

OR AMIR

HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

Khidr and Rasputin: On the Potentials and Limits of Charismatic Advisors at Court

I vividly remember a conversation with Professor Reuven Amitai, back in 2010, when I had just begun considering a topic for my M.A. thesis. Seeking direction for the project, we discussed the role of Sufi shaykhs in the context of the Islamization of Palestine during the Mamluk period, and Reuven pointed me to a certain shaykh Khidr (d. 676/1277), who was sultan Baybars' spiritual advisor, a curious "Rasputin-like" character, and suggested that I start by reading about his deeds. Thus began my relationship with Khidr—and with the Sufis in general.

While the reference to Grigory Rasputin (1869–1916)—the notorious spiritual advisor to the last Czar of Russia, Nicholas II (1868–1918), and especially to the latter's spouse, Alexandra (1872–1918)—was obviously humorous, it soon became clear to me how much the stories of those two controversial (to put it mildly) spiritual figures had in common and how pairing them in a discussion about the possible influence of saintly characters at rulers' courts might be instructive. This short essay will thus examine the influence a charismatic advisor was able to wield at court but also consider how crossing certain boundaries might lead to a clash with other, more traditional or bureaucratic, authorities. Focusing on Khidr and the Mamluk context, Rasputin will serve as a point of comparison, which will help shed new light on Khidr and the phenomenon he represented at large. By doing so, the article will propose insights into the nature of relations between the Mamluk ruling elite and Sufi shaykhs, or other saintly figures, while situating them within a broader context.

Louis Pouzet pointed out the resemblance between Khidr and Rasputin in a brief footnote in his 1978 article.¹ While not the first scholar to emphasize Khidr's influence during Baybars' reign—Ashtor aptly called Khidr Baybars' "Hausprophet" in a brief 1937 article²—Pouzet's article paved the way for a number of subsequent short studies of the shaykh's mesmerizing story.³ It seems

¹Louis Pouzet, "Ḥaḍīr Ibn Abī Bakr al-Mihrānī (m. 7 muḥ. 676/11 juin 1277), šayḥ du sultan mamelouk Al-Malik aḏ-Zāhir Baībars," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 30 (1978): 182.

²Eliyahu Strauß (Ashtor), "Scheich Ḥīḍr, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Juden in Damaskus," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 44 (1937): 227–30.

³Most studies dealt with Khidr's notorious assaults on the *dhimmi*s, or his influence over Baybars. Joseph Drory, "On Some Misdeeds of Sheikh Khidr, 'Chief of the Ishmaelites,'" in *Studies in Arabic and Islamic Culture*, ed. Binyamin Abrahamov (Ramat Gan, 2000), 37–49; Christian Müller and Johannes Pahlitzsch, "Sultan Baybars I and the Georgians—In the Light of New Documents



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that no other shaykh from the Mamluk period has received such scholarly attention, and rightly so.

In fact, writers contemporaneous to Khiḏr were no less intrigued than modern ones by his personality, his influence over such a potent ruler as Baybars, the edifying value of his story, and, as importantly, his alleged scandalous (and therefore entertaining) deeds. Khiḏr is mentioned in practically every chronology or biographical compendium of the Mamluk period. Most recensions of his story seem to be ultimately derived from two main “primary” sources. The first, attributed to the amir Qashtamur al-ʿAjamī (d. after 680/1281)—Baybars’ comrade in the Baḥrīyah regiment and a fellow devotee of the shaykh—was originally narrated by Ibn Shaddād al-Ḥalabī (d. 684/1285), Baybars’ court biographer.⁴ The second version appears to have originated with the Damascene chronicler Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 739/1338), relying on an account narrated to him by his father, who personally met Khiḏr. Ibn al-Jazarī’s version is later reproduced—and embellished—by the Cairene chroniclers Ibn al-Dawādārī (fl. 736/1335), al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333) and Ibn Abī al-Faḍāʿil (fl. 759/1358).⁵ In other words, Khiḏr’s story gained wide publicity very early on, was founded on well-known narrators who knew him first-hand, and received wide coverage from prominent chroniclers representing both Cairene and Syrian circles.

THE RISE AND FALL OF SHAYKH KHIḌR

Since Khiḏr’s story is well known to modern scholarship, in what follows I will focus on the magnitude of his influence and the dynamics that made his downfall inevitable. Meanwhile, the parallels to Rasputin—whose story verges on a

Related to the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem,” *Arabica* 51, no. 3 (2004): 259–90; Peter Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the 13th Century*, trans. Peter M. Holt (London, 1992), 225–29; Anne-Marie Eddé, “Baybars et son double: De l’ambiguïté du souverain idéal,” in *Le Bilād al-Šām face aux mondes extérieurs: La perception de l’Autre et la représentation du souverain*, ed. Denise Aigle (Damascus and Beirut, 2012), 73–86; Peter M. Holt, “An Early Source on Shaykh Khaḍir al-Mihrānī,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 46 (1983): 33–39; Denise Aigle, “Legitimizing a Low-Born, Regicide Monarch: The Case of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars and the Ilkhans in the Thirteenth Century,” in *Representing Power in Ancient Inner Asia: Legitimacy, Transmission and the Sacred*, ed. Isabelle Charleux et al. (Bellingham, WA, 2010), 61–94; Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1382* (London, 1986), 53–55 (Irwin also notes Khiḏr’s resemblance to Rasputin).

⁴Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥuṭayṭ (Wiesbaden, 1983), 58–60, 272–74.

⁵Holt, “Early Source”; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmiʿ al-ghurar*, ed. Ulrich Haarman et al. (Cairo, 1960–94), 8:220–24; Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī al-Faḍāʿil, *Al-Nahj al-sadīd wa-al-durr al-farīd fīmā baʿda tārīkh Ibn al-Amīd*, ed. Muḥammad Kamāl al-Dīn ʿIzz al-Dīn ʿAlī al-Sayyid (Damascus, 2017), 241–45; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, ed. Fahīm Muḥammad ʿAlawī Shaltūt (Cairo, 1975–98), 30:376–77.



modern-day popular myth—will be discussed further below.⁶ The sources outline several main features in Khidr’s biography: his dubious origins and early life prior to his attachment to Baybars; his prophecies to the sultan predicting his ascent and key events during his reign; his unprecedented influence during the first decade of Baybars’ reign; taking advantage of this influence, his scandalous deeds, related both to his private conduct and to his persecution of Jewish and Christian subjects; and, finally, his inevitable downfall—whether the outcome of his offensive behavior or of his clash with competing powerful members of court. I will concentrate on Khidr’s influence over the sultan and his clash with other authoritative figures which, I maintain, was the most probable reason for his eventual fall from grace.

