practice of distributing his *manāshib* among his more promising students, acting as something of a career-making broker for them;³² as will be seen, this was precisely the role he played for al-Biqā‘ī. The question remains, however, what Ibn Ḥajar hoped to gain from this: was he simply attempting to build a network of people who were both loyal and indebted to him?

Regardless of how and why the relationship arose, it would nonetheless prove to be influential and important. Among the works he studied with Ibn Ḥajar were the *Sharḥ nukhbat al-muḥaddithīn* (from which al-Biqā‘ī tells us he benefited greatly), *Al-Tārīkh al-mufannan*, and the majority of *Sharḥ alfiyat al-‘Irāqī fī ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*. Ibn Ḥajar had a formative impact upon al-Biqā‘ī. Al-Biqā‘ī attests to this himself frequently in the biography, stating for instance that he was increasingly humbled by and in awe of his teacher as the years passed,³³ and that he continued being eager for Ibn Ḥajar’s company.³⁴ Furthermore, in the introduction to the *‘Unwān al-zamān*, al-Biqā‘ī explains that it was only when he met Ibn Ḥajar that he found a teacher whose interest in the personal qualities of transmitters matched his own, and that it was out of this interest that the *‘Unwān al-zamān* arose.³⁵ Likewise, his introduction to the *Izhār al-‘aṣr* explicitly describes the work

²⁹MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 72r; MS ‘Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 97r; al-Biqā‘ī, *‘Unwān al-zamān*, 2:63. For al-Biqā‘ī’s biography of him, see MS Köprülü 1119, fols. 233v–234r; al-Biqā‘ī, *‘Unwān al-zamān*, 5:112–14.

³⁰MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 72r; MS ‘Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 97r; al-Biqā‘ī, *‘Unwān al-zamān*, 2:63. For al-Biqā‘ī’s biography of him, see MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 92v; MS ‘Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 123r; al-Biqā‘ī, *‘Unwān al-zamān*, 2:135.

³¹For more on his relationships and studies with these scholars, see Goudie, “Al-Biqā‘ī’s Self-Reflection: A Preliminary Study of the Autobiographical in his *‘Unwān al-Zamān*.”

³²See Sabri Khalid Kawash, *Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (1372–1449 A.D.): A Study of the Background, Education and Career of a ‘Alim in Egypt* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1970), passim.

³³MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 24v; MS ‘Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 35r; al-Biqā‘ī, *‘Unwān al-zamān*, 1:138.

³⁴MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 32v; MS ‘Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 46r; al-Biqā‘ī, *‘Unwān al-zamān*, 1:171.

³⁵Al-Biqā‘ī, *‘Unwān al-zamān*, 1:33; MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 1v. The introduction in MS ‘Arabīyah akhbār 40 is wildly different, and was evidently written by a later hand: this is made clear on



as a continuation of Ibn Ḥajar's *Inbā' al-ghumr bi-anbā' al-'umr fī al-tārīkh*,³⁶ discrepancies between the style and structure of the two works, not to mention the five-year gap between the end of the *Inbā' al-ghumr* and the beginning of the *Izhār al-'aṣr*, do not undermine the spirit of al-Biqā'ī's statement.

Beyond the formative impact on his intellectual development, Ibn Ḥajar played a much more prominent role as al-Biqā'ī's patron. Al-Biqā'ī describes himself as Ibn Ḥajar's *mulāzim*, meaning either an adherent or follower, but which might be more fruitfully understood as "disciple." *Mulāzim* denotes the junior partner in a *ṣuḥbah* or *mulāzamaḥ* relationship, terms which both connote a long and enduring personal relationship, wherein one follows or adheres to a master, a *ṣāhib*, and works under his direction.³⁷

The *ṣuḥbah* relationship was first explored within the context of the educational field by Makdisi, but has more recently been understood by scholars such as Berkey, Hirschler, and Eychenne as an important bond between individuals in other social fields.³⁸ Eychenne especially has framed the *ṣuḥbah* relationship as one of those practices whereby individuals could acquire loyalties and connections which were both socially and politically useful, and has focused in particular on its appearance in and between the civilian and military elites.³⁹ He understands the *ṣuḥbah* relationship as the base for the foundation of those temporary groups which constituted the social network;⁴⁰ in this, he follows Hirschler who conceptualized it as expressing "the highly personalized nature of relationships within formative and medieval society as a whole."⁴¹

It has been more schematically defined by Hirschler, who has highlighted four key features of this type of relationship: it was hierarchical, formal, mutually exclusive, and advantageous. Thus, it was the socially weaker partner who would accompany the socially stronger in a relationship that was not merely stable but which had been explicitly established. Concomitant with this formalization, the relationship would typically be exclusive, especially on the part of the junior

fōl. 3r.

³⁶Al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-'aṣr li-asrār ahl al-'aṣr*, 1:63.

³⁷George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1981), 128.

³⁸Ibid., 128–29; Jonathan Porter Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education*, Princeton Studies on the Near East (Princeton, 1992), 34–35; Konrad Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors*, SOAS Routledge Studies on the Middle East 5 (London, 2006), 19; Mathieu Eychenne, *Liens personnels, clientélisme et réseaux de pouvoir dans le sultanat Mamlouk: milieu XIIIe–fin XVe siècle* (Beirut, 2013), 41–44.

³⁹Eychenne, *Liens personnels, clientélisme et réseaux de pouvoir dans le sultanat Mamlouk*, 43.

⁴⁰Ibid., 42–43.

⁴¹Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography*, 19.



partner: where the more senior partner might have multiple such relationships, especially when the social gulf was particularly extreme, it was uncommon for the socially weaker partner to do so. Finally, and most importantly, both members of the relationship expected to benefit in some way from their association.⁴²

It is clear that al-Biqā'ī's relationship with Ibn Ḥajar followed this pattern. Their relationship was particularly enduring, with al-Biqā'ī stating that it was ongoing from 834/1430–31 through 846/1442–43:⁴³ this was the year in which he composed his biography of Ibn Ḥajar and, given its laudatory tones, it is likely that the relationship continued until Ibn Ḥajar's death. Al-Biqā'ī also accompanied Ibn Ḥajar when the latter was part of al-Ashraf Barsbāy's 836/1433 campaign to Āmid. Further, we know of a letter sent by al-Biqā'ī to Ibn Ḥajar, and included in the latter's *Inbā' al-ghumr*, wherein al-Biqā'ī described his personal experience of the Rhodes campaign of 847/1443.⁴⁴ Most important, however, are the tangible advantages which al-Biqā'ī garnered from his relationship with Ibn Ḥajar. These advantages were both professional and social.

