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A Thirteenth-Century Faḍāʾil Treatise on Syria and Damascus

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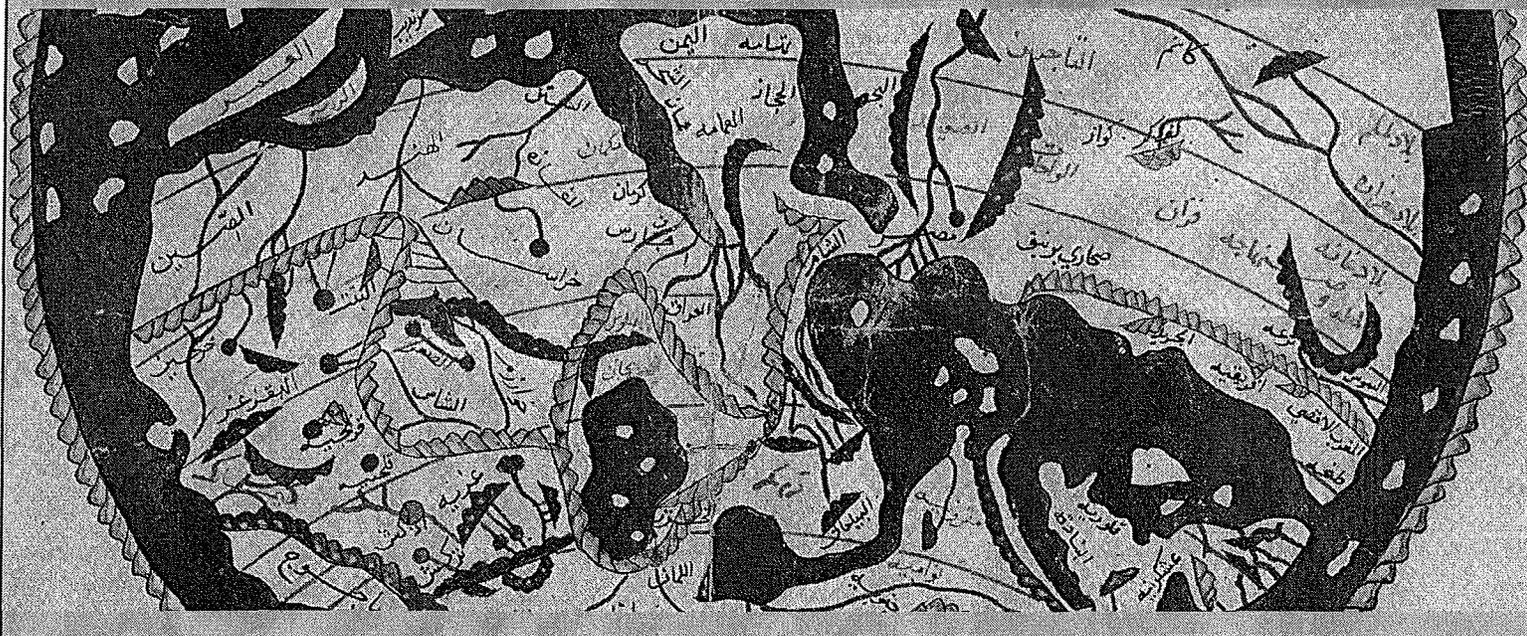
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A Thirteenth-Century *Fadā'il* Treatise on Syria and Damascus

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In the period of the Crusades, Arabic compilations of Qur'anic quotes, *Ḥadīth*, legendary and historical anecdotes, poetic fragments, and prose commentary extolling the merits (*fadā'il*) of Syria and Syrian cities flourished as a genre. The landmark work in this genre was the introductory tribute to Syria and Damascus from the voluminous biographical dictionary, the *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq (History of the City of Damascus)*, written by Damascene notable Abū al-Qāsim 'Alī b. 'Asākir (d. 571/1176) under the patronage of the warrior-prince Nūr al-Dīn b. Zangī, "avenger of the vile, infidel enemies of Muslims." In the decades after 583/1187 when Nūr al-Dīn's successor Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn b. Ayyūb (Saladin) re-conquered Jerusalem ending a century of Crusader rule, the holy city remained a *cause célèbre* among Muslim intellectuals, especially when Saladin's Ayyubid descendants used the holy city as a bargaining piece in their intra-dynastic struggles for power. At the same time, perhaps not surprisingly, *fadā'il* literature on Jerusalem proliferated. However, *fadā'il* treatises were also being circulated in this period that reflected the vitality of the city of Damascus, second city after

Cairo in the Ayyubid confederation, and the assertiveness of its scholarly milieu.

