Literarisierung Reconsidered in the Context of Sultanic Biography: The Case of Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī's *Sīrat al-Nāṣir Muḥammad* (BnF MS Arabe 1705)

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While the historiography of late medieval Egypt and Syria is exceptionally well documented and many, if not most, of its major sources have by now been edited and studied, manuscript repositories still contain several historical texts that have received little to no attention from scholars. This essay will present one such unpublished and mostly unstudied excerpt of a historical biography devoted to Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (r. 693–4/1293–4, 698–708/1299–1309, 709–41/1309–41) preserved in the manuscript Arabe 1705, held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. It will be argued that its author can be identified as Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī (d. 730/1330), who also wrote two well-known historical biographies of the sultans Baybars (r. 658–76/1260–77) and Qalāwūn (r. 678–89/1281–90). Using this particular text as a case study, I will discuss how the concept of "Literarisierung," first applied to Mamluk historiography by Ulrich Haarmann almost half a century ago, may still be used fruitfully to think about how historiography and literary modes of expression interacted.

In a famous article published in 1971, Ulrich Haarmann argued that historiography in late medieval Egypt and Syria underwent a particular innovation, which he defined as a "Literarisierung der inneren Form," or "literarization of the inner form." According to Haarmann, the chronicles and biographical dictionaries produced between the 7th/13th and early 10th/16th centuries should not be considered as innovative in their formal, outer form, as they generally adhered to characteristics set by earlier precedents. There was, however, something distinctive about their inner form (i.e., on the level of individual segments within the larger works). At this level, one would come across a much higher attestation of literary elements, that is, anecdotes, topoi, colloquialisms, and especially miraculous stories, *ʿajāʾib wa-gharāʾib* pervading the annalistic historical narratives.[1] This argument and related observations from Haarmann's dissertation, *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit*, sparked a

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1 Haarmann, Auflösung 48–50.

debate in German academia about the supposed distinction between the historical as a science (ʿilm, a term more accurately rendered as a field of knowledge) and the literary as equivalent to entertaining digression. This point was taken up somewhat more stringently by Barbara Langner in her dissertation on popular culture in this period, where she argued that this historiographical tendency was the result of a growing popularization of historiography. She also translated a number of examples of the phenomenon.[2] Haarmann's and Langner's main challenger was Ernst Radtke, who argued that contemporary authors did not make a distinction between the historical as science rather than as literary and that the elements noted by Haarmann and Langner did not constitute a new development.[3] Despite Radtke's criticisms, the idea of "Literarisierung" has been implicitly and often rather uncritically accepted by many later researchers.[4] Although in Haarmann's and Langner's definition the idea denoted such anecdotal elements, the use of the term "Literarisierung" in the context of historiography does create some confusion: Should it mean, in keeping with Haarmann's observations, that literary elements appear in historiography or rather that history is written according to a literary logic?

Haarmann's argument was about content, and he implicitly suggested that simply being aware of literarization made it possible to distinguish between the facts and the fanciful, so to speak. This essentially positivistic idea may also be found in the influential study of early Islamic historical narrative written by Haarmann's contemporary Albrecht Noth.[5] The stories and anecdotes may, of course, also be a worthwhile subject of research in themselves, but essentially, these should be studied as *literary* subject matter and not taken at face value. In addition to Radtke's objections against Haarmann's evaluation of Mamluk distinctiveness, we can formulate the remark that this is a very reductive interpretation of what literature and literary forms of expression amount to. In fact, if we look at the history of the term "Literarisierung" in German research, it becomes clear that Haarmann's conceptualization was somewhat idiosyncratic. Consider, for example, the following quote by Gustav von Grunebaum from his influential study *Medieval Islam*, taken from a section where he evaluates a letter written in the *inshāʾ* tradition:

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2   Langner, *Untersuchungen* 127–85.

3   Radtke's earliest engagement with the issue may be found in the introduction (Einleitung) to his edition of the first volume of Ibn al-Dawādārī's *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmiʿ al-ghurar*. He returned to the topic several times: Radtke, Literarisierten; *Weltgeschichte* 186–95. He changed his mind slightly in Radtke, Literarisierung.

4   Holt, Early 35–6; Guo, *Early* 87–96; Weintritt, *Formen*; Robinson, *Islamic* 100; Conerman, Tankiz 4; Mazor, Topos 105–6.

