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# Niẓām al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Ṭayyārī – An Artist in the Court of the Ilkhans *and* Mamluks

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**Abstract:** Reading through the sources written in the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517), one receives the impression that the political borders between the Mamluk and Ilkhanid realms were just that – in no ways cultural or even serious physical barriers. This paper will demonstrate this by focusing on the biography of Niẓām al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Ṭayyārī (685–760/1286/7–1358/9~). His father served under the Ilkhans as a physician and scribe, while Niẓām al-Dīn grew up into the Ilkhanid elite and became a prolific calligrapher, scribe and musician in his own right, being especially close to the Sultan Abū Saʿīd and his vizier, Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad. After the death of Abū Saʿīd and the subsequent disintegration of the Ilkhanate, Niẓām al-Dīn made his way to the Mamluk Sultanate, where his artistic talents were very much appreciated, representing the glorious artistic tradition of the east. Despite his seemingly smooth reception in the ruling circles of the Mamluk Sultanate, Niẓām al-Dīn seems to have remained attached to his homeland, and to the lavish properties which he left behind him. He subsequently returned to Baghdad, where he was immediately reinstated to his former duties. Following and analyzing the career of Niẓām al-Dīn can grant insights into court culture of the Muslim world of his age, where similarities in taste and bureaucratic traditions probably outweighed the differences. We also learn about mobility, cultural exchange and artistic sensibilities between the two competing courts.

**Keywords:** mobility, Ilkhanate, artists, Mamluk Sultanate, Historiography

## 1 Introduction

Students of the Mongol Empire are familiar with the Mamluk Sultanate mainly for its role in putting a halt to the westward advance of the Mongol armies and then, for its role as the Ilkhanate's long-standing enemy. While the Mamluks are therefore conceived as situated beyond the reach of the famous *Pax Mongolica*, the period of open Mamluk-Mongol hostility and later reconciliation was also

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marked by mobility between Ilkhanid lands (as well as the areas under Golden Horde and Chaghadaid rule) and the sultanate.<sup>1</sup>

Egypt and Syria were too strongly connected, under the aegis of Islam, to Iraq and Iran, to be separated by an *ad hoc* political border between two warring states. While changes can be detected in patterns of migration and mobility (e.g. the decline in importance of Baghdad *vis-à-vis* Damascus),<sup>2</sup> generally speaking, contemporaneous sources provide abundant examples of people – scholars, merchants, mendicants, soldiers and nomads – moving between the territories.

Not only did Muslim scholars living in Damascus and Cairo share much the same Islamic worldview with their counterparts in Tabriz or Baghdad, but the courts of Cairo and Tabriz, as well as Saray, shared a broad Turko-Mongol ethnic and cultural background associated with Eurasian Steppe origins. In this latter sense, the Mamluks, considered as having halted the Mongol advance westward, in many ways extended Turko-Mongol cultural-political dominance over Eurasia.<sup>3</sup>

This paper shows how all of the above was articulated in the life of one individual, the renowned artist and scribe Nizām al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍā'il Yaḥyā b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṭayyārī al-Tustarī. Nizām al-Dīn flourished and was closely connected to the highest echelons of politics at the court of the last Ilkhān Abū Sa'īd (r. 1316–1335) and after the Ilkhanate's collapse was warmly received, along with other distinguished notables, at the court of the Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (3<sup>rd</sup> r. 1310–1341). However, several years into his stay at the Mamluk Sultanate, Nizām al-Dīn migrated back to his homeland of Iraq and reassumed several of his former positions as a court scribe there.

In what follows, I first give an overview of the biographies of Nizām al-Dīn and his father, Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān, and then address the main issues derived from them. As will be seen, the biographies of both father and son are constructed almost exclusively from Mamluk-Arabic sources, as is the case with a number of notables who flourished in the Mongol dominions, especially those

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<sup>1</sup> As was noted in several studies by Reuven Amitai (most recently in Amitai 2015: 242).

<sup>2</sup> Arabic sources written in Mamluk territories show a much higher rate of movement westward – from Iraq and Iran towards Syria – than vice versa. Even when considering the bias of these sources, the trend is unquestionably pronounced. See Amitai 2015: 242–243.

<sup>3</sup> See Yosef 2010, 2012, Mazor 2012. There were also great differences between Mamluks and Mongols, the former being for the most part faithful Muslims and assimilated, at least in part, to the Arab-Muslim culture into which they were brought. See, for instance: Amitai 2013: especially chapter 2.

in the second or third tier of political importance, something that underlines the close cultural connections across political fault lines.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Biography

