

THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

CHRISTIAN MAUDER:

In the Sultan's Salon: Learning, Religion, and Rulership at the Mamluk Court of Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516) (2 vols). 1302 pp. Leiden: Brill, 2021. ISBN 978 90 04 44421 8.
doi:10.1017/S0041977X2300006X

Historians of the pre-modern Islamic world have long taken notions of “the court” and “courtiers” for granted as vague abstractions without pursuing detailed or theoretical approaches as to how such concepts are scientifically conceptualized. The idea of the court as an analytical category during the reign of the penultimate ruler of the sultanate of Cairo, Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–16) is at the heart of Christian Mauder’s excellent new book, which provides a window into this crucial yet poorly understood dimension of elite society.

For his readers’ benefit, Mauder has mobilized an array of Arabic manuscripts and synthesized theoretical literature to arrive at a holistic and grounded reflection of a highly cosmopolitan early sixteenth-century Islamicate “court society”. The study rests upon three literary manuscripts produced in the milieu of al-Ghawrī’s scholarly salons (*majlis*, pl. *majālis*) penned by two (or three?) eyewitness authors. These texts were not only significant for the history of literature and book arts, but also broadly shaped the performative and political aspects of the court.

Due to a dearth of sources, modern scholarship has relied primarily on the Arabic chronicler Muḥammad ibn Iyās (d. 1524), absorbing the biases of that author and allowing them to colour contemporary studies. To his credit, Mauder instead turns the spotlight on a dynamic new corpus of source material that exposes the one-dimensionality of Ibn Iyās’s presentation and recasts him as woefully uninformed of goings-on in al-Ghawrī’s inner circle in the Cairo citadel. Importantly, the author emphasizes the literary nature of his key texts, discouraging scholars from reading them merely in a positivist light (p. 233).

In the first introductory chapter, Mauder reveals his understanding of court as a mode of analysis for Islamicate societies; as a key transregional centre of innovation in cultural, political, and intellectual production; as a hierarchical institution of posts and offices; as a social entity comprised of competitive elites; and most intriguingly, as a series of events with communicative significance.

The second chapter provides the historical context of al-Ghawrī based on analysis of Ibn Iyās’s problematic presentation and the state of modern research. In chapter 3, Mauder surveys the literary corpus, beginning with the three courtly *majālis* texts alongside other genres of relevant source material in Arabic, Turkic, and European languages. The chapter also examines issues of authorship and audience and brings disparate materials into coherent conversation. In the context of the fourth chapter’s discussion of the scholarly life and transmission of knowledge occurring at court between varied (though thoroughly Muslim) participants, Mauder narrows his focus on types of intrigue, power politics, and social relationships (pp. 346–55).

The fifth chapter deconstructs religious life at court in view of the different social, intellectual, and ceremonial dimensions involving Sufism, Shī‘ism, eschatological concerns, as well as performative elements of rituals and festivals. Reading beyond the practices and activities involving al-Ghawrī, Mauder devotes space to discussing the sultan’s possible strategic motivations which were demonstrable to

audiences within and beyond Cairo. The author cautiously walks the line between critical evaluation of communicative contexts and meanings, while acknowledging that assessing a historical actor's intentions is a treacherous enterprise.

In the sixth chapter, concerning rulership, representation, and legitimation, Mauder departs from previous scholarship on the *majālis* literature that concluded the court of al-Ghawrī was preoccupied by “secular” interests. Proving much the contrary, the author shifts his focus to presenting the unfiltered interests of the court which were oriented toward a Ḥanafī-Māturīdī iteration of Sunni Islam.

The seventh, concluding, chapter restates the main findings of the book. Additionally, the author problematizes the decline paradigm, “Renaissance”, as an inappropriate Eurocentric concept, and refutes the notion that Middle Period Islamicate courts were irrelevant. The book contains three useful appendices concerned with isolating: 1) the texts mentioned within the *majālis* accounts; 2) the known participants of the salons; and 3) parallel passages within the texts. The reader is likewise served by a helpful index.

Although Mauder's almost encyclopaedic coverage at times seems daunting, the rich material services the book's grander purposes while including relevant commentary on architecture, Quranic exegesis, numismatics, and pre-modern religious debates. Despite the book's many prolix digressions and summaries, indeed, among its most enjoyable sections are the occasions when the author takes space to “thickly describe” moments of performative significance within the ocean of socio-cultural realities underlying seemingly innocuous moments in the salon sessions (pp. 240, 380–90). Discussion throughout the study enriches the material, adds deep context, and provides the reader with a multi-layered cultural understanding of the milieu addressed by the book. *In the Sultan's Salon* is thus bound together by its themes and methodologically by its approach; each chapter standing as a well-crafted study at near monograph length.