5   Noth, *Quellenkritische*. Later translated and updated in Noth and Conrad, *Early*.

> Abū l-ʿAlāʾ [al-Maʿarrī]'s letter is an extreme but by no means isolated
> example of that dissolution of thought and sentiment into musical
> phrase, that sacrifice of sense to sound, which so deeply affected the lit-
> eratures of the Muslim peoples. The trend begins in the 8th century, to
> win an uncontested victory during and after the 11th century. *Literariza-*
> *tion of ideas and rhetorization of style*—there is no Arabic or Persian after
> A.D. 1000 who does not, in some measure, exhibit their trace. *Present-*
> *ation and content interact.* The supremacy in prose and poetry of the
> writer-virtuoso goes far to inject into any concept of human perfection
> an element of the *versatile, widely read, quick-witted, and entertaining lit-*
> *térateur.*[6]

The quote is, of course, problematic in its negative attitude toward literariz-
ation, but von Grunebaum's evaluation of the literary as a *stylistic* logic, as
fundamentally related to a register of language, may, in fact, be useful in evalu-
ating the ways in which historiography can be interpreted within conceptualiz-
ations of literature that circulated among late medieval authors. Perhaps most
importantly, unlike Haarmann, von Grunebaum also argued that the form of
presentation and its content were fundamentally intertwined and can thus not
be separated in satisfactory ways. This is an important observation, which also
resonates with medieval evaluations of rhetoric and linguistic construction in
general.[7]

One surprising result of Haarmann's conceptualization of literature as equi-
valent to the anecdotal is that according to him, the small corpus of sultanic
biographies (*sīra*, pl. *siyar*) written by chancery officials during the 7th/13th
and early 8th/14th centuries fell outside of the period's literarization because
they were said to build on earlier examples and did not contain as many anec-
dotes. The examples are never named explicitly, but one assumes Haarmann
referred to the works of Bahāʾ al-Dīn b. Shaddād (d. 632/1234) and ʿImād al-
Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 597/1201) on Saladin (d. 589/1193)—which are not actually
that far removed in time from the early Mamluk examples—and the important
but somewhat singular *Kitāb al-yamīnī* written by Abū Naṣr al-ʿUtbī (d. 1040).
Furthermore, in his major study *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit*, Haar-
mann evaluates the three *sīra*s written by Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir as "quantitativ and
qualitativ drei der bedeutesten Quellen zur frühen Mamlukenzeit," because

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6   Von Grunebaum, *Medieval* 229–30. Italics mine.

7   For a rare early criticism against the dichotomy between content and form proposed by Haar-
    mann and like-minded researchers, see Malti-Douglas, Dreams 139–41.

they were widely used as source material for later historians.[8] One wonders how texts that supposedly fell outside of a nascent literarized historical tradition could at the same time be highly influential on works firmly within that tradition.

This essay aims to present an as-yet-unedited text and argue by way of examples taken from that text for a different interpretation of Literarisierung that is related to von Grunebaum's evaluation but enriched by more recent frameworks from studies on medieval Arabic literature, especially by Thomas Bauer and Rebecca Gould, and with general ideas of historical emplotment as propounded by Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur. To refer directly to Hayden White, part of what I will be interested in, is the "content of the form," the meaning that is communicated by way of the narrative structure used by an author.[9] It will furthermore be my contention that reading the corpus of sultanic biographies, to which this particular text belongs, as merely functioning within a logic of legitimization is too reductive. Instead, I propose a broadly defined evaluation of patronage as a performative negotiation of social position, in which agents employed their mastery of various literary registers as a distinctive form of cultural capital.[10]

1 Text and Author

The manuscript Arabe 1705 held by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has not been studied nor identified in any detail before.[11] This is somewhat remarkable as it has been filed in the same shelfmark range as two very closely related and well-known texts. The directly preceding shelfmark BnF MS Arabe 1704 holds the second and third volumes of *Tashrīf al-ayyām wa-l-ʿuṣūr bi-sīrat al-Sulṭān al-Malik al-Manṣūr*, a biography of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn written by Muḥyī l-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir (d. 692/1293), Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī's maternal uncle. Furthermore, BnF MS Arabe 1707 holds find Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī's own *Ḥusn al-manāqib al-sirriyya al-muntazaʿa min al-sīra l-Ẓāhiriyya*, an abridgment and reworking of his uncle Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir's biography of Baybars.[12] Three further biographies written

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8   Haarmann, *Quellenstudien* 97–101 (quotation on 97).

