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Caught between heredity and merit: the amir Qūṣūn and the legacy of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (d. 1341)[1]

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Abstract
From medieval times until today ideas of heredity through lineage and of merit through slave status have jostled for pre-eminence as explanations for transitions of Mamluk royal authority. This article contributes to this debate through an analysis of events in late 1341 marking the transition from the reign of one of the sultanate's most successful rulers, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn, to that of his sons. This is achieved by focusing on the whereabouts of one of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's most powerful agents, Qūṣūn al-Sāqī al-Nāṣirī, and on how this amir monopolized power in Egypt and Syria in such a way that his accession to the sultanate seemed inevitable. The article then demonstrates how things went wrong for Qūṣūn and how his failed attempt to obtain the sultanate triggered a Qalāwūnid dynastic succession practice that was to remain dominant for many decades.
Keywords: Mamluk sultanate, Qalāwūnids (1279–1382), Qūṣūn al-Sāqī al-Nāṣirī (*c.* 1300–42), Royal succession, Tanistry

My son (*yā waladī*), I raised you so that you would be of use to me when I am gone. I realize that my descendants' succession (*al-khalaf*) will be the best way forward after my demise. But you should be the legal guardian (*fa-takūnu waṣīyun*) over my sons (*awlādī*), joining them to your own sons (*awlādika*) and raising them just as I have raised you.[2]

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2 Shams al-Dīn al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn al-Ṣāliḥī wa Awlādihi*, ed. B. Schäfer, *Die Chronik aš-Šujāʿīs* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1977), Erster Teil (Arabischer Text), 160.

Shortly before his death, after a highly successful reign of several decades, the Mamluk sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (23 March 1285–7 June 1341) is said to have left the senior amir Sayf al-Dīn Qūṣūn al-Sāqī al-Nāṣiri (*c*. 1300–March 1342) with these explicit instructions for his succession. In fact, it is hard to imagine that the chronicler who reproduced this direct speech, the low-ranking military Shams al-Dīn al-Shujāʿī (d. after 1356), was really present on the occasion, or would take any interest in a verbatim reconstruction of what was said in the sultan's bedchamber back in early June 1341.[3] This particular succession arrangement, attributed by al-Shujāʿī to the dying sultan, is no doubt one of the retrospective explanations for the situation that was to follow al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death. The fact that a number of "legal guardians" tried time and again to impose their authority on the sultanate did not prevent, over the course of four decades from 1341, eight of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sons, two of his grandsons, and two of his great-grandsons acceding in a continuous sequence to the throne of Mamluk Egypt and Syria. This went hand-in-hand with the simultaneous consolidation of a powerful system of "Qalāwūnid" royalty, which secured these descendants' special social status far beyond the deposition of the last sultan from their ranks in 1390.[4]

In this paper, I seek to demonstrate how the reality of Qalawunid dynastic success was less straightforward than retrospective explanations, such as al-Shujāʿī's, seem to suggest. I will show how the transition from al-Nāṣir Muḥammad to his sons in late 1341 in particular was an episode in Mamluk political history that was far more complex, and at the same time very revealing about royal succession practices in late medieval Egypt and Syria.

1. Caught between heredity and merit?

Academic debates among Mamlukologists on the nature of the ruling succession in the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517) are long-standing and extremely vexed, with dynastic father-to-son (or brother-to-brother) sequences such as those of the Qalāwūnids being pitched against the equally concrete reality of multiple usurpations of royal authority by *mamluk* amirs, by military leaders of

3 On al-Shujāʿī, see Peter M. Holt, "Shams al-Shujāʿī: a chronicler identified?", *BSOAS* 58/3, 1995, 532–4.

4 For details of this continuous struggle for power among Qalāwūnid elites, see J. Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos. Patronage, Conflict, and Mamluk Socio-Political Culture, 1341–1382* (The Medieval Mediterranean 65. Leiden: Brill, 2006), esp. 123–68. For a discussion and illustration of the system of Qalāwūnid royalty, see J. Van Steenbergen, "Qalāwūnid discourse, elite communication and the Mamluk cultural matrix: interpreting a 14th-century panegyric", *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43, 2012, 1–28, esp. pp. 6–13. For a long-term appreciation of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Mamluk socio-political practice within which these tensions as well as this emerging system of royalty need to be viewed, see J. Van Steenbergen, "The Mamluk sultanate as a military patronage state: household politics and the case of the Qalāwūnid *bayt* (1279–1382)", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56/2, 2013, 189–217: for a related but more structuralist approach up to the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, see also W.W. Clifford (Stephan Conermann, ed.), *State Formation and the Structure of Politics in Mamluk Syro-Egypt, 648–741 A.H./ 1250–1340 C.E.* (Mamluk Studies 2. Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2013).

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exogenous slave origins.[5] In fact, the majority position in these debates has always prioritized the normative nature of Mamluk usurpation practices, and this is deeply rooted in long-standing discursive traditions that were informed by internal and external perceptions and experiences from Mamluk times onwards. In a well-known passage from a deed of nomination, drawn up in 1309 by order of the ʿAbbāsid caliph, an act of usurpation by a military leader of *mamluk* origins, Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Jāshnakīr (d. 1310), was sanctified in the clearest anti-dynastic terms:

> I have shown you my pleasure with the slave of God Most High, al-Malik al-Muẓaffar Rukn al-Dīn, as my deputy in the kingship of the Egyptian territories and the Syrian lands. I have set him in place of myself because of his religion, his competence, his ability and his favour to the Believers (*li-dīnihi wa-kafāʾatihi wa-ahaliyyatihi wa-raḍiyyatihi li-l-muʾminīn*). I deposed his predecessor after learning of his abdication from the kingship. I deemed this to be my function, and the four judges gave their judgments therein. And know (may God have mercy upon you) that kingship is childless (*al-mulk ʿaqīm*) and does not pass by inheritance to anyone from predecessor to successor or in order of seniority (*laysa bi-l-warātha li-aḥad khālif ʿan sālif wa-lā kābir ʿan kābir*). I have besought the choice of God Most High, and appointed al-Malik al-Muẓaffar as governor over

5 For summary reconstructions of this debate, see A. Levanoni, "The Mamluk conception of the Sultanate", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, 1994, 373–92, esp. pp. 373–4; J. Van Steenbergen, "'Is anyone my guardian …?' Mamluk under-age rule and the later Qalāwūnids", *al-Masāq* 19/1, 2007, 55–65, esp. pp. 56–8 (referring to relevant publications by David Ayalon, Peter Holt, Robert Irwin, William Brinner, Linda Northrup, Ulrich Haarmann, and Angus Stewart). To this should now also be added more recent publications, representative of different voices in the debate that are (much) more critical of the traditional one-generation/usurpation viewpoint: A.F. Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 145–8; F. Bauden, "The sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and the politics of puppets: where did it all start?", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 13/1, 2009, 53–81; J. Loiseau, *Reconstruire la maison du sultan, 1350–1450. Ruine et recomposition de l'ordre urbain au Caire*, 2 vols (Etudes Urbaines 8/1. Cairo: IFAO, 2010), 198–203; A.F. Broadbridge, "Sending home for mom and dad: the extended family impulse in Mamluk politics", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 15, 2011, 1–18; K. Yosef, "Mamluks and their relatives in the period of the Mamluk sultanate (1250–1517)", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 16, 2012, 55–69; K. D'hulster and J. Van Steenbergen, "Family matters: the 'family-in-law impulse' in Mamluk marriage policy", *Annales Islamologiques* 47 (J. Loiseau (ed.), Dossier *Histoires de famille*), 2013, 61–82; J. Van Steenbergen, "Ritual, politics and the city in Mamluk Cairo: the Bayna l-Qasrayn as a dynamic 'lieu de mémoire' (1250–1382)", in A. Beihammer, S. Contantinou and M. Parani (eds), *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean. Comparative Perspectives* (The Medieval Mediterranean 98. Leiden: Brill, 2013), 227–76; Van Steenbergen, "Military patronage state"; J. Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks. XIIIe–XVIe siècle. Une expérience du pouvoir dans l'Islam médieval* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014), esp. pp. 106–37; W. Flinterman and J. Van Steenbergen, "Al-Nasir Muhammad and the formation of the Qalawunid state", in A. Landau (ed.), *Pearls on a String: Art in the Age of Great Islamic Empires* (Baltimore and Seattle: The Walters Art Museum and University of Washington Press, 2015), 86–113.