### 2.1 The father, Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān

Nūr al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Umar b. ‘Alī al-Tustarī al-Hāshimī al-Ja‘farī al-Ṭayyārī, also known as al-Nūr al-Ḥakīm, was the son of ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Umar, probably a lecturer (*mudarris*) at al-Thiqatiyya madrasa in Baghdad.<sup>5</sup> We have no further information about his father or family, but his *nisba* claims relation to Ja‘far b. Abī Ṭālib al-Ṭayyār, the elder brother of the fourth caliph ‘Alī.<sup>6</sup> It is said that Nūr al-Dīn came to Baghdad during ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Ja‘farī’s term as governor of al-Baṣra, so probably during the 1260s,<sup>7</sup> but since his father lectured there, this was probably not his first visit. Residing at the Nizāmiyya madrasa, he learned Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and gained expertise in medicine (*al-ṭibb*) from the city’s top physicians, Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh and Ibn al-Qissīs,<sup>8</sup> later specializing in the scribal arts, calligraphy and literature. Becoming close to ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Ja‘farī, he was held in high esteem and assigned lavish stipends.<sup>9</sup> It is plausible that through his relationship with al-Ja‘farī Nūr al-Dīn was able to enter the service of Baghdad’s *ṣāhib dīwān* ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Juwaynī, where he started earning from medical practice, specializing in ophthalmology.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This continues the growing interrogation of Arabic sources written under Mamluk rule for the study of the Mongol Empire and subsequent Mongol states. For representative studies see works by Amitai, Biran and Melville.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 1995: 1:277.

<sup>6</sup> He also receives at times the *nisba* al-Ja‘farī (Al-‘Umarī 2010: 10:406; Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:213).

<sup>7</sup> Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:214. This is ‘Izz al-Dīn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Ja‘far al-Naysābūrī (626–672 / 1228/9–1273/4). In 656/1258, when Iraq was conquered by the Mongols, he found refuge with the Juwaynīs (‘Alā’ al-Dīn and Shams al-Dīn) and became their client. They made him the *shahna* of al-Wasīṭ and al-Baṣra. This means that Nūr al-Dīn arrived in Baghdad sometime between 1259 and 1273. On al-Naysābūrī see Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 1995: 1:226–227; Pseudo Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 1997: 413–414.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:214. On Ibn al-Ṣabbāgh (al-Mubārak b. al-Mubārak, d. 682/3–1283/4), a physician and calligrapher/copyist who worked at al-Mustanṣiriyya madrasa, and lived over a century, see Ibn al-Fuwaṭī (Pseudo) 1997: 470. On ‘Isā Ibn al-Qissīs al-Baghdādī al-Ḥazīrī (d. unknown) see Ibn al-‘Ibrī 1890: 478–479.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:214.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:214; Al-‘Umarī 2010: 10:407; Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 3:34.

Nūr al-Dīn's career reached its peak during the reign of Öljeitü (1304–1316), when he served as a court physician, treating “the Hülegüid dynasty, the Qān, the noble ladies, the emirs and the notable merchants, while forming connections with the viziers, associating with them and being a part of their retinue.”<sup>11</sup> Patronage from the Juwaynis being long past, Nūr al-Dīn cultivated ties to the Ilkhān Öljeitü and his vizier Rashīd al-Dīn, as is evinced from his rare mentions in the Ilkhanid Persian sources.<sup>12</sup>

Thanks to his court connections, Nūr al-Dīn accumulated a great fortune, purchasing real estate at al-Ḥilla and Baghdad<sup>13</sup> that yielded an annual income, which, according to al-Dhahabī, reached seventy thousand dirhams, and lasted until his death, at an advanced age, in 723/1323.<sup>14</sup> At some point he became inclined to Sufism and founded a *ribāṭ* in Baghdad, making himself its shaykh and teaching students or disciples.<sup>15</sup> Mystical quests aside, Nūr al-Dīn's activity at court continued, apparently until his death. According to al-Birzālī, Nūr al-Dīn performed the pilgrimage to Mecca in 720/1320–1,<sup>16</sup> but as we will see this might actually refer to a ḥajj performed by Nūr al-Dīn's son.

## 2.2 The son, Niẓām al-Dīn Yahyā

The above biography of Nūr al-Dīn is necessary for understanding the *milieu* in which Niẓām al-Dīn grew up and made his own career, taking a different

11 Al-ʿUmarī 2010: 10:407. Cf. al-Ṣafadī: “He used to treat the Mongol rulers and others” (Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563).

12 He was appointed as one of the six professors in the mobile madrasa, founded by Öljeitü (Qāshānī 1969: 108). Besides that, he wrote a *taqrīẓ* for Rashīd al-Dīn and asked the vizier a theological question regarding the transmigration of souls after death (Van Ess 1981: 23, 47).

13 Al-ʿUmarī 2010: 10:407. In this edition, instead of Baghdad the text reads: “He purchased property at *Bilād al-Maghrib* and al-Ḥilla.” This seems to be an error, and in a facsimile edition (Al-ʿUmarī 1988: 361), we find *Bilād Baghdād*, which is much more likely.

14 Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:214. It is not clear to what currency this figure refers, but it was probably the dirham.

15 Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:214. Al-Ṣafadī seems to have reproduced the former's biographical entry regarding Nūr al-Dīn, but describes this Sufi convent as *khānaqāh* rather than *ribāṭ* (Al-Ṣafadī 2008: 18:206). Ibn al-Fuwaṭī calls it a *ribāṭ*, mentioning it twice when visiting Sufis from Khurasan stayed there, one in October 1320 and another evidently around the same year. The *ribāṭ* lay in the goldsmiths' quarter (*Maḥallat al-Ṣāgha*), near the caliphal palace (Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 1995: 1:199, 3:451–452). The editor remarks that Nūr al-Dīn had a second *ribāṭ*, located at al-Shūniziyya, in the environs of al-Junayd's cemetery (Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 1995: 1:199), but without citing a source. Al-Ṣafadī (or al-Dhahabī) portrays his turn to Sufism in negative terms, stating that “he entered those straits,” terminology both employ for several Sufis considered to have gone astray (Al-Ṣafadī 2008: 18:206; Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:214).