9   White, *Content*.

10 For a similar argumentation on an 8th/14th century literary offering, see Van Steenbergen, Qalāwūnid.

11 The only exception I am aware of is Hayat Nasser al-Hajji, who used the manuscript as a source but did not identify its author in *Internal* 205–6. I am grateful to Mustafa Banister for bringing this to my attention. Some episodes of the text are also referred to in Chamberlain, *Knowledge*.

12 The first has been edited by Murad Kāmil and the second by ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Khuwayṭir.

by these two intimately related authors were known and have been published before. While the manuscript does not carry the author's name due to its first folios having disappeared, it is possible to securely identify the author of BnF MS Arabe 1705 as the same Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī who wrote *Ḥusn al-manāqib* on the basis of a number of stylistic mannerisms and, most importantly, a self-attributed epigram concluding a section on the infamous Taqī al-Dīn b. Taymiyya's struggles with the Cairene authorities. A slightly variant version of this poem is unambiguously attributed to Shāfiʿ by Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) in his biographical dictionary *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr wa-aʿwān al-naṣr*.[13] Al-Ṣafadī met our author personally and reproduced the poem as one among several for which Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī gave an *ijāza* to al-Ṣafadī. The *ijāza* itself is dated to 728/1328, so Shāfiʿ clearly deemed the poem important enough to reproduce it two decades after its initial composition.

That same *ijāza* is a small gold mine of information about Shāfiʿ's creative activities, as it also contains an extensive list of more than 30 books written by Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī. In this list, a multivolume biography of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad is included under the name *Sīrat al-Nāṣir Muḥammad* (The biography of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad)—without a doubt a shorthand for a more elaborate title that now eludes us. A similar work is listed as *Naẓm al-jawāhir fī sīrat al-Malik al-Nāṣir* (The string of pearls: The biography of al-Malik al-Nāṣir), but it is explicitly referred to as written "in verse" (*naẓman*). Although this title most certainly belonged to another work, I will return to the important concept of *naẓm*, also attested to in Shāfiʿ's writing beyond the domain of poetry as a theoretical concern for understanding this particular work, and indeed the workings of the literary in historiography in general.[14] The manuscript BnF MS Arabe 1705 does carry two variants of the title *Kitāb taʾrīkh al-salāṭīn wa-l-ʿasākir* (The history of the sultans and armies) on its covering bifolium, but this very unspecific title must be a later addition, perhaps added by a bookseller.

The manuscript consists of 107 folios and is missing both its beginning and ending folios. It commences in medias res during the sultan's second reign, detailing events of the years 703–5/1304–6, but then it jumps ahead to the year 709/1309 with a discussion of the sultan's defection to Karak and abdication of the throne.[15] Similar to Shāfiʿ's more well-known biography of Qalāwūn, *al-Faḍl*

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13   Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān* ii, 512. It should be noted that Frédéric Bauden had come to the same conclusion concerning the author's identity independent of my findings.

14   Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān* ii, 507. Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī also uses the term when describing his uncle's writing of the *sīra* of Baybars: *Ḥusn* 56.

15   There is no noticeable gap in the manuscript, and the title of the new section is even spread across a verso and recto page, so if this is indeed a gap, it must be a copyist's mistake.

al-maʾthūr min sīrat al-sulṭān al-Malik al-Manṣūr, the text is written predominantly in *sajʿ*. It contains some compiled material: several poems, two of which are explicitly said to be written by the author, as well as one letter and one official document, both composed by the author. Most of this quoted material does not appear elsewhere, and the historical accounts are also unique to this biography, although parallel (but not derived) versions of most of the events may be found in contemporary and later chronicles and biographical dictionaries.[16] Like Shāfiʿ's other *sīra*s, no later author explicitly reproduced narrative material from this text, and it is quite likely that this manuscript is part of an original presentation copy due to its careful handwriting and wide spacing throughout.