One of the most intriguing examples of Damascus-centric *fadā'il* literature, particularly as it relates to the politics of the Crusades, is the treatise written by noted preacher and Shāfiī jurist, 'Izz al-Dīn 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Abd al-Salām al-Sulamī (d. 660/1262), entitled *Targhīb ahl al-Islām fī sukna al-Shām (Inciting Muslims to Settle in Syria)*. Al-Sulamī had a distinguished career in Damascus, occupying the post of *khaṭīb*, or preacher, of the Umayyad Mosque under the city's Ayyubid ruler, al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl (reigned 63/1237-635/1238, 637/1239-643/1245). Described as having attained the status of "independent thinker" (*mujtahid*) in juridical matters by his biographers, al-Sulamī's career exemplifies the loosening of the relationship between local intellectuals and the ruling elite in the Ayyubid period. Few Ayyubid rulers in the first half of the thirteenth century were able to build or maintain a support system among Syrian religious scholars (*ulamā'*) of the kind that had strengthened Saladin, founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, and his predecessor Nūr al-Dīn. Internecine rivalry between the sons of Saladin's brother al-'Adil I, who had consolidated power over both Egypt and Syria from 596/1200 until his death in 615/1218, created an unstable situation in which the cities of Cairo, Damascus, and Aleppo were increasingly aligned against each other as Ayyubid claimants jockeyed for position. It was in an attempt to strengthen his hand against those of his brothers in Syria that the Ayyubid ruler in Cairo, al-Kāmil, signed a treaty with Frederick II of Hohenstaufen in 626/1229 that ceded Jerusalem back to the Crusaders. This gesture raised the ire of Syrian *ulamā'*, particularly those in Damascus who had constituted the most

vocal supporters of jihad against the Crusaders.

A decade later, intra-dynastic power struggles again prompted an Ayyubid, this time the ruler of Damascus al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl, to sign a treaty with the Crusaders in 638/1240, which ceded some coastal territories and a number of nearby fortresses to the Franks of Acre and allowed them access to the weapons markets of Damascus. In response to this calculated act of realpolitik, many members of the Damascene *ulamā'* raised their voices in condemnation of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl's judgment. Front and center in this uproar was al-Sulamī, who issued a fatwa, or legal opinion, condemning the sale of arms to Crusaders and preached a fiery Friday sermon from the pulpit of the Umayyad Mosque expressing outspoken rejection of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl's policies and, therefore, of his legitimacy as a ruler. Reprisal was swift on the part of the Ayyubid ruler, and al-Sulamī was briefly imprisoned and then forced to leave Damascus, from whence he fled to Egypt where he spent the rest of his life in self-imposed exile.

After fleeing to Egypt, al-Sulamī authored his *fadā'il* tribute to Syria and Damascus, presumably at least partly out of homesickness. In compiling this work, he borrowed material from the earlier *Fadā'il al-Shām wa-Dimashq (Merits of Syria and Damascus)* by one Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Rabā'ī (d. 444/1052) and the introduction to Ibn 'Asākir's *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq* and reflected their emphases on the privileged status of the region of Syria and its central city, Damascus, in sacred history.

These similarities aside, al-Sulamī arranges and comments on this material in such a way as to communicate his particular understanding of his authority as a religious scholar as well as his

political agenda. Unlike his predecessors, he does not hesitate to wield his independent judgment as a *mujtahid*, abbreviating or eliminating chains of transmission and proffering his own exegesis of the material from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth that he presents as evidence for Syrian excellence.