16 Al-Birzālī 2006: 4:464.

direction from that of his father. Born around 685/1286–7,<sup>17</sup> Nizām al-Dīn was raised in Ilkhanid Baghdad. Under his father's guidance he received an excellent education, probably consisting of the traditional Islamic sciences but including also fine arts, such as calligraphy and music, which were popular in the higher circles of the Ilkhanid court and considered essential for a belletrist (*adīb*). He learned those arts from Aḥmad al-Suhrawardī,<sup>18</sup> the great master of the time, who also taught the Ilkhān Abū Sa'īd and the vizier Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad – son of Rashīd al-Dīn – to name just two.<sup>19</sup>

As for Nizām al-Dīn's musical talents, the Mamluk author al-'Umarī places his biographical entry in his work among those of the musicians, and, like al-Ṣafadī, pours praise on his skills, comparing him to great masters of past generations.<sup>20</sup> Ibn al-Fuwaṭī mentions that he was associating with Nizām al-Dīn at the city of Sulṭāniyya, when they met with another musician, a certain Majd al-Dīn al-Dalqandī, in Rajab 717/Sept. – Oct. 1317.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, Nizām al-Dīn was a regular member of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad's and Abū Sa'īd's salons, known for hosting and patronizing great scholars, and especially musicians.<sup>22</sup>

Growing very close to the Ilkhān Abū Sa'īd and the vizier Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad, it was in their service that Nizām al-Dīn's calligraphic skill came into use, serving in Abū Sa'īd's court as a scribe, primarily composing Arabic diplomatic epistles intended for the sultans of Egypt and India (al-Hind).<sup>23</sup> Al-'Umarī mentions fine letters arriving at Cairo which, since he was assigned with reading diplomatic correspondence to the sultan, he witnessed in person.<sup>24</sup> Judging from al-'Umarī's biography of Nizām al-Dīn, he was a member of the Ilkhanid court, directly under the vizier's command, and, although generously paid for composition, not working full time in this capacity.<sup>25</sup> According to

17 Al-Dhahabī 1988: 295.

18 Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:407.

19 Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:392. On their calligraphic talents see Soudavar 1996: 160–162.

20 Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:407.

21 Ibn al-Fuwaṭī 1995: 4:526.

22 On Ghiyāth al-Dīn see Soudavar 1996: 171–172; Melville 2002: 57–59; Marlow 2004: 176. On Abū Sa'īd: Al-Yūsufī 1986: 335–336; Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:371–372.

23 Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:407. That is, to al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad of Egypt and the Delhi Sultan Muḥammad b. Ṭughluq (r. 1324–1351).

24 Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:407; regarding al-'Umarī's role reading the mail (*barīd*) see Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 1:417.

25 Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:407. He writes that Nizām al-Dīn “was not a permanent scribe in the chancery, since it was not the Mongols' habit [to employ such permanent scribes], but he was something of that sort” (*wa-lam yakun kātib mustaqarr li'l-inshā' idh lā 'āda li'l-qawm bi-dhalika wa-lakinnahu kāna fī hadhā al-ma'nā*).



Mamluk sources, Niẓām al-Dīn also served the “rulers of Baghdad” as a scribe,<sup>26</sup> and was one of the city’s “leading scholars (*ṣudūr*).”<sup>27</sup> The evidence is insufficient to determine whether he held another position there, or whether it was the same role he filled at the *Ordu*.<sup>28</sup>

After the deaths of Abū Saʿīd and then Ghiyāth al-Dīn Muḥammad, in 1335 and 1336 respectively, Niẓām al-Dīn found a new patron in the Oyirat ʿAlī-Pādshāh, who held him in great esteem, doubling his income.<sup>29</sup> Eventually, after the defeat of his new patron in July 1336,<sup>30</sup> and facing a deteriorating situation in Baghdad, Niẓām al-Dīn, along with other key figures in the Ilkhanid administration, most prominently the vizier Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. ʿAlī b. Sharwīn, travelled to the Mamluk Sultanate, arriving at Damascus in late summer 738/1337.<sup>31</sup> Received with honor by the governor Tankiz, key members of the

26 “*wa-kāna fī awwal amrihi yaktubu al-inshāʾ ʿan ḥukkām Baghdād*.” Ibn Ḥajar 1966: 5:193.

27 Al-ʿUmārī 2010: 10:407.

28 It is difficult to determine exactly what is meant by “the governors of Baghdad” here. This may relate to the period after Abū Saʿīd’s death, when central authority in the Ilkhanate became a matter of contention, Niẓām al-Dīn being attached to those ruling Baghdad, for example ʿAlī-Pādshāh, already governor over the Baghdad region in the late 1320s (Melville 1999: 31; Wing 2007: 79; on connections to ʿAlī-Pādshāh after Abū Saʿīd’s death see below). The meaning here might also be that Niẓām al-Dīn served the local governors of Baghdad *before* becoming attached to the *Ordu*, that is at the beginning of his career, or that he served the Baghdadi governors when the *Ordu* was at Baghdad.