Not much is known regarding the shaykh Khidr ibn Abī Bakr al-Mihrānī al-‘Adawī (d. 676/1277) prior to his joining Baybars’ entourage. He grew up in Jazīrat Ibn ‘Umar (modern Cizre, Turkey) and was of Kurdish descent. According to Ibn al-Jazarī, Khidr started as a lowly servant in several notable households and constantly became entangled in controversies—all related to illicit affairs with women. Facing castration as punishment for impregnating a handmaiden, he fled southward, evidently reaching Damascus no later than 1250, about a decade before Baybars’ ascent to the throne.⁷

In Damascus, Khidr began living as a recluse in a cave, which served him as a *zāwiyah*, on top of al-Mizzah, a Damascene suburb located on a hill outside of town, where he might have met Baybars for the first time and prophesied his future success. Al-Nuwayrī presents us with two versions—both quoted from Ibn al-Jazarī—which aim at explaining Khidr’s widely known predictions regarding Baybars’ career. According to one version, Khidr met some Sufis during his stay at al-Mizzah and they informed him of his future, including his relationship with Baybars.⁸ In the second version, Ibn al-Jazarī quotes a conversation between his own father, Ibrāhīm, and the shaykh Khidr, which Ibrāhīm narrated to his son. Here, Khidr recounts that he received the prophecy about his illustrious future

⁶Rasputin became, beginning during his lifetime and even more so posthumously, one of the most omnipresent figures in Russian popular culture and beyond. An incredibly vast and diverse oeuvre has been composed about him, from biographies and novels to movies and pop songs, a fact which makes him an especially difficult figure to study—even more so considering the surprising dearth of reliable academic studies. Most of the writing on Rasputin is clearly biased, particularly against him. This is now slowly changing, as new archives from the early twentieth century are gradually opened to scholars since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. See: Douglas Smith, *Rasputin* (London, 2017), 3–7.

⁷Pouzet, “Ḥaḍīr,” 174; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz*, 8:220; cf. Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 242; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 30:376–77.

⁸Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 30:377. This is Ibn al-Jazarī’s version which is also quoted by Mufaḍḍal (*Al-Nahj*, 242) and Ibn al-Dawādārī (*Kanz*, 8:220–21).



from a wandering naked *faqīr* on Mt. al-Jūdī, where he lived for a while after fleeing Jazīrat Ibn ‘Umar.⁹ According to Khiḍr, the anonymous *faqīr* told him, “Go to Syria (al-Shām). A great matter with its king is destined for you.” Having done so, while Khiḍr dwelled in his cave on al-Mizzah, he chanced to meet Baybars—by then an amir in the service of al-Malik al-Nāṣir, the Ayyubid ruler of Damascus (d. 658/1260)—and foretold his sultanate. Khiḍr continued, saying, “And that *faqīr* informed me of everything that will happen to me during my lifetime, and everything that will occur to the sultan, one incident after the other.”¹⁰

The two conflicting versions suggest that rumors were widespread regarding the origins of the mysterious and unconventional shaykh, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere to become one of the most powerful men in the sultanate, possessing an instant, legendary influence over the sultan. This is apparent from the beginning of the conversation between Khiḍr and Ibrāhīm al-Jazarī, as narrated by his son:

My father, Ibrāhīm, had once asked [Khiḍr]: “Brother, I yearn to know what the circumstances that led you to this state [in which you are now, i.e., as the sultan’s close advisor] were.” [Khiḍr] told him: “By God, I will not tell you before you tell me what you know about me [i.e., about my origins].” [Ibrāhīm al-Jazarī] said: “I know that you were an unfortunate shaykh (*shaykh naḥs*), that you were deported from al-Jazīrah, then from Aleppo, and then from Damascus, and I had not seen you before you reached this state.” [Khiḍr] said: “By God Almighty, you have told the truth! And no one has ever spoken truthfully about me but you, my brother!”¹¹

⁹Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 30:378. Mt. al-Jūdī is, according to Islamic tradition, the place where Noah’s ark rested. See: M. Streck, “Djudi,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 2:573–74.

¹⁰Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 30:379. The conversation between Khiḍr and Ibrāhīm al-Jazarī is quoted, from Ibn al-Jazarī’s chronicle *Ḥawāḍith al-zamān*, only by al-Nuwayrī and does not appear in Ibn al-Dawādārī or Mufaḍḍal’s accounts. This second version produced by Ibn al-Jazarī, via his father, was apparently unknown to Holt (“Early Source”), who assumed that Ibn al-Jazarī’s first version of Khiḍr’s early encounter with Baybars—available to him through the chronicles of Ibn al-Dawādārī and Mufaḍḍal—was the product of a later literary embellishment (*Literarisierung*) aimed at producing a “good story.” As we see here, rather than relying on Ibn Shaddād as his source for Khiḍr’s biography, as Holt suggested, Ibn al-Jazarī actually had his own sources, probably local Damascene ones, such as his own father. Holt was right, though, in his assumption—following Haarmann—that both Ibn al-Dawādārī and Mufaḍḍal drew on Ibn al-Jazarī. There are further sources Holt was apparently unaware of, a fact which compromises his conclusions even more, as will be discussed below.

¹¹Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 30:378. Khiḍr then goes on to recount his story, including his meeting with the *faqīr* on Mt. al-Jūdī.



The main issue behind this anecdote, and in fact behind both stories that aim at narrating Khidr's biography prior to his attachment to the sultan—regardless of their veracity and the effects of *Literarisierung* on them—is that contemporaries, who knew all too well of Khidr's influence and unruly conduct, had difficulty reconciling his eminence with his personality. It was widely known that Khidr prophesied Baybars' ascension to the throne, as well as other key events of the sultan's career, but Khidr did not fit the type of diviner people had in mind: he was no astrologer or expert in other divination techniques, nor was he a respected Sufi saint, who might also be considered capable of clairvoyance through divine grace (*karāmah*).¹² In fact, he was an outsider of dubious origins and, to add insult to injury, what was known about him was a far cry from what was expected of a typical saintly figure.

One approach to reconciling this anomaly was to portray Khidr as one who did not achieve his prophecies through divine favor but rather heard them from some mysterious, yet “proper,” ascetic, or Sufi. It was the Sufis Khidr met at al-Mizzah, or the *faqīr* at Mt. al-Jūdī, who attained the prophecies and transmitted them to Khidr, who in turn presented them to Baybars as his own.¹³ This narrative is echoed in an anecdote—of a more purely didactic nature—brought by the Upper Egyptian Sufi Ibn Nūḥ al-Qūṣī (d. 709/1309), in his treatise on the Friends of God (*awliyāʾ*), *Al-Wahīd fī sulūk ahl al-tawḥīd*.¹⁴ The purpose of the anecdote related to Khidr is to show that a true *walī*—as opposed to Khidr—has no need to associate with worldly rulers and receive their patronage. The anecdote presents a slightly different, though essentially similar, version of the origin of Khidr's prophecy. It is narrated by a certain righteous Sufi (*faqīr ṣāliḥ*), Ṭalḥah al-

¹²Like, for example, another contemporary shaykh who predicted Baybars' ascension. See: al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, ed. Kāmil Salmān al-Jabūrī and Maḥdī al-Najm (Beirut, 2010), 8:173.