He divides his *faḍā'il* treatise into two major parts, the first making a case for the virtues of the region of Syria and the second making a much briefer case for the virtues of the city of Damascus before concluding with a discussion of just leadership in Islam. While some ambiguity plagues the use of the toponym "al-Shām" in literature of this sort, the earlier exemplars by al-Rabaī and Ibn 'Asākir both include traditions defining "al-Shām" as a regional entity, blessed by God in the Qur'ān, stretching from the town of al-'Arīsh on the border with Egypt in the south-west to the Euphrates in the north-east, an entity that might be termed today "Greater Syria" or "Bilād al-Shām." Al-Sulamī also includes this tradition, and establishes a clear distinction between the region of "al-Shām" and the city of "Dimashq" in his opening remarks on the source and nature of their blessings: "God Almighty has made known those of us of the people of Syria who reside there to the worlds; He settled [Syria] with prophets and messengers, with saints and saviors, and with righteous worshippers; He surrounded [Syria] with His closest angels and placed it in the protection of the Lord of the Worlds; He made its people victorious in the name of truth, not impaired by those who forsake them, until Judgment Day; He made [Syria] a refuge for the faithful and a sanctuary for refugees. And, in particular, Damascus, the protected one (*wa-lā siyyamā Dimashq al-mahrūsa*) is described in the glorious Qur'ān as "high ground, affording rest and furnished with

springs" (23:50). Also, as transmitted on the authority of the descendants of the prophets and the group of exegetes and commentators, it is where Jesus, peace be upon him, will descend to strengthen the religion and to help those who believe in the unity of God and to fight infidels and heretical practices. And its Ghūṭa will be the fortress of the Muslims during the slaughters [of the apocalypse]."

This passage starts out by conferring God's blessings upon "al-Shām," referred to thereafter by the third person singular masculine pronoun, and then the phrase "and in particular Damascus, the protected one" switches the focus to Damascus, referred to in the rest of the passage by the third person singular feminine pronoun. There can be little doubt here that al-Sulamī is using "al-Shām" and "Dimashq" as distinct toponyms referring to plots of land at different scales, one nestled within the other, rather than as synonyms. Despite this distinction, al-Sulamī's Syria and Damascus are also intimately related. In this passage, he represents Damascus, along with its adjacent fertile oasis the Ghūṭa, as the epicenter of Syrian virtue, a predestined virtue derived from the privileged role in sacred history that Syrians *in Syria* – "those of us of the people of Syria who reside there" – have played and will play again at the end of time.

Al-Sulamī, however, is quick to acknowledge another kind of virtue bestowed upon Syria, "its worldly blessings" (*barakātīhi al-'ājila*), though no less evidence of God's favor in their worldliness. Referring to two of the Qur'ānic verses in which God blesses a particular territory (17:1, 21:71), al-Sulamī notes that scholars disagree as to the nature of that blessing: "Some say that it is [by means of] prophets and messengers; others say that it is [by

means of] what He bestows upon it in the way of fruits and water." He continues by acknowledging that God clearly endowed Damascus with springs, rivers, fruits, and cereals. However, he also concludes that abundant "religious blessings" (*al-barakāt al-dīniyya*) reside in Syria and in Jerusalem. He never specifies the source of Jerusalem's "religious blessings," other than being part of Syria, and he seems much more preoccupied with the blessings bestowed upon Syria as a region – both worldly and religious – than to those accrued to any of its constituent parts other than Damascus. For instance, later in the *faḍā'il* treatise he presents an exegesis of the phrase from the first verse of the "Night Journey" in *Sūra* 17 in which God blesses the area around "al-Masjid al-Aqṣā": "This does not apply specifically to one locality in [Syria] as opposed to other localities, but it applies to what is generally encompassed by the borders (*hudūd*) of Syria." Thus, al-Sulamī downplays Jerusalem's particular claim to the *baraka* conferred by God in the "Night Journey" *Sūra* and assigns it to the region of Syria as a whole, echoing earlier interpretations of the "Holy Land" as comprising all of Syria.

