

AMINA A. ELBENDARY
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

The Sultan, The Tyrant, and The Hero: Changing Medieval Perceptions of al-Zāhir Baybars*

As the true founder of the Mamluk state, al-Zāhir Baybars is one of the most important sultans of Egypt and Syria. This has prompted many medieval writers and historians to write about his reign. Their perceptions obviously differed and their reconstructions of his reign draw different and often conflicting images.

In this article I propose to examine and compare the various perceptions that different writers had of Baybars's life and character. Each of these writers had his own personal biases and his own purposes for writing about Baybars. The backgrounds against which they each lived and worked deeply influenced their writings. This led them to emphasize different aspects of his personality and legacy and to ignore others. Comparing these perceptions will demonstrate how the historiography of Baybars was used to make different political arguments concerning the sultan, the Mamluk regime, and rulership in general. I have used different representative examples of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century histories, chronicles, and biographical dictionaries in compiling this material. I have also compared these scholarly writings to the popular folk epic *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*.

In his main official biography, written by Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, Baybars is presented as an ideal sultan. By contrast, works written after the sultan's day show more ambivalent attitudes towards him. Some fourteenth-century writers, like Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, Baybars al-Manṣūrī, and al-Nuwayrī, who were influenced by the regime of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, tend to place more emphasis on his despotic actions. Other late Mamluk historians, like al-Maqrīzī, al-'Aynī, and Ibn Taghrībirdī, demonstrate a more balanced approach towards the sultan, and present him as a great ruler while still acknowledging his shortcomings and excesses. In the popular epic *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, he is a Muslim hero. Comparing these three main perceptions of Baybars—as idealized sultan, harsh despot, or Muslim hero—shows that certain qualities such as just rule and commitment to Islam were to be emphasized when constructing the ideal image of the ruler, while others

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such as cruelty and despotism were to be ignored or downplayed. It also allows us to see through the seemingly straightforward veneer of narrative that these sources employ and to glimpse the undercurrents beneath.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir (1223-92), Baybars’s loyal employee, wrote the sultan’s official biography.¹ The writer was chief clerk in Baybars’s chancery and drafted many state documents himself.² Thus he was witness to many of the events he described.³ Baybars was very much involved in the writing of this work. The writer often read out drafts to the sultan, who duly rewarded him.⁴ Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir gives Baybars a voice in several passages of the book that begin with phrases like “the sultan told me” or “I was informed by the sultan,” which indicates that his source for this version of an event was the sultan himself.⁵ This work was clearly intended as a panegyric of Baybars and sought to promote the Mamluk regime.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir presented Baybars as an ideal ruler and an excellent soldier, ignoring events that could have tarnished Baybars’s image or else relating them in ways that worked in the sultan’s favor. He considered him the true hero of the famous battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt and attributed the larger part of the victory to his military efforts rather than those of the actual leader of the armies, Quṭuz.⁶ Furthermore, instead of arguing that Baybars had no role in the murder of Quṭuz, Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir insisted that Baybars alone was responsible for killing him and was not a member of a larger conspiracy.⁷ This was to legitimize Baybars’s rule

¹The other biography of Baybars is *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir* by ‘Izz al-Dīn ibn Shaddād. Unfortunately it does not survive in full. The extant part, dealing with the years 1272-78, has been edited and published by Aḥmad Hutayt: ‘Izz al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir*, Bibliotheca Islamica, 31 (Wiesbaden, 1983). These two works are the main primary sources used by later medieval historians writing on the reign of Baybars.

²P. M. Holt, “Three Biographies of al-Zahir Baybars,” in *Medieval Historical Writing in the Christian and Islamic Worlds*, ed. David O. Morgan (London, 1982), 20; Abdul-Aziz Khowaiter [‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khuwayṭir], *Baibars the First: His Endeavours and Achievements* (London, 1978), 145.

³Khowaiter, *Baibars*, 158.

⁴Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī ibn ‘Abbās, *Husn al-Manāqib al-Sirrīyah al-Muntaza‘ah min al-Sīrah al-Zāhirīyah*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1989), 339; Holt, “Three Biographies,” 20; idem, “The Virtuous Ruler in Thirteenth-Century Mamluk Royal Biographies,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 24 (1980): 28; Khowaiter, *Baibars*, 162.

⁵For example: Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1976), 51. See Khowaiter, *Baibars*, 154.

⁶Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 64; Holt, “Three Biographies,” 23.

⁷Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 68; Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250-1382* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill., 1986), 37; Holt, “Three Biographies,” 21-22; Khowaiter, *Baibars*, 159.



according to what Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir claimed to have been a law of the *yasa*, namely that a regicide should succeed to the throne.⁸ Because of the semi-official nature of the book, we may consider Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s account to be the one promoted by Baybars himself.⁹

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s account of Baybars’s life focused on the sultan’s military endeavors and achievements. He also emphasized the sultan’s piety and his services to Islam; for example, he restored the Abbasid caliphate in Cairo. This of course further legitimized his rule. It also gave him leverage in his confrontation with the Mongols.¹⁰ Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir also gave many examples of Baybars’s pious acts, especially his pilgrimage to the holy sites in Mecca and Medina, his ban on the consumption of wine¹¹ and hashish,¹² and his campaigns against prostitution.¹³ The writer’s description of Baybars’s pilgrimage is rather elaborate. The sultan’s trip to the Hijaz, like many of his endeavors, was arranged in semi-secrecy.¹⁴ This habit of making a mystery of his whereabouts and travels contributed to Baybars’s development into a romantic character.¹⁵

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir sought to impress upon his readers that Baybars performed the rites of pilgrimage perfectly. He humbled himself before God:

He remained like an ordinary person not shielded by anyone and protected only by God. He was alone in praying and performing the rites of pilgrimage. He then went over to the Ka‘bah—God bless it—and washed it with his hands. He carried the water in a waterskin over his shoulders and washed the blessed house and remained among the common people. . . . He held people’s hands—may God help him—and assisted them to the Ka‘bah; one commoner clung to him and could not keep hold of his hand because of the crowds and so clung to the sultan’s clothes and tore them and almost threw him on the ground.¹⁶

⁸Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 69; Irwin, *Middle East in Middle Ages*, 37.