you. Whosoever obeys him, obeys me; and whosoever disobeys him, disobeys me; and whosoever disobeys me, disobeys Abu'l-Qāsim my cousin (the blessing of God be upon him and peace).[6]

In Ulrich Haarmann's reading of this episode, this caliphal statement "epitomized the ideal of personal effort over inherited position", the normative nature of merit over heredity in succession practices.[7] In his 2001 study of late medieval European reports of travels to Mamluk Egypt, Haarmann demonstrated how, here too, similar understandings of a purely meritocratic political system prevailed, thus explaining how "the primary reaction of the contemporary western commentary on Mamluk rule was astonishment over the fact that slaves could become rulers of the land".[8]

Interestingly, in his discussion of this contemporary European perception of meritocratic slave rule as the norm in Egypt, Haarmann primarily evoked its discursive nature. He demonstrated amongst others how "the absurdity of slave rule was easily harmonized by our European travelers with the image associated with Egypt since Herodotus that everything on the Nile stands on its head".[9] For the Mamluk sources themselves, however, the discursive layers involved in their simultaneous construction and communication of ideas of *al-mulk ʿaqīm* and of dynastic heredity remain little acknowledged. As a result, the precise relationship between these two antithetical ideas – dynasty versus one-generation nobility, Qalāwūnid royalty versus *al-mulk ʿaqīm*, or heredity versus merit – within one social system is an issue that defies scholarly consensus, as is true for the whole of Mamluk succession practices. The resultant paradox of how both – whether as social norm or as taboo – could continue to transfer successful claims to legitimate tenure of the sultanate for the entire Mamluk period has not yet been seriously considered.

In fact, Haarmann eventually also concluded, from his analyses of both Mamluk and European contemporary sources, that the adoption of anti-dynastic attitudes among Mamluk political elites was a very gradual process. He even came to the conclusion that only "by the end of the fifteenth century [was] the succession of the son (instead of a genuine, i.e. first-generation *mamluk*) [...] generally regarded as illegitimate".[10] Haarmann's model, then, combines

6 Translation from P.M. Holt, "Some observations on the ʿAbbasid Caliphate of Cairo", *BSOAS* 47/3, 1984, 501–7, pp. 505–6; quoting Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Kitāb al-nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk miṣr wa'l-qāhira* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub and Wizārat al-thaqāfa wa al-irshād al-qawmī, 1963–72), 8, 263. See the same text also in al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. M.M. Ziadeh (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1934–73), 2, 65 (quoted in Bauden, "The politics of puppets", 55).

7 Ulrich Haarmann, "The Mamluk system of rule in the eyes of Western travelers", *Mamluk Studies Review* 5, 2001, 2–24, esp. p. 22.

8 Haarmann, "System of rule", 4–6

9 Haarmann, "System of rule", 5.

10 U. Haarmann, "Regicide and the 'Law of the Turks'", in M. Mazzaoui and Vera B. Moreen (eds), *Intellectual Studies on Islam, Essays Written in Honor of Martin B. Dickson* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1990, 128–30; Haarmann, "System of rule", 22–4. See also D. Ayalon, "The Circassians in the Mamluk kingdom", *JAOS* 69/3, 1949, 135–47, 139, 145–6, where Ayalon already noticed such a gradual shift from hereditary to strictly meritocratic succession practices (but with a much earlier turning point: at the end of

the different viewpoints in the Mamluk succession debate in a historical model of slow change over time, with the succession of sons slowly being overtaken as the social norm by the usurpation by military slaves. However, what emerges from the combination of Baybars' appeal to the *al-mulk ʿaqīm* phrase in the early fourteenth century with Haarmann's analyses of reports on the issue of succession, is perhaps not so much how norms might have changed over time, but rather how in their own discursive ways discussions in all reports revolved principally around that paradox of a legitimacy that could be acquired through usurpation and hereditary succession alike. That the unfamiliar idea of entitlement on the basis of slave status could hold its ground in Mamluk Egypt obviously appealed to the imagination of any European visitor, author and reader; but neither was there doubt in any of their accounts that it did so against the more familiar idea of entitlement on the basis of lineage, as in an endless competition of ideas about legitimacy that appeared as mutually exclusive and therefore absurd to outsiders and that was obviously even still raging – as noted by Haarmann – "by the end of the fifteenth century". Even in the early sixteenth century, this paradox still resonated in outsiders' perceptions of the Mamluk political system, as in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, produced in 1513:

> And you have to note that the sultan's state (*stato*) is formed unlike all other principalities because it is similar to the Christian pontificate, which cannot be called either a hereditary principality or a new principality. For it is not the sons (*figliuoli*) of the old prince who are the heirs (*eredi*) and become the lords, but the one who is elected (*eletto*) to that rank by those who have the authority (*autorità*) for it. And this being an ancient order (*ordine*), one cannot call it a new principality, because some of the difficulties in new principalities are not in it; for if the prince (*principe*) is indeed new, the orders of that state (*stato*) are old and are ordered to receive him as if he were their hereditary lord (*signore ereditario*).[11]

Whatever the late Mamluk realities that may (or may not) have been reflected in representations such as Machiavelli's, it is clear that for a very long time in Mamluk history ideas of heredity through lineage and of merit through slave status continued to jostle for pre-eminence as successful explanations for transitions of Mamluk power. Both continued to represent diverging but equally useful and powerful explanatory tools in the strategies applied by competing elite groups throughout these moments of transition. As will be shown below, the transition of power upon al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death in the summer of 1341 offers a case in point of how exactly such strategies could crystallize

the fourteenth century); this point was later repeated in D. Ayalon, "From Ayyūbids to Mamlūks", *Revue des Études Islamiques* 49, 1981, 43–57, p. 56.

11 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*. Translated and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield. Second edition (Chicago, 1998), 82; see also Haarmann, "System of rule", 19.

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around ideas of heredity and merit, both acting as two powerful centres of gravity in the multifaceted arsenal of Mamluk ideologies of legitimate rule.

But that certainly is not all. As is true for any social formation, social realities and the ways they are explained do not necessarily correspond. The practice of transitions of Mamluk rule cannot and should not be reduced to how they were explained by observers or by participating groups, let alone by those on the winning side. The unequivocal consolidation of the idea of the royalty of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's offspring in the course of the fourteenth century does not necessarily reflect a teleological reality of Qalāwūnid succession practices. As al-Shujāʿī also suggested in the opening quotation of this article, beyond 1341 "legal guardians" continued to jostle for pre-eminence with al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sons, just as ideas of merit did with ideas of heredity. But they did not necessarily do so in symmetric pairs of "guardians" and "merit" versus "sons" and "heredity". As will be shown below, the amir Sayf al-Dīn Qūṣūn's adventures between June 1341 and January 1342 offer a case in point of how the reality of Mamluk succession also concerned an open-ended renegotiation of relationships of power among a variety of stakeholders. These certainly included sons and "legal guardians", but mainly again as two rallying points for a multifaceted variety of centripetal and centrifugal elite groups.