¹³Alternatively, as Ibn al-Dawādārī and Mufaḍḍal have it, those successful predictions might very well be by chance and not a sign of any clairvoyance or divine gift—God knows best. See: Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz*, 8:221; Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 243; Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, 226. Here as well, both Egyptian chroniclers use identical phraseology, which leads us to assume they used the same common source—i.e., Ibn al-Jazarī; however, this statement is not found in al-Nuwayrī's account. The question of the nature of Khidr's prophecies is also raised by al-Yūnīnī, who characteristically takes a middle ground on the issue, and even by Ibn Taymīyah, who, also typically, did not think highly of Khidr. See: al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl mirʾāt al-zamān* (Hyderabad, 1954), 3:268; al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām wa-wafayāt al-mashāhīr wa-al-aʿlām*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Beirut, 2003), 50:223. This is in fact part of a larger, ongoing discussion over questions of sanctity and authority in Islam, within which miracle and divination stories played a key role.

¹⁴Denis Gril, “Une source inédite pour l'histoire du *taṣawwuf* en Égypte au viie/xiiiè siècle,” in *Livre du centenaire, 1880–1980* (Cairo, 1980), 441–508.



Damāmīnī,¹⁵ who relates that he was with Khiḏr and another, anonymous, *faqīr* in Damascus (*al-Shām*), and Baybars—still prior to his ascent to the throne—associated with them in a mosque. When Baybars left, the anonymous *faqīr* predicted that “this man will be the ruler of Egypt and al-Shām.” The *faqīr* then left on a journey; when Baybars returned, Khiḏr presented him with the prophecy as if it were his own. He made a pact with Baybars that when the prediction came true, Khiḏr would be his partner (*qasīm*). Years passed, Baybars became sultan, and Khiḏr achieved what he achieved. Meanwhile, one day Ṭalḥah—the eyewitness narrator of the story—saw the anonymous *faqīr*, the “original” prophesier, sleeping blissfully on a winter day in the courtyard of the mosque. The message is clear: “He never met with al-Malik al-Zāhir [Baybars] again, but his kingdom is superior to that of the earthly ruler and of any of those who exerted themselves in achieving ephemeral authority—both in life and in the Hereafter.”¹⁶ Khiḏr thus achieved worldly glory not for any sanctity or supernatural powers he possessed but simply because he stole the prediction emanating from a true saint.¹⁷

These anecdotes are also important in providing some insights into another issue pertaining to Khiḏr’s character: While most scholars who have dealt with Khiḏr have taken it for granted that he was a Sufi shaykh,¹⁸ it is far from clear whether it is accurate to label him as such, since we have practically no information on any shaykhs he might have associated with in contemporaneous sources.¹⁹ The most substantial clues to Khiḏr being a Sufi, thus, are found in the

¹⁵I was unable to identify this person in the sources.

¹⁶Ibn Nūḥ, *Kitāb al-waḥīd fī sulūk ṭarīq al-tawḥīd* (publisher unknown), 2:216–17.

¹⁷As I argue elsewhere, the “stolen prediction” was a popular *topos* in medieval Islamic literature.

¹⁸This led some to make unsubstantiated claims. For example, Bloom suggests that, “It is indeed possible that the *zāwiya* of Ṣayḥ Ḥadir, Baybars’ spiritual adviser, may have had Ḥanafī-Ṣūfī activities . . .”; and Berkey writes (without any apparent reference) that Baybars “performed with him [Khiḏr] the Sufi *dhikr*.” See: Jonathan M. Bloom, “The Mosque of Baybars al-Bunduqdārī in Cairo,” *Annales Islamologiques* 38 (1982): 69; Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (New York, 2003), 243.

¹⁹It is true that later sources, such as the late fifteenth-century al-Sakhāwī, the sixteenth-century al-Shaʿrānī, or the even later al-Munāwī, refer to Khiḏr in more distinctly “Sufi” terms. In these works, Khiḏr is portrayed more as a righteous and venerated shaykh, who experienced mystical states (*aḥwāl*) and *karāmāt*, and whose tomb had become an object of pious visitation (*ziyārah*), while his controversial deeds are left aside. See: al-Munāwī, *Al-Kawākib al-durrīyah fī tarājīm al-sādah al-ṣūfiyah*, ed. Muḥammad Adīb al-Jādir (Beirut, 1999), 3:27–28; al-Sakhāwī, *Tuḥfat al-aḥbāb wa-bughyat al-ṭullāb fī al-khiṭaṭ wa-al-mazārāt wa-al-tarājīm wa-al-biqāʿ al-mubārakāt*, ed. Maḥmūd Rabīʿ and Ḥasan Qāsim (Cairo, 1937), 23; al-Shaʿrānī, *Al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sāʿīḥ and Tawfīq ʿAlī Wahbah (Cairo, 2005), 229, 288.



aforementioned anecdotes about his early association with certain anonymous *fuqarā'* prior to his meeting with Baybars.²⁰

Be that as it may, it was during his sojourn at al-Mizzah that Khidr met the person who would become his second notable devotee, the amir Sayf al-Dīn Qashtamur al-ʿAjamī,²¹ who is famous for bringing Baybars and Khidr together.²² According to Ibn Shaddād, the fateful meeting between Baybars and Khidr took place in 661/1263, when Baybars was already sultan.²³ Since Khidr foretold Baybars' ascension to Qashtamur, it was now Qashtamur who told the sultan about the mysterious shaykh who had predicted his success and arranged the meeting between the two. Baybars was pleased with the shaykh, attached Khidr to his retinue, and the rest is history.

The next decade—from 661/1263 until his fall from grace in 671/1273—was Khidr's zenith. During that period, the shaykh attained a degree of power and authority as Baybars' spiritual advisor that perhaps no other Sufi shaykh—indeed no other religious figure throughout the long history of the Mamluk Sultanate—achieved.²⁴ The peak of the shaykh's influence seems to have been between 665/1267 and 669/1271.²⁵ How far his influence extended is difficult to say. The sources, for their part, indicate that it was significant. As Ibn Shaddād writes, after reporting the shaykh's trial and imprisonment:

²⁰In the account of Khidr's beginnings, it is stated that during his stay in Aleppo (that is, after being forced out of Jazīrat Ibn ʿUmar and before arriving at Damascus), he “served Ibn Qaraṭāy as a *bābā* for a period of time” (*wa-khadama ʿinda Ibn Qaraṭāy fī sūrat bābā muddatan*). According to Pouzet (following Blochet, the editor and translator of *Al-Nahj al-sadīd*), this should be read as “superintendent.” However, Holt claims that the meaning must be understood as “dervish.” If Holt is correct, then we have here an early indication of Khidr's Sufi-like tendencies. Holt, “Early Source,” 33.