⁹Peter Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. P. M. Holt (London, 1992), 81.

¹⁰Khowaiter, *Baibars*, 35.

¹¹Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 228, 258, 307, 390.

¹²*Ibid.*, 266.

¹³*Ibid.*, 176, 350.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 354, 357, 359-60; P. M. Holt, *The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1517* (London and New York, 1986), 96.

¹⁵Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, 197.

¹⁶Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 355.



He also instructed his close employees to distribute money and clothing discreetly to the people of the Ḥaram. Baybars obviously wanted to perform the pilgrimage correctly and to carry out all the rites to perfection, so much so that he had the Hanafī *qāḍī al-quḍāh* accompany him throughout the trip and instruct him in matters of religion.¹⁷ Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir concluded the account of the pilgrimage by declaring that: “the sultan performed the duty of pilgrimage as it should be.”¹⁸

Baybars the ideal sultan was also necessarily a just ruler. Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir dealt extensively with Baybars’s administration of justice. He described how Baybars restored the Dār al-‘Adl and often presided over the court himself.¹⁹ He related various cases to prove to his readers that Baybars was extremely firm and stern about justice. For example, a man was in dispute with the sultan over the ownership of a well which Baybars had started digging and which the man had completed. Baybars insisted that he and his opponent be treated equally before the *shar‘* and stepped down from his position of judge at the Dār al-‘Adl so that the *qāḍī al-quḍāh* could decide the case. The qadi ruled that the sultan had the right to the well but must pay the building expenses of his opponent.²⁰ Baybars is thus shown as setting an example to demonstrate that the *shar‘* and rule of law must be observed by all, even the sultan. He is portrayed as a strong sultan who is not afraid of being made equal with his subjects.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s presentation of Baybars’s death was in line with his approach throughout the rest of the work. In dealing with this he was very formal and discreet: he merely stated that Baybars fell sick and died.²¹ He did not mention any of the unseemly circumstances of his illness, which according to other reports was due to poison or drinking too much *qumz*, a favorite Mamluk alcoholic drink made from mares’ milk.²²

By contrast, in later works written during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a more ambivalent attitude towards Baybars emerged. This led the writers of these works to include less glamorous and less flattering accounts of the sultan alongside accounts of his military achievements and the glories of his reign. Some of these

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 356.

¹⁹Ibid., 77, 84, 176; Holt, “Virtuous Ruler,” 32-33.

²⁰Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, 84.

²¹Ibid., 472-73.

²²For example: Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma‘rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah (Cairo, 1957), 1:635; Mufaḍḍal ibn Abī al-Faḍā’il, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks: texte arabe publié et traduit en française par E. Blochet* (Paris, 1919), 276-77; Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh Ibn al-Furāt*, ed. Quṣṭanṭīn Zurayk (Beirut, 1942), 7:85.



historians, such as Baybars al-Manṣūrī (d. 1325), Shāfi' ibn 'Alī (d. 1330), Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. 1336), and al-Nuwayrī (d. 1332), may have wished to diminish the importance of Baybars's legacy in order to enhance the achievements of the regime of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. This is particularly evident in Shāfi' ibn 'Alī's *Ḥusn al-Manāqib al-Sirrīyah al-Muntaza'ah min al-Sīrah al-Zāhirīyah*, his *mukhtaṣar* of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's *Rawḍ*. P. M. Holt argued that this work might have appeared as a sort of companion to Shāfi' 's biography of Qalāwūn, *Al-Faḍl al-Ma' thūr min Sīrat al-Sulṭān al-Malik al-Manṣūr* during the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.²³ This later work was intended as praise of Qalāwūn and served to legitimize his regime and by extension, those of his sons.²⁴ Shāfi' had the task of justifying Qalāwūn's usurpation of the throne from the sons of Baybars, his *khushdash* and former sovereign to whom he owed allegiance. This prompted Shāfi' to slight Baybars's reputation while simultaneously praising Qalāwūn. Yet even in these works, Baybars's legacy and importance could neither be ignored nor completely obliterated. Historians writing in the later Mamluk period, such as Ibn al-Furāt (d. 1404), al-Maqrīzī (d. 1441), al-'Aynī (d. 1451), and Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 1469), even expressed a sense of nostalgia for "the good old days" which prompted al-Maqrīzī to describe Baybars as "one of the greatest rulers of Islam."²⁵

In these later works, Baybars's role in the murder of Quṭuz was no longer the main one, nor was it necessarily to be celebrated.²⁶ The murder of Quṭuz was presented as a conspiracy involving several amirs, among whom was Baybars.²⁷ In some versions he was not even the one to deal either the first blow or the death blow.²⁸ They further emphasized the abhorrent nature of the act by portraying

²³P. M. Holt, "The Presentation of Qalāwūn by Shāfi' ibn 'Alī," in *The Islamic World From Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis*, ed. C. E. Bosworth, Charles Issawi, et al. (Princeton, 1989), 143.

²⁴Ibid., 148.

²⁵Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:641.