2. The rise of the amir Qūṣūn

Before June 1341

The amir Sayf al-Dīn Qūṣūn al-Sāqī al-Nāṣiri (*c.* 1300–March 1342) surely experienced an extraordinary career. From being a petty Mongol salesman of hides and furs in the Black Sea area before 1320, Qūṣūn achieved almost unprecedented status at al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's court in Cairo in the 1330s through a combination of good fortune, appealing looks and shrewd character. At that time, and together with the amir Sayf al-Dīn Bashtak al-Nāṣiri (d. *c.* August 1341), he became the primary mover at court, superior even to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's own sons. This status was illustrated by their membership of the sultan's private retinue of the *khāṣṣakiyya* and of the group of amirs linked to the sultan through marriage, by their leading involvement in ceremonies surrounding the marriages and military promotions of the sultan's sons, and by the occasional delegation to both of them of certain royal responsibilities, including the reception of important guests and, according to one source, Qūṣūn's standing in for the sultan when a renewed oath of allegiance was taken from the entire army in 1340. Additionally, the well-known cases of Qūṣūn and Bashtak were equally notorious for the competition that had grown between them in the course of those years. As one contemporary author put it, "they were as envious as a man's wives".[12] For all of this divide-and-rule-policy's usefulness to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's political authority, chaos and violent conflict were about to erupt between those two ambitious competitors when Muḥammad was dying in June 1341. Only their peers' initial concerns for continuity and, hence, dynastic succession, in conjunction with a final resuscitation of the sultan's charismatic

12 al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 68.

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authority managed to prevent this and to have his son Abū Bakr's succession generally accepted.[13]

The summer of 1341

Qūṣūn's manoeuvring for political pre-eminence can be seen to have started immediately upon Abū Bakr's succession to his father's throne in early June 1341. In July 1341, al-Maqrīzī identifies him in unambiguous detail as being responsible for the arrest of his competitor Bashtak. In that chronicler's version the following very entertaining slapstick plot developed:

> Qūṣūn acted in the case of Bashtak, and he kept [bothering] the sultan until he agreed with him to arrest him, upon the arrival [from Syria] of [the senior amir] Quṭlūbughā al-Fakhrī. Qūṣūn spread a rumour (*ashāʿ*) that Bashtak intended to take hold of Quṭlūbughā. That [rumour] reached the ears of one of Quṭlūbughā's close companions, so he sent [someone] to meet him on the road and to inform him of how Bashtak was preparing himself, [telling him that the latter was] "determined to meet up with you on your way back, and to kill you, so watch out". From al-Ṣāliḥiyya onwards, therefore, Quṭlūbughā began to be on his guard, until he set up camp at Siryāqūs.
>
> In this extraordinary case, it so happened that Bashtak left Cairo for his estate at al-Raydāniya, to inspect his dromedaries and camels. The news then made its way to Quṭlūbughā al-Fakhrī that Bashtak had gone to al-Raydāniya "to wait for you". So he prepared himself and girded his weapons underneath his clothes. Then, after several of his mamluks had joined up with him, he moved on, while he was geared for war. He left the road and proceeded along the foot of the mountain, to save himself from Bashtak. But Bashtak knew that he was coming. Therefore, when Quṭlūbughā got close to the place where Bashtak was and the dust of his horse became visible to him, [Bashtak] guessed that it was Quṭlūbughā. So he sent one of his mamluks to welcome him and inform him that he was going to stay there until he came to meet him. But when Quṭlūbughā was informed of this, his fear for Bashtak only

13 For Qūṣūn's career under al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, see J. Van Steenbergen, "The amir Qawṣūn: statesman or courtier? (720–741 AH/1320–1341 AD)", in U. Vermeulen and J. Van Steenbergen (eds), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras – III* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, 102. Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 449–66, including further bibliographic references; for the settlement of Abū Bakr's succession in June 1341, see J. Van Steenbergen, "Mamluk elite on the eve of an-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death (1341): a look behind the scenes of Mamluk politics", *Mamluk Studies Review*, 9/2, 2005, 173–99; Bauden, "The politics of puppets", 76. The examples mentioned here may be found in al-Yūsufi, *Nuzhat al-nāẓir fī sīrat al-malik al-nāṣir*, ed. A. Hutayt (Beirut: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1986), 236, 290, 363–4; al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 42, 45, 68, 86–8; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:379, 392, 407, 417, 460; K.V. Zetterstéen, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mamlükensultane in den Jahren 690–741 der Higra nach arabischen Handschriften* (Leiden: Brill, 1919), 200–1; Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī al-Faḍāʾil, *Kitāb an-nahj al-sadīd wa al-durr al-farīd fīmā baʿda Taʾrīkh Ibn al-ʿAmīd*, S. Kortantamer ed. (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, 23. Freiburg im Breisgau: K. Schwarz Verlag, 1973), 81, 87.

> increased, as did his [belief] in the veracity of [the rumour that] had reached his ears concerning him. So he said to the mamluk: "Greet the amir, and say to him: I will not meet with him or with anyone else until I stand before the sultan; only after that, I will meet with him". The mamluk of Bashtak left, while Quṭlūbughā imagined that once his mamluk had informed him of [his] reply, he would ride towards him. So he ordered his mamluks to proceed very slowly, while he himself rode on his own and without any delay to the citadel. Quṭlūbughā entered to see the sultan and [...] he started to inform the sultan, the amir Qūṣūn, and all the amirs about what had happened to him with regard to Bashtak, that he had wanted to confront and kill him en route. So the sultan and Qūṣūn informed him that they had agreed to arrest Bashtak.
>
> In the afternoon of this day, when as usual the amirs entered the Qasr for the public service (*khidma*), the amir Bashtak was among them. [When] they were eating from the [sultan's] table, the amir Quṭlūbughā al-Fakhrī and the amir Tuquzdamur al-Nāṣiri al-Sāqī went to Bashtak, took his sword, and tied his hands behind his back. And together with him, his brothers Aywān and Ṭūlūtamur were arrested, as were two royal mamluks that used to side with him. They were all enchained and sent to Alexandria overnight [...]. And all his mamluks were arrested, his houses and stables were confiscated, and his slaves and retinue were pursued.[14]

For all the doubts one should have about the realities reflected in this entertaining narrative, Qūṣūn's aforementioned years-long rivalry with Bashtak, which, just one month previously, their peers had expected would erupt into open conflict, suggests that this outcome should not have displeased Qūṣūn, whether or not he was directly involved.[15]

Much less open to doubt, however, was Qūṣūn's leading involvement in the major conflict that soon followed, and which ended in al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr's premature abdication on 4 August 1341, less than two months after his enthronement. In essence, this was a token of the typically Mamluk generational conflict between youngsters' ambitions for change and established seniors' desire for continuity. In August 1341, this competition crystallized around the figures of the new sultan and his kingmakers. On one side was al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr and his young entourage, who had tasted power and were very keen for more. On the other were the new sultan's kingmakers, a host of senior amirs from his father's reign who were equally keen not to forsake their privileges. The contemporary author al-Shujāʿī, indeed, succinctly explained this conflict's deeper grounds as follows: "[al-Manṣūr] wanted to arrest the seniors and promote the

14 Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:561–2; remarkably identical – with even more detail and accuracy – in Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Nujūm*, 10:7–8. This close interdependence, which continued for the entire episode and beyond, seems to indicate the use of a common source for this period, probably al-Yūsufī's lost chronicle *Nuzhat al-Nāẓir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Nāṣir* (see Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos*, 11–2)

15 Qūṣūn is additionally mentioned as the first and major recipient of the redistribution of Bashtak's impressive *iqṭāʿ* (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:562), which at least suggests some involvement.