Central to al-Sulamī's vision of Syrian virtue, reflecting again an emphasis in earlier *faḍā'il* literature, especially Ibn 'Asākir's introduction to the *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, is his representation of the region of Syria as a site of struggle and triumph in the service of the one true faith, both past and future. However, unlike Ibn 'Asākir, he makes an explicit connection between this representation and his own experience of life in Syria in the thirteenth century. In commenting on a Prophetic Ḥadīth predicting that when Islam is threatened "Syria will be the center of the abode of the faithful," al-

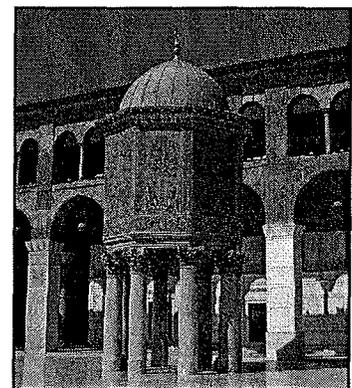
Sulamī explains that in this prediction the Prophet was urging the settlement of Syria because it is “a frontier fortress until Judgment Day, and we have witnessed this, for the edges of Syria have always been frontier fortresses.” In this commentary, al-Sulamī consciously represents Syria as the lodestone for faithful Muslims in the fight against disbelief, a fight that he has “witnessed” in his own time. Moreover, it is clear that he intends “al-Shām” in this statement to transcend the bounds of Damascus or of any single locality or district within the region of Syria, such as Jerusalem or Palestine, since, by evoking “frontier fortresses” (*thughūr*) along “edges” (*aṭrāf*) both historical and contemporary he conjures images of the northern border with Byzantium, the western Mediterranean coast, and, in this era of increasingly aggressive Mongol incursions, of which he was certainly aware, the north-eastern border along the Euphrates. Another of al-Sulamī’s commentaries calls attention to the weight he gives recent events in substantiating the claims of the material he presents from the Ḥadīth. In one version of the oft-repeated tradition in which the Prophet directs the Companion ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥawāla to settle in Syria, Ibn Ḥawāla shows some reluctance. At this, the Prophet reminds him: “Do you not know what God Almighty says of Syria? Truly God Almighty says: ‘Oh Syria, you are the choicest of my lands, and I have made the best of my worshippers enter you.’ Truly God Almighty has vouchsafed to me Syria and its people.” Then, al-Sulamī explains the significance of this version of the Ḥadīth: “This is testimony from the Prophet of God, peace be upon him, to the preference for Syria and its favor and to the choice nature of its people and to his preference for its residents. We have been eye-witnesses to

this, for whoever has seen the righteous people of Syria and compared them to others has seen between them a difference that proves the choice and chosen nature [of the people of Syria].”

In this commentary al-Sulamī deems the Prophet’s words self-evident to anyone who has spent time in Syria and has been an “eye-witness” to its people’s righteousness and fortitude, particularly in comparison to those of other regions. In the final section on Damascus, al-Sulamī quickly dispatches with the conventional Qur’anic evidence for the city’s merits, its association with the “high ground” (*al-rabwa*) upon which Jesus and Mary took refuge (23:50), with the fig in God’s oath “by the fig and the olive” (95:1), and with the pre-Islamic city of Iram (89:7-8). He also presents further apocalyptic traditions locating Jesus’ second coming in Damascus and portraying the Ghūṭa as a refuge for the faithful at the end of time. Then, however, he enumerates the kinds of *baraka* accrued to Damascus by the current vitality and piety of the religious life of its notables and scholars, among whom he used to figure prominently: “Among the things that show its *baraka* and the merit of its people is the great number of its pious endowments for the purpose of different types of cisterns and public drainage channels as well as the fact that its Great Mosque is never empty, whether at midnight or noon, of followers of the Book of God Almighty, of people praying or reciting the Qur’an, or of religious scholars and students.”