Dealing with the more straightforward first, Ibn Ḥajar was responsible for al-Biqā'ī receiving his appointment as Sultan Jaqmaq's hadith teacher in 842/1438, and defended him during the controversy which had erupted upon his nomination.⁴⁵ In his autobiography, al-Biqā'ī states that:

When Sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir Abū Sa'īd Jaqmaq obtained the sultanate in the year 842/1438, I inquired of the *qāḍī al-quḍāh*; and therefore did he speak on my behalf concerning the reading of al-Bukhārī in his—the sultan's—presence, because he who had been reading in that capacity was no longer competent for it. He assented and described me in my absence with reference to many attributes, amongst which was that the handsomeness of my reading was excellent. The slanderers sought to undermine that, exerting themselves and acting deceitfully.

And so, on the day on which he would select someone to read, the *qāḍī al-quḍāh* inquired of the sultan before the reading. He said: “The one about whom you have spoken—may he be greatly rewarded.” And he praised me concerning my knowledge and my

⁴²Ibid., 19–20.

⁴³MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 24v; MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 35r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 1:138.

⁴⁴On this, see Yehoshua Frenkel, “Al-Biqā'ī's Naval War-Report,” in *History and Society during the Mamluk Period (1250–1517)*, ed. Stephan Conermann, Mamluk Studies 5 (Göttingen, 2014), 9–19.

⁴⁵MS Köprülü 1119, fol. 72r; MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fol. 97r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 2:64.



compositions, and said: “Tomorrow, he will read and he will astonish the sultan.”⁴⁶

Although it is uncertain how al-Biqā'ī became the Quran exegete of the Zāhir Mosque, it was likely around the same time that he gained this appointment.

That al-Biqā'ī relied upon Ibn Ḥajar as a continuing source of support in Cairo is suggested by the fact that the tumult Ibn Ḥajar experienced in his later career coincided with a period of tumult in al-Biqā'ī's life. When, after the old minaret of the Fakrīyah madrasah collapsed and killed many people, Ibn Ḥajar lost his position as *qāḍī al-quḍāh* on 11 Muḥarram 849/19 April 1445, and when later that year on 20 Jumādā I/24 August Ibn Ḥajar was ousted as the shaykh of the Baybarsīyah *khānqāh*, al-Biqā'ī lost his immediate source of support in Cairo. While his position remained secure in the short term, Ibn Iyās notes that al-Biqā'ī was dismissed as Sultan Jaqmaq's hadith teacher in Rajab 851/September 1447 and imprisoned in the Maqsharah before being banished to India.⁴⁷ His eventual return was facilitated by a group of amirs whose names, unfortunately, we do not know. That it was amirs who were responsible for his pardon suggests that al-Biqā'ī's network had expanded and evolved in the 840s.

Further hardship followed when, a few months after the death of Ibn Ḥajar (on 28 Dhū al-Ḥijjah 852/22 February 1449), al-Biqā'ī was dismissed from his position as the Quran exegete of the Zāhiriyyah in Rabī' II 853/May 1449. He would not recover the position until Jumādā I 857/May 1453, after al-Ashraf Īnāl had become sultan. While it may well be coincidence that the upheaval experienced by both Ibn Ḥajar and al-Biqā'ī overlapped, that Ibn Ḥajar was so instrumental in al-Biqā'ī's career suggests otherwise. The social advantages which pertained to al-Biqā'ī's relationship with Ibn Ḥajar, to which we now turn, are somewhat more opaque and best exemplified by al-Biqā'ī's marriages.

Matrimonial Maneuvers

Two marriages of al-Biqā'ī are documented: the first was to Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad (d. 884/1479) and the second to Su'ādāt bint Nūr al-Dīn al-Būshī (d. after 902/1497). While both marriages have been discussed before by such schol-

⁴⁶MS 'Arabīyah akhbār 40, fols. 106v–107r.

⁴⁷Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī' al-zuhūr fī waqā'ī' al-duhūr* (Beirut, 1973), 2:259. Al-Biqā'ī himself tells us that it was by his own volition that he departed his position as Jaqmaq's hadith teacher, being replaced first by the protégé of al-Saftī, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Amānā, and then by Wālī al-Dīn al-Asyūṭī, protégé of the *nāẓir al-khāṣṣ*. The sultan, however, sought to enforce the position upon al-Biqā'ī, but he resolved never to do it because of the opinions of the religious notables; in the face of further urging, al-Biqā'ī remained silent until finally God intervened and repelled it from him. Al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-'aṣr li-asrār ahl al-'aṣr*, 1:413.



ars as Rapoport and Guo,⁴⁸ only the marriage to Su‘ādāt has been covered in any great detail: al-Biqā‘ī’s marriage to Fāṭimah is treated as a mere marriage of convenience that he left when “his luck changed for the better.”⁴⁹ Rapoport and Guo’s understanding of the marriage to Fāṭimah is based on al-Sakhāwī’s acerbic biography of her, wherein he describes her as “one of those [women] who married al-Biqā‘ī when he was insignificant and poor and whom—as soon as he came into his prime—he abandoned and divorced.”⁵⁰ Su‘ādāt, the daughter of the late shaykh of the *khānqāh* in Siryāqūs, is presented as being a much more advantageous match than Fāṭimah, the daughter of a Cairene perfume merchant.⁵¹ While al-Biqā‘ī did divorce Fāṭimah and did marry Su‘ādāt, further exploration of Fāṭimah’s family sheds light onto how the marriages both functioned as attempts to consolidate his position in Cairo.

Fāṭimah was, like al-Biqā‘ī, an immigrant to Cairo. She had moved from her native Sunbāt, near Cairo, in 831/1427–28 with her father, Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-‘Aṭṭār (ca. 784 to 849/1382 to 1445–46) and her younger brothers, Muḥammad (816 to 891/1413–14 to 1486) and ‘Abd al-Laṭīf (819/1416 to after 902/1497). As her father’s *nisbah* suggests, the family made its money in the perfumery trade; they were also particularly well-regarded. Fāṭimah’s great-grandfather, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Mas‘ūd al-‘Alim al-Bahā’ ibn al-‘Alim, was highly regarded and was one of those upon whom an unidentified *nāzir al-jaysh* bestowed favor. Her grandfather, Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad (d. 816/1413–14),⁵² was counted among the most reputable men of the country, as was her father.⁵³ After moving to Cairo, Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-‘Aṭṭār established a shop near the Zuhūmah Gate at the market of the ‘Anbārīyūn;⁵⁴ his younger son, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, helped run the shop, taking it over upon his death.

Although we do not know the date of the marriage, if al-Sakhāwī is to be believed that it took place before al-Biqā‘ī established himself in Cairo, then it

⁴⁸Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilisation (Cambridge, 2005), 87–88; Guo, “Tales of a Medieval Cairene Harem,” 103–9.

⁴⁹Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*, 87; Guo, “Tales of a Medieval Cairene Harem,” 103. Both Rapoport and Guo use the same phrase.