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juniors".[16] As seen above, one of the most prominent amirs among those seniors, even more so after the arrest of Bashtak, was the amir Qūṣūn who became a major target for Abū Bakr's hostile policies. But Qūṣūn was not the kind of man to wait and see what would happen. Thus, according to the same author:

> [Qūṣūn] took steps to save himself, meeting with the senior amirs and informing them of [...] what the sultan was doing. He said to them: "This young man is no good for us as long as these young men [from his entourage] control his mind; he [and they] intend to arrest all of us, sparing none of the senior amirs, so as to have the regime to themselves and to play with it as they see fit".[17]

As a result, Qūṣūn decided to act first, taking up position at Qubbat al-Naṣr, a notorious meeting place for rebels outside Cairo, together with his troops and some of his peers, and meanwhile inviting all others, including the royal mamluks, to follow suit. The sultan, however, totally misjudged the situation, resulting, again, in a very curious and entertaining turn of events. Al-Shujāʿī left the following remarkable observation in this respect:

> Most of the amirs had refrained from joining the amir Sayf al-Dīn Qūṣūn, thinking that the sultan would ride out or react in some way. But when they realized that he did not ride out or do anything, they became afraid for their own [wellbeing], rode out and one by one they headed for Qūṣūn, including even [such well-respected senior veterans as] Almalik, al-Jāwulī and Kūkāy.[18]

Qūṣūn had gambled and won. Such a unanimous and unexpected expression of support for his cause left him with almost total political control, which he very carefully started consolidating immediately upon Abū Bakr's formal abdication. From a dozen Qalāwūnid candidates, al-Manṣūr's youngest (and hence politically weakest) brother was chosen and enthroned as al-Malik al-Ashraf Kujuk (d. 1345). Furthermore, Qūṣūn's position was confirmed through his appointment to the office of nāʾib al-salṭana, allowing his close supervision of the infant sultan.[19]

Thus Qūṣūn in effect became the sultan in all but name only two months after al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death, and there are quite a few facts and figures that

16 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 134.
17 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 135.
18 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 137, 134–40 (for his full account of this conflict), 160 (for his assessment of Qūṣūn's motives and scheming). For other versions, all agreeing on the leading role of Qūṣūn, see Ibn al-Wardī, *Tatimmat al-mukhtaṣar fī akhbār al-bashar*, in al-Malik al-Muʾayyad ʿImād al-Dīn Abū al-Fidāʾ, *Taʾrīkh Abī al-Fidāʾ al-musammā al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar*, ed. M. Dayyub (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1997), 2:496; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:566–70; al-ʿAyni, *ʿIqd al-jumān fī Taʾrīkh ahl al-zamān*, Ms. Cairo Dār al-Kutub 1584 *Taʾrīkh*, 49–51.
19 See Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos*, 43, 116, 184.

attest to a generally perceived consensus to that effect. To begin with, al-Maqrīzī describes the beginning of this new political episode as follows:

> On Monday 6 August 1341, [Kujuk] was made sultan [...] and he was given the honorific "al-Malik al-Ashraf". The office of nāʾib al-salṭana was offered to the amir Aydughmish, the amīr ākhūr. But he refused and turned it down. Then the agreement was reached to make the amir Qūṣūn nāʾib. He accepted, but imposed on the amirs the condition that he could continue to live in the Ashrafiyya [palace] in the citadel, and would not have to leave [the citadel] and live in the nāʾib's residence outside the citadel's gate. They accepted that. So from that day [in August 1341] onwards, he became the nāʾib al-salṭana, holding executive authority in the regime's business.[20]

There is no doubt that the impression one gains from these and many similar accounts is one of a rapid build-up of political authority for Qūṣūn, including a reluctant but growing acknowledgement thereof from the senior amirs. But equally revealing of the nature of that rising new authority is the fact that he was capable of bending established rules, forsaking his newly acquired position's customary operational base outside the citadel and ensuring he and his entourage maintained a physical presence as close as possible to the new sultan, in the Ashrafiyya palace inside the citadel's southern enclosure, built by the little Kujuk's uncle and namesake, the illustrious al-Malik al-Ashraf Khalīl (r. 1290–93).[21] This physical manifestation of Qūṣūn's empowerment over the sultan and his authority advanced further when, only a few months later, Qūṣūn had a new headquarters for the nāʾib constructed, inside the citadel's gate and very conspicuously overlooking its access:

> Then, the amir Qūṣūn had a hall constructed for his session with the amirs, inside the citadel's gate. He had it opened [on one side with] a grilled window (shubbāk) overlooking the vestibule [of the citadel's gate], in which he was to hold session with the senior amirs. He would organize the [ceremonial] banquet in [this new hall], which the amirs, the muqaddams and the soldiers started to attend [instead of the sultan's banquet].[22]

Everything seemed to go well for Qūṣūn, who was by now sultan in all but name; even the support from his peers that he needed to take his final steps towards the sultanate appeared to be growing. This had been made clear in early August, when almost all of them, reluctantly or otherwise, had rallied around him against the former sultan Abū Bakr. It was further confirmed in late September 1341, when discontent among the sultan's mamluks concerning

20 Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:571; again almost identical in Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Nujūm*, 10:21–2 (adding that "the sultan was an instrument in the sultanate").

21 On this palace, see N. Warner, *The Monuments of Historic Cairo. A Map and Descriptive Catalogue* (ARCE Conservation Series, 1. Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2005), 185, with further bibliographic references.

22 Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:580.

Qūṣūn's increasing claims to some of the sultan's prerogatives provided a first and successful test for that support. Al-Shujāʿī claims to record the following words from the mouths of those rebellious mamluks:

> We have problems with this Qūṣūn and we want to know his office. If he is the sultan, then we know that he is our ustādh and we will serve him wholeheartedly. But when he is the nāʾib, then he has no right to take our khushdāshiyya one by one and employ them in his service. [In that case] we will not subject ourselves to such a [practice].[23]

The amirs, however, seemed less concerned with Qūṣūn's overt ambitions. When Qūṣūn went with his troops to Qubbat al-Naṣr for the second time in less than two months, "all the amirs and muqaddams and the [entire] ḥalqa came to him, and no one stayed away from him".[24] As a result, after only a brief military confrontation at the foot of the citadel, the handful of rebellious mamluks were forced to flee and Qūṣūn emerged victorious, thus publicly confirming his position and status yet more strongly.

Such unprecedented support from almost all of Cairo's military elements was not all that built up Qūṣūn's power. It was at least matched by his own military entourage, unparalleled in size and consisting of an elaborate household, including amirs related to him through kinship and marriage, some seven-hundred personal mamluks and, at least according to al-Shujāʿī, three- to four-thousand "horsemen".[25]

Furthermore, his influence had come to stretch far beyond the military, reaching much deeper into Mamluk society as a whole. An extant unique manuscript copy of a panegyric *risāla*, written in early August 1341 by a secretary from the royal chancery, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī (d. 1352), testifies to how, even at this early stage, a legitimating discourse explaining Qūṣūn's dominance was being constructed. Pursuing this legitimation via explanatory tools such as divine providence and, indeed, the merits of his guardianship of the Qalāwūnid royal house, Ibn al-Qaysarānī left no doubt about his purpose with this *risāla* when he entitled it "The book of the well-protected pearl on the divine election of the most noble lord, al-Sayfī Qūṣūn".[26] In unequivocal terms, the author then uses the twenty-one folios of the autograph manuscript, preserved in the Chester Beatty Library, to explain what he meant by this divine election, using his knowledge of Quran, *ḥadīth*, and the recent history of Egypt's rulers and sultans to support his arguments. The bulk of the *risāla* therefore consists of a chronological sequence that suggests a direct link between: royals such as the last Ayyubid ruler of Egypt al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb, the Mamluk sultan

23 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 150.
24 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 152.
25 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 159, 183–4, 188; al-Maqrīzī also mentions the number of 700 mamluks (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:588). On the dimensions of his household, see Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos*, 116.
26 Chester Beatty, MS 4179, fol. 1r; see also A.J. Arberry, *The Chester Beatty Library. A Handlist of the Arabic Manuscripts*, volume V (Dublin, 1962), p. 58, no. 4179, which identifies the manuscript as an autograph in a "fine scholar's naskh" and describes its contents as "a panegyrical account of Qūṣūn and his family".