²⁶Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, *Ḥusn al-Manāqib*, 66; Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Mukhtār al-Akḥbār: Tārīkh al-Dawlah al-Ayyūbiyah wa-Dawlat al-Mamālik al-Baḥrīyah ḥattā Sanat 702 A.H.*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ṣāliḥ Ḥimḍān (Cairo, 1993), 11; idem, *Kitāb al-Tuḥfah al-Mulūkīyah fī al-Dawlah al-Turkīyah: Tārīkh Dawlat al-Mamālik al-Baḥrīyah fī al-Fatraḥ min 648-711 A.H.*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ṣāliḥ Ḥimḍān (Cairo, 1987), 45; Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab* (Cairo, 1964-), 29:477-78; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:435; Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Maḥāsīn Yūsuf ibn Taghrībirdī al-Atābikī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1963), 7:83; Irwin, *Middle East in Middle Ages*, 37.

²⁷'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl Abū al-Fidā, *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī Tārīkh al-Bashar* (Beirut, 1968), 3:207.

²⁸For example: Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Mukhtār*, 11; idem, *Tuḥfah*, 45; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:435; Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, *Ḥusn al-Manāqib*, 66-67; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 29:477-78; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 7:83. See Holt, "Three Biographies," 26; idem, "Some Observations on Shāfi' ibn 'Alī's Biography of Baybars," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 29 (Spring 1984): 125.



Quṭuz in positive terms as a good and pious Muslim, suggesting he did not deserve to be killed and that his murder was therefore unjust.²⁹ Quṭuz in these writings was a good, pious sultan who was betrayed by his men. This was emphasized by reports that Quṭuz was originally “Maḥmūd”, the Muslim-born son of the Khwarizm-shahs, who was sold into slavery after the Mongol defeat of his dynasty and who was later the hero of the battle of ‘Ayn Jālūt, where the Muslims achieved victory over the Mongols.³⁰ In contrast to Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s version, which left no room for contenders to the throne, Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī wrote that the top Mamluk amirs had chosen Sayf al-Dīn Balban al-Rashīdī, “the most prominent amongst them,” to be their next sultan.³¹ The idea that Baybars was not among the prominent Mamluk amirs is echoed in Ibn Kathīr’s version, which complements Shāfi‘’s. Ibn Kathīr wrote:

It is said that when he [Quṭuz] died the amirs were confused amongst themselves over whom to make sultan. They each feared the consequences and that what befell others could quickly befall them [i.e., that they could be murdered by fellow Mamluks like Quṭuz, his predecessor Aybak, and the Ayyubid Tūrañshāh before them], so they agreed on Baybars al-Bunduqdārī, though he was not among the most prominent *muqaddamīn*; they wanted to try it out on him.³²

These writings presented the harsh and despotic side of Baybars’s rule. Baybars was known for his strictness and severe punishments.³³ These writers reported that he spied on and imprisoned several top Mamluk amirs, often on the grounds that they were conspiring against the sultan.³⁴ These accounts tended to present unfavorable images of Baybars as a paranoid, insecure dictator rather than a strong ruler trying to control a huge empire. Baybars’s imprisonment of Shams

²⁹Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 29:484; Abū Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Aybak ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar wa-Jāmi‘ al-Ghurar*, ed. Ulrich Haarmann (Cairo, 1971), 8:41.

³⁰For example: Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar*, 8:39-40; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 29:479-80; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, 7:85-86; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:435; Quṭb al-Dīn Abū al-Faṭḥ Mūsā ibn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Quṭb al-Dīn al-Yūnīnī al-Ba‘labakī al-Ḥanbalī, *Dhayl Mir‘āt al-Zamān* (Hyderabad, 1954), 1:368.

³¹Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī, *Ḥusn al-Manāqib*, 67.

³²Abū al-Fidā al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Biḍāyah wa-al-Nihāyah* (Beirut and Riyadh, 1966,) 13:223.

³³Khawaiter, *Baibars*, 37-38.

³⁴Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī, *Ḥusn al-Manāqib*, 129; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 30:84-87, 111, 123, 180; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar*, 8:96; Ibn Abī al-Faḍā’il, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks*, 79; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:493-95.



al-Dīn Sunqur al-Rūmī, for instance, could have been presented as an example of the sultan reining in his top generals, which was always a challenge for the Mamluk regime. Instead, Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī and al-Nuwayrī cast shadows on Baybars’s character in their accounts of the incident. According to Shāfi‘, the sultan imprisoned Sunqur al-Rūmī, who had tortured one of his mamluks to death despite the sultan’s intercession. Shāfi‘ explains that Sunqur had discovered that the mamluk was a spy for Baybars.³⁵ Al-Nuwayrī’s version, on the other hand, suggests that the sultan might have been attracted to the mamluk, who was “good looking,” and it was this which prompted Sunqur al-Rūmī to punish him.³⁶ Both explanations for the imprisonment of this amir thus portray Baybars in a negative light.

Other writers, like al-Maqrīzī, did not criticize this toughness that Baybars demonstrated in dealing with the Mamluks. So, for example, in dealing with the imprisonment of a top general, Sayf al-Dīn Balban al-Rashīdī, al-Maqrīzī mentioned his several transgressions and Baybars’s patience and tolerance until he was informed—through spies, of course—of this amir’s conspiracy with an Ayyubid ruler against Baybars, which the sultan could not allow to go unpunished.³⁷ Here Baybars hardly seemed despotic in seeking to control the Mamluk generals and preempting a coup d’état.