29 Al-ʿUmārī 2010: 10:408. ʿAlī-Pādshāh administered the kingdom under the nominal rule of Mūsā Khān, a descendant of Baidu. On this period see Melville 1999: 46–53. ʿAlī-Pādshāh being a bitter rival of Niẓām al-Dīn’s former patron Ghiyāth al-Dīn apparently did not hinder Niẓām al-Dīn’s acceptance into his service.

30 Wing 2007: 85.

31 There are several descriptions of this group’s arrival in Damascus; most sources date it to either al-Muḥarram or Ṣafar 738 (Aug.–Sept. 1337), while in the printed edition of al-Yūsufī’s work it is erroneously recorded under the year 732/1331–2 (Al-Yūsufī 1986: 448). The group seems to have numbered several hundred persons, including families, harems, etc. (Al-Yūsufī 1986: 448; Al-Jazarī 1998: 3:1022). The reason for their migration remains unclear; while it is generally stated that they escaped political upheaval in Iraq, at least one version, by al-Jazarī, offers a more specific circumstance, noting that they escaped after Fakhr al-Dīn ʿUthmān b. al-Baladī, a member of the group described as “one of the governors of Baghdad” (Al-Jazarī 1998: 3:1022) or “*ṣāḥib al-dīwān*” (Zettersteen 1919: 195), had killed Jamāl al-Dīn b. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī, a great-grandson of the renowned Sufi shaykh Shihāb al-Dīn ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī, who was himself the inspector over the endowments (*nāẓir al-awqāf*) and is described as one who possessed much influence in Baghdad’s affairs, while acting in haughtiness and extorting the local population (Al-Jazarī 1998: 3:1008; al-Dhahabī 61:343. This person also held the position of shaykh of ribāṭ al-Maʾmūniyya which was a hereditary position passing in the Suhrawardī clan). Al-Yūsufī’s account (1986: 448) is similar, but identifies the murder victim as ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī (which might be the same person) and adds that the group left

group were dispatched to the court in Cairo, where they received stipends from the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.<sup>32</sup>

Beside those stipends, some members of the group also received key positions in the Mamluk administration. The former qāḍī of Baghdad, Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Ghūrī was appointed chief Hanafite qāḍī of Egypt,<sup>33</sup> while the vizier Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd was assigned an emirate of a hundred and later appointed vizier of the kingdom.<sup>34</sup> Another member of the group, Nāṣir al-Dīn Khalīfa, son of the former Ilkhanid vizier ‘Alī Shāh, stayed in Damascus at the request of the governor Tankiz.<sup>35</sup>

As for Niẓām al-Dīn, it is clear that his reputation reached the Mamluk Sultanate prior to this journey. First, he performed the pilgrimage to Mecca several times, reportedly sometimes heading the Iraqi caravan.<sup>36</sup> While it is

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Baghdad fearing extortion. Al-Jazarī describes the events in Baghdad as a “*fitna*,” and we should probably look at the circumstances leading to the migration as a combination of political and local-social upheavals. See Melville 1999: 70.

32 The group’s reception could be viewed as part of the *wāfidiyya*, which was important for the Mamluk sultans, especially in the early period, when the sultans enhanced their prestige by receiving refugees seeking asylum from constant warfare between rival Mongol khanates and from internal disputes. Also a source of information about events in the Ilkhanate, and probably for intelligence, it provided new Mongol personnel – mainly youths and women – for the Mamluk emirs. See Ayalon 1951; Nakamachi 2006; Amitai 2008. Whether or not this group was actually considered part of the *wāfidiyya* trend is not of prime importance – the peak *wāfidiyya* years were already long gone by that time – but the tradition was still fresh in the memory, and the group’s arrival is described as *wāfidiyya*, i.e. they “*wafadū ‘alā al-sulṭān al-Nāṣir Muḥammad*” (Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:562).

33 Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī 1966: 2:127. Al-Ghūrī was extremely unpopular by the Egyptians, so much that the commoners plundered his house and demanded his execution. Thanks to the intercession of one Mamluk emir he was eventually banished from Cairo, spent some time in Damascus, and then found his way back to Baghdad, where he was appointed as a lecturer at the *mashhad* of Abū Ḥanīfa (Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī 1966: 2:41–43).

34 Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd is said to have handed the sultan a precious stone valued at 200,000 dirhams or 10,000 dinars on their first meeting. From there, his way to a favored position at court was clear. His conduct of affairs as vizier is described very favorably and, although this position was considerably less important in the Mamluk Sultanate than the Ilkhanate, he is remembered in biographical compendiums as one who served as both “vizier of the east and the west.” Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:399; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī 1966: 5:99–100.

35 According to at least one source (Al-Shujā’ī 1978: 27), Nāṣir al-Dīn Khalīfa arrived later. It is notable that ‘Alī Shāh, Nāṣir al-Dīn’s father, was the person behind Öljeitü’s “mobile madrasa”, where Niẓām al-Dīn’s father, Nūr al-Dīn, was employed as a teacher (Qāshānī 1969: 108).