Qalāwūn, and al-Nāṣir Muhammad himself on the one hand; and on the other "the lord of the amirs of the *dawla*, the assistant of kings and sultans, the supporter of the commander of the faithful, Qūṣūn al-Nāṣirī al-Manṣūrī".[27] This royal history is actually presented as culminating in Qūṣūn's rule as the towering guardian of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's legitimate successor, in support of which the author ends his panegyric with the following prodigious bombardment of eulogy, subtly moving from the sultan to the eclipsing status and personality of the amir Qūṣūn:

> If God would have wanted to protect my love from a wounded heart, He would not have spoken [to me, Ibrāhīm b. al-Qaysarānī] of the installation of the heir and rightful successor to the kingship (*iqāmat wārith al-mulk wa-mustaḥiqqihi*) [. . .], the sultan son of the sultan son of the sultan, the *imām* son of the *imām* son of the *imām*, our lord and our master, the sultan al-Malik al-Manṣūr Sayf al-Dunyā wa-l-Dīn; may God combine for him the good fortune of the two dwellings; may He make his face second only to the two moons and his justice second only to [that of] the two ʿUmars; may He enable his victories; may He join all the regions to his capital to become his territories. [May this happen] under the continued supervision of the guardian and protector of his supreme kingship (*bi-baqāʾ kāfil mulkihi al-sharīf wa-kāfīhi*), the supporter and defender of his exalted throne (*ʿāḍid dastihi al-munīf wa-ḥāmīhi*), the shepherd and herdsman of Islam (*murāʿī al-islām wa-rāʿīhi*), the controller of the reins of state business, the assistant of every commanding one and the helper of every commanded one, the one whose victory is ensured and whose support is secured, the powerful one by divine decree (*al-maqdūr*), the one who is protected by God (*al-muʿtaṣim bi-llāh*), the one to whom His business has been delegated (*al-mufawwaḍ umūrihi ilayhi*), the one who is being relied on for all His affairs (*al-muttakil fī sāʾir aḥwālihi ʿalayhi*); the one whose determination will continue to fight for the sovereign and to protect the kingship, whose respected status keeps the provinces well-organized, strengthens the strongholds and reinforces the fortresses, whose visions(?) in [his occupation of] the high guardianship of the sultanate are like the blessed tree while the others are like [its] branches (*ārāʾuhu*[?] *fī kafālat al-salṭana al-muʿaẓẓama hiya al-shajara al-mubāraka wa-l-bāqūn ghuṣūn*); our lord, the most noble majesty, the lofty, the lord and servant, al-Sayfī Qūṣūn, God willing (*mawlānā al-maqarr al-Ashraf al-ʿālī al-mawlawī al-makhdūmī al-sayfī Qūṣūn, in shāʾa llāh taʿālā*)! Hail to our lord, the king of commanders (*malik al-umarāʾ*), for the good tidings which God has prepared for him, that God proscribes for him what he is in charge of and guards him in what he is supposed to take care of, in line with the words of [the Prophet], God bless Him and grant Him salvation . . .[28]

27 Chester Beatty MS 4179, fol. 3v.
28 Chester Beatty MS 4179, fol. 20r–21v.

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Beyond preserving some rare illustrations of this discursive construction of Qūṣūn's authority from early August 1341 onwards, contemporary sources occasionally also offer a glimpse into the realities of his growing monopolies over Mamluk society. In a very different and somewhat surprising context – the circumstances of Qūṣūn's arrest in January 1342 – al-Shujāʿī again offers a rare insight into the appreciation in Mamluk society at large of the wide-ranging extent, reach, power and, eventually, fate of this fine maze of his social and economic agents, representatives and interests:

> Whereas at first the people had been seeking to gain his favour by any means possible, they now started to deny him such efforts, to the extent that when someone had an argument with another, he would say to him: "you are a Qūṣūnid" (*anta Qūṣūnī*) and the other would try to clear himself from this epithet, saying: "there is no Qūṣūnid but you" (*mā Qūṣūnī illā anta*). That became an insult among the people. [...] His coat of arms was ripped from all the places in one go, and no sign of him was left on anything on earth.[29]

A few months before this outlawing of Qūṣūnid allegiances, in late September 1341 the stage had seemed ideally set for Qūṣūn to proceed as others in Mamluk history had done before and would do again. Yet, as can be seen from this quotation, something had happened to trigger a complete reversal of this situation, from very overt and all-encompassing professions of loyalty in late September 1341 to the exact opposite by January 1342. What made things go so wrong?

3. The decline of the amir Qūṣūn

Soon after September 1341 it became apparent that Qūṣūn had made a critical misjudgement through a lack of socio-political astuteness in his dealings with al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sons. Qūṣūn tried to remove these potential heirs to the Mamluk throne from the central political scene in Cairo, but this backfired because he went too far and offered latent political opponents a very useful and powerful excuse to ignite a whole host of rebellions and bring his ambitions to a premature end.

Still in August 1341, we are told, Qūṣūn had the former sultan Abū Bakr and seven of his brothers exiled to the city of Qūṣ, tucked away in Upper Egypt.[30] A few months later, however, in November–December 1341, reports started to appear in Cairo about the suspicious death of Abū Bakr, resulting in great discomfort among the ruling circles. In an again rather dramatic fashion, al-Shujāʿī describes what was rumoured to have happened:

> On Friday the 30th of November of the year 1341, a letter arrived from Ṣafī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Muʾmin, the governor of Qūṣ. He reports that al-

29 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 189–90.
30 Ibn al-Wardī, *Tatimmat*, 496; al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 139–40, 160; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:566.

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> Malik al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr had died, and that death had befallen the city of Qūṣ. He drew up a report that 700 individuals had died within a month. But the case was unlike that. For Qūṣūn had actually been afraid of al-Manṣūr and he had chosen to get rid of him. So he had sent Jariktamur b. Bahādur to stay with [al-Manṣūr] and he had commissioned him to kill [the latter]. [...] Jariktamur b. Bahādur went to [al-Manṣūr] and said to him: "O lord, truly your father was extremely benevolent and charitable. Qūṣūn's order to kill you has arrived, but I am willing to put my life at stake and take you to your brother at al-Karak". So he took him [...]. He left [the city] with [al-Manṣūr], who was unarmed and mounted upon a horse. He led him to the cemetery outside Qūṣ, close to the river, where he had [secretly] arranged to meet [the wālī Qūṣ] ʿAbd al-Muʾmin. When he found him standing there, with some of his relatives, Jariktamur handed over [al-Manṣūr] to ʿAbd al-Muʾmin and left. Thereupon, al-Manṣūr knew that his killing was inevitable. They made him dismount from his horse and they stripped him of his clothes. He said to [ʿAbd al-]Muʾmin: "keep me alive, for your own sake. My brothers and the mamluks of my father will not forsake me and if you kill me, your life will be doomed". But he did not heed his words and they strangled him and drowned him in the river. [...] Some of the amirs [in Cairo] were informed of that and they were upset about it. They reproached Qūṣūn for having [al-Manṣūr] killed. [...] [The veteran amir Jankalī b. al-Bābā] said: "By God, O lord, you have endangered our lives. By God, if he really is dead, then total material and financial ruin will be upon our houses".[31]

Despite a prescient level of prophetic foresight in this passage, it leaves the general impression, as do other references to this murder, of a widespread negative perception of Qūṣūn's involvement in Cairo, resulting particularly in his worrying estrangement from some of his peers.[32] In fact, that estrangement was only really worrying since it was provoked simultaneously with things going very similarly, but much more rapidly, wrong in Syria.