Nevertheless, even these later writings, which were not intended to idealize Baybars, acknowledged his active role in the administration of justice and the implementation of shari‘ah.³⁸ Unlike Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, who suspiciously ignored Baybars’s decision to appoint four chief judges from the four schools, later sources dealt with the decision but differed in its evaluation. Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī, in his *mukhtaṣar* of Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir’s work, explained that the reason behind the decision was the strictness of the Shafi‘i qadi, Ibn Bint al-A‘azz, which led to a state of stagnation in the administration of justice.³⁹ Ibn Kathīr explained that Ibn Bint al-A‘azz held up rulings that went against the Shafi‘i *madhhab* but were allowed by other *madhāhib*.⁴⁰ This was also the explanation given by al-‘Aynī later in the fifteenth century.⁴¹ The qadi’s adherence to the letter of the law rather than its spirit appeared almost unjust and obstructive. Thus Baybars’s decision was presented as an

³⁵ Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī, *Husn al-Manāqib*, 210.

³⁶ Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 30:123.

³⁷ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:493.

³⁸ Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Mukhtār*, 13; Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī, *Husn al-Manāqib*, 135, 143, 157; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:501, 503, 508, 536-37.

³⁹ Shāfi‘ ibn ‘Alī, *Husn al-Manāqib*, 210-11.

⁴⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah*, 13:245.

⁴¹ Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-‘Aynī, *Iqd al-Jumān fī Tārīkh Ahl al-Zamān*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo, 1988), 1:408.



innovative solution to the everyday problems which people faced in the qadi's court. It could be interpreted as an act of religious tolerance that simultaneously enhanced the power of the sultan.⁴²

For writers like al-Nuwayrī, Ibn Bint al-A'azz was a respectable, firm judge who followed shari'ah strictly even when it was in contradiction to the interests of the ruling authorities, the Mamluks. In this version of the incident, the qadi had issued a ruling which harmed the interests of one of the top amirs, and it was this amir who suggested that Baybars appoint four chief judges.⁴³ Al-Nuwayrī's probable disapproval of the decision is hinted at by his account of the Syrian judges' resistance to this decision. They first refused their appointments and then tried to resign, but the sultan would hear none of that.⁴⁴ That there would be resistance to such a decision after traditional Shafi'i control is perhaps understandable.

Al-Maqrīzī's account, on the other hand, included an anecdote that reveals how unpopular the decision was. Somebody saw al-Zāhir Baybars in a dream after his death and asked him how God had judged him. Baybars responded that he received the most punishment for appointing four judges since this had disunited Muslims.⁴⁵ This then was his most unjust decision according to al-Maqrīzī.

The ambivalence of later Mamluk sources towards Baybars's harshness and injustice is further demonstrated in their accounts of the fires in Fustat and the taxation of Damascus. Both cases were ignored by Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, who sought to promote an ideal image of the sultan.

The fires that plagued Fustat in 1264 were obviously dangerous and threatened to lead to disorder. They occurred during a time when Crusaders were among the main enemies of Islam and when toughness with Franks and Christians in general was welcomed by many Muslims. Copts were blamed for the spread of the fires, supposedly as revenge for Baybars's attacks on and destruction of churches in Syria after his defeat of various Frankish enemies.⁴⁶ Baybars reacted by ordering that all Copts and Jews, including the elders of both communities, be burned. They responded by offering to ransom themselves. Some sources report that the elders of the community paid the ransom.⁴⁷ While none of the writers consulted outwardly criticized Baybars's actions, some of their accounts seem to suggest they thought the punishment was too severe. Thus Mufaḍḍal ibn Abī al-Faḍā'il (a Copt himself) along with al-Nuwayrī wrote that a pious Coptic monk who was

⁴²Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, 165-66.

⁴³Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 30:117.

⁴⁴Ibid., 122.

⁴⁵Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:640.

⁴⁶Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, *Husn al-Manāqib*, 198; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 30:114.

⁴⁷Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, *Husn al-Manāqib*, 198.



known for helping people in need regardless of their religion paid the requested amount.⁴⁸ This man was tortured to death on the basis of a *fatwá* given by the *fuqahā'* citing "fear of *fitnah*."⁴⁹ The positive terms in which that man is described suggest that by helping pay the fine he was doing a good deed, which in itself implies that these people were treated unjustly.

While all sources appreciated Baybars's war efforts and his victories against the Mongol and Frankish enemies of Islam, later sources also acknowledged that this glory came at a high price. Building and sustaining large armies cost a lot of money. This overburdened some members of the population more than others. Baybars raised the taxes on Damascus and its environs, arguing that this was land reconquered from the Mongols and therefore as technically '*anwah*' land it could be taxed at a higher rate.⁵⁰ The sultan's earlier decision to appoint four chief qadis came to his service. He secured *fatwás* from Hanafī jurists legitimizing his argument and his decision.⁵¹ Yet this decision was listed among Baybars's injustices in several later sources. The understandable unpopularity of this maneuver was still clear a century later in Ibn Kathīr's *Al-Bidāyah* where he wrote:

This issue is famous and there are two opinions on the matter; the correct one is that of the majority, which is that [Muslim property reconquered from infidels] should be returned to its original owners.⁵²

This decision was listed among Baybars's injustices in several later sources. Ibn al-Furāt and al-Nuwayrī reported that the people of Damascus suffered so much that they prayed Baybars's rule would end.⁵³ Al-Nuwayrī wrote that various ulama of Damascus had pleaded with Baybars to decrease the heavy taxes, and though the sultan promised them to end all taxes once he defeated the enemy, he broke his promise.⁵⁴ After much pleading and with the intercession of al-Šāhib Fakhr al-Dīn (son of the vizier Ibn Ḥannā), who had studied Shafī'i jurisprudence, Baybars agreed to allow Damascenes to keep their property in return for a million dirhams paid in installments.⁵⁵ When he died, Damascenes had paid only half of the amount due.