²¹Not much is said of him in the sources. Al-Birzālī mentions an amir by that name who died in Damascus in 710/1310 and was buried at al-Mizzah cemetery, not far from Khidr's sanctuary, where Qashtamur met the shaykh for the first time. The report seems questionable, though, and it appears that Qashtamur generally disappears from the scene after participating in the battle of Homs (680/1281). Al-Birzālī, *Al-Muqtafi ʿalā kitāb al-rawḍatayn*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut, 2006), 3:463.

²²Another amir of the Baḥrīyah who is mentioned as Khidr's devotee is Atāmish al-Saʿdī (d. 684/1285): Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 282. On Atāmish (or Aytamish): al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-muqaffā al-kabīr*, ed. Muḥammad al-Baʿlāwī (Beirut, 1991), 2:335.

²³The sources disagree as to whether this was their first meeting; some mention an earlier meeting, before Baybars' sultanate. According to Holt (“Early Source,” 35–36), the stories about an earlier meeting were a product of *Literarisierung*. Perhaps there is no real contradiction between the two options: Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 242.

²⁴Perhaps one possible exception would have been the shaykh Naṣr al-Manbijī, during the first decade of the eighth/fourteenth century: al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 32:306.

²⁵Eddé, “Baybars.”



This man attained such a position with our lord the sultan [Baybars] as no other, so that [Baybars] would come visit him once or twice weekly, treat him kindly and joke with him, do for him what he wished, accept his petitions of intercession (*shafā'āthu*), carry out his orders, and take him as his companion on all his journeys. Whenever [Baybars] would conquer a certain place, he would dedicate a portion of it to him from his own share of the booty. [Khiḍr's] authority (lit. his hand) stretched throughout the kingdom of our lord the sultan, [so that] he would do as he pleased and none of the governors (*nuwwāb*) would prevent him from it.²⁶

Al-Yūnīnī, who reproduces Ibn Shaddād's account almost verbatim, adds that Baybars would "inform him [Khiḍr] of his deepest secrets (*ghawāmiḍ asrārihi*), advise him on his matters, and would never stray from his advice."²⁷ Of course, Khiḍr's predictions to the sultan were always fulfilled, thus reinforcing the latter's belief in the shaykh.²⁸

Khiḍr's position at court also translated into substantial material benefits he received from the sultan. Besides the share he was awarded after each of Baybars' successful military campaigns, the sultan founded for Khiḍr a vast chain of *zāwiyahs* throughout the realm: we read of branches in Cairo, Damascus,²⁹ Aleppo, Alexandria, Gaza, Hebron, Baalbek, Homs, Ḥamāh, and Jerusalem, but there might have been more, since, according to Mufaḍḍal and Ibn al-Dawādārī, Khiḍr "had a *zāwiyah* in every town (*madīnah*)."³⁰ In each *zāwiyah* Khiḍr had a deputy in charge of its affairs (*nā'ib*) and *fuqarā'* who were allocated stipends for their live-

²⁶Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 59 (compare: al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:5–6).

²⁷Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:264–65.

²⁸Ibid., 3:265. Between the crucial prediction regarding Baybars' ascent to the throne and Khiḍr's final prediction about their shared fate in death (on which below), all the predictions are related to Baybars' conquests, namely in Safed, Arsūf, Krak des Chevaliers (Ḥiṣn al-Akrād), and Caesarea. Another successful prophecy is Khiḍr's warning to the sultan to refrain from a planned trip to al-Karak and rather return to Cairo. Baybars ignored the warning; during that trip, he fell from his horse and was injured.

²⁹Khiḍr's *zāwiyah* at al-Mizzah was constructed by Baybars in 664/1266. According to Ibn al-Ṣuqā'ī it was a domed structure (*qubbah*) which the shaykh referred to as *al-ma'bad* (the place of worship) and where he used to stay during his frequent visits to Damascus. Ibn Shaddād adds that Baybars dedicated stipends for Khiḍr's disciples who lived in this *zāwiyah*, allocated from the endowments of the mosque (perhaps meaning the Umayyad Mosque). Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Al-Rawḍ al-zāhir fī sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1976), 266; Ibn al-Ṣuqā'ī, *Tālī kitāb wafayāt al-a'yān*, ed. Jaqueline Sublet (Damascus, 1974), 69; Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 356; Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah* (Beirut, 1993), 13:309.

³⁰Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 243. The most comprehensive list is provided by Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 273, 350–52.



lihood.³¹ Those were corrupt men who robbed travelers, demanded protection payments from the population, gave shelter to criminals, and were given to all sorts of criminal behaviors, among them illicit sexual acts with married women and children.³² While Khidr's "gangs" are described as *fuqarā'*—usually meaning Sufis—and even as his *murīdūn*,³³ i.e., disciples on the Sufi path, as with their shaykh, it is difficult to ascertain in what manner they were indeed invested in Sufism.

Khidr led these devoted (and well paid) followers in his notorious and well-documented purge of the religious minorities in the sultanate. During the years of his peak influence at court, Khidr and his rough followers led a series of attacks against Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan places of worship. Among their targets were the Georgian Monastery of the Cross, to the west of Jerusalem;³⁴ the Great Synagogue of Damascus;³⁵ the church that was the seat of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Alexandria;³⁶ a Samaritan synagogue in Nablus;³⁷ and perhaps more.³⁸

At least some of Khidr's actions, though somewhat representative of the general anti-*dhimmī* ambiance prevalent in the region at the twilight of the Crusader period,³⁹ were met with disapproval by the mainstream of the ulama.⁴⁰ They

³¹ Khidr apparently took good care of his followers, generously providing for them. In fact, his generosity seems to be his one positive trait mentioned in the sources. See, e.g., al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Muqaffá*, 3:753.

³² Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 243; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 30:379; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz*, 8:222.

³³ Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz*, 8:222.

³⁴ Müller and Pahlitzsch, "Sultan Baybars."

³⁵ Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 59; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*, 30:176; Strauß, "Scheich Ḥidr."

³⁶ Khidr "plundered it, converted it into a mosque, and named it *al-madrasah al-Khaḍrā'*." Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 59. The name is obviously a pun on Khidr's, but the fact that he made it a mosque, which was called a madrasah, is somehow strange. It would be reasonable to assume that this also functioned as one of Khidr's *zāwiyahs*.

³⁷ Drory, "Some Misdeeds."

³⁸ Drory suggests that there were other sites as well, and perhaps Khidr's other *zāwiyahs* were also sites he confiscated from the religious minorities.

³⁹ Reuven Amitai, "Islamisation in the Southern Levant after the end of Frankish Rule: Some General Considerations and a Short Case Study," in *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, ed. A. C. S. Peacock (Edinburgh, 2017), 160–61; Yehoshua Frenkel, "Baybars and the Sacred Geography of *Bilād al-Shām*: A Chapter in the Islamization of Syria's Landscape," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 153–70; Tamer El-Leithy, "Sufis, Copts and the Politics of Piety: Moral Regulation in Fourteenth-Century Upper Egypt," in *La Développement du soufisme en Égypte à l'époque mamelouke*, ed. Richard J. A. McGregor and Adam Sabra (Cairo, 2006), 75–119.