Only one Qalāwūnid had managed to escape the clutches of Qūṣūn: al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's eldest son Aḥmad, who for various reasons Muḥammad had removed from the public scene in Cairo to the remote desert fortress of al-Karak several years before. As a result, he had not been involved in his father's succession, nor did there seem to be much chance that he might want to become involved afterwards. He was, in fact, as well ensconced on the fringes of the Syrian desert as were his brothers in Upper Egypt. Qūṣūn, however, did not want to leave any loose ends and is reported to have pursued a campaign of diplomatic exchanges in August and September 1341, aimed at tracking down Aḥmad and sending him to his brothers in Qūṣ. Aḥmad, however, thus drawn into court politics, saw through Qūṣūn's plans and refused to comply. In the

31 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 169–71.

32 All other sources concur that public opinion at the time implicated Qūṣūn; see Ibn al-Wardī, *Tatimmat*, 496; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya waʾl-nihāya fī al-Taʾrīkh* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Maʿārif, 1990), 14:194; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:579–80; Ibn Taghī Birdī, *Nujūm*, 10:17.

course of these two months of increasingly aggressive correspondence, it is even suggested that Aḥmad eventually came to redefine his own position, claiming, contrary to his previous stance, a moral authority within the Qalāwūnid family in line with his relative seniority and with his growing support and independence in al-Karak. As such, he actually requested that his brothers be sent to him in al-Karak, and he is even said to have written to Qūṣūn "to take the rulership and leave me and my brothers alone in al-Karak". [33]

Hence, Qūṣūn's diplomacy failed miserably, and even backfired, pushing Aḥmad into a position he had not sought before. Nevertheless, despite such an unwelcome outcome and his peers' protests, Qūṣūn would not relent. From early October 1341 onwards, he decided to adopt a more proactive policy and send in an army against Aḥmad in al-Karak. It is probably in this context of growing frustration with the Qalāwūnids that his decision, taken around the same time, to have Abū Bakr killed was conceived.

At the head of this military expedition, which started the almost impossible siege of the city and fortress of al-Karak by mid-October 1341, Qūṣūn decided to appoint the aforementioned amir Quṭlūbughā al-Fakhrī.[34] And this measure, one in a whole range of, with hindsight, fatal decisions, was to spark the beginning of the end for Qūṣūn. By sending away Quṭlūbughā, he not only deprived himself of one of his foremost supporters in Cairo, certainly since the arrest of the amir Bashtak, but his policy also boosted support for the distressed Qalāwūnids' cause. One reads, for instance, in Ibn al-Kathīr's contemporary account, that by December 1341 the following remarkable turn of events had sprung up:

> [...] the amir Sayf al-Dīn Quṭlūbughā al-Fakhrī [all of a sudden] settled down outside Damascus [...], with the regiments (aṭlāb) that had come with him from Egypt to besiege al-Karak and to arrest the son of the sultan, the amir Aḥmad b. al-Nāṣir. They had remained on the ridge [of al-Karak], besieging and beleaguering him, until the governor of Damascus had left for Aleppo [to pursue its rebellious governor Ṭashtamur Ḥummuṣ Akhḍar]. Then these days passed by [in Damascus without any news, until] all of a sudden al-Fakhrī and his band appeared. They had sworn allegiance to the amir Aḥmad, calling him al-Nāṣir b. al-Nāṣir, and they had renounced the oath of allegiance to his brother al-Malik al-Ashraf ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Kujuk, offering his infancy as an excuse. They reported that his atābak, the amir Sayf al-Dīn Qūṣūn al-Nāṣiri, had wronged two of the sultan's sons, having them strangled in Upper Egypt [...]. Because of that [they claimed] the amir [Qūṣūn] had estranged

33 For details on Aḥmad and Qūṣūn's diplomatic offensive, see J. Drory, "The prince who favored the desert: a fragmentary biography of al-Nāṣir Aḥmad (d. 745/1344)", in D.J. Wasserstein and A. Ayalon (eds), *Mamluk and Ottoman Societies: Studies in Honour of Michael Winter* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 19–33; for the major source references, see al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 141, 143, 145–7, 161; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:573, 574.

34 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 148, 155–6, 161; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:574, 577, 578; al-ʿAynī, *ʿIqd al-jumān*, 53.

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himself, and they said: "This one wants to destroy this house [of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad], so as to enable himself to take royal power". This is why they had become furious and [why] they had acclaimed the son of their ustādh.[35]

As is clearly borne out by passages such as this, Qūṣūn's antagonism towards the Qalāwūnids resulted first and foremost in discontent in Syria with Qūṣūn finding a common cause in defending the family of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. One long-standing Nāṣiri amir in particular, the nāʾib Ḥalab Ṭashtamur Ḥummuṣ Akhḍar (d. 1342), who had only reluctantly left Cairo a few years before anyway,[36] had refused to swear allegiance to al-Ashraf Kujuk and now seized the opportunity Qūṣūn offered him. He proclaimed Aḥmad sultan, very tellingly assigning to him his father's regal title: al-Malik al-Nāṣir. This revolt in the name of the house of al-Nāṣir, however, seemed doomed when the governor of Damascus refused to forsake Qūṣūn's cause.[37]

The force that really was to turn things upside down, however, was the army Qūṣūn himself had sent against al-Karak. Their siege of this superbly fortified stronghold had grown all the more desperate, while Qūṣūn seems to have grown all the more convinced of its inevitability, and entirely unsympathetic to the idea of breaking off the siege. The sole options he left to Quṭlūbughā and his men, it would seem, were to perish before al-Karak, or to face disgrace and disfavour. Or, in al-Shujaʿi's rendering of Qūṣūn's words:

I will not allow you to return, until you have taken al-Karak, even if it would cost you a year. O you [weaklings], don't just besiege, but smash [al-Karak].[38]

When, therefore, messages arrived with Quṭlūbughā from his old companion and "brother" Ṭashtamur, inviting him to partake in a revolt for the sake of their former master's house, it did not take long until an agreement was reached. As a result, events ensued as described above by Ibn Kathīr, and eventually, by December 1341, Quṭlūbughā and his men were capable not only of taking Damascus, but also of bringing down its returning governor and his supporters, bereft as they had become of their seat of power.[39]

This successful revolt then easily transferred to Egypt. As seen above, the gap between Qūṣūn and his peers had been gradually widening since late September 1341, due primarily to Qūṣūn's increasingly uncompromising attitude. In addition to general concerns being expressed about the suspicious death of al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr, tension had been rising in particular with another veteran

35 Ibn Kathir, *al-Bidāya*, 14:194; similar wording in al-Kutubī, *ʿUyūn al-tawārīkh*, Cambridge UL Ms. Add. 2923(9), fol. 54–54v.
36 See Van Steenbergen, "Mamluk elite", 185.
37 See especially al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 161–5, 172–4; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:579, 580–3.
38 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 165. The addition of "weaklings" to the translation is of course conjectural.
39 See especially al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 165–8, 170–2, 176–9, 180–1; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, 14:194–7; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:580, 581, 583–5, 586.

of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's reign, Aydughmish al-Nāṣiri.[40] By early January the latter took the lead in a rebellion of senior amirs in Cairo, similarly in favour of the house of his former master and against Qūṣūn. Eventually, he and his peers are quoted as having made the following public statement against Qūṣūn:

> We installed a vicegerent. We did not install you as a sultan. These things you have been doing are not the practices of vicegerents. The best thing for you is to surrender yourself, because you will not be able to escape from our hands.[41]

By early January 1342, unlike a few months beforehand, Qūṣūn's fading pre-eminence was no longer acceptable to the senior amirs. All, including those who had maintained their support in the months before, now rose in rebellion against him. With almost no-one left to assist him, Qūṣūn was arrested on 8 January 1342 and sent to prison in Alexandria, the little Kujuk was deposed and returned to his mother in the harem, and al-Nāṣir Aḥmad was invited to reclaim the rights of his family, not just in Syria, but in Egypt too.[42]

4. Conclusion: Qūṣūn and the legacy of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad

Qūṣūn enjoyed a status
    that rose beyond the full moon that is shining in the sky.
But Aydughmish took him down in shackles,
    [causing] his free fall from a tremendous height.
He found no one to protect him from his disgrace;
    where is the [guarding] eye of al-Malik al-Nāṣir?