This tribute to the religious life of his hometown, a tribute to the life he lost in fleeing the city, acts as a prelude to the conclusion of the *faḍā’il* treatise in which al-Sulamī reflects on the issue of the just ruler in Islam – a thinly veiled tirade against the injustice he so soundly condemned on the part of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā’īl and an expression of his

bitterness as an émigré and political dissident. In this conclusion, al-Sulamī presents the same material Ibn ‘Asākir uses as an apologia for the role Syrians played in the Battle of Ṣiffin (37/657). However, al-Sulamī’s presentation of these traditions is intended less to exonerate Syrians for their ancestors’ mistakes than to reflect on past instances of unjust rulers of Damascus betraying Syria and Syrians. Al-Sulamī invokes words attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib – “Don’t blame Syrians! Rather blame the oppression of Syrians!” – to condemn the unjust or illegitimate policies of Syrian rulers. He concludes his *faḍā’il* treatise by asking God “to bring the governors of the affairs of the Muslims into line with your Book.” By representing Damascus via the exemplary religious life of its inhabitants just before this conclusion, al-Sulamī uses the *faḍā’il* genre to condemn any betrayal of them on the part of their rulers. The crimes of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā’īl, this conclusion suggests, were all the more unforgivable since their victim was Damascus. In compiling a *faḍā’il* treatise that drew both from earlier exemplars of the genre and from his own independent judgment and lived experience, al-Sulamī communicated his conviction that Syria’s divinely privileged destiny depended on the ‘*ulamā’* of Damascus and their willingness to speak truth to power.



Damascus, Great Mosque,
Dome of the Treasury

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¹ Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq*, vol. 1, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Damascus, 1951), 4. On this work, see my “Ibn ʿAsakir’s Representations of Syria and Damascus in the Introduction to the *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq*,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, 1 (2006): 109-129.

² Prominent – and still at least partially extant – among these were the *faḍāʾil* treatises on Jerusalem authored by Ibn ʿAsākir’s son Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-Qāsim (d. 600/1203); Baghdad-based Ḥanbalī scholar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200); and Damascus-based Ḥanbalī scholar Ḍiyāʾ al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (d. 643/1245). The celebratory history of Saladin’s re-conquest of Jerusalem, *al-Fath al-qussī fī al-fath al-Qudsī*, written by his chancery official ʿImād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 597/1201) can also be seen as an extended *faḍāʾil* treatise on the holy city. For others from this period, see Kāmil Jamīl al-ʿAsālī, *Makhtūṭāt faḍāʾil Bayt al-Maqdis* (Amman, 1984), 41-61; Isaac Hasson, “The Muslim View of Jerusalem: The Qurʾān and Ḥadīth,” in *The History of Jerusalem: The Early Muslim Period, 638-1099*, ed. Joshua Prawer and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem and New York, 1996), 370-374.

³ The introduction to Ibn ʿAsākir’s *Taʾrīkh madīnat Dimashq* continued to be presented in public readings in Damascus by local scholars and members of the ʿAsākir family in the late twelfth and early thirteenth

One of the most intriguing examples of Damascus-centric *faḍāʾil* literature, particularly as it relates to the politics of the Crusades, is the treatise written by noted preacher and Shāfiʿī jurist, ʿIzz al-Dīn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. ʿAbd al-Salām al-Sulamī (d. 660/1262), entitled *Targhīb ahl al-Islām fī sukṇā al-Shām* (Inciting Muslims to settle in Syria).⁴ Al-Sulamī had a distinguished career in Damascus, occupying the post of *khaṭīb*, or preacher, of the Umayyad Mosque under the city’s Ayyubid ruler, al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl (reigned 634/1237-635/1238, 637/1239-643/1245). Described as having attained the status of “independent thinker” (*mujtahid*) in juridical matters by his biographers, al-Sulamī’s career exemplifies the loosening of the relationship between local intellectuals and the ruling elite in the Ayyubid period.⁵