Shāfiʿ b ʿAlī is a fairly well-known author of the period, mostly because of the two *sīra*s he wrote about Qalāwūn, *al-Faḍl al-maʾthūr min sīrat al-Malik al-Manṣūr*, and Baybars, *Ḥusn al-manāqib*, respectively. The latter is explicitly announced as an abridgment of his uncle Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir's *sīra* of Baybars (itself published under the title *al-Rawḍ al-zāhir fī sīrat al-Malik al-Ẓāhir*), although several researchers have rightly noted that much more than simply summarize his uncle's text, it also critically reworks and adds material.[17] The author wrote both texts, claiming proximity to the events because of his position as a scribe (*kātib*) at court. While a decent number of contemporary and later entries exist for this author in the prosopographical literature of the period, much of what we know about the author's professional activities as *kātib* comes from the two already known *sīra*s. This is due to his remarkable proclivity to extensively detail his various personal contributions to political and especially diplomatic activities. The author appears to have started his scribal activities sometime around the end of Baybars' sultanate, as he quotes a letter he wrote and sent to that sultan's son, al-Saʿīd Bereke, informing him about the death of his father. The letter is sent in the name of the Syrian viceroy (*nāʾib al-salṭana*) Badr al-Dīn Baylik al-Khazindār, so one presumes our author to have been working as a scribe in his service at that point.[18] He subsequently rose to prominence under the short but eventful sultanate of al-Saʿīd Bereke, the period of which he describes in quite some detail in *al-Faḍl*

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16   In the edition and commentary of the text currently being prepared by Frédéric Bauden and myself, these parallel accounts are identified and their relationship to Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī's accounts is discussed extensively.

17   Holt, Observations; Northrup, *Slave* 30.

18   Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī, *Ḥusn* 342–8. The contemporary author ʿIzz al-Dīn b. Shaddād also notes that a letter was sent to al-Saʿīd Bereke in the name of this viceroy but does not name the scribe who wrote it. *Taʾrīkh* 224.

al-ma'thūr with increasing personal contributions. Although it is somewhat unclear how he ended up in the sultan's chancery, he claims to have been accorded a prominent position in al-Saʿīd Bereke's chancery by the powerful *dawādār* Balabān al-Rūmī (d. 680/1281).[19] Shortly before Bereke's deposal, he switched sides to Qalāwūn's camp, under whose reign he would continue to serve, apparently as *kātib al-darj* (scribe of the bench), until he was famously hit by an arrow in the temple during the Battle of Homs, after which he became at least partially blind.[20] While he only very ambiguously mentions this event in his own works, a first-person account of the accident is rendered by al-Jazarī in his extensive obituary of Shāfiʿ. Al-Jazarī, al-Ṣafadī, and all other biographers attest that he was sent home after this event (variations of the phrase *lāzama min-hu bayta-hu* are used by various biographers), although some add that he retained his salary.[21] The *sīra*s of Qalāwūn and Baybars contain a few elements that problematize this proposed run of events, as the author claims to have written several official pieces which should be situated in later periods. While the author's presence in the narrative is noticeably more toned down in the partially preserved *sīra* of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, the text does add two further claims to having written official documents, neither of which are attested elsewhere: a letter addressed to the ruler of Yemen from the year 704/1304 and the caliphal *taqlīd* composed for al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's reinstatement as sultan, to which I shall return in more detail below.[22] It is in any case clear that the author kept on writing prolifically in the half-century after the arrow incident. All the *sīra*s contain material that should be dated to well after this event, as should a good deal of our author's poetry quoted in other sources.

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19   Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī, *Faḍl* 49.

20   Paulina Lewicka suggests, on the authority of unnamed ophthalmologists, that becoming fully blind due to such an incident would have resulted in the failure of all other brain functions as well; *Šāfiʿ* 91.

21   The first-person account is in al-Jazarī, *Ḥawādith ii*, 429. Other biographical lemmata who mention the author being sent home are: al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-aṣr* ii, 503; *Nakt* 163; al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh* iii, 356; Ibn Taghrī-Birdī, *al-Manhal* vi, 200; Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Durar* ii, 184. Divergent but unfortunately not very detailed information is given by Ibn Ḥabīb, who only mentions that "he became blind in old age" (*al-ḍarīr ʿalā kibar*), *Tadhkirat* 208.