40 Illustrated by the fact that in August 1341 Aydughmish had been offered the office of *nāʾib al-salṭana* before Qūṣūn. Aydughmish's long-standing and stable career at the court of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (he had been in charge of the sultan's stables as the *amīr ākhūr* for thirty years, i.e. during al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's entire third reign) made him the doyen of this period's court politics; as was to be expected, by mid-November 1341 accounts emerged mentioning how Aydughmish felt increasingly uneasy about Qūṣūn's rising star and the increasing challenges he perceived from Qūṣūn's side to his own high status and natural seniority at court. It seems, however, that Aydughmish never shared the high political ambitions on which others such as Qūṣūn thrived; at least, this is suggested by his unusual success in remaining in favour at al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's court for three decades, by his renouncing the office of nāʾib in August 1341, and eventually also by his voluntary retreat to a governorship in Syria in the spring of 1342, resigning from a promising position at the centre of Mamluk political power when he and his colleagues had arrested Qūṣūn in January 1341 (on the November 1341 tension that threatened to develop into a military confrontation, see al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 157–9; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:579; on Aydughmish's career, see e.g. al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 251; Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr wa-ʿawān al-naṣr*, ed. A. Abu Zayd, N. Abu 'Umsha, M. Muwʿad and M.S. Muhammad (Beirut and Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1998), 1:652–4).

41 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 186.

42 Al-Shujāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, 181, 182–7, 189; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:586–590; al-ʿAynī, *ʿIqd al-jumān*, 57–9.

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His entire case is astonishing,
from beginning to end.[43]

This poem by a contemporary of Qūṣūn, the Syrian scribe and *littérateur* Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī (*c.* 1297–1363), summarizes in unequivocal terms the astonishing case of Qūṣūn's rise and fall; it also represents in equally unequivocal terms contemporary perceptions and sentiments regarding Qūṣūn's case, couched in the ancient *topos* of the ambitious man who reaches for the sky but ends up in his grave instead. In Qūṣūn's case, the latter happened on 27 March 1342, when he was strangled in his prison cell in Alexandria and when his severed head was sent to sultan al-Nāṣir Aḥmad b. al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in Cairo.[44]

If anything more general can be concluded from the life and times of the amir Qūṣūn, it surely is that there was no clear-cut protocol defining how succession to rule and transitions of power should proceed, or indicating how they should not. By the end of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's thirty-year reign, any authoritative tradition was clearly lacking, when succession by his son occurred simultaneously with the disintegration of his court into various opposing groups built around a handful of its senior members. There must have been a script that required the immediate succession of the father by his son, in a ritual attempt to maintain continuity and social order. But this nominal notion of heredity did not automatically endow the new sultan with the legitimacy required to enforce his authority, as Abū Bakr soon experienced to his own detriment. At the same time, Qūṣūn's fate some months later suggests that the merits of successful high-profile service in the former sultan's shadow did not necessarily generate such a legitimacy either. In fact, in spite of what is commonly assumed, ideas and realities of heredity and merit figured simultaneously and often even in asymmetric ways in these confrontations; but given the instability that continued to plague the political elites of the 1340s, they never managed to solve the paradox of legitimacy.

Hence between June 1341 and January 1342, different groups, with interests at court and beyond, organized themselves around a variety of claims and leaders, including ideas of heredity and merit and including sons such as Abū Bakr, Kujuk and Aḥmad, and "guardians" such as Qūṣūn, Ṭashtamur, Quṭlūbughā and Aydughmish. They all engaged in multiple complementary, competing, or conflicting ways in the redrawing of social order after al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death, deploying a variety of physical and symbolic strategies. In the end, however, when the promising future of Qūṣūn's leadership backfired spectacularly, growing expectations of his swift reproduction of a stability that paralleled al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's social order appeared futile, and instability and continued fragmentation of the elite were all that remained for many years to come.

43 Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyan al-ʿaṣr*, 4:141 (where al-Ṣafadī claims to be the author of this poem); a copy in al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:593 (with variant reading of line 5: "In his debasement, he no longer found a companion").

44 Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyan al-ʿaṣr*, 4:140; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:605, 615; Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *Nujūm*, 10:75; al-ʿAynī, *ʿIqd al-jumān*, 65.

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In the context of this renegotiation of the social order of Cairo's political society, Qūṣūn's downfall in particular is revealing of the nature and workings of the strategies deployed, and of the consolidation of Qalāwūnid royalty in the face of elite fragmentation in particular. It is especially the comparison with a similar moment of renegotiation that is revealing. Just as al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's father, Qalāwūn (d. 1290), had emerged very favourably from the generational conflict with sultan Baybars' son and successor, sultan al-Saʿīd Barka, in June–July 1279, so did Qūṣūn rise to pre-eminence from a conflict with Abū Bakr and his young entourage in August 1341. Both then took up the position of de facto ruler in the name of the new minor sultan. As is well known, Qalāwūn soon moved on smoothly to end the rule of Baybars' house and successfully become a sultan in his own right. Qūṣūn, however, eventually succumbed to rebellions in the name of Qalāwūn's descendants, the Qalāwūnids, for which he was himself largely responsible.[45]

In 1279, Qalāwūn had generously allowed Barka and his brothers to retreat to the fortress of al-Karak. That this was a dangerous decision was borne out by the fact that Barka, and his brother Khidr after him, soon started engaging in provocative subversive activities that took several years to quell.[46] Similarly, and with much more success, in 1310 al-Karak had been used as a base to regain the throne from Baybars al-Jāshnakīr by Qalāwūn's son al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.[47] It is impossible to assess whether such a notorious track record for a sultan's offspring in al-Karak formed part of Qūṣūn's considerations in the autumn of 1341. What is clear, however, is that unlike Qalāwūn more than half a century before, Qūṣūn decided to take a very aggressive stance to the former sultan's lineage and that this had perverse effects. It alienated his peers from his cause and, at the same time, publicly acknowledged the rights of that lineage to the Mamluk throne. On the one hand, such attitudes certainly resulted from Qūṣūn's suspected involvement in the murder of the former sultan Abū Bakr, making it clear that uncompromising change would be Qūṣūn's major line of policy. On the other, his decision to target Aḥmad and, eventually, to lay siege to al-Karak only fed into such concerns as were already growing. Everyone who was worried, for whatever reason, about Qūṣūn's rise to pre-eminence, now found common ground and justification for opposition in defence of the wronged house of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. Therefore, the restoration of this "house", headed by its distressed senior Aḥmad, soon gained a momentum which Qūṣūn proved incapable of quelling.