⁴⁸ Ibn Abī al-Faḍā'il, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks*, 135-36.

⁴⁹ Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 30:151-52.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152-53.

⁵¹ Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 2:386-87; al-'Aynī, *'Iqd al-Jumān*, 2:30.

⁵² Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah*, 13:252.

⁵³ Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh*, 85.

⁵⁴ Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 30:362-63.

⁵⁵ Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 2:387; al-'Aynī, *'Iqd al-Jumān*, 2:30; Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah*, 13:252.



Historians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries cast doubts over the manner of Baybars's death which further tarnish his image. In several versions, the sultan had planned to poison another man but the cups were mixed up and Baybars drank the poison by mistake.⁵⁶ The insinuations in these stories cannot be ignored. First they imply that Baybars was in the habit of killing and poisoning other men for no legitimate reason. In this case, the man for whom the poison was intended was an Ayyubid who had performed outstandingly in a battle and received high praise, which is said to have made the sultan jealous. But more importantly, these reports imply that Baybars deserved to die such a death, which in itself betrays the authors' true judgment of his rule. Most versions suggest that Baybars died of poison, although they differ in their rendition of the details. This air of conspiracy and mystery adds to the legend of the sultan.

While historians were busy writing their interpretations of the Mamluk regime and the reign of Baybars, other histories, unofficial and unscholarly, were also being constructed. The events of Baybars's life and reign provided a source for popular entertainment. The first major work of a popular nature to take Baybars as its protagonist was *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*.

The dating of *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* is a fundamental problem facing researchers who wish to use it as a source for cultural and social history. We know that some form of the *Sīrah* had come into being by the fifteenth century, because it was mentioned by Ibn Iyās.⁵⁷ His comments were very brief and do not indicate to what degree it had developed by then. The earliest extant manuscript of the *Sīrah* is found in the Vatican collection and dates back to the sixteenth century.⁵⁸

The fact that the *Sīrah* was primarily a work for oral performance meant that it was a fluid, changing text, rather than a static and defined one. The storyteller and the audience reconstructed the already fluid text at every recitation. This work, which began as an *oral* folk epic, was eventually put into writing, though most surviving manuscripts of the *Sīrah* date back only to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries.⁵⁹ Even so it continued to be a living oral tradition; E. W. Lane gave an account of the reciters of "*Seeret Ez-Zahir*" in the nineteenth century, and Ṭāhā

⁵⁶Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, 242; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar*, 208-10; Ibn Abī al-Faḍā'il, *Histoire des sultans mamlouks*, 276-77; Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh*, 86; Abū al-Fidā, *Al-Mukhtaṣar*, 4:10; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:635-36; al-'Aynī, *Iqd al-Jumān*, 2:179-80.

⁵⁷R. Paret, "Sīrat Baybars," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 1:1127; Boaz Shoshan, "On Popular Literature in Medieval Cairo," *Poetics Today* 14 (1993): 354.

⁵⁸Bridgette Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic and Identity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1986), 8; Paret, "Sīrat Baybars," 1127.

⁵⁹Connelly, *Arab Folk Epic*, 8.



Ḥusayn mentioned public recitations and the sale of printed editions of it in the early twentieth century.⁶⁰

The printed versions of the *Sīrah* that are now available are not carefully prepared editions of specifically identified manuscripts, nor are they faithful to the richness and language of the manuscripts.⁶¹ The only serious academic work carried out so far on *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* is the still incomplete translation into French—without an accompanying edited Arabic text—by Georges Bohas and Jean-Patrick Guillaume.⁶² This translation is based on a nineteenth-century manuscript from Aleppo.⁶³ For this article I have used the printed edition currently available in the bookstores of Cairo. This is a five-volume edition published in 1996 by al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kitāb.⁶⁴ The title page of each part (of which there are fifty in the five volumes) includes the title *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars, Tārīkh al-Malik al-'Ādil Ṣāhib al-Futūḥāt al-Manṣūrah* and announces that it is a second edition of a version first published in 1341/1923.

The importance of *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* in studying the historiography of Baybars himself has not received sufficient consideration. It is as if scholars of the *Sīrah* were trying to divorce its protagonist from his historic counterpart. It is important for the scholar to realize and to emphasize that Baybars the sultan, Baybars of the historical scholarly sources, and Baybars of the *Sīrah* are not identical. Yet it is equally important to realize that this distinction was probably lost on most reciters, listeners, and readers of *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*. Thus the reconstructions of Baybars's life through the *Sīrah*—just as those in traditional primary sources—were meant to comment on Baybars the sultan and consequently on rulership in general even while they entertained the public.

The *Sīrah* relates the exploits of "Maḥmūd" Baybars, the legendary Muslim hero who triumphs over wicked *kuffār*. It is important to note that in the epic it is Baybars, not Quṭuz, who is born into a noble Muslim family.⁶⁵ This fabricated royal lineage might have been necessary to legitimize Baybars's—and by extension, the Mamluk regime's—rule. Just as in official discourse Baybars needed the legitimation provided by a caliph's seal, so in popular discourse this legend served

⁶⁰E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (The Hague, London, and Cairo, 1978), 395; Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Al-Ayyām* (Cairo, 1992), 82.

⁶¹Georges Bohas, "L'autobiographie de Baïbars," *La Museon* 104 (1991): 125.

⁶²Georges Bohas and Jean-Patrick Guillaume, *Roman de Baïbars/Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, 8 vols. (Paris, 1985-).