22   The letter is found on folios 48ʳ–54ʳ, and the *taqlīd* on folios 96ᵛ–105ᵛ.

2   "Literarisierung" as Narrative Construction: *Naẓm*

As noted above, Shāfiʿ wrote another work about al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, of which the "thematic phrase" runs as *Naẓm al-jawāhir*, "the string of jewels."[23] Although that title almost certainly does not apply to the work found in BnF MS Arabe 1705, the meaning implied by this short phrase is helpful in interpreting the cohesion and meaning of the text preserved in the manuscript. *Naẓm* is a particularly potent Arabic term, most often used to refer to poetic composition, but in fact, it bears much wider signification related to a root meaning of organization. Rebecca Gould has pointed to the importance of this "polysemic term" in the Arabic rhetorical tradition, from al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868) to ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) and beyond, as denoting "the order that binds together all the elements that comprise a literary text," in the first place the Quran, where the term was used to conceptualize that work's inimitability.[24] In al-Jurjānī's rhetorical interpretation, which has been likened to Saussurean semiotics, it is the interplay between words (*alfāẓ*, singular *lafẓ*), meanings (*maʿāni*, singular *maʿnā*),[25] and this binding structure, or *naẓm*, that constituted literary language. As such, *naẓm* was essential in forming the cohesion of any linguistic expression.[26] Taking this understanding of literary composition into account means that the distinction between content and form posited by Haarmann becomes highly problematic, as it distinguishes between aspects that were considered to be fundamentally interrelated. In the following paragraphs, I will show that reading the closing third of the *sīra*, which deals with al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's defection, abdication, and ultimate reascension to the throne in the year 709/1309, through this tripartite lens of words, meanings, and binding structure, suggests a fruitful way to conceptualize how authors engaged with history by way of narrative emplotment.

The background of the story discussed in this section involves the complex history of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's ascension to the throne. In 693/1293, while still an infant, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad had succeeded his assassinated brother al-Ashraf Khalīl as sultan but was deposed soon after, only to be reinstated as sultan from 698/1299 until 709/1309. During this second reign, the still young sul-

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23   For the term "thematic phrase," see Ambros, Beobachtungen and Hirschler, *Medieval* 66.
24   Gould, Inimitability 86.
25   This term is exceptionally complex in itself and has been the subject of much research, but I am here referring to it in its most common usage as denoting "meaning." See, for an up-to-date bibliography and thorough etymological discussion, as well as a discussion of *lafẓ* near the end of the article, Larsen, Meaning 221 (for *lafẓ*). An in-depth discussion of the issue may be found in Key, *Language*.
26   Gould, Inimitability 90.

tan was dominated by the two powerful amirs, Sallār and Baybars al-Jāshnikīr. While perhaps not as explicit as in other historical sources, this tension is also evident from the first two-thirds of the manuscript Arabe 1705, which details events from this second reign. For example, in an account about the arrival of Īlkhānid envoys in the year 703/1303, it is Baybars who received and honored these envoys before they met with the sultan.[27] Further on, several accounts deal at length with the *ḥajj* undertaken by the viceroy Sallār as well as his later reunion with his brother.[28] While al-Nāṣir Muḥammad is certainly not absent from these first two-thirds of the manuscript—one finds, for example, a laudatory description of a hunting trip and accounts of the birth of an unnamed son, and military endeavors that are carried out in his name—it is clear that he had to share the spotlight with these two powerful men. Things eventually came to a head, and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad abdicated, exacerbated from being dominated by these two amirs, after having escaped to Karak under the ruse of wanting to perform the *ḥajj* himself. Baybars then ruled for nine months with the regnal title al-Muẓaffar until al-Nāṣir reconquered the throne and established his authority for the following three decades. The part detailing the transition of the sultan's second to third reign in the manuscript starts at folio 68ᵛ and continues until 105ᵛ. It provides not only a quite extensive account of the events but also a *taqlīd* (diploma of investiture) written by Shāfiʿ himself in the name of the caliph al-Mustakfī bi-llāh (d. 740/1340) for al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's reinstatement as sultan. Shortly after the quotation of this document, the manuscript is cut off after folio 107.

As it is impossible to study the complete text due to its fragmentary survival, we will focus on this particular section. This will allow us to study various aspects of the text's narrative construction within a continuous and thematic whole. This continuity and cohesiveness may result partly from this section having been a stand-alone text before being integrated into the *sīra*. We know Shāfiʿ similarly integrated an earlier written text on the Battle of Homs in 680/1281 in *al-Faḍl al-maʾthūr*, although there he clearly signposted having done so and named the text separately in the *ijāza* reproduced by al-Ṣafadī.[29] I see at least five arguments in favor of the text's initial composition as a standalone treatise. First is the fact that the intervening four years between this part and the directly preceding accounts are discussed only in very broad terms (and

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27   BnF MS Arabe 1705, 11ʳ–2ʳ.