⁵⁰Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’*, 12:105, no. 665.

⁵¹Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society*, 87; Guo, “Tales of a Medieval Cairene Harem,” 103.

⁵²Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’*, 9:46.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 9:198, no. 487.

⁵⁴William Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans, 1382–1468 A.D.: Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghrī Birdī’s Chronicles of Egypt* (Berkeley, 1955), 1:28–29.



must have been sometime between 834/1430–31 and 842/1438.⁵⁵ There is the question, then, of why this good local family, which was evidently well-respected and successful, would have accepted al-Biqā'ī as a son-in-law. The biographies of Fāṭimah's brothers suggest a possible reason. According to al-Sakhāwī, both brothers studied with Ibn Ḥajar, performed the hajj, and resided in the Ḥijāz, suggesting that the marriage was arranged on the basis of personal links between Fāṭimah's brothers and al-Biqā'ī, which were formed by all three being students of Ibn Ḥajar.

Al-Sakhāwī provides more information about the two brothers. After the death of their father, 'Abd al-Laṭīf married the daughter of a certain Shaykh Muḥammad al-Fawī, had many children, and became rich. At the same time, he patronized the *khānqāh* of Sa'īd al-Su'adā'; after the death of his brother, he devoted himself to his *ṭarīqah*, leaving the running of the perfume shop to his son.⁵⁶ Unlike 'Abd al-Laṭīf, however, Muḥammad enjoyed a much broader reputation as a scholar: al-Sakhāwī describes him as *qidwat al-muḥaddithīn wa-al-māḍī*, and states that he “became an authority concerning books and their study for those who desired that.” Upon his death, he was buried in the *turbah* of Sa'īd al-Su'adā'.⁵⁷

Muḥammad's biography is particularly illuminating; by digging deeper into it, it is possible to reconstruct his intellectual network. Aside from Ibn Ḥajar, al-Sakhāwī singles out six shaykhs with whom Muḥammad studied: Sharaf al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 840/1437), Shams al-Dīn al-Qāyātī (d. 850/1446), Shams al-Dīn al-Wanā'ī (d. 849/1445), 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī (d. 856/1452), Abū al-Qāsim al-Nuwayrī (d. 857/1453), and al-Maqrīzī. With the exceptions of Ibn Ḥajar and al-Maqrīzī, none of these scholars are particularly famous; nevertheless, they were all important figures in fifteenth-century Cairene society.

Biographies of these men are provided in the Appendix, but suffice it to say here that there is a striking concentration of high positions within this group, both in institutions of learning and administrative posts. Shams al-Dīn al-Qāyātī and Shams al-Dīn al-Wanā'ī were, like Ibn Ḥajar, *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah*; indeed, the three men seem to have passed the position between themselves for much of the 840s. 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī sought to be *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* of Damascus and was also a candidate to be *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* of Egypt, but was unsuccessful in both cases. Conversely, the Maliki scholar Abū al-Qāsim al-Nuwayrī refused all the judgeships he was offered because he was opposed to salaried positions, though he had previously been deputized as the *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-mālikīyah* in Egypt.

⁵⁵ Al-Sakhāwī raises some ambiguity with this when he states that the marriage to Su'adāt occurred “[...] at the time of his separation” from Fāṭimah. See al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 12:62.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4:337–38, no. 937.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9:272–74, no. 707.



In terms of teaching positions, these men taught at some of the most important and prestigious madrasahs in Cairo and Egypt: the Ashrafiyah, the Baybarsiyah, the Gharābiyah, the Ḥasanīyah, the Ṣālihiyah, the Shaykhūniyah, and the Zāhiriya. Of these, the Shaykhūniyah was perhaps the most important, with Shams al-Dīn al-Wanā'i being followed by Shams al-Dīn al-Qāyātī and then 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī as the *mudarris al-fiqh* there. Additionally, the *khānqāh* of Sa'īd al-Su'adā' also played a prominent role in the network: Shams al-Dīn al-Qāyātī was the *shaykh al-shuyūkh* there from 839/1435–36, and was buried there alongside Sharaf al-Dīn al-Subkī. This *khānqāh* was the oldest in Cairo—having been founded by Saladin in 569/1173–74—and one of the most prestigious: its *shaykh al-shuyūkh* was drawn from men deeply involved in affairs of state, and it attracted numerous scholars from throughout the Islamic world.⁵⁸

What, however, does this have to do with al-Biqā'i's marriage to Fāṭimah, and al-Biqā'i's relationship with Ibn Ḥajar? First, Muḥammad studied with several shaykhs who would go on to hold a significant number of important teaching and administrative positions during the reign of Sultan Jaqmaq. 'Abd al-Laṭīf also studied with Ibn Ḥajar and, though he failed to develop any reputation as a scholar, it is likely that he patronized the same shaykhs as his brother. Likewise, both of Fāṭimah's brothers devoted themselves to the *khānqāh* of Sa'īd al-Su'adā'. This suggests that Fāṭimah's family was not merely a "good" local family, but was an aspirational family, the younger son of which was making a good case for his *own* social advancement on the basis of his intellect and network of scholarly and administrative contacts—contacts who would themselves go on to prominence.

Second, the network of Muḥammad overlaps with that of al-Biqā'i: in addition to Ibn Ḥajar and al-Maqrizī, al-Biqā'i studied with all five of these shaykhs. More importantly, al-Sakhāwī states that al-Biqā'i was part of a group of young students—which included Muḥammad, Ibn Fahd (d. 885/1480), and Taqī al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī (d. 871/1466), younger brother of 'Alā' al-Dīn—who visited these shaykhs together. In other words, not only did al-Biqā'i study with the same shaykhs as Muḥammad, he studied with them at the same time.⁵⁹ The question raised here is, of course, whether the relationships that al-Biqā'i established with these shaykhs preceded or followed his marriage to Fāṭimah. That is to say, were these relationships a factor in Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Āṭṭar's acceptance of al-Biqā'i as a son-in-law, or were these relationships a consequence of al-Biqā'i becoming the brother-in-law of Muḥammad?

⁵⁸For an overview of the history of the Sa'īd al-Su'adā', see Carl F. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2014), 327–28. For its early history, see Nathan Hofer, *The Popularisation of Sufism in Ayyubid and Mamluk Egypt, 1173–1325* (Edinburgh, 2015), 35–102.

⁵⁹Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 9:272–73.