⁶³Robert Irwin, "Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars," *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, ed. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London, 1998).

⁶⁴*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1996).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 128, 277, 469, 471-77, 704.



to affirm the right of slave troops who were born non-Muslims to rule over most of the central Islamic lands.

Most medieval scholarly sources did not dwell on Baybars's pre-Mamluk life. He entered official narrative as a mamluk of Aydakin Bunduqdār, after which he rose through the military bureaucracy and became one of the top mamluks of al-Şāliḥ Ayyūb.⁶⁶ *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* offered a domesticated image of this military slave. It did not portray Baybars in any barracks. Instead, "Maḥmūd" was adopted by a rich Damascene lady, Fāṭimah al-Aqwasīyah. She is the one who named him "Baybars," after her deceased son.⁶⁷ Thus the *Sīrah* domesticated its hero and presented him in terms to which the audience could relate. The motif of Baybars's adoption is repeated with al-Şāliḥ Ayyūb and Shajar al-Durr, who also adopt Baybars as their son and name him as al-Şāliḥ's heir. The emphasis on Baybars's origin as "Maḥmūd," as well as his adoption by prestigious Muslim families, appears to be a response to the charge that Mamluks did not know their families and their parents. For a culture that highly esteems the family as a social unit it would have been important to present the hero as a man from a "good family."

All medieval scholarly reports, both those in Baybars's favor and those against him, claimed that he had played a part in the regicide of his predecessor, Quṭuz. Contrary to that stance, however, *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* attempted to clear its hero from any such charge. The relationship between the two men was portrayed as amiable and strong; Quṭuz treated Baybars very generously and appointed him his heir to the throne.⁶⁸ Baybars in turn "commended Quṭuz's doings and rulings and praised him."⁶⁹ Quṭuz was mysteriously killed and a note beside the corpse accused Baybars of the regicide.⁷⁰ It turned out that Baybars's Frankish enemy, Juwān, was behind both the murder and the accusation, and subsequently Baybars was cleared.⁷¹

Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars is rather nuanced in its interpretation and representation of Baybars's legend. It presents him as a hero, a good pious Muslim ruler. Yet unlike the ideal sultan which Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir makes Baybars out to be, *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* humanizes rather than valorizes its protagonist. This Baybars is not a larger than life hero; he does not perform miraculous feats himself and is often caught in troublesome situations and needs assistance. It is the secondary

⁶⁶G. Wiet, "Baybars I, al-Malik al-Zāhir Rukn al-Dīn al-Şāliḥī," *EI*², 1:1124.

⁶⁷*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, 164.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 1076-77.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 1078.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 1079.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 1080-81.



"helper" characters of 'Uthmān and Jamāl al-Dīn Shīḥah (an Isma'ili chief) who perform miracles and are often considered to be divinely guided.⁷² Baybars himself is neither almighty nor invincible. This almost subversive portrayal of a ruler's power is best exemplified in the way the *Sīrah* deals with Baybars's relations with the Isma'ilis.

In the official narrative Baybars crushed and subjugated the Isma'ilis of Syria.⁷³ A great deal of emphasis is placed on how they were forced to pay tribute to the Mamluks rather than to the Franks.⁷⁴ In the *Sīrah*, however, the Isma'ilis are presented as one of Baybars's main support groups who came to his rescue when he was in danger and performed miracles to save him.⁷⁵ Their leaders saved Baybars from deadly situations when Christian enemies tried to kill him.⁷⁶ It is as if he owed to them his sultanate and the maintenance of his power. Yet even in the *Sīrah* Baybars appointed their leader for them, choosing an outsider for the job; an act of extreme subjugation for such a group.⁷⁷

Baybars's piety and loyalty to Islam was stressed throughout the *Sīrah* primarily in terms of popular religious beliefs and practices.⁷⁸ He was looked after by several saints who saved him by miracles from life-threatening dangers.⁷⁹ He was also depicted as performing orthodox religious rituals strictly.⁸⁰ Sayyidah Zaynab is the patroness of many of the characters of the *Sīrah*, ensuring their victory and helping them out of trouble.⁸¹ Sayyidah Nafisah is the one who unites Baybars with his aide and companion 'Uthmān ibn al-Ḥublā.⁸²

Baybars's loyalty to Islam was also expressed in terms of strong religious prejudice against Franks as well as Christians in general. The Franks were the main enemies of Islam in the *Sīrah*, along with fire-worshipping Mongols. Baybars's principal enemy and the personification of evil in the *Sīrah* was Juwān, a Christian monk who disguised himself in several personae, including that of chief qadi, in

⁷²For example: *ibid.*, 571, 636.

⁷³Jean-Patrick Guillaume, "Les Ismaéliens dans le *Roman de Baybars*: genèse d'un type littéraire," *Studia Islamica* 84 (November 1996): 145.

⁷⁴For example: Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, *Ḥusn al-Manāqib*, 224-25, 241-42; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 30:247-52; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:587; Khowaiter, *Baibars*, 123-26

⁷⁵*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, for example: 203, 206, 565, 705, 1038, 1051, 1055, 1106, 1171, 1173, 1175, 1186, 1322.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 1175.

⁷⁷Guillaume, "Les Ismaéliens," 145.

⁷⁸*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, 290, 323, 570, 573, 592.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 676, 718.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 145, 257, 325, 328, 332, 621, 720.

⁸¹Fārūq Khūrshīd, *Aḍwā' 'alā al-Siyar al-Sha'bīyah* (Cairo, 1964), 101.