⁴⁰ Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1987), 8:28; al-'Umarī, *Masālik*, 1:373. Indeed, both the synagogue in Damascus and the Monastery of the Cross were eventually returned to their owners. Another indication of the ulama's antagonism to



also compromised Baybars' foreign policy by arousing discontent from both the Georgians and Byzantines.⁴¹ And yet, as Ibn Shaddād, Baybars' biographer, states, Khiḍr did "all of these with the sultan's consent."⁴² Furthermore, the reports on Khiḍr's seizure of the Damascene synagogue suggest that Baybars was complicit beyond just approving the shaykh's actions: Ibn Shaddād writes that Khiḍr (like Ibn Shaddād himself) had come to Damascus as part of the sultan's entourage when he sacked the synagogue, and al-Dhahabī adds that Khiḍr arrived at the place accompanied by "the amirs, notables, and the governor [of Damascus]."⁴³ Finally, Ibn al-Ṣuqā'ī, a Christian, writes that this was done to celebrate the occasion of Baybars' seizure of the Frankish stronghold of Krak des Chevaliers (Ḥiṣn al-Akrād), and adds that the synagogue and the adjunct Jewish properties were allocated to Khiḍr by the sultan, which strongly suggests that the two acted in partnership.⁴⁴ It should be noted that the conversion of the Greek Orthodox church in Alexandria into a "mosque" was also sponsored by the state treasury (*bayt al-māl*).⁴⁵

Two incidents reported by al-Yūnīnī, allegedly as an eyewitness, bolster the claim that Khiḍr acted as the sultan's representative and, especially, that he was conceived as such by contemporaries. First, al-Yūnīnī reports Khiḍr's arrival at his native town Baalbek in 669/1271, probably as part of Baybars' entourage on the way to capture Krak des Chevaliers.⁴⁶ Al-Yūnīnī writes that the shaykh stayed at the *zāwiyah* constructed for him outside of town, where a delegation of the sultan's local representatives (*nuwwāb al-salṭanah*) and some of the inhabitants of the town came to pay homage to him (*ilā khidmatihī*). Al-Yūnīnī adds that he was part of that delegation and heard the local governor ask Khiḍr to predict when the fortress would be seized. Khiḍr said that it would fall within forty days—and so it was.⁴⁷ The second incident, also narrated by al-Yūnīnī as an

Khiḍr's actions is the possible link some contemporaneous authors made between the raid on the synagogue and a subsequent flood which struck Damascus, supposedly divine retribution for this unsanctioned act. Strauß, "Scheich Ḥiḍr."

⁴¹Müller and Pahlitzsch, "Sultan Baybars."

⁴²Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 274.

⁴³Al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 49:56–57.

⁴⁴Ibn al-Ṣuqā'ī, *Tālī wafayāt*, 69–70.

⁴⁵Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 59. Khiḍr's raid on *dhimmī* taverns in Damascus in the year 668/1269–70—smashing wine vessels and forcing the owners to sign an oath (*qasāmah*) that they had no wine left in their possession—also seems to have been related to a sultan decree on the matter. See: al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh*, 49:50–51.

⁴⁶Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, 204–5.

⁴⁷Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:265–66. Al-ʿUmarī (*Masālik*, 8:175) is quoting al-Yūnīnī on this episode but adds that Khiḍr replied to the question by saying, "I told my son—and by that he meant al-



eyewitness, relates a confrontation between Khiḍr and Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), one of the most prominent and widely respected religious scholars of the age. Al-Nawawī, a Damascene Shafi‘ite *faqīh*, did not shy away from publicly reproaching the sultan on various matters, most notably regarding the confiscation of the income from al-Ghūṭah, the agricultural oasis surrounding Damascus. In al-Yūnīnī’s account, al-Nawawī ascended Khiḍr’s *zāwiyah* on top of “the hill overlooking al-Mizzah,” and discussed with the shaykh “a certain matter.” When al-Nawawī’s reproach of the shaykh reached high tones and harsh words were uttered, Khiḍr had his men forcefully evict al-Nawawī.⁴⁸ While we cannot tell what the issue at stake was, it seems reasonable, within the context of al-Nawawī’s criticism of the sultan, that he approached Khiḍr as the ruler’s representative. Whether Khiḍr indeed represented the sultan, then, would be less relevant than the fact that he was perceived as doing so.

All these examples show that, especially in the provinces, Khiḍr acted without restraint and was considered the sultan’s right hand. Yet Khiḍr’s vast network had its center in Cairo, next to the sultan’s. Baybars founded for his shaykh a *zāwiyah* in the developing suburb of al-Ḥusaynīyah, which seems to have symbolized the latter’s presence in the capital. For this *zāwiyah* Baybars allocated endowments which yielded 30,000 dirhams annually. Just in the vicinity of this impressive *zāwiyah*,⁴⁹ Baybars had constructed his Friday Mosque—his most conspicuous monumental building project in Cairo. Some sources are explicit that Baybars established this mosque for Khiḍr and chose a location near his

Malik al-Zāhir [Baybars]: You will seize it within forty days.” That Khiḍr referred to Baybars as such in the presence of state notables is telling.

⁴⁸Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:283. The issue of the confiscation of the Ghūṭah’s revenues was extremely sensitive for the Damascenes, and this was remembered negatively for many years after Baybars’s death: Jacqueline Sublet, “Le Séquestre sur les jardins de la Ghouta (Damas 666/1267),” *Studia Islamica* 43 (1976): 81–86; ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-muḥāḍarah fī tārikh Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1967), 2:97–105.

⁴⁹The *zāwiyah* included several residence buildings for Khiḍr’s disciples, assembly halls, a pool, a bathhouse, a mill, and an oven. Ibn Shaddād, *Tārikh*, 346; al-Maqrizī, *Al-Mawā‘iz wa-al-i‘tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-al-āthār*, ed. Ayman Fu’ād Sayyid (London, 2003), 4:808. Al-Nuwayrī (*Nihāyat*, 32:73) mentions, in passing, two bathhouses in Cairo named “*ḥammāmay al-shaykh Khiḍr*.” If these were indeed related to this shaykh, they attest further to the magnitude of his properties.



zāwiyah.⁵⁰ We should not over-emphasize Khiḏr's influence, however, and Baybars certainly had other considerations.⁵¹