Few Ayyubid rulers in the first half of the thirteenth century were able to build or maintain a support system among Syrian religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) of the kind that had strengthened Saladin, founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, and his predecessor Nūr al-Dīn. Internecine rivalry between the sons of Saladin’s brother al-ʿĀdil I, who had consolidated power over both Egypt and Syria from 596/1200 until his death in 615/1218, created an unstable situation in which the cities of Cairo, Damascus, and Aleppo were increasingly aligned against each other as Ayyubid claimants jockeyed for position. It was in an attempt to strengthen his hand against those of his brothers in Syria that the Ayyubid ruler in Cairo, al-Kāmil, signed a treaty with Frederick II of Hohenstaufen in 626/1229 that ceded Jerusalem back to the Crusaders. This gesture

century, and an abridgement of the work as a whole was prepared in this period by the famous historian and Damascus resident Abū Shāma (d. 665/1266). See Ibn ʿAsākir, 1: 627-628, 629, 630-631, 632-634, 638-639, 640-641, 642, 643, 644, 648-649, 650-651, 652, 655, 656, 660, 661-662, 663-664, 665, 666, 670, 671-673, 674-675, 679, 680-681, 682-683, 684, 688, 689-690, 691-692, 696, 697-698, 699, 700, 701, 705, 706-707, 709-710, 711, 712, 713, 716, 717-718, 719, 720, 721 (*samāʾāt*); Abū Shāma, *Kitāb al-rawḍatayn*, 5 vols., ed. Ibrāhīm al-Zaybaq (Beirut, 1997), 1: 25-26.

⁴ al-Sulamī, *Targhīb ahl al-Islām fī sukṇā al-Shām*, ed. Iyād Khālid al-Ṭabbāʿ (Damascus, 1998).

⁵ Tāj al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb b. ʿAlī al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfiʿiyya al-kubrā*, vol. 4, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir Aḥmad ʿAṭā (Beirut, 1999), 354-385 (no. 1183). See also E. Chaumont, “al-Sulamī,” *EP*.

raised the ire of Syrian *‘ulamā’*, particularly those in Damascus who had constituted the most vocal supporters of jihad against the Crusaders.⁶

A decade later, intra-dynastic power struggles again prompted an Ayyubid, this time the ruler of Damascus al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl, to sign a treaty with the Crusaders in 638/1240, which ceded some coastal territories and a number of nearby fortresses to the Franks of Acre and allowed them access to the weapons markets of Damascus. In response to this calculated act of *realpolitik*, many members of the Damascene *‘ulamā’* raised their voices in condemnation of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl’s judgment. Front and center in this uproar was al-Sulamī, who issued a *fatwā*, or legal opinion, condemning the sale of arms to Crusaders and preached a fiery Friday sermon from the pulpit of the Umayyad Mosque expressing outspoken rejection of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā‘īl’s policies and, therefore, of his legitimacy as a ruler. Reprisal was swift on the part of the Ayyubid ruler, and al-Sulamī was briefly imprisoned and then forced to leave Damascus, from whence he fled to Egypt where he spent the rest of his life in self-imposed exile.⁷

After fleeing to Egypt, al-Sulamī authored his *faḍā’il* tribute to Syria and Damascus, presumably at least partly out of homesickness.⁸ In compiling this work, he borrowed material from the earlier *Faḍā’il al-Shām wa-Dimashq* (Merits of Syria and Damascus) by one Abū I-Ḥasan ‘Alī al-Rabā‘ī (d. 444/1052) and from the introduction to Ibn ‘Asākir’s *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq* and reflected their emphases on the privileged status of the region of Syria and its central city, Damascus, in sacred history. These similarities aside, al-Sulamī arranges and comments on this material in such a way as to communicate his particular understanding of his authority as a religious scholar as well as his political agenda. Unlike his predecessors, he does not hesitate to wield his independent judgment as a *mujtahid*, abbreviating or eliminating chains of transmission

⁶ For more on these tensions in Ayyubid Syria, see R. Stephen Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: the Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193-1260* (Albany, 1977).

⁷ al-Sulamī, 3-4; see also Emmanuel Sivan, *L’Islam et la Croisade: idéologie et propagande dans les réactions musulmanes aux Croisades* (Paris, 1968), 149-152.

⁸ al-Sulamī, 3.