28   BnF MS Arabe 1705, 19ʳ–20ᵛ, 45ʳ–6ʳ.

29   Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī, *al-Faḍl*, 79–85 (statements as to the text's previous stand-alone character are made at the beginning and end of this section); al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān* ii, 507, noted as *al-Masāʿī l-murḍiyya fī l-ghazwa l-Ḥimṣiyya*, or "The satisfactory efforts in the Battle of Homs."

only further on in the section) insofar as they were deemed relevant to this section's narrative. Second is *sajʿ*, which is more consistently sustained here than elsewhere in the *sīra*. Third, in the first part of the *sīra*, Shāfiʿ concludes the majority of accounts with a variation of the somewhat idiosyncratic statement that an event happened "in this way" (*ʿalā hādhihi l-ṣūra*), which he completely abandons in this later part.[30] Fourth, the introductory lines of this section bear a resemblance to the traditional *taḥmīd* section at the start of any Islamic text. Lastly, and most importantly for our purposes, its narrative construction of a departure for Syria and an eventual glorious return to Cairo makes for a cohesive narrative whole. However, even if the text was separately composed, it was clearly reworked to be integrated into the *sīra*. This is evident from Shāfiʿ's cross-references to things he has mentioned earlier and the suggestion that the following narrative should be read as a reaction to those events.

2.1 Analysis 1: Introduction

The *taḥmīd*-like qualities of the beginning of the section are evident from the first lines:

ذكر عود الملك لمولانا السلطان مرة ثالثة

لله سبحانه وتعالى بمولانا السلطان ألطاف وأي ألطاف * ومنن لم تزل من يد نصرته دانية
القطاف * وظفر بمناوئه[31] بإتاحة القدر * وأخذ بناصية معانديه يحسب ما للتوكل على الله
تعالى من ظفر *

An account of the return of kingship to our lord the sultan for a third time.
God be praised, most high. For our lord the sultan there are benevolences—and what benevolences these are!—and graces, which continue to bestow on him the harvest through the hand of His support. And so too the victory in his struggle through the foreordainment of destiny, taking hold of the forelock of his enemies in reckoning the victory that belongs to [those who] trust in God most high.[32]

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30 BnF MS Arabe 1705 9ʳ, 13ʳ, 15ʳ, 18ʳ, 22ᵛ, 23ᵛ, 35ʳ, 46ʳ, 49ʳ, 57ʳ, 65ᵛ, 67ʳ. While not an unusual phrase per se (Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir also uses it three times in *Tashrīf* 29, 88), it does seem to have been a mannerism of Shāfiʿ to use it so extensively. He also uses variations of it several times in *al-Faḍl* 28, 38, 59, 69, 100, 114, 118, 139, 140, 150, 156, 162; and *Ḥusn* 66, 113, 118, 172, 264, 321.

31 Variant spelling of *munāwaʾa*.

32 BnF MS Arabe 1705 69ʳ. I am grateful to Mohamad Meqdad for his advice on this translation.

This highly laudatory and rhetorically dense introductory discourse, replete with the ambiguous qualities of the Arabic lexicon, continues for several more lines. As is typical in introductory discourses, at the end the topic is discussed in more detail, albeit without a formal *ammā baʿd* to signpost this transition:

ونوزع في ميراث ملك أبيه ويأبى الله إلا أن يرد الحق في نصابه * ويعيد الملك لمن هو أولى به * وقد تقدم ما أعتمده معه أولاً وثانياً من مماليك والده الشهيد من معاندة الله تعالى وإنتزاع الملك من يده ويأبا الله إلا أن يؤتيه إياه * وعصبه ما يستحقه مما أرضى الله فيه وأباه فأباه * وهو صابر محتسب صارعاً لله في حُسن تدبيره وعلى قدم الإبتهال منتصب سائلاً من الله العون * مبتهلاً اليه في حسن الحراسة والصون*

The inheritance of his father's kingship was contested [but] God willed rightfulness to return to its origin, and he caused the kingship to return to who is most deserving of it. It has been mentioned before how the *mamlūk*s of his father the martyr [Qalāwūn] employed him a first and second time in resistance to God the most high and [how] they removed kingship from the hand [of our lord the sultan], even though God wanted nothing but give [the kingship] to [our lord the sultan]. And [so the sultan] applied himself with zeal to what he was entitled to, which it pleased God [to accord] to him and his father, but he was rejected. But he is patient in anticipation of God's reward, struggling for God in the excellence of his management, upright in beseeching, asking God for help, and praying to Him for the blessing of sustained protection.[33]

This introductory discourse announces the fundamental features of the text to follow: the sultan as chosen by God and favored by fate, the accusatory tone against Qalāwūn's former *mamlūk*s who dominated al-Nāṣir's first two reigns, and the departure-return structure that is evident from the title and the suggestion that al-Nāṣir overcame his difficulties and established his Godly ordained authority. These narrative stakes are in the following pages emplotted into a cohesive historical account that may be identified with a very widely used narrative form of departure and return.