36 Al-‘Umari 2010: 10:408. As stated above, al-Birzālī (2006: 4:464) writes that Niẓām al-Dīn’s father –referred to as “Nūr al-Dīn al-Ḥakīm” – was part of the Iraqi caravan of 720/1320–1, which arrived at Mecca in great splendor. Considering that Niẓām al-Dīn is often called “Ibn al-Nūr al-Ḥakīm”; that Nūr al-Dīn was already quite old at the time; and that Niẓām al-Dīn



uncertain if his caravan passed by Damascus, at the very least Niẓām al-Dīn most certainly met scholars and officials from the Mamluk Sultanate at the Hijaz. Secondly, as noted above, he was known in Cairo court circles for the fine letters composed in the Ilkhān's name.<sup>37</sup> Due to all this, his arrival at Damascus, and then at Cairo, was rather smooth.

In Cairo he was attached to the household of the prominent emir Sayf al-Dīn Qawṣūn (d. 741/1341), one of the sultan's favorites. Qawṣūn cherished Niẓām al-Dīn's musical talents and, according to the latter's own statement, made him sing on demand, until the Iraqi émigré tired of this and asked the sultan to be relocated to Damascus.<sup>38</sup> This being granted, Niẓām al-Dīn returned to the Syrian capital, where he was assigned by the governor Tankiz to the post of shaykh of al-Rabwa, a pleasant hill on the outskirts of the city known for its holy shrines.<sup>39</sup> This was obviously a radical change in lifestyle for Niẓām al-Dīn, after years among the luxuries – and intrigues – of court life. His responsibilities as shaykh of al-Rabwa are unclear, but it seems likely that the holder of this position was in charge over the management of the shrine and mosque of al-Rabwa.<sup>40</sup> Niẓām al-Dīn apparently found the

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reportedly performed the pilgrimage several times, it is conceivable that it was he who took part that year. On the Iraqi caravan in the context of Mamluk-Ilkhanid relations see Melville 1992 (pp. 204–205 on the 720/1320–1 caravan).

**37** Al-'Umarī (2010: 10:407–408) quotes from one of the letters dealing with the Ilkhans' demand that the Iraqi caravan be permitted to go directly to Mecca, rather than forcing eastern pilgrims to join the Syrian caravan via Damascus. This was a major subject in the ongoing peace talks between Abū Sa'īd and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. See Melville 1992.

**38** Al-Ṣafadī quotes Niẓām al-Dīn, recounting his experience living with Qawṣūn: "He [Niẓām al-Dīn] told me himself: '[...] I remained with the emir Sayf al-Dīn Qawṣūn, and when he would summon me he would tell me: 'O Shaykh Niẓām al-Dīn, play for us that *bīshūra*, [or:] play for us that story/poem (*qawl*), [or:] play for us that *sādhij* which you composed.' And I said to myself: 'O Yaḥyā, when have you become so feeble that those men treat you as no more than a singer?' And I asked the sultan to return to Damascus, and he dispatched me to it'" (Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563). Al-Ṣafadī (1998: 5:562) also writes that Niẓām al-Dīn asked to return to Damascus because of the "proud [desire for] freedom his soul possessed (*li-mā 'inda nafsihi al-abiyya min al-ḥurriyya*)," which is probably connected to the aforementioned description of his life with Qawṣūn.

**39** Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563.

**40** The best known person to have held this title was the Sufi and polymath Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī (d. 727/1327; see Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 4:474–475). There was a Friday mosque (*jāmi'*) and two holy shrines at al-Rabwa, and at least two official positions: an *imām* and an inspector over the endowments (*nāẓir*). It was also a favorable place for ascetics, about whom see Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 56:308; 60:443–444; Ibn Al-Ṣuqā'ī 1974: 69. A detailed description of al-Rabwa is provided by the twelfth century Andalusian traveler; Ibn Jubayr 1964: 248–249.

place pleasant and dedicated his time there to studying hadith and teaching his children.<sup>41</sup>

During the time Nizām al-Dīn spent in the Mamluk Sultanate he was again mostly cherished for his prowess in music and calligraphy. Although, as stated above, Nizām al-Dīn felt some chagrin at constant requests to perform in the household of the grand emir Qawṣūn, when associating with other notables, and in the right spirit, he would many times sing of his own volition, and his works on music were circulated among artists in Egypt and Syria.<sup>42</sup>

Nizām al-Dīn's second highly esteemed talent was as a calligrapher, skills required as a leading scribe for the Ilkhān. According to al-Ṣafadī he excelled in various styles of calligraphy, such as the proportional style (*al-mansūb*), the Kūfī and the Ma'qilī styles of script.<sup>43</sup> He was also cherished for his flair in painting arboreal diagrams (*tashjīr*). Both al-'Umarī and al-Ṣafadī saw his works in person and were impressed by his diagrams. Al-'Umarī wrote that he had seen many of his works of this genre, and specifically mentioned one diagram of the various sciences, arranged into branches.<sup>44</sup> Al-Ṣafadī described one diagram of pilgrimage stations between Baghdad and Mecca, painted on a linen scroll, as "one of the finest specimens of its kind in terms of writing and skill."<sup>45</sup> Nizām al-Dīn left this piece, as well as several other excellent works, at the residence of the qāḍī and head of the chancery in Damascus, Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn al-Qaysarānī.<sup>46</sup>