This brings us to the key question of how far Khiḏr's influence over the sultan actually extended. Several modern scholars have suggested that Khiḏr was a key figure behind some of Baybars' policies, especially his aggressive attitude towards the Franks and his *dhimmī* subjects.⁵² Eddé has made a compelling argument regarding Khiḏr's decisive influence over the sultan, based on Baybars' adoption of the title(s) *Iskandar al-zamān ṣāhib qirān* ("Alexander of the age, lord of the auspicious conjuncture"). Implicit in this comparison was Alexander's "double"—al-Khaḏir, who appears as his spiritual guide in the Alexander romance—and, thus, Baybars' own double, shaykh Khiḏr.⁵³ This would suggest that Khiḏr actually stood behind Baybars' legitimization propaganda, as articulated in his public inscriptions. Denise Aigle went even further, writing that, "Like all the Mamluks . . . [Baybars] had little acquaintance with Islamic culture, and was advised on these matters by a shaykh who appears as his 'spiritual director,' one al-Khaḏir (the Green)."⁵⁴ I find this suggestion unfounded: Baybars had lived in an "Islamic culture" for many years prior to his acquaintance with Khiḏr, and more importantly, he had many other, far more suitable, advisors on these matters—qadis, ulama, and leading bureaucrats—chief among them, perhaps, Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir and the vizier Ibn Ḥinnā (d. 677/1278). In fact, it is the latter who

⁵⁰Mufaḏḏal, *Al-Nahj*, 158; al-Sakhāwī, *Tuḥfah*, 23. Al-Maqrīzī writes that Baybars visited Khiḏr's *zāwiyah* twice during the construction of the mosque: once when he came to choose the location and again when he reviewed the final product (al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 4:188–94; cf. Bloom, "Mosque of Baybars," 53–55). Al-Maqrīzī is here quoting from "*jāmi' al-sīrah al-zāhirīyah*," which surely relates, as Bloom rightfully speculated, to Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, Baybars' "official" biographer (a comparison between another passage al-Maqrīzī quotes from this *jāmi' al-sīrah al-zāhirīyah* and the parallel passage in *Al-Rawḏ* proves this point: compare *Khiṭaṭ*, 2:425–26, with *Al-Rawḏ*, 419). The section describing the construction of the mosque indeed appears in Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's *Al-Rawḏ*, albeit in a much more concise form than in al-Maqrīzī. Bloom further speculated that al-Maqrīzī had access to an expanded version of *Al-Rawḏ* compared to the one we possess today. In light of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's disdain for Khiḏr, it is interesting that, if al-Maqrīzī indeed quotes him truthfully (which is far from taken for granted), here we have two mentions of Khiḏr with the adjective *al-shaykh al-ṣāliḥ* (the righteous shaykh), which Khiḏr does not receive in his other two mentions in *Al-Rawḏ*. This might imply that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir wrote some earlier version of the work when his opinion of Khiḏr was somehow better, or prior to the latter's fall from grace.

⁵¹For example, the power struggle between the Hanafi and Shafi'i *madhāhib* for dominance, or the accelerated urban development of al-Ḥusayniyah: Bloom, "Mosque of Baybars."

⁵²See especially Eddé, "Baybars." Pouzet already pondered these issues ("Ḥaḏir," 182–83).

⁵³Eddé, "Baybars." On al-Khaḏir as Alexander's companion and guide, see: A. J. Wensinck, "al-Khaḏir," *EI2*, 4:902–5.

⁵⁴Aigle, "Legitimizing," 65.



stands at the center of the last part of our investigation of shaykh Khiḍr: his downfall.

In 669/1271, Khiḍr was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment by an ad hoc tribunal consisting of Baybars and several of his most senior amirs.⁵⁵ Suggestions as to the cause for this sudden turn of events range from Khiḍr's unruly behavior to his notorious persecution of the *dhimmi*s, which compromised Baybars' diplomatic interests.⁵⁶ However, as some sources make abundantly clear, it was the shaykh's direct clash with competing authorities at court that caused his demise. A plot in which two such authorities cooperated resulted in Khiḍr's trial.

According to the sources, even the most eminent persons in the Sultanate, like the amir Badr al-Dīn Bīlik al-Khazindār (d. 676/1277), Baybars' trusted mamluk and viceroy, and the vizier Bahā' al-Dīn Ibn Ḥinnā, feared Khiḍr,⁵⁷ who openly disregarded, even humiliated, the vizier and the viceroy, among other notables.⁵⁸ While the conspiracy against Khiḍr is mentioned in several sources, the most interesting account is given by al-ʿUmarī (d. 749/1348). The latter, it should be noted, was a senior official in Cairo during al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's third reign (709–41/1309–41) and quotes his father—also a senior official—as his source.⁵⁹ His authority on the matter is further solidified since he ends his report by claiming that, “I saw, myself, in the papers of my uncle⁶⁰ . . . a copy of the

⁵⁵This included, besides the sultan, the *atābak* Aqṭāy, Qalāʿūn, Baysarī, and Khiḍr's devotee, Qashtamur. Some sources (e.g., Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 244) also mention Bīlik. The trial scene is surely one of the most dramatic—and famous—ones in Khiḍr's biography. The main anecdote related to it is Khiḍr's prophecy—as he faced the death sentence—that his fate and Baybars' are bound together: only days separate them. The prediction—which earned Khiḍr his life—indeed came true. Holt (“Early Source”) argued that the trial scene was part of the later process of *Literarisierung*, *inter alia* since it was not part of Ibn Shaddād's recension of Khiḍr's biography. However, Ibn Shaddād seems at least to have known of this story, since he is quoted by al-Yūnīnī as narrating it. See: al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:266.

⁵⁶Drory, “Some Misdeeds,” 45.

⁵⁷Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:268. Cf. Ibn Shaddād (*Tārīkh*, 59), who writes of Khiḍr's *carte blanche* to act as he wished and his uncontested authority, but unlike the other sources, does not specify names. On Bīlik: Reuven Amitai, “An Arabic Inscription at al-Subayba (Qalʿat Namrud) from the Reign of Sultan Baybars,” *Israel Antiquities Authority Reports*, No. 11 (Jerusalem, 2001): 114–16; on Ibn Ḥinnā: al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl*, 3:384–85. Thorau (*Lion of Egypt*, 228) already noted the leading role the two played in Khiḍr's downfall.

⁵⁸Mufaḍḍal, *Al-Nahj*, 244; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Muqaffā*, 3:752.

⁵⁹His father, Yaḥyá ibn Faḍl Allāh (d. 738/1338), served *inter alia* as head of the chancery (*ṣāḥib dīwān al-inshāʿ*): Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar al-kāminah fī aʿyān al-miʿah al-thāminah*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Jād al-Ḥaqq (Cairo, 1965), 5:199–200.