Given our current knowledge, this question is a thorny one to say the least. Al-Biqā'ī himself tells us that he traveled to study with Ibn Ḥajar in 834/1430–31, though whether the relationship became formalized in the same year is unclear; there may be an element of retrospective revision in al-Biqā'ī's telling. Al-Biqā'ī likewise tells us that he studied with al-Sharaf al-Subkī in 834/1430–31, though the relationship seemingly did not become as enduring as the one he had with Ibn Ḥajar. His study with al-Maqrīzī, al-Biqā'ī states, took place when al-Maqrīzī traveled to al-Shām; although no date is ascribed to this by al-Biqā'ī, on balance it seems more likely that this was before 834/1430–31, when al-Biqā'ī traveled to Cairo, though it cannot have been during al-Maqrīzī's longer residence in Damascus, at which point al-Biqā'ī was still living in Khirbat Rūḥā.⁶⁰ Al-Biqā'ī provides no information about how or when the relationships with the other scholars began.

In either case, these relationships cast the marriage in new light: whether they preceded or followed the marriage, the marriage was nevertheless an attempt by al-Biqā'ī to establish his footing in Cairo, either by facilitating his entry into the scholarly elite or by consolidating his position within that elite. Regardless, we do know that his relationship with Ibn Ḥajar was the first he established in Cairo, through which it is likely that he was first introduced to the family of Fāṭimah. Thus, against the background of al-Biqā'ī's intellectual network, the marriage to Fāṭimah is functionally similar to his marriage to Su'ādāt.

As noted above, the marriage to Su'ādāt has been covered before: Guo's discussion is so extensive that it can be discussed here with brevity.⁶¹ On 24 Ṣafar 858/23 February 1454, when al-Biqā'ī was in his late forties, he married Su'ādāt, daughter of Nūr al-Dīn al-Būshī (790–856/1388–1452), the late shaykh of the *khānqāh* in Siryāqūs. While both al-Biqā'ī and Su'ādāt were reputedly excited for the wedding, this happiness quickly turned to acrimony.⁶² According to al-Sakhāwī, al-Biqā'ī's behavior towards her was abusive and, after a year and a half of marriage—during which she gave birth to a son on 12 Rabī' I 859/1455—she could take it no more and asked him for a divorce. The straw that seems to have broken the camel's back is a marriage which al-Biqā'ī concluded in Damascus while he was there overseeing the construction of a *khān al-fundūq* on behalf of Birdibak al-Qubrusī (d. 868/1464), the *dawādār thānī* and powerful son-in-law of the sultan; he was absent from Cairo from shortly after Dhū al-Qa'dah 858/November 1454 until Shawwāl 859/September 1455. The conditions of the divorce settlement, and the bitterness

⁶⁰al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān al-zamān*, 1:110.

⁶¹Guo, "Tales of a Medieval Cairene Harem," 103–9.

⁶²For al-Biqā'ī's account of the wedding, see al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*, 2:20–23.



which accompanied their negotiation, have been outlined so extensively by Guo that they need not concern us here.⁶³

Rather, from the perspective of al-Biqāʿī's strategies of social advancement, there are two aspects of this wedding which bear further investigation. The first is Suʿādāt's father, Nūr al-Dīn al-Būshī. He had held the position of shaykh of the Siryāqūs *khānqāh* since the end of 830/1427. Located some twelve miles north of Cairo, this *khānqāh* was preeminent, particularly during the fourteenth century, and was the most important outside of the city proper.⁶⁴ Nūr al-Dīn al-Būshī had also been—at least tangentially—related to the same network of scholars and administrators as al-Biqāʿī; as shaykh of the Siryāqūs *khānqāh*, he had proven beneficial to various eminent people, including Shams al-Dīn al-Wanāʿī. Likewise, he was linked by way of the Siryāqūs *khānqāh* to Abū al-Qāsim al-Nuwayrī, who established a madrasah there. Additionally, Nūr al-Dīn al-Būshī had been offered the position of qadi of Egypt, but had declined it.⁶⁵ The marriage to Suʿādāt thus appears to have come out of the same nebulous network as the marriage to Fāṭimah.

Secondly, and crucially, it also points to the continuing evolution of his network. We noted earlier that al-Biqāʿī's pardon and return from exile was facilitated by a group of anonymous amirs, and that this suggested that his network had expanded and evolved in the 840s. The detailed guest list al-Biqāʿī describes in his own recollection of his wedding is a clear statement of the new circles within which he was moving. His wedding was, he tells us, the first wedding ever in Khānkah to be attended by the elite of Cairo. Alongside the Hanbali *qāḍī al-quḍāh* and the shaykhs of the Baybarsiyah, Barqūqiyah, Ashrafīyah, and Jamāliyah madrasahs, the wedding was attended by the *wakīl bayt al-māl*, the *nāẓir al-māristān*, the *nāẓir al-istabal*, the *khaṭīb* of the Great Mosque in Mecca, various Sufi shaykhs, and various members of the court, including the *muqaddam al-mamālīk*, ʿAbd al-Laṭīf al-Tuwāshī, the aforementioned Birdibak al-Qubrusī, and—last but by no means least—Sultan Īnāl himself.⁶⁶ This guest list shows us how strikingly composite al-Biqāʿī's social network had become, and how it had moved beyond the realm of the intellectual and into the political: he had a new patron, Sultan Īnāl.

⁶³Guo, "Tales of a Medieval Cairene Harem," 107–8. For al-Biqāʿī's own account of the divorce proceedings, see al-Biqāʿī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*, 2:143–45.

⁶⁴On the Siryāqūs *khānqāh*, see Leonor E. Fernandes, *The Evolution of a Sufi Institution in Mamluk Egypt: The Khanqah* (Berlin, 1988), 29–32.

⁶⁵Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmiʿ*, 5:178.

⁶⁶Al-Biqāʿī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*, 2:20–21.



A Political Patron

Although al-Biqā'ī began his career in the reign of Sultan Jaqmaq as the sultan's hadith teacher, a position which he held for almost a decade, there is nothing to suggest that the relationship was particularly close. The only information which survives about their relationship is found in al-Biqā'ī's *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*, which begins in 855/1451; that is, some four years after al-Biqā'ī was stripped of his position, imprisoned, and sent into exile. Consequently, there was no love lost for al-Biqā'ī when it came to Sultan Jaqmaq, whom he excoriated in the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*.

Aside from ascribing all of the turmoil and chaos of the reign to the sultan himself, al-Biqā'ī records scandalizing anecdotes about Sultan Jaqmaq—such as his taking his son's bride-to-be for himself, and his inability to consummate the marriage—and details the mistreatments which Jaqmaq inflicted upon the ulama at large. Thus, he tells us how Jaqmaq threatened to have Ibn Ḥajar paraded through the streets of Cairo on the back of a donkey and imprisoned in the Maqsharah. Likewise, he also threatened the *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-ḥanafīyah*, Sa'd al-Dīn ibn al-Dīrī, with the Maqsharah, and severely mistreated the *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah*, 'Alam al-Dīn al-Ṣāliḥ ibn al-Sirrāj al-Bulqīnī.⁶⁷

Al-Biqā'ī's standing does, however, seem to have improved somewhat in the last days of Sultan Jaqmaq's reign. At some point during Muḥarram 857/January 1453, when Jaqmaq's health was rapidly deteriorating and rumor spread that he had died, al-Biqā'ī was appointed to teach the *ʿilm al-qirā'āt* at the Mu'ayyadiyah mosque in place of the position he had lost.⁶⁸ Whether he was appointed by the ailing sultan or whether his appointment was due to shifting balances in the court of Jaqmaq is, however, unclear. Nevertheless, it was during his involvement at the court of Sultan Jaqmaq that al-Biqā'ī met Īnāl, the powerful *amīr al-kabīr*, and entered into his circle; pinpointing when this occurred is another matter.