At some point, Nizām al-Dīn traveled back to Iraq for the purpose of collecting revenues from the lands he still held there, probably those he inherited from his father. He seems to have had little success, however, due to a combination of ruination and hostile takeovers.<sup>47</sup> Returning to Damascus he then traveled to Cairo to study hadith and to purchase parchment (*raqq*), staying

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41 Al-'Umarī 2010: 408.; Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563. Evidently, Nizām al-Dīn was far from being considered a respectable scholar of hadith, since his biographies contain no mention of his teachers or of anyone who heard hadith from him. Despite receiving proper Islamic education in his youth, he became expert in the fine arts, in contrast to his father's primary specialization in religious law.

42 Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563–564.

43 Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563.

44 Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:407.

45 Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563.

46 Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563. Ibn al-Qaysarānī (d. 1352) headed the chancery under Tankiz, governor of Damascus, and was very close to the latter. He was appointed to this position in late 1337, not long after Nizām al-Dīn had reached Damascus from Iraq (Al-Jazarī 1998: 3:1020). Al-Ṣafadī, a close friend, praises him as an excellent calligrapher. See Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:550–560.

47 Al-'Umarī 2010: 408.

there for a while.<sup>48</sup> On his return to Iraq he was reinstated to his former position, composing epistles for the Jalayirid governors of Baghdad.<sup>49</sup>

The reasons for Nizām al-Dīn's return to Baghdad are not stated, but it is not too far-fetched to assume that material concerns were his prime motivation, especially administering his vast properties, and perhaps also a wish to assume a major role at court again. Two poems he composed, quoted by al-'Umarī, imply that Nizām al-Dīn might also have been driven back by yearning for his homeland and the friends he left behind.<sup>50</sup> Whatever his reasons, Nizām al-Dīn probably spent the rest of his life in Iraq. We learn only that he died in 760–1/1358–60, and that news of his passing came from Baghdad.<sup>51</sup>

### 3 Discussion and conclusions

The borders between the Ilkhanate and the Mamluk Sultanate were far from hermetically closed, as is evinced by the constant mobility of notables, mainly westward. Those people, bringing with them various forms of material and cultural capital – merchandise, religious knowledge, military skills, or artistic styles – were agents of cross-cultural exchange and reciprocal pollination.<sup>52</sup>

Two important patterns of mobility played a central role: pilgrimage to Mecca and the so-called *wāfidiyya*. The former continued to be a key locus for Muslims from across Eurasia for meeting, exchanging ideals and learning, even when the pilgrimage caravans from the east experienced hardships in performing the ḥajj. Meanwhile, the constant flow of migrants from the Ilkhanate to Syria and Egypt, especially those seeking political asylum, came to be known as the *wāfidiyya* in the Mamluk-Arabic sources. Despite the fact that reverse mobility – i.e. from the Mamluk Sultanate to the Ilkhanate – also took place,<sup>53</sup> the

<sup>48</sup> Al-'Umarī 2010: 408.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Ṣafadī mentions the letters on behalf of the governors of Baghdad, written in Nizām al-Dīn's hand, which arrived at the Mamluk chancery. Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:563. At this time Baghdad was ruled by the Jalayirid dynasty, under which Baghdad underwent an artistic efflorescence. See Wing 2016: 1–20.

<sup>50</sup> Al-'Umarī 2010: 408–409. Al-Ṣafadī (1998: 5:562) likewise implies such homesickness. At least one more figure who traveled with Nizām al-Dīn from Baghdad, Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Ghūrī, also ended up returning to Iraq (Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī 1966: 2:43).

<sup>51</sup> Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 5:562.

<sup>52</sup> As Amitai has recently shown, Mongol effects on Syria in this regard were mostly passive and indirect, as opposed to the active agency inside their empire demonstrated by Allsen. See Allsen 2001; Amitai 2015.

<sup>53</sup> For one example of “reverse *wāfidiyya*” see Al-Jazarī 1998: 1:427–428.

*wāfidiyya* was important for the Mamluk regime, supplying much-needed regional prestige, as well as skilled personnel.<sup>54</sup>

These two institutions feature prominently in the biography of Nizām al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Ṭayyārī. A notable figure in the Ilkhanid court, his connections to scholars living in the Mamluk realm were in many ways related to the pilgrimage to Mecca – either through his own pilgrimages or through the letters he wrote on the Ilkhān's behalf, some of which related to the ḥajj. Later on, after the dissolution of the Ilkhanate, he found refuge with the Mamluk elite, as part of the *wāfidiyya* tradition.

The assimilation of key members of the Ilkhanid court, such as Nizām al-Dīn as well as some of his colleagues, into the Mamluk court or the elite circles of Mamluk society is clear evidence that political borders between those two kingdoms did not also function as cultural borders. Examining Nizām al-Dīn's entry to two elite circles on arrival in the Sultanate offers insight into the fluidity of this border.