⁶⁰This is Shams al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Ibn Faḍl Allāh (d. 717/1317), who also served as head of the chancery in Cairo: al-Ṣafadī, *Kitāb al-wāfi bi-al-wafayāt*, ed. Aḥmad al-Aranāʿūṭ and Turkī



report (*nuskhat muṭāla‘ah*) written on this affair.”⁶¹ The gist of the affair was that both Bīlīk and Ibn Ḥinnā were disgusted by Khiḍr’s influence and his open disregard of their honor. It might be that the trigger was Khiḍr implicitly accusing Bīlīk, in front of Baybars, of conspiring to murder the sultan, which made Bīlīk fear for his own life. Be that as it may, the two, along with other senior amirs, investigated Khiḍr’s unorthodox deeds and recruited witnesses from among his men—promising them substantial material rewards—to testify against him. The results of the investigation were apparently compiled in the report, which, according to al-‘Umarī, “contained grave accusations.”⁶²

It seems that those accusations mainly related to acts of sodomy (*liwāt*) and fornication (*zinā*). Those were typical generic accusations in such cases and, given Khiḍr’s history and the aforementioned description of the *fuqarā’* who lived in his *zāwiyahs*, it is not surprising that the trial focused on them. Even though sodomy and fornication were crimes normally brought in front of the qadi, it seems that the entire procedure was managed by leading Mamluk amirs.⁶³ Apart from three witnesses from among Khiḍr’s men, the “key witness” was a Cairene woman with whom Khiḍr supposedly had adulterous relations, and who was shrewdly recruited by Ibn Ḥinnā in a plot meant to incriminate the shaykh. The investigation eventually resulted in the report being presented to the sultan, who ordered his shaykh arrested and brought to the famous trial at the citadel.⁶⁴ Baybars realized that to keep the fragile equilibrium within the Mamluk elite he had to sacrifice his shaykh. After all, as ferocious as Baybars may have been, in a way he was still first among equals with his senior amirs, whose interests he had pledged to protect when he was sworn in as sultan.⁶⁵

KHIḌR AND RASPUTIN: A PATTERN?

A comparison between a thirteenth-century Sufi shaykh from the Levant and a modern Siberian *khlyst* is certainly problematic in many ways, but the stories

Muṣṭafá (Beirut, 2000), 19:211–16.

⁶¹ Al-‘Umarī, *Masālik*, 8:178.

⁶² *Ibid.* As Drory (“Some Misdeeds,” 39) pointed out, certainly some of the accusations against Khiḍr were generic ones meant to tarnish his reputation. However, as I discuss below, we should not dismiss those accusations out of hand, since they might have been based on widespread rumors.

⁶³ It is also possible that this was because convicting a person of such accusations in a shar‘ī court was extremely difficult, and necessitated four witnesses: Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York, 2021), 191.

⁶⁴ Al-‘Umarī, *Masālik*, 8:177–78.

⁶⁵ P. M. Holt, “The Position and Power of the Mamluk Sultan,” *BSOAS* 38 (1975): 242.



of Khidr and Rasputin have much in common. This is already evident in the preceding misleading sentence: labeling Khidr as a Sufi is somehow like labeling—or rather, accusing of being—Rasputin a *khlyst*.⁶⁶ Both figures were in fact difficult to classify, and the one thing which stands out in their personalities, the thing which won them their fame, was their charisma. This elusive quality was what drew elite persons to their orbit and allowed them eventually to exert influence at court. What the nature of either man's charisma was is difficult to say. Multiple accounts of Rasputin emphasize his “magnetic eyes” and the impression he made on St. Petersburg high society.⁶⁷ Regarding Khidr, we have no comparable descriptions. While Baybars might have been drawn to him because of his accurate prophecies, what was it that drew others, such as Qashtamur, to the shaykh? Charisma, as Weber famously showed, is a quality by virtue of which certain individuals are set apart from ordinary men and treated as though endowed with exceptional powers. Charisma must be recognized by others, and while both Rasputin's and Khidr's charisma was certainly recognized by some, others were far less impressed.⁶⁸

The similarities between the two do not end there: both made their way to prominence as outsiders from extremely humble origins;⁶⁹ both owed their attachment to the ruler to middlemen or women;⁷⁰ both predicted their way to glory, resulting in a spiritual or magnetic hold over the ruler;⁷¹ both were notorious for illicit and even utterly obnoxious conduct, transgressive of public norms, mostly related to their affairs with women;⁷² both deployed their influence at court to act as social brokers who attained considerable material capital, which they distributed to their devotees, thus building reputations as generous patrons and solidifying their authority;⁷³ both were rumored to have (mostly negatively) influenced state policy;⁷⁴ both were drawn, by the combination of their alleged influence, otherness, and unorthodox conduct, to inevitable clashes with competing authorities from different elite circles and thus made victims

⁶⁶Smith, *Rasputin*, 82–97, 279–88.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 50–59, 103–6.

⁶⁸Xavier Marquez, “Charisma and Authority,” in *Staging Authority: Presentation and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe: A Handbook*, ed. Eva Giloi et al. (Berlin, 2022), 31–33; Smith, *Rasputin*, 110.

⁶⁹Smith, *Rasputin*, 12–29.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 50–70, 98–102.

⁷¹Joseph T. Fuhrmann, *Rasputin: The Untold Story* (London, 2013), 19–20, 27.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 54–58.

⁷³Smith, *Rasputin*, 155; Fuhrmann, *Rasputin*, 51, 111, 132–34, 185.

⁷⁴Fuhrmann, *Rasputin*, 152–65; Smith, *Rasputin*, 359–488.



of plots to dispense with them;⁷⁵ and, finally, both “predicted” that their end would be bound to that of the ruler, as indeed eventually happened.⁷⁶

Each of these parallels is intriguing on its own, and inquiries into them would certainly be merited. However, I will settle here for just one: the inevitable clash between the charismatic adviser and competing forces at court. This has much to do with the juicier details in both men’s biographies, since, while those are virtually impossible to ascertain, they were intricately bound with widespread rumors. As Rasputin’s contemporary Lev Tikhomirov aptly noted in 1916, “What really matters is not what sort of influence Grishka [Rasputin] has on the Emperor, but what sort of influence the people think he has.”⁷⁷ Following this, Douglas Smith states in his recent biography of Rasputin that “There is no Rasputin without the stories about Rasputin.”⁷⁸ Likewise, the accounts of Khiḍr’s life penned by his contemporaries reflect what people thought about him. More than a product of *Literarisierung* meant to embellish chronicles with popular anecdotes, what we see is an organic social process of rumors circulating and eventually being written down.

Did Khiḍr influence Baybars’s policies? We cannot know, and I personally tend to doubt that he had any substantial influence. But that is not as important as the fact that people *thought* so. Was he drawn to wine drinking and adultery? Perhaps, but either way there were certainly rumors implying so. In a way, what we see here is a reverse of miracle stories. As Benedicta Ward observed, “[H]ere was an event that caused wonder . . . Certainly, something was thought to have happened; the rest is interpretation.”⁷⁹ And what happened with Khiḍr was indeed in need of explanation. Nobody seemed to need to explain how another shaykh, ‘Alī al-Bakkā’ of Hebron, predicted Baybars’ ascension, since he was a well-respected, normative Sufi shaykh, and his story followed accepted models and *topoi*.⁸⁰ But Khiḍr did not conform to the stereotype of a respectable shaykh, and so his prophecy—widely known at the time—was explained in various ways.