Al-Biqā'ī tells us that it was when he participated in the jihad of Rhodes that he met Īnāl and found favor with him, becoming one of his close and intimate companions.⁶⁹ During the reign of Sultan Jaqmaq, three expeditions were sent against Rhodes: the first was in late 844/1440, the second in 847/1443, and the third in 848/1444. The first expedition was led by the amir Taghrī Birmish al-Zardkāsh (d. 854/1450) and the *amīr ākhūr* Yūnus al-Muḥammadī, and proved insufficiently strong to overwhelm the defenders of the city of Rhodes and was forced to withdraw. The second and third expeditions were both led by Īnāl. The second succeeded only in capturing Castellorizo; the third laid siege to the city of Rhodes for

⁶⁷Ibid., 1:304–5.

⁶⁸Ibid., 1:269–70.

⁶⁹Ibid., 1:412–13.



forty days, but counterattacks by the Knights Hospitaller forced the expedition to retreat to Egypt.⁷⁰

As mentioned above, al-Biqā'ī took part in at least the second Rhodes campaign, in 847/1443.⁷¹ While Īnāl was in charge of this expedition, al-Biqā'ī's report of the campaign, included by Ibn Ḥajar in the *Inbā' al-ghumr*, makes clear that he was not yet within Īnāl's circle. Concerning the retreat from Rhodes, al-Biqā'ī states that

On Sunday (3 Rağab/27 October) in the forenoon the flotilla sailed. At morning it reached Finike. Because the night was dark and the wind light, the fleet dispersed. It anchored there for two days and sailed afterwards. The wind intensified and the flotilla anchored on the western side of Ra's aš-Šalidūn, in a bay named Qarā Bālik (the Black Fish). The fleet scattered all over. No one knew the place of the others. Then the wind intensified and the flotilla reassembled. All the vessels regrouped, only the ship of the emir Īnāl ad-Duwaydir was missing. He was the senior among the commanders and they sent a light boat to enquire about his fate, but failed to obtain any information whatsoever. After a while it became known that due to the light wind, Īnāl was anchoring at al-Qayqabūn together with his retinue. The commander of the navy ordered the war-vessels (*ağriba*) to sail and join Īnāl.⁷²

Al-Biqā'ī did compose a longer work, titled *Al-Isfār 'an ashraf al-asfār wa-al-ihkbār bi-azraf al-akhbār*, which was an eyewitness account of his experience of the campaigns against Cyprus and Rhodes. The work is, unfortunately, lost.⁷³

It may well have been during the expedition of 848/1444 that al-Biqā'ī was properly inducted into the circle of Īnāl; although there is no evidence of al-

⁷⁰See in particular C. Edmund Bosworth, "Arab Attacks on Rhodes in the Pre-Ottoman Period," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6, no. 2 (1996): 162–64; S. Soucek, "Rodos," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6309.

⁷¹On this, see Frenkel, "Al-Biqā'ī's Naval War-Report."

⁷²Ibid., 16–17; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Inbā' al-ghumr bi-anbā al-ʿumr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥaḇashī (Cairo, 1998), 4:215.

⁷³There is some disagreement over the title of the work. Ḥājjī Khalīfah gives the title as *Al-Isfār 'an ashridat al-asfār*, and is followed in this by Li Guo. See Ḥājjī Khalīfah, *Kashf al-zunūn 'an asāmī al-kutub wa-al-funūn* (Beirut, 1992), 1:86; and Guo, "Al-Biqā'ī's Chronicle," 125. Ḥājjī Khalīfah does, however, seem to have been mistaken. Muḥammad al-Iṣlāḥī, who edited a medieval handlist of al-Biqā'ī's work, gives the title as *Al-Isfār 'an ashraf al-asfār wa-al-ihkbār bi-azraf al-akhbār*. Al-Iṣlāḥī, *Fihrist muṣannafāt al-Biqā'ī*, 149–50. Further, al-Biqā'ī refers to a work by this title in his *Akhbār al-jilād fī futūḥ al-bilād*. See Bibliothèque Nationale de France MS Arabe 5862, fol. 467v.



Biqā'ī's involvement in this expedition, it is not unlikely. Al-Biqā'ī had a deep-seated interest in jihad, dating back at least to the 830s when he performed jihad twice. He even tells us that so great was his passion for jihad that he devoted himself to the practice of archery and swordsmanship, hoping to master both. He states that he furthermore began to compose a work on the science of the sword, which he hoped would become paradigmatic; if the work was ever completed, it does not survive.⁷⁴

In this regard, al-Biqā'ī appears emblematic of one of the broader changes in fifteenth-century social order; namely, the blending and blurring of the traditional roles played by the “men of the sword” and the “men of the pen.”⁷⁵ There is of course the question of why al-Biqā'ī was so keen to practice jihad. It is unlikely that it was a deliberate attempt to ingratiate himself with the military elite, given how enduring his interest appears to have been; it is tempting to interpret it as a post-traumatic response to the attack on his family, which instilled within him a desire to become proficient in self-defense and warfare. In any case, al-Biqā'ī's penchant for jihad so puzzled al-Sakhāwī that the latter said concerning it that “God knows his reason for all of that.”⁷⁶

Al-Biqā'ī did not only practice jihad; he also preached it. He wrote two works on jihad, *Al-Istishhād bi-āyāt al-jihād* and *Dhayl al-istishhād bi-āyāt al-jihād*.⁷⁷ The latter is an example of the forty *aḥādīth* genre, which found its impetus in variants of a hadith wherein the Prophet praised the collection of forty *aḥādīth* which would benefit the Muslim community, and had been a popular vehicle for the encouragement of jihad since the second half of the twelfth century.⁷⁸ Given al-Biqā'ī's involvement in the campaign of 847/1443, it is likely that both works were

⁷⁴MS 'Arabiyah akhbār 40, fol. 106r–v.