The first circle is that of the Mamluk ruling elite; Nizām al-Dīn reportedly enjoyed relations with two major figures – Tankiz, governor of Syria, and the senior emir Qawṣūn, both known for their connections to Mongol elite circles, and probably themselves of Mongol origin.<sup>55</sup> Many such Mamluks shared more or less common cultural tastes – clothing, storytelling, women and culinary preferences – with the warlords of the Mongol Empire.<sup>56</sup> While we know that some of those “Mongol-Mamluks” played a part in transcultural exchange, as well as diplomacy with the Mongol realms,<sup>57</sup> their role in attracting and receiving dignitaries from the east – either Mongols or others – merits further study.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Nakamachi 2006; Amitai 2008.

<sup>55</sup> Tankiz had relationships with two Mongol princesses (Brack 2011: 348; Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 4:160), and with several Mongol youths at his household, even reportedly threatening to flee to the Ilkhanate (see Yosef 2010: 1:60–61, where he also suggests Tankiz's Mongol origins). Qawṣūn, a Mongol who arrived in the entourage of the Golden Horde princess Ṭulunbāy Khatun, brought relatives to Egypt from the Qipchaq Steppe and was entrusted to compose official letters in Mongolian on behalf of the Mamluk sultan. Qawṣūn also built a *khānqāh* for the scholar Shams al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Iṣfahānī (674/1276–749/1349), who migrated to the Mamluk Sultanate from Tabriz. See Van Steenbergen 2001: 450–451; Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 4:140; Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī 1966: 3:343, 4:327–328; Al-ʿUmārī 1988: 70; Little 1979: 392–393.

<sup>56</sup> For examples, see Little 1979; Amitai 2008; Mazor 2012: 252–265; Haarmann 1988; Fleming 1977; Levanoni 2005; al-Maqrīzī 1930–1973: 1:813.

<sup>57</sup> For one of the better known examples for this see Little 1979.

<sup>58</sup> Alongside Nizām al-Dīn, we should consider one of his travel companions, Khalifa b. ʿAlī Shāh, son of the great vizier of Öljeitü and Abū Saʿīd, also received by Tankiz, who liked his physical appearance. Made an emir in Damascus he married the daughter of the emir Sayf al-Dīn Kujkun (also probably of Mongol origin), whom he made dress in accordance with Mongol

The first phase of Niẓām al-Dīn's stay in the Mamluk Sultanate was at the household of Qawṣūn, where he was asked to perform as a musician. It was under this hat that Niẓām al-Dīn was mainly cherished by the Mamluk elite, and not in vain. Niẓām al-Dīn represented the glorious musical tradition of the east, as successor to the great masters Aḥmad al-Suhrawardī and Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Urmawī before him.<sup>59</sup> It has been noted that the top musicians of the Ilkhanid court, who continued, at least from an Islamic perspective, the mythical past of the Abbasid court of Baghdad, were highly sought after in courts throughout the Muslim world, from India to Egypt and Yemen, and even at the Yuan court of China.<sup>60</sup> Under the patronage of Ilkhanid notables including the Juwaynīs, Rashīd al-Dīn's son Muḥammad, and Abū Sa'īd, Abbasid court musical traditions not only survived the Mongol conquest but reached new heights.<sup>61</sup> From al-'Umarī to Ibn Khaldūn, it is clear that the musical tradition of Persia and Abbasid Baghdad was considered far superior to that of other Arab lands.<sup>62</sup> Niẓām al-Dīn was one of several noted musicians who made their way from the

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custom (Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 2:325). He was entrusted with the building of the mosque commissioned by the emir Yalbughā at Damascus, which he had built "in the architectural style of that Eastern Land [i.e. the Ilkhanate]" (probably that of the grand mosque erected at Tabriz by Khalīfa's father 'Alī Shāh), building his own mansion in that style, too. In 722/1322, Aitmish al-Ashrafī, another "Mongol-Mamluk", brought an architect from his mission to Abū Sa'īd's court at Tabriz who then built minarets according to the same style for the mosques of Aitmish, as well as for the aforementioned Qawṣūn (Little 1979: 397–398; Rabbat 1995: 265–266). In 1340, when Tankiz fell out of favor, Khalīfa did not suffer from that fall, because the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad "took care of him as if he were his brother, since he used to live in *that land*" (Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 2:325). This opaque statement might relate to another, made by al-Ṣafadī and al-Dhahabī in their biographical note dedicated to 'Alī Shāh, where they write that "he [probably Khalīfa but conceivably referring to his father] has a brother in *that land* [the Ilkhanate] who possess high status and reverence" (Al-Ṣafadī 2008: 20:456; Cf.; Al-Dhahabī 1987–2004: 61:221). Another point is that 'Alī Shāh himself had good relations with the Mamluk sultan, being a key player in the peace treaty, and said to have sent precious gifts to the sultan (al-Ṣafadī 2008: 20:456; Amitai 2005; Little 1979: 396). He was also on good terms with Tankiz, and even told his son Khalīfa that "after I die you have no choice but to enter Syria" (Al-Shujā'ī 1978: 27; al-Ṣafadī 2009: 20:455–456).