The book offers a valuable and potentially portable model of early sixteenth-century court dynamics. Mauder's theoretical and empirical understandings of the court raise questions of whether his findings may reasonably be applied to earlier periods of the sultanate. The author rightly advises caution on this point, though in lieu of similar *majālis* literature for the earlier fourteenth- or fifteenth-century eras of the sultanate, it begs the question of how similar al-Ghawrī's sixteenth-century court was to slightly earlier courts based in Cairo. To explain issues of early sixteenth-century elite culture, Mauder sometimes relies on earlier fifteenth-century chancery manuals such as those produced by al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418) or al-Sahmāwī (d. 1463) as a means of explicating practices, offices, and court functions almost 100 years later. Indeed, such practices, rituals and terms evolved quickly, and their meanings shifted with the appearance of each new sultanate order. In this sense, while remaining cautious, it seems reasonable to accept the author's observations extracted from earlier manuals and applied to the early sixteenth century, in exchange for the hope that many of the book's observations about early sixteenth-century courtly life may shed light on earlier eras of the sultanate.

Importantly, Mauder demonstrates that the sultanate was far more integrated into the cultural context of the wider sixteenth-century Islamicate world. This is in part achieved through the book's elucidation of the consequences of the movement of Persian emigres to Cairo in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (p. 154). *In the Sultan's Salon* permits the reader to observe increased cosmopolitanism at the court of the sultan and rethinks misconceptions about the Arabophone, Persianate, and Turkic spheres as not separate, but rather far more interwoven at court. This links to the overall connectivity the author demonstrates between late

medieval Egypt and adjacent moments of “confessional ambiguity”, ‘Alid loyalism, and messianism in the fifteenth-century “eastern” Islamic world, long believed to be closed off from isolated, Sunni, “Mamluk” Cairo (pp. 736, 785).

The author could have devoted more time to strategically editing, both for brevity and to decrease the number of typos that arrived in the final manuscript (pp. 21, 27, 126, 133, 210, 240, 245, 321, 355, 357, 393, 457, 582, etc). The rather idiomatic choice to translate ‘ulamā’ *al-qirsh* as “crappy scholars” (457) or to refer to the *majālis* texts as a “best of” (573) also seem odd in an otherwise serious work of scholarship. Nevertheless, these are minor faults, and some verbiage notwithstanding, the work is expertly explained and well-written. Following the author’s arguments and instructive theorization, scholars can no longer use “court” as thoughtless shorthand; instead, future scholarship is behooved actively to ponder and digest Mauder’s important conceptualization as it applies to the eras before, during, and after the early sixteenth century.

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GEORGE WARNER:

The Words of the Imams: Al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq and the Development of Twelver Shī‘ī Hadith Literature.

227 pp. London: I.B. Tauris, 2022. ISBN 978 1 8386 0560 5.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X23000137

The Words of the Imams focuses on the life and works of prominent Twelver Shiite scholar Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991) – al-Ṣadūq “the Veracious One” or al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq “the Truthful Master” – compiler of the Twelver Shiite *ḥadīth* work *Kitāb Man lam yaḥḍuruḥu al-faqīh* (The Book of One Who Does not Have a Jurist at Hand), one of the four canonical *ḥadīth* collections in the Twelver tradition.

The work consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction provides an overview of Ibn Bābawayh’s life and works. Like other prominent Shiite scholars of this period, including Muḥammad al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941), al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), and others, the life of Ibn Bābawayh poses a historiographical challenge since biographical sources provide the names of teachers, book titles, and a death date. The historian is forced to scour the scholars’ own works to investigate his life. Ibn Bābawayh was born *c.* 306/918–19 and raised in Qum, where he studied with his father ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn Ibn Bābawayh (d. *c.* 329/941), Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Walīd (d. 343/954), and Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Mājīlawayh (fl. fourth/tenth *c.*). He moved at some point between 339/950 and 347/958 to the Buwayhid capital Rayy, where he resided for much of the rest of his life, but he travelled to Iraq and made the pilgrimage to Mecca in 352/963 and made pilgrimages to the Eighth Imam’s shrine in Ṭūs in 367/978 and 368/979. He died in Rayy in 381/991 (pp. 7–8). Al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067) reports that Ibn Bābawayh wrote over 300 works, and he and Aḥmad al-Najāshī (d. *c.* 450/1058) record over 200 titles (pp. 26–7). However, only 19 of Ibn Bābawayh’s works have been preserved, and Warner provides an annotated list (pp. 22–7).