Those who eventually brutally murdered Rasputin were members of the St. Petersburg elite, who might have acted from personal motivation or from a true call of duty to save Russia from his influence,⁸¹ but they were certainly not his

⁷⁵Fuhrmann, *Rasputin*, 185–205.

⁷⁶Fuhrmann, *Rasputin*, 222; Smith, *Rasputin*, 584–85.

⁷⁷Quoted in Smith, *Rasputin*, 7.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Benedicta Ward, “Miracles and History: A Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories used by Bede,” in *idem, Signs and Wonders: Saints, Miracles and Prayer from the 4th Century to the 14th*, *Variorum Collected Studies* 361 (London, 1992), IX, 71.

⁸⁰Al-ʿUmarī, *Masālik*, 8:173.

⁸¹Smith, *Rasputin*, 592–96.



only enemies in the capital and not the first to plot his murder.⁸² Likewise for Bīlīk and Ibn Ḥinnā: did they go after Khiḍr out of envy or resentment at his treatment of them, or did they feel Baybars had to be saved from himself, as he was blind to the detrimental effect of his shaykh? The point is that an outsider pushing his way to the top, basing his claims to authority solely on his charisma, is bound to draw fire. Rasputin is a good comparison for Khiḍr, but one need not go as far as early twentieth-century Russia to notice this dynamic. We may consider the Khalwatī shaykh Shujāʿ al-Dīn (d. 996/1588) and the Ottoman sultan Murād III (r. 982–1003/1574–95);⁸³ or Shaykh Ḥaydar al-Rammāl (fl. ca. 1530–50) and Sultan Sulaymān (r. 1520–66).⁸⁴ Even closer, the story of shaykh Quṭb al-Dīn al-Hirmās (d. 769/1367–68) and Sultan al-Nāṣir Ḥasan (r. 1354–62),⁸⁵ or that of Shaykh Ibrāhīm Ibn Zuqqāʿah (d. 816/1414) and the sultans Barqūq (r. 1382–99) and his son Faraj (r. 1399–1411), present the same phenomenon in many ways.⁸⁶

There was an alternative way, though, for a charismatic person to make it at court without necessarily drawing opposition from competitive actors. An example is Aḥmad al-Zuhūrī (d. 801/1398), a holy fool (*majdhūb*)⁸⁷ who predicted Barqūq's ascent to the throne and who, when that indeed happened, was brought by the sultan to the Cairo citadel and allowed to act freely: “[Barqūq] was extremely close to him and had an excessive veneration of him, so that [al-Zuhūrī] used to spit at the sultan's face and swear at him in front of the amirs, and others, and this was tolerated. He [also] used to enter [the sultan's] harem and [the women there] would not hide from him.”⁸⁸ This behavior was tolerated, I assume, because al-Zuhūrī was a *majdhūb*, a sort of holy fool.⁸⁹ As al-Maqrīzī writes, it was “as if he was Barqūq's lucky charm.”⁹⁰ Whatever influence or intimate access to the sultan he might have had, he was considered harmless,

⁸²Ibid., 330–50.

⁸³John J. Curry, “The Meeting of the Two Sultans: Three Sufi Mystics Negotiate with the Court of Murad III,” in *Sufism and Society: Arrangements of the Mystical in the Muslim World, 1200–1800*, ed. John J. Curry and Erik S. Ohlander (New York, 2012), 226–30.

⁸⁴Cornell F. Fleischer, “Seer to the Sultan: Haydar-i Remmal and Sultan Süleyman,” in *Cultural Horizons: A Festschrift in Honor of Talat S. Halman*, ed. Jayne L. Warner (Syracuse, 2001), 290–99.

⁸⁵Al-Maqrīzī, *Durar al-ʿuqūd al-farīdah fī tarājīm al-aʿyān al-mufīdah*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Jalīlī (Beirut, 2002), 3:386–87.

⁸⁶Ibid., 1:63.

⁸⁷The *majdhūb* was, literally, one whose soul was enraptured by God, and was thus allowed to act in a non-normative manner. On this Islamic “institution” see: Michael Dols, *Majnūn: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society* (Oxford, 1992), 366–422.

⁸⁸Al-Maqrīzī, *Durar al-ʿuqūd*, 1:179.

⁸⁹I have the impression that Rasputin was also, in a way, considered as something of that sort early on, when he was taking his first steps in St. Petersburg.

⁹⁰Al-Maqrīzī, *Durar al-ʿuqūd*, 1:179.



and thus drew no opposition. A similar dynamic may be noticed with the later *majdhūb*, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Daṣṭūṭī (d. 924/1518), whose feet the sultan Qāyṭbāy (r. 1468–96) used to kiss and whom he saw as his spiritual guide.⁹¹

If the similarities between Khiḍr and Rasputin are apparent, this is not necessarily the case with their patrons, Sultan Baybars and the czar Nicholas. In fact, Baybars was in many ways a complete opposite of the Russian sovereign, who inherited the throne prematurely (and was perhaps never suited for the job to begin with). Baybars was a self-made man, who seized the throne violently and established a mighty sultanate. His relationship with Khiḍr should not obscure this. Baybars may have had a certain fascination with the occult, as some anecdotes about his interest in astrology may suggest,⁹² but this was the *Zeitgeist*, and we would be hard pressed to find a medieval ruler who did not show an interest in astrological prognostications or an inclination to charismatic “spiritual advisors.” Not only was this common, but, for Ibn Shaddād at least, Baybars’ relations with Khiḍr were a clear indication of his piety, rather than a weakness.⁹³

To better understand the apparent contradiction between Baybars’ complete devotion—even submissiveness—to his shaykh on the one hand, and his ability to disregard his advice (which, remember, “he would always accept”), we can turn to Nicholas: while his court attracted a wide range of eccentric figures, Rasputin being just the last,⁹⁴ and despite his “naïve” personality and his deep spiritual conviction, his letters and actions show that he was more than capable of spurning Rasputin’s advice when he saw fit. This applied all the more to Baybars. Thus, we must understand these figures not as naïve or gullible, but as complicated men: they believed in miracles, divination, astrology, and saints, but they also knew when to ask for a second opinion or, indeed, when to execute their spiritual advisors if realpolitik so demanded.

⁹¹ Al-Ghazzī, *Al-Kawākib al-sā’irah bi-a’yān al-mi’ah al-‘āshirah*, ed. Khalīl al-Manṣūr (Beirut, 1997), 1:299. Geoffroy already noticed the parallels between the two pairs, Baybars/Khiḍr and Qāyṭbāy/al-Daṣṭūṭī. See: Éric Geoffroy, *Le soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie: Sous les derniers mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: Orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels* (Damascus, 1995), 124.

⁹² Eddé, “Baybars,” 83.

⁹³ Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh*, 272.

⁹⁴ Robert D. Warth, “Before Rasputin: Piety and the Occult at the Court of Nicholas II,” *The Historian* 47/3 (1985): 323–37.