<sup>59</sup> Biran 2016: 146–147.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Aḥmad al-Suhrawardī was wooed by the rulers of al-Hind and Yemen (Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 1:415). Al-'Umarī's section on musicians in his *masālik al-abṣār* demonstrates this; most biographies of musicians relate to the great masters of the Abbasid court (especially in the golden age of Hārūn al-Rashīd *et al.*), and then mostly those active in the Ilkhanate, with a remarkably small share dedicated to the Mamluk realms, where al-'Umarī was based (Al-'Umarī 2010: volume 10). See also: Biran 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Biran 2016: 144–149.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn Khaldūn 1967: 2:401; Biran 2016; and see footnote 61 above.



Ilkhanate westward to Cairo, sometimes after heavy persuasion and promises of material compensation.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, alongside his musical flair, Niẓām al-Dīn was also a great calligrapher, an art in which he again represented the legendary tradition of Abbasid Baghdad as one of Aḥmad al-Suhrawardī's foremost disciples.<sup>64</sup> Through these talents – as musician and calligrapher – Niẓām al-Dīn found an admiring audience in another elite circle of the Sultanate, the belletrists and the high bureaucracy. Almost all of our information regarding Niẓām al-Dīn comes from two great contemporary writers, al-'Umarī and al-Ṣafadī, both of whom met and spent time with Niẓām al-Dīn during his Mamluk stint.

As suggested above, scholars such as al-'Umarī, al-Ṣafadī and Niẓām al-Dīn shared roughly the same world view, received similar education, and therefore, could easily communicate with each other.<sup>65</sup> It was only natural for someone like Niẓām al-Dīn to move in those circles. Besides the exchange of poems, musical works, paintings, etc., this association bore further fruit still meaningful to this day, especially for historians, namely the information transmitted about the Mongols and about political and social developments in the east.

In his edition of the parts of al-'Umarī's *Masālik al-abṣār* relating to the Mongol domains, Klaus Lech pointed to Niẓām al-Dīn as one of al-'Umarī's most important informants about those regions, and indeed he is cited numerous times as the author's source.<sup>66</sup> Niẓām al-Dīn was one of many informants, either

<sup>63</sup> See, for example: Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:372–373, 374–376, 396; Al-Yūsufī 1986: 443; Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī 1966: 5:127–128; Biran 2016: 146–149; Neubauer 1969. This exchange was not a unilateral affair: Al-'Umarī mentions an Iraqi singer named Khālīd who chanted poems written by the Egyptian poet Ibn Nubāta (Al-'Umarī 2010: 10:382–390).

<sup>64</sup> Aḥmad al-Suhrawardī was a student of Yāqūt al-Musta'ṣimī (d. 698/1298), probably the representative *par excellence* of Baghdad's calligraphic tradition, and another beneficiary of Juwaynī patronage. Al-Suhrawardī was counted among Yāqūt's famous six disciples, and is even said to have outdone his mentor. See: Canby 2002: 264; Blair 2003; Thackston 2001: 8; Al-Ṣafadī 1998: 415. It should be noted that the calligrapher-musician combination was rather common in this period, as shown in many biographies of such artists (e.g. al-Suhrawardī, al-Ṭayyārī and al-Urmawī).

<sup>65</sup> All of the above were well versed in poetry, literature and other arts grouped under the Arabic term *adab*. While al-'Umarī and Niẓām al-Dīn served in the highest roles in the bureaucracy – writing or reading out rulers' diplomatic correspondence – al-Ṣafadī held lesser and more local roles but was certainly part of the same milieu. See: Little 1976: 206–210.

<sup>66</sup> See Al-'Umarī 1968: 36–37. In fact, Niẓām al-Dīn seems to be al-'Umarī's primary source – he is cited on the Mongol kingdoms more often than anyone else (see the index in: Al-'Umarī 1968). The information he transmitted to al-'Umarī relates to all the Mongol Khanates and to such diverse topics as politics, military, administration, economics and local customs, on top of valuable material on the Chinggisid house. It is intriguing though that al-Ṣafadī does not quote him on Mongol related biographies, except once, and even then he probably copied from al-



migrants or travelers, moving westward and, by associating and sharing their knowledge on their former lands, greatly enriching the Mamluk-based historians' knowledge of affairs in the east.<sup>67</sup> It was this side effect of the westward mobility that facilitated, more than six hundred years later, the growing tendency of modern scholars to use Arabic sources for the study of the Mongols. Moreover, as sources written in the Ilkhanate were relatively poor in biographical material, those Mamluk authors not only used the data they received from their eastern colleagues but were also, at many times, the ones to record their biographies and so commemorate them, as in the case of Niẓām al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Ṭayyārī.

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<sup>67</sup> 'Umarī (this point is made by Brack 2011: 348, note 83). Otherwise, al-Ṣafadī quotes al-'Umarī or uses him as an oral source quite frequently. See: Little 1976: 203–204.

<sup>67</sup> Among those one can mention 'Izz al-Dīn al-Irbilī, Ḥāḥir al-Dīn al-Kazārūnī, 'Alā' al-Dīn al-Nu'mān al-Khwārizmī, Sa'īd al-Dihlī, and Niẓām al-Dīn's travel companion Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Ghūrī.

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