⁸²*Ibid.*



order to kill Baybars and defeat the Muslims. This motif of the Christian villain in Muslim disguise is echoed throughout the *Sīrah*. Several minor villains also turn out to be Christians in disguise.⁸³ Baybars defeats them all, with the help of ‘Uthmān or the Isma‘ilis. Tough and despotic measures taken by Baybars and Shīḥah against Christians, such as destroying churches or turning them into mosques, are related with pride.⁸⁴

As in the more scholarly sources, in constructing a heroic image of Baybars, a great deal of emphasis is placed on his justice. Baybars himself laid down forty conditions which had to be met before he would accept the sultanate. Most of these conditions have to do with government and the administration of justice. Similar to the image of Baybars in some of the later medieval sources, despotic suspicion seems behind some of these conditions. Thus any two amirs consulting over a decision of the sultan’s would be killed, amirs were not to convene except in the sultanic *dīwān*, and only the ulama had the right to voice opposition to any of his decrees.⁸⁵ In contrast, Jamāl al-Dīn Shīḥah set only one condition for Baybars to be sultan: “Abide by justice and fairness. For I have made you ruler over Egypt, Syria, and other Muslim lands as long as you obey God. If you steer away from the course of Truth you will be dismissed and we would not owe you any obedience.”⁸⁶

The despotic side of Baybars which was apparent in many of the medieval sources is, as one might expect, almost absent in the *Sīrah*. Yet the *Sīrah* does deal with the taxation of Damascus, which was considered one of Baybars’s most unjust decrees. In the *Sīrah*, Baybars tries to levy taxes on Damascus in order to fight the Mongol enemy Hulāwūn, but the Damascenes refuse to pay, arguing “you are a king and kings meet one another and fight for their positions; . . . we serve whoever sits on the throne.”⁸⁷ The pious shaykh al-Nūrī tells Baybars that these taxes are unjust. When Baybars asks how he is then to defend his land from unbelievers, the shaykh curses him and accuses him of insulting the men of virtue and the doctors of the law.⁸⁸ The *Sīrah* reverses the traditional balance of power between ruler and subjects. Baybars appears helpless in the face of strong opposition from the people and the ulama. This must have brought a sort of sweet imaginary revenge to audiences accustomed to heavy taxation throughout the centuries.

⁸³*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, 800, 804, 807, 812, 927, 990, 1039-40, 1103, 1174.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 946, 982, 1202, 1238, 1242, 1245.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 1084.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 1084-85.

⁸⁷M. C. Lyons, *The Arabian Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-Telling* (Cambridge, 1995), 1:33.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*



While in the scholarly sources most justice was carried out within the boundaries of formal judicial and legal procedures, the *Sīrah* celebrates a more crude street style of justice, where Baybars always defeats the “bad guys.”⁸⁹ His use of questionable means is justifiable, because it leads to the triumph of good over evil. Thus one of the recurring motifs of the work is Baybars killing off an evil character apparently without due cause. In court, the truth is made clear and it becomes obvious that Baybars’s action had been just. His taking the law into his own hands is not condemned.

This practical attitude towards justice and the law demonstrated in the *Sīrah* was paralleled by a distrust of qadis and the court system. Thus Baybars’s main opponent and the personification of evil in the *Sīrah*, the Christian spy Juwān, spent the first half of the work disguised as chief qadi in the Ayyubid court. In his position as qadi he repeatedly tried to prosecute Baybars for the various murders, but Baybars always came out justified. The *Sīrah* also made fun of the schools of law. To save himself from a long wait for their case to be heard by a qadi, ‘Uthmān, Baybars’s friend and aide, proposed that he would be a Hanafi while Baybars could be a Shafi‘i “for today.”⁹⁰ This further confirms the pragmatic stance that the *Sīrah*, and by extension its Cairene audience, took with regard to the law, a stance that one could argue is still part of Egyptian urban culture to this day.

Baybars’s reputation, from the earliest scenes of the *Sīrah*, is based on his justice. In his pre-sultanate days, Baybars rose quickly through the government bureaucracy and at each new post fought corruption and injustice against the common people. This—rather than some miraculous power—seems to have been both his greatest credential and his greatest achievement. Baybars’s main attraction as a hero in this *Sīrah* was his ability to defeat wrongdoers and dispense justice. This fight to establish internal justice and order preceded external battles against enemy troops.

It is Baybars’s local reputation as a man of honor and courage, a man capable of fighting corruption, which qualified him to lead armies into battle and earn his troops’ loyalties.⁹¹ The *Sīrah* is full of anecdotes about Baybars’s military capabilities and stories of his courage in battle.⁹² In many instances, however, Muslim victories were due more to trickery and intelligence than simply to military and physical power.

⁸⁹*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, 147, 151, 226, 278, 285, 363, 369, 373, 378, 426, 556, 563.

⁹⁰Lyons, *The Arabian Epic*, 1:34.

⁹¹Khūrshīd, *Aḍwā’*, 105-6.

⁹²*Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, 981-82, 989, 996, 1163.