⁷⁵For a summary of this, see Jo Van Steenberg, Patrick Wing, and Kristof D'hulster, “The Mamlukization of the Mamluk Sultanate? State Formation and the History of Fifteenth Century Egypt and Syria: Part I—Old Problems and New Trends,” *History Compass* 14, no. 11 (November 2016): 552, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12357>. For particular studies of the blending of traditional roles, see in particular Toru Miura, “Urban Society in Damascus as the Mamluk Era Was Ending,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (2006): 157–93; Robert Irwin, “The Privatization of “Justice” under the Circassian Mamluks,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 63–70.

⁷⁶Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 1:102.

⁷⁷Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Biqā'ī, *Al-Istishhād bi-āyāt al-jihād*, ed. Jum'ah 'Alī and Marzūq 'Alī Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 2002); on the *Dhayl* in particular, see Stephen R. Burge, “The “Ḥadīṭ Literature”: What Is It and Where Is It?,” *Arabica* 65, no. 1–2 (27 February 2018): 64–83. Al-Biqā'ī's interest in jihad is also suggested by his *Al-I'lām bi-sann al-hijrah ilā al-Shām*. See Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Biqā'ī, *Al-I'lām bi-sann al-hijrah ilā al-Shām*, ed. Muḥammad Mujīr al-Khaṭīb al-Ḥasanī (Beirut, 1997).

⁷⁸On the use of the forty *aḥādīth* genre in jihad preaching, see Kenneth A. Goudie, *Reinventing Jihād: Jihād Ideology from the Conquest of Jerusalem to the End of the Ayyūbids (c. 492/1099–647/1249)*, *The Muslim World in the Age of the Crusades 4* (Leiden, 2019); Suleiman A. Mourad and James E. Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunni Jihād Ideology in The Crusader Period: Ibn*



composed during the 840s. Further, as Burge notes, that the *Dhayl* in particular is a hadith collection suggests that it was composed during the earlier part of his career when he was more involved in hadith;⁷⁹ this would place it during his time as Sultan Jaqmaq's hadith teacher.

Thus al-Biqā'ī appears as something of an adventurer, and it is not inconceivable that he took part in the 848/1444 expedition; indeed, it is possible—perhaps even likely—that it was his martial ability that endeared him to Īnāl in the first place. Furthermore, it is possible that the group of anonymous amirs who intervened on his behalf and had his exile overturned included Īnāl and other members of his circle.

Much like his relationship with Ibn Ḥajar, al-Biqā'ī's relationship with Īnāl would prove both beneficial and enduring. Indeed, al-Biqā'ī refers to Īnāl as his *ṣāhib*,⁸⁰ and was close to him throughout his reign. As noted above, it was after Īnāl's enthronement that al-Biqā'ī was returned to his position as the *mufassir* of the Zāhirīyah mosque. It is also likely, though not certain, that it was during Īnāl's reign that he was appointed to teach at the Sharfīyah madrasah, and as the *nāzir* of the Fakkāhīn Mosque. He would step down from these positions in 869/1464, the same year in which he resigned or was removed from his position as *mudarris* at the Mu'ayyadīyah madrasah.⁸¹

Aside from holding these teaching positions, al-Biqā'ī acted on behalf of Sultan Īnāl. He describes himself at one point as Īnāl's secretary,⁸² and spends considerable time discussing his supervision of the *waqf* of a *khān al-funduq* in Damascus on behalf of both the sultan and his son-in-law, the *dawādār thānī* Birdibak al-Qubrusī.⁸³ He was in charge of a group of distinguished members of the *fuqahā'* and the *fuqarā'*, including the Maliki and Hanbali qadis of Damascus, which was tasked with both the examination and recording of the properties attached to the *waqf* of the *khān al-funduq*, but also their renovation. By al-Biqā'ī's own account, he was successful and the sultan was happy with his work. Consequently, al-Biqā'ī's close relationship with Īnāl solidified his position within the courtly elite, and offered him the opportunity to build relationships with leading members of Īnāl's court.

During his reign, Sultan Īnāl founded his leadership and authority on the relationships, wealth, and charisma of his family. Aside from his wife, Zaynab

ʿAsakir of Damascus (1105–1176) and His Age, with an Edition and Translation of Ibn ʿAsakir's The Forty Hadiths for Inciting Jihad (Leiden, 2013).

⁷⁹Burge, "The "Ḥadīṭ Literature,"" 72.

⁸⁰Al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*, 1:305.

⁸¹Guo, "Al-Biqā'ī's Chronicle," 123.

⁸²Al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*, 2:20.

⁸³Ibid., 2:111–28.



bint Ḥasan ibn Khāṣṣ Bak (d. 884/1479), and son Aḥmad (d. 893/1488), it was the husbands of his daughters, the *dawādār kabīr* Yūnus al-Aqbā'ī (d. 865/1461) and the *dawādār thānī* Birdibak al-Qubrusī, who played an increasingly central role.⁸⁴ Al-Biqā'ī developed a particularly close relationship with Birdibak al-Qubrusī. Indeed, Birdibak al-Qubrusī is one of the more frequently mentioned figures in the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*, appearing as both al-Biqā'ī's source of information and—on occasion—his traveling companion. Their closeness is further attested by al-Biqā'ī's attempt to absolve Birdibak al-Qubrusī from any blame for the problems of Īnāl's reign, or the failure of Aḥmad ibn Īnāl to successfully succeed his father. The latter was in distinct contrast to the writings of his contemporary, Ibn Taghrībirdī, who imputes a large part of the failure of Aḥmad ibn Īnāl to his reliance upon Birdibak al-Qubrusī.⁸⁵

It is clear also that al-Biqā'ī sought to maintain his association with the family of Īnāl after Īnāl's death. In addition to his relationship with Birdibak al-Qubrusī, al-Biqā'ī laid the groundwork for a relationship with Aḥmad ibn Īnāl. At the beginning of Jumādā II 865/March 1461, al-Biqā'ī went to the new sultan to congratulate him on his accession;⁸⁶ a little over a month later, on 18 Rajab 865/29 April 1461, he recited to the sultan a panegyric which he had composed.⁸⁷ His efforts, however, proved futile, for Aḥmad ibn Īnāl was deposed by Khushqadam in Ramaḍān 865/June 1461—some four months after his sultanate began; at the same time, Birdibak al-Qubrusī was imprisoned and mulcted, and was sent to live in Mecca in Shawwāl 866/July 1462.⁸⁸

This is, of course, only scratching the surface of what can be said about al-Biqā'ī's relationships with the key figures of Sultan Īnāl's court, particularly how and when these relationships developed. In particular, there is the question of how the triangle of Sultan Īnāl, Birdibak al-Qubrusī, and al-Biqā'ī functioned in actuality. Was, for instance, al-Biqā'ī closer to either of them, and could he be both the sultan's man and representative while also being close to Birdibak? To answer this, however, would be to go far beyond the scope of the current article; it will require deeper analysis of how, why, and around which themes contemporary

⁸⁴See in particular Lucian Reinfandt, *Mamlukische Sultansstiftungen des 9./15. Jahrhunderts: nach den Urkunden der Stifter al-Aṣraf Īnāl und al-Muʿayyad Aḥmad ibn Īnāl* (2003). See also Jo Van Steenberghe, "Īnāl Al-Ajrūd, al-Malik al-Ashraf," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_32454.