Hence, the Qalāwūnids were the primary legacy of the amir Qūṣūn, owing to his failure to realize his plans in the autumn of 1341. More particularly, the unprecedented nature of the actions Qūṣūn initiated against his master's house

45 See L.S. Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan: The Career of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn and the Consolidation of Mamluk Rule in Egypt and Syria (678–689 AH/1279–1290 AD)*, (Freiburger Islamstudien, 18. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), 72–83; on the transition from Baybars to Qalāwūn, see also A. Stewart, "Between Baybars and Qalāwūn: under-age rulers and succession in the early Mamlūk Sultanate", *al-Masāq*, 19/1, 2007, 47–54.

46 See Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan*, 88–90, 134–6.

47 See e.g. R. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 85–6, 105–6.

not only caused tensions with peers whose crucial support he had won before, but it sparked unexpected opportunities for rebellion in the name of that house. Subsequent success, therefore, could similarly only be claimed in the name of that house, resulting in the proclamation of the one who, willingly or not, had had its leadership vested in him by general consensus: al-Nāṣir Aḥmad, true heir to the legacy of his father, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.

The opportunistic fiction of this allegiance to the Qalāwūnids' dynastic cause was soon borne out again when Aḥmad, reluctant to return to Cairene court politics, fell victim to restraining attitudes very similar to those his brothers had endured before.[48] This pattern, of asymmetric Qalāwūnid opportunism among the leading amirs, would continue for quite a few years to come. The Qalāwūnids were firmly linked to the commemoration of the "good old days", that is the long, successful and prosperous reigns of Qalāwūn and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. As such, it was impossible for anyone to emulate the way in which their rule promised at least some level of continuity and maintenance of vested interests, and therefore legitimacy. This had been made perfectly clear in the experience of autumn 1341 and Qūṣūn's grooming for the sultanate. As a result of this grooming's failure, taking advantage of the opportunities for continuity and steady enhancement offered by Qalāwūn's lineage, and operating against dangerously precipitate change, became the preferred norm in the very fragmented political environment that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and Qūṣūn left behind. Even when, from the 1350s onwards, that environment became much less fragmented and strong new leaders equivalent to Qūṣūn emerged, the enthronement of Qalāwūnids continued to represent the prime solution to the paradox of legitimacy. And this, to a great extent, they owed to the amir Qūṣūn.

5. Afterthought: Caught between *al-mulk ʿaqīm* and tanistry

As mentioned above, the *al-mulk ʿaqīm* idea represented a useful tool for Baybars al-Jāshnakīr and his supporters to explain their 1309 usurpation of the sultanate against the dynastic claims of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and his two sons. Nevertheless, it quickly proved unsuccessful. By early 1310 al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was back on the throne, more powerful than ever, as ideas and groups closed ranks behind him and his dynastic claims and against the usurper. Moreover, apart from this particular episode, no single similar invocation of this principle is known from extant source material for the entire Mamluk period. For Baybars al-Jāshnākīr, just as for Qūṣūn thirty years later, usurpation continued to be confronted with problems of legitimation in its competition with dynasty. In both cases this confrontation proved insoluble.

Qūṣūn's case does, however, reveal that it was not so much these ideas, but rather the groups that used them, that decided on the outcome of this confrontation. From this perspective, and despite its singularity in Mamluk succession practices, the *al-mulk ʿaqīm* phrase may yet be more revealing of the true nature of those practices than is suggested by the short-lived example of sultan Baybars II. It is so in particular when looking at other, pre-Mamluk, historical contexts in

48 For more details, see Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos*, 148–9.

which the phrase was also recorded. In a 2007 publication on Ayyubid underage rule, Konrad Hirschler referred to the Ayyubid practice of hereditary succession, a practice that was deeply linked to the tribal notion of the leadership of the strongest within the extended ruling family, a principle that had (re)appeared at the forefront of Islamic politics by the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries.[49] Hirschler interestingly noted that the phrase *al-mulk ʿaqīm* was used as a slogan when two Ayyubid brothers were vying for the throne of Ḥamā, presented by one of them to support his claims to leadership over the local branch of the Ayyubid family and its assets against those of his brother.[50] To this Ayyubid use of the phrase to refer to their extended-family-succession concept in the early thirteenth century, can be added others that are equally relevant and revealing. In a politically influential Seljuq context, the twelfth-century historian al-Ḥusaynī (d. 1180) includes the following passage in his presentation of some of the traditions about the origins of the Seljuq dynasty:

> The wife of the king of the Turks used to make her husband fear the amir Seljuq ibn Tutaq and prevented him from trusting him or being at ease with him . . . . One day she said to her husband, "Kingship is barren (*al-mulk ʿaqīm*) and cannot bear partnership. You will not savour the wine of kingship unless Seljuq is killed. . .".[51]

References such as these Ayyubid and Seljuq sources in fact suggest that the phrase *al-mulk ʿaqīm* need not necessarily refer to a strictly Mamluk anti-dynastic succession practice; rather, it was clearly meant to capture the Turco-Mongol version of the tribal succession principle of tanistry, of succession to rule by the most capable male member of the ruling clan, as decided by the sword.[52] This is also suggested by Frédéric Bauden's explanation of the phrase, when he states that "for lexicographers, this idiom represents the fact that no genealogical link is of use when it comes to political power, given that a ruler can kill his own son, brother, uncle, or the like in order to maintain his rule".[53] In the Mamluk context, then, *al-mulk ʿaqīm* as a succession practice

49 K. Hirschler, "'He is a child and this land is a borderland of Islam': Under-age rule and the quest for political stability in the Ayyūbid period", *Al-Masāq*,19/1, 2007, 37–40.

50 Hirschler, "Under-age rule", 39, referring to Ibn Wāṣil, *Mufarrij al-Kurūb fī akhbār banī ayyūb*, ed. J. al-Shayyal, H. al-Rabiʿ and S. ʿAshur (Cairo: Wizārat al-thaqāfa wa al-irshād al-qawmī, 1953–1977), 4:89.

51 Al-Ḥusaynī, *Akhbār al-dawla al-saljūqīya*, ed. M. Iqbal (Lahore, 1933), 2; translation from B. Lewis (ed. and tr.), *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople. Volume I: Politics and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 69. The phrase is also encountered in other pre-1000 source-references to succession practices in Umayyad and ʿAbbāsid contexts, always again linking this to tribal customs of leadership won by the sword rather than by mere kin ties (see T. El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography. Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the ʿAbbāsid Caliphate* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 83. I am grateful to Kristof D'hulster for bringing this reference to my attention.

52 Joseph Fletcher, "Turco-Mongolian monarchic tradition in the Ottoman empire", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 3–4/1, 1979–80, 236–51, esp. 236–42.

53 Bauden, "The politics of puppets", 55.

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that paralleled Turco-Mongol tanistry meant that succession to rule was always open to sons and "guardians" alike, and that at moments of transition Mamluk elites almost naturally always fragmented into various groups of claimants – or factions – for the sultanate, as the legitimating contours of this "ruling clan" or "extended ruling family" were open to constant negotiation and interpretation by different Mamluk stakeholders. The apparently mutually exclusive ideas of heredity and merit were thus joined together in this one practice, and although neither decided the course of its process, one or both were always used to explain its outcome to various audiences. Hence the paradox of legitimacy experienced by many a successor, the fact that – whatever his good credentials from the perspectives of heredity, merit, or both – legitimacy was only really obtained when the competition among claimants was won, when fragmentation of the elites was overcome, and when support from a majority of elite social groups at any given time was and continued to be secured.

Baybars al-Jāshnakīr, Abū Bakr, Qūṣūn and other sons and usurpers before and after found that this balancing of elite interests was a hazardous enterprise; in the course of their balancing acts, Baybars, Qūṣūn and their peers experienced moreover that in the fourteenth century at least the Qalāwūnid dynastic nut was a hard one to crack, even when kingship was supposed to be childless.