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⁹ Ibid., 11-26 (on Syria), 27-32 (on Damascus).

¹⁰ al-Rabāʾī, *Faḍāʾil al-Shām wa-Dimasq*, ed. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid (Damascus, 1950), 11 (no. 19); Ibn ʿAsākir, 1: 129, 130, 133, 139, 152, 153, 188. For the Qurʾānic referents, see Qurʾān 5:21, 7:137, 21:71.

¹¹ al-Sulamī, 26.

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¹² Ibid., 12.

¹³ Ibid., 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

than Damascus.¹⁶ For instance, later in the *faḍā'il* treatise he presents an exegesis of the phrase from the first verse of the “Night Journey” *Sūra* (Qur’ān 17:1) in which God blesses the area around “al-Masjid al-Aqsā”: “This does not apply specifically to one locality in [Syria] as opposed to other localities, but it applies to what is generally encompassed by the borders (*ḥudūd*) of Syria.”¹⁷ Thus, al-Sulamī downplays Jerusalem’s particular claim to the *baraka* conferred by God in the “Night Journey” *Sūra* and assigns it to the region of Syria as a whole, echoing earlier interpretations of the “holy land” as comprising all of Syria.¹⁸

Central to al-Sulamī’s vision of Syrian virtue, reflecting again an emphasis in earlier *faḍā'il* literature, especially Ibn ‘Asākir’s introduction to the *Ta’rīkh madīnat Dimashq*, is his representation of the region of Syria as a site of struggle and triumph in the service of the one true faith, both past and future.¹⁹ However, unlike Ibn ‘Asākir, he makes an explicit connection between this representation and his own experience of life in Syria in the thirteenth century. In commenting on a Prophetic Ḥadīth predicting that when Islam is threatened “Syria will be the center of the abode of the faithful,” al-Sulamī explains that in this prediction the Prophet was urging the settlement of Syria because it is “a frontier fortress until Judgment Day, and we have witnessed this, for the edges of Syria have always been frontier fortresses.”²⁰ In this commentary, al-Sulamī consciously represents Syria as the lodestone for faithful Muslims in the fight against disbelief, a fight that he has “witnessed” in his own time. Moreover, it is clear that he intends “al-Shām” in this statement to transcend the bounds of Damascus or of any single locality or district within the region of Syria, such as Jerusalem or Palestine, since, by evoking “frontier fortresses” (*thughūr*) along “edges” (*aṭrāf*) both historical and

¹⁶ Al-Sulamī only mentions Jerusalem three times in the treatise, and, apart from Damascus, he mentions no other locality within Syria; see *ibid.*, 14, 29, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸ See, for a compelling earlier example, Ibn al-Jawzī, *Faḍā'il al-Quds*, ed. Jibrā'īl Sulaymān Jabbūr (Beirut, 1979), 67-69.

¹⁹ See my “Ibn ‘Asākir’s Representations,” 112-114.

²⁰ al-Sulamī, 19-20.

contemporary he conjures images of the northern border with Byzantium, the western Mediterranean coast, and, in this era of increasingly aggressive Mongol incursions, of which he was certainly aware, the north-eastern border along the Euphrates.²¹

Another of al-Sulamī's commentaries calls attention to the weight he gives recent events in substantiating the claims of the material he presents from the Ḥadīth. In one version of the oft-repeated tradition in which the Prophet directs the Companion 'Abd Allāh b. Ḥawāla to settle in Syria, Ibn Ḥawāla shows some reluctance.²² At this, the Prophet reminds him: "Do you not know what God Almighty says of Syria? Truly God Almighty says: 'Oh Syria, you are the choicest of my lands, and I have made the best of my worshippers enter you.' Truly God Almighty has vouchsafed to me Syria and its people." Then, al-Sulamī explains the significance of this version of the Ḥadīth:

This is testimony from the Prophet of God, peace be upon him, to the preference for Syria and its favor and to the choice nature of its people and to his preference for its residents. We have been eye-witnesses to this, for whoever has seen the righteous people of Syria and compared them to others has seen between them a difference that proves the choice and chosen nature [of the people of Syria].²³

In this commentary al-Sulamī deems the Prophet's words self-evident to anyone who has spent time in Syria and has been an "eye-witness" to its people's righteousness and fortitude, particularly in comparison to those of other regions.