Fourteenth-century Egyptian scholars writing under Qalawunid influence and patronage tended to throw unfavorable light on Baybars's image and present his legacy in a negative manner. The text of the *Sīrah* appears to be conscious of those subtle tensions. In *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, Baybars the protagonist is poisoned to death by none other than Qalāwūn!⁹³

Thus historians of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries and the creators of *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars* presented very different perceptions of al-Zāhir Baybars. These varying and often contradictory accounts show that they used the historiography of this sultan to make various political arguments. For example, Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir glorified Baybars in an attempt to legitimize his rule and promote the then newly-established Mamluk regime. This he accomplished by presenting its founder as an ideal sultan and ruler. Historians of successive generations demonstrated more ambivalent attitudes towards Baybars. Some, like Baybars al-Manṣūrī, Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, and al-Nuwayrī, might have been interested in de-emphasizing Baybars's achievements in order to enhance those of the regime of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. This might not seem strange in light of the changes that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was introducing to the institutional foundations set by the founders of the Mamluk state, including his own father, Qalāwūn. His experience being ousted from the sultanate twice left him determined to turn his third reign into a new beginning for Mamluk rule and to make a name for himself as a great ruler.⁹⁴ To justify and rationalize his innovations it followed that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and his court intellectuals would attempt to slight the founders and originators of the very traditions they sought to overturn. It is revealing that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad chose to destroy and rebuild at a lower height Baybars' famous Bridge of the Lions, the lions adorning the bridge being Baybars's emblem.⁹⁵ This might have prompted fourteenth-century Egyptian historians to include negative aspects of Baybars's rule and character. That they were not writing under his control, as Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir was, also allowed them more freedom in expressing their views—a point which Shāfi' ibn 'Alī explicitly makes.

In contrast to the Egyptian authors, most Syrian historians of the fourteenth century, like al-Yūnīnī and Ibn Kathīr, were religious scholars and teachers.⁹⁶

⁹³Ibid., 3078.

⁹⁴Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn (1310-1341)* (Leiden, 1995), 31, 197.

⁹⁵Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Cairo, 1996), 3:238.

⁹⁶Donald P. Little, *An Introduction to Mamluk Historiography: An Analysis of Arabic Annalistic and Biographical Sources for the Reign of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn*, Freiburger Islamstudien, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1970), 69. For a review of literature discussing the existence of a "Syrian school" of Mamluk historiography see Li Guo, "Mamluk Historiographic Studies: The State of the Art," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 1 (1997): 29, 37-41.



Their distance from the court and the fact that they did not hold official positions meant that they were less likely to be influenced by the attempts to slight and defame the legacy of Baybars for the benefit of the Qalawunid dynasty. The third Syrian historian of this period referred to in this article is Abū al-Fidá, the Ayyubid prince of Ḥamāh.⁹⁷ Though Abū al-Fidá was part of the ruling regime he was more concerned in his work with provincial affairs. Being an Ayyubid himself, he did not need to legitimize the Qalawunid dynasty and consequently he, too, was not overly prejudiced against Baybars. Thus the attitudes expressed by fourteenth-century Syrian historians towards Baybars paralleled those of later Egyptian historians of the fifteenth century.

Yet obviously the legacy of Baybars was so strong that even rival regimes could not afford to ignore his achievements. His military victories and conquests and his establishment of a strong, centralized, extensive empire were not ignored by any of the Mamluk writers I consulted. Needless to say, a severe attack on the founder of the Mamluk state would have undermined the legitimacy of the regime under which they all lived and worked. Furthermore, the ambivalence that these writers demonstrated towards Baybars suggests that while they appreciated his contributions to state building and his establishment of order and military conquests, they also realized that these came at a heavy price. Maintaining large armies that were strong enough to expand Mamluk rule into Nubia, Libya, and Armenia, to keep such a huge empire together, and to fight off enemies, east and west, such as the Mongols and the Crusaders, also entailed a high degree of discipline and order and were—necessarily—funded by heavy taxation. However, by the fifteenth century writers were removed from the events of Baybars's reign and the heavy burdens caused by his achievements had been somewhat forgotten. His reign came to represent an age of glory, perhaps because these writers perceived their own time as one of decline and decadence. In popular memory Baybars lived on through *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*, which presents him as a humanized Muslim hero who fought the internal as well as external enemies of Islam and who carried out justice for all. During the nineteenth century, an age of European occupation and Egyptian defeat, these memories of past glory were so popular that E. W. Lane reported that there were thirty reciters, in Cairo alone, who specialized exclusively in *Sīrat al-Zāhir Baybars*.⁹⁸

⁹⁷Little, *Introduction*, 46.

⁹⁸Lane, *Manners and Customs*, 395.



three main perceptions of Baybars as idealized sultan, harsh despot, or Muslim hero shows that certain qualities such as just rule and commitment to Islam were. Middle East Documentation Center. The University of Chicago. For example, a man was in dispute with the sultan over the ownership of a well which Baybars had started digging and which the man had completed. Baybars insisted that he and his opponent be treated equally before the shari'ah and stepped down from his position of judge at the Dar al-Adl so that the qa'ids. Baybars I, in full al-Malik al-Ahmad Rukn al-Din Baybars al-Bunduqdari, or Al-Ali, Baybars also spelled Baibars, (born 1223, north of the Black Sea died July 1, 1277, Damascus, Syria), most eminent of the Mamluk sultans of Egypt and Syria, which he ruled from 1260 to 1277. He is noted both for his military campaigns against Mongols and crusaders and for his internal administrative reforms. The Middle East Documentation Center at The University of Chicago - The Sultan, The Tyrant, and The Hero: Changing Medieval Perceptions of al-Zahir Baybars. Article History. Article Contributors. Baybars' story is exemplary of the careers of many slave soldiers of the medieval and early modern Muslim world. He rose from being a refugee and slave to become a soldier, officer, and then a ruler. Ibn Abd al-Zahir, Baybars' secretary and author of his biography, states that he commanded 200 mamluks against an army of 13,000 rebels. There were also an unspecified number of auxiliaries that rallied to Baybars to bolster his numbers and even out the odds. The rebellion was very bloodily suppressed. In 1254 al-Ashraf was deposed. Baybars was proclaimed the new sultan by his followers and the entire army followed suit. The Sultan.