⁸⁵Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah fī mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1992), 16:200–1.

⁸⁶Al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*, 3:228.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 3:249.

⁸⁸Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Ḥawāḍith al-duḥūr fī madā al-ayyām wa-al-shuhūr*, ed. William Popper (Berkeley, 1932), 3:405, 407, 428.



historiographical material concerning the dynamics of Īnāl's court was produced by both al-Biqā'ī and other fifteenth-century historians.

The above cursory sketch should nevertheless demonstrate how al-Biqā'ī established and tried to establish relationships with the sultanic court, and it is perhaps not coincidental that the weakening of al-Biqā'ī's position in Cairo—as evidenced by his inability to weather the controversies on use of the Bible in *tafsīr* and the poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ—followed the dismantling of Sultan Īnāl's political order; indeed, it may even suggest that al-Biqā'ī deliberately courted these controversies in order to establish his intellectual credentials in the new political order of Khushqadam.

Conclusion

This article has pursued two lines of enquiry. On the one hand, it has sought to clarify how al-Biqā'ī increased the social and cultural capital resources that he had at his disposal to build and expand the social network that underpinned his career in Cairo. Thus having no social capital but his intelligence and knowledge, al-Biqā'ī leveraged this to develop relationships with leading scholars, particularly Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, through whose patronage he was able to enter the orbit of Sultan Jaqmaq. His association with Jaqmaq's court offered him the opportunity to cultivate relationships with leading members of the court, relationships that would prove beneficial when the political order of Jaqmaq was replaced with that of Īnāl. At the same time, he sought to enhance and operationalize the social capital accrued through his scholarly and political connections by marrying into leading ulama families in Cairo.

This is not, of course, to suggest that there was some sort of Machiavellian plan behind al-Biqā'ī's career. While he was no doubt ambitious—why else would he have left Damascus for Cairo?—and capable, there is nothing to suggest that he viewed the relationships he cultivated as mere means to an end. Likewise, we must not strip his teachers, his peers, or his wives of their agency; they were not merely stepping stones on al-Biqā'ī's path to success, but were themselves actors with their own goals and intentions. Rather, the point to be made is how these different relationships all opened up different avenues for al-Biqā'ī while at the same time closing others: to do otherwise is to approach al-Biqā'ī's life and career teleologically.

This interpretation of al-Biqā'ī's life and career has relied primarily on three sources, two written by al-Biqā'ī and one by al-Sakhāwī. As noted earlier, these sources cannot simply be mined for historical information without considering why they were written. Rather, they should be understood as carefully crafted



literary works in their own rights, which served as a means through which their authors could mediate their own perspectives and understandings of that reality.

Literary does not necessarily mean fictional as, for instance, postmodernists following in the footsteps of White would have us believe.⁸⁹ Rather, if these works are fictional then it is, to borrow the words of Geertz, fictional “in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned’—the original meaning of *fictiō*—not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments.”⁹⁰ If we consider the events of al-Biqā'ī's life to be raw data, then we can consider al-Biqā'ī's autobiographical writings and al-Sakhāwī's biography to be attempts to fashion this raw data into something meaningful. This is done through the judicious selection of which events to focus on, which relationships to emphasize, and by rationalizing al-Biqā'ī through different themes and motifs.

There is, as was noted, considerable contradiction between al-Biqā'ī's and al-Sakhāwī's emplotments of al-Biqā'ī's life and career—between al-Biqā'ī's self-ordained self and al-Sakhāwī's shameless charlatan. This does not mean that the images of al-Biqā'ī which they create are irreconcilable. We know, for instance, that al-Sakhāwī was familiar with the *Unwān al-zamān*, and used it as a source for his biography of al-Biqā'ī. Crucially, then, we can see how al-Sakhāwī chose to incorporate this material and how these choices influenced the al-Biqā'ī who emerges from *Al-Daw' al-lāmi'*.

Thus while al-Sakhāwī might jettison all of al-Biqā'ī's discussion of his childhood—so essential as it was for al-Biqā'ī's sense of self—and while he might minimize the importance of certain relationships, as he does with Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, or turn supportive relationships critical, as he does with ʿAlā' al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī, he cannot deny the historicity of these relationships. Likewise, what may appear as nothing but the specious insults of a rival are confirmed by al-Biqā'ī, who tells us that he was conscious of his pronunciation of Arabic, and that he occasionally had difficulties reading.⁹¹ Al-Sakhāwī and his biography of his arch-rival are still essential for our understanding of al-Biqā'ī. As Walid Saleh argues,

the significance of al-Sakhāwī's biography is that, despite all the self-disclosure that al-Biqā'ī offers his readers, one needs an outsider's view of our author in order to corroborate his self-understand-

⁸⁹For succinct criticism of White and the postmodernists, see Lubomír Doležel, “Fictional and Historical Narrative: Meeting the Postmodernist Challenge,” in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman, Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series (Columbus, 1999), 248–51.

⁹⁰Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973), 15.

⁹¹MS ʿArabīyah akhbār 40, fols. 106v–107r.



ing. It takes an opponent to describe for us the circle of influences that shaped al-Biqāʿī.⁹²

The issue at stake, then, is not so much one of historicity as of interpretation. Both emplotments are founded upon a fundamental and shared layer of historicity: the “historical reality” of al-Biqāʿī. That is to say, these emplotments are circumscribed by the social contexts in which both al-Biqāʿī and al-Sakhāwī operated, and it is at these social contexts that the emplotments meet and from which they depart. They use the same basic information—particularly the relationships that al-Biqāʿī cultivated—to create wildly different understandings of al-Biqāʿī; their use of this basic information was filtered through their respective lenses, and colored by their feelings about al-Biqāʿī. While al-Sakhāwī may exclude or reframe material, he nevertheless confirms al-Biqāʿī’s own reflections that he faced hardship and opposition from the intellectual elite of Cairo, who disputed his presence among them. Al-Sakhāwī’s biography of al-Biqāʿī is this opposition made manifest.

Consequently, this article has argued that by recognizing how thoroughly entangled our authors and texts are—and by appreciating their discursive strategies and intentions—we can begin to disentangle the emplotments of al-Biqāʿī’s life from the social contexts. In this way, we develop a more nuanced understanding of both who al-Biqāʿī was and the social contexts themselves. What this has meant for our present purpose is that we were not in the process of simply reconstructing al-Biqāʿī’s life and career as it actually happened, but rather of also exploring how and in what ways his life and career were perceived and emplotted by both al-Biqāʿī himself and his greatest rival. In doing so, we arrive at a multi-layered representation of al-Biqāʿī, one which eschews the positivist tendency to seek the “answer” to historical figures, and which is perhaps closer to the historical al-Biqāʿī, in all his complexity and contradiction.