In the final section on Damascus, al-Sulamī quickly dispatches with the conventional Qur'ānic evidence for the city's merits, its association with the "high ground" (*al-rabwa*) upon which Jesus and Mary took refuge (23:50), with the fig in God's

²¹ Sivan, *L'Islam et la Croisade*, 157.

²² For examples of this tradition in earlier *faḍā'il* treatises, see al-Rabaī, 4-6 (nos. 4, 5); Ibn 'Asākir, 1: 47-90. For a discussion of the origins of this tradition, see Wilferd Madelung, "Has the *Hijra* Come to an End?," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* 54 (1986): 225-237.

²³ al-Sulamī, 20.

oath “by the fig and the olive” (95:1), and with the pre-Islamic city of Iram (89:7-8).²⁴ He also presents further apocalyptic traditions locating Jesus’ second coming in Damascus and portraying the Ghūṭa as a refuge for the faithful at the end of time.²⁵ Then, however, he enumerates the kinds of *baraka* accrued to Damascus by the current vitality and piety of the religious life of its notables and scholars, among whom he used to figure prominently:

Among the things that show its *baraka* and the merit of its people is the great number of its pious endowments for the purpose of different types of cisterns and public drainage channels as well as the fact that its Great Mosque is never empty, whether at midnight or noon, of followers of the Book of God Almighty, of people praying or reciting the Qur’ān, or of religious scholars and students.²⁶

This tribute to the religious life of his hometown, a tribute to the life he lost in fleeing the city, acts as a prelude to the conclusion of the *faḍā’il* treatise in which al-Sulamī reflects on the issue of the just ruler in Islam – a thinly veiled tirade against the injustice he so soundly condemned on the part of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā’īl and an expression of his bitterness as an émigré and political dissident.

In this conclusion, al-Sulamī presents the same material Ibn ‘Asākir uses as an apologia for the role Syrians played in the Battle of Ṣiffīn (37/657).²⁷ However, al-Sulamī’s presentation of these traditions is intended less to exonerate Syrians for their ancestors’ mistakes than to reflect on past instances of unjust rulers of Damascus betraying Syria and Syrians. Al-Sulamī invokes words attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib – “Don’t blame Syrians! Rather blame the oppression of Syrians!” – to condemn the

²⁴ Ibid., 27-28. See, for earlier examples, Ibn ‘Asākir, 1: 192-208; al-Raba’ī, 17-19 (nos. 28-33), 20 (no. 36), 21 (no. 38), 22-23 (nos. 41-45), 26 (nos. 49, 50), 53-55 (no. 89).

²⁵ al-Sulamī, 29-30. See, for earlier examples, Ibn ‘Asākir, 1: 213-233; al-Raba’ī, 44 (no. 75), 71-74 (nos. 105-111), 77-79 (nos. 116-118).

²⁶ al-Sulamī, 30.

²⁷ See Ibn ‘Asākir, 1: 321-334.

unjust or illegitimate policies of Syrian rulers.²⁸ He concludes his *faḍā'il* treatise by asking God “to bring the governors of the affairs of the Muslims into line with your Book.”²⁹ By representing Damascus via the exemplary religious life of its inhabitants just before this conclusion, al-Sulamī uses the *faḍā'il* genre to condemn any betrayal of them on the part of their rulers. The crimes of al-Ṣāliḥ Ismā'īl, this conclusion suggests, were all the more unforgivable since their victim was Damascus. In compiling a *faḍā'il* treatise that drew both from earlier exemplars of the genre and from his own independent judgment and lived experience, al-Sulamī communicated his conviction that Syria's divinely privileged destiny depended on the *'ulamā'* of Damascus and their willingness to speak truth to power.

²⁸ al-Sulamī, 32.

²⁹ Ibid., 35.