⁹²Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible*, 10.



Appendix: Biographies of Shaykhs

Here follow brief biographies of the shaykhs with whom both Muḥammad, brother of Fāṭimah, and al-Biqā'ī studied.

*Sharaf al-Dīn Mūsá ibn Aḥmad ibn Mūsá ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sulaymān al-Subkī (ca. 762–840/1361–1437)*⁹³

A scion of the Banū al-Subkī, Sharaf al-Dīn al-Subkī was a prominent scholar well-versed in *fiqh*, *uṣūl*, and Arabic. He was a *mulāzim* of Burhān al-Dīn al-Abanāsī, to whom he was related by marriage. He was appointed to teach at the Gharābiyah madrasah, and would also read either *Al-Tanbih*, *Al-Hāwá*, or *Al-Minhāj* by himself in the Azhar. After his death in 840/1437, he was buried in the *turbah* of Sa'īd al-Su'adā'.

*Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Alī ibn Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Qāyātī (c. 785–850/1384–1446)*⁹⁴

Shams al-Dīn al-Qāyātī had a career as both a *mudarris* and an administrator. Supporting himself initially by working as a *shahīd* out of the Ṣāliḥīyah Mosque in Cairo, he studied at the Mu'ayyadī Mosque before being appointed the *mudarris* of hadith at the Zāhirīyah (Barqūq) Mosque and then the Shafi'ī *mudarris* at the Ashrafīyah mosque in 830. Subsequently he became the Sufi shaykh of the *khānqāh* Sa'īd al-Su'adā' in 839 (held until he replaced Ibn Ḥajar),⁹⁵ the *mudarris* of the Gharābiyah after the death of Sharaf al-Dīn al-Subkī, and then the *mudarris* of *fiqh* at the Shaykhūniyah and the Ṣāliḥīyah after the death of al-Wanā'ī. He replaced Ibn Ḥajar as both the shaykh of the Baybarsiyah and as the *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* in 849/1445. He continued to hold these positions until his death in 850/1446; he was buried in the *turbah* of Sa'īd al-Su'adā'.

*Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Wanā'ī (788–849/1386–1445)*⁹⁶

Shams al-Dīn al-Wanā'ī, a companion of Shams al-Dīn al-Qāyātī, likewise supported himself as a *shahīd* before embarking upon a career as a *mudarris* and administrator. His first position was a *mudarris* at the Tankizīyah, fol-

⁹³ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 10:176–77; MS Köprülü 1119, fols. 369r–370v.

⁹⁴ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 8:212–14.

⁹⁵ Badr al-Dīn al-'Aynī, *Iqd al-jumān fī tārikh ahl al-zamān: Ḥawādith wa-tarājim*, ed. 'Abd al-Rāziq al-Ṭanṭāwī Qarmūṭ (Cairo, 1989), 2:640–41.

⁹⁶ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi'*, 7:140–41.



lowed by *mudarris al-fiqh* at the Shaykhūniyah. During the reign of Barsbāy, al-Maqrīzī tells us that he was patronized by a number of the *a'yān*, among them the amir Jaqmaq; when Jaqmaq became sultan, al-Wanā'ī frequently attended his councils until he was given responsibility in government.⁹⁷ Al-Wanā'ī's career in government would, however, prove to be tumultuous. In Rabī' I 843/August 1439, Jaqmaq appointed him the *qādī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* of Damascus; he was removed from this position in Ramaḍān 843/February 1440. After traveling to Mecca, he returned to Cairo and was appointed the *qādī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* in Ṣafar 844/July 1440; he was quickly replaced by Ibn Ḥajar. He then returned to Damascus, and in Rajab 844/December 1440 or Sha'bān 844/January 1441 was once again made *qādī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* of Damascus, a position which he successfully held until the end of 846/1443. Once again he returned to Cairo and once again he was appointed *qādī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah*. He resigned in Muḥarram 848 and devoted himself to teaching *fiqh* until his death in 849.

*ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad ibn Ismāʿīl ibn Muḥammad al-Qalqashandī (788–856/1387–1452)*⁹⁸

ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Qalqashandī was the scion of a prominent family of Cairene ulama, and enjoyed a reputation as a scholar, particularly of hadith. He was appointed the shaykh of the madrasah endowed by the *dawādār al-kabīr* Taghrībirdī al-Muʿayyadī, and was at one point the librarian of the Ashrafiyah. He sought to be *qādī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* of Damascus and was also a candidate for the *qādī al-quḍāh al-shāfi'īyah* of Egypt, but was unsuccessful in both cases. He was more successful later in life: he was appointed the Shafi'i *mudarris al-fiqh* at the Shaykhūniyah after the death of Shams al-Dīn al-Qāyātī in 850/1446, and was appointed to teach hadith at the Mosque of Ibn Ṭulūn after the death of Ibn Ḥajar in 852/1449. He also taught the *qirāʾāt* at the Ḥasaniyah madrasah, and in 853/1449 he was appointed the *mudarris* of the Khashābiyah—a *zāwīyah* in the Mosque of ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ.⁹⁹ He resigned the appointed soon after because this position had been held by scions of the Bulqīnī family for some sixty years.

⁹⁷ Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā (Beirut, 1997), 7:438.

⁹⁸ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ*, 5:161–62.

⁹⁹ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Ḥawādith al-duḥūr fī madā al-ayyām wa-al-shuhūr*, ed. Fahīm Muḥammad Shaltūt (Cairo, 1990), 1:164.



*Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Nuwayrī al-Mālikī (801–57/1399–1453)*¹⁰⁰

A scholar of some repute, Abū al-Qāsim al-Nuwayrī was eulogized by al-Sakhāwī as “a shaykh greatly exalted, revered, and essential to his *madhhab*.”¹⁰¹ He was offered numerous judgeships, including of Jerusalem, Egypt, and al-Shām. He rejected all of these because he was opposed to taking salaried positions, though he had previously deputized for his shaykh Shams al-Dīn al-Bāsaṭī (d. 842/1439), as the *qāḍī al-quḍāh al-mālikīyah* in Egypt.¹⁰² He is reputed to have said on one occasion that “Verily, Jaqmaq desires to bind me in conformity to him with this salary!”¹⁰³ He established a madrasah at the Siryāqūsīyah *khānqāh*, to which he bequeathed his landed property, with the surplus going to his children.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’*, 9:246–48.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 9:248.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 9:247; on Shams al-Dīn al-Bāsaṭī, see *ibid.*, 7:5–8.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 9:248.