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33   BnF MS Arabe 1705 69ᵛ–70ʳ.

2.2 *Analysis 2: Departure and Return*

The departure-return structure evident in this section has many precedents in world literature, and it is even one of the integral ways in which stories work according to structuralist theorists such as Vladimir Propp, Northrop Frye, and those who worked on Jungian archetypes, such as Joseph Campbell.[34] The basic format involves a hero having to relinquish a comfortable, static situation to overcome a number of difficulties before ultimately returning to his rightful position. While much of the research on these structures has focused on stories that should be situated within Western mythical and folklore settings, these are not at all alien to the Islamic textual tradition. They are a major building block of the Prophetic *sīra*, in which the point at which Muḥammad leaves Mecca for Medina is even the historical crux around which time itself would come to be measured and his triumphant return to Mecca heralded as the start of Islam as a world-conquering religion. The narrative structure is also present in other works from the very same corpus of early Mamluk *sīra*s. Both Shāfiʿ's *sīra* of Qalāwūn as well as Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir's important *sīra* of Baybars contain variants of this structure.[35] I will be understanding this type of structure not through the structuralist lens of Propp, Frye, or Campbell, but with Paul Ricoeur, who argued that such paradigmatic structures should be seen as part of "the grammar that rules the composition of new works." In this view, any act of writing is a constant interplay between such received structures and the innovative authorial practice, which results in new configurations of these two poles of the creative process, which he calls "sedimentation" and "innovation."[36] Beyond identifying the fact that an author made use of such structures, it is of critical importance to understand, on the one hand, the specific ways in which they are integrated into a particular text and, on the other hand, what meaning they may be said to convey.

One of the clearest ways in which Shāfiʿ's creative development of this structure becomes clear is through his application of symmetrical relations. Consider, for example, the extensive descriptions of the ceremonial of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's departure and return, which more or less bookend the momentous events. Our author uses these to stress the growth of the sultan's glory. While his departure is framed in laudatory language but with several comments denoting the impure intentions of his entourage, when he returns, any trace of doubt is erased, and the sultan ascends the throne in excellent fashion. While his departure from the citadel is described as "he descended from his Citadel

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34   Propp, *Morphology*; Frye, *Anatomy*; Campbell, *Hero*.
35   I discuss this more extensively in the fifth chapter of my PhD dissertation.
36   Ricoeur, *Temps* i, 134.

accompanied by his enemies though they made believe that they were his help-
ers," al-Nāṣir wisely escapes from this tension to squash it upon his return.[37]
Contrastingly, the event of his return to the citadel is described as follows:

وكان قد عزم على الإقامة يوم عيده * والطلوع إلى القلعة ثانيه بمقتضى يمن الطالع وسعيده *

ثم بدى له أنه لا طالع اسعد من رقيه إلى منبر الملك وطلوعه * وعوده والعود أحمد إلى منبر

سلطنته ورجوعه * فركب في موكبه والشمس في قبة شرفها * ودائرة أنفتها وأنفها * والنجوم

قد قارنته سعودها * وتنازل دون علو ركابه صعودها * وقد أستغنى ببيض الصفائح عن سود

الصحائف النجومية * ووثق بمتونها في جلا الشك والريب عملاً ونية *

He had decided to celebrate the day of his Feast [of Breaking at the Pond
of the Well, see excerpt quoted below] and to ascend the Citadel on the
second day [of the Feast] in accordance with the good fortune and radi-
ance of the ascendant star of destiny. Then it appeared to him that there
was no ascendant star more radiant than his rise to the pulpit of kingship,
his ascension of [the throne], and his return—for finishing what one star-
ted is commendable—to the pulpit of his sultanate and his restitution.
So he rode triumphantly as the sun in the dome of its elevated place and
[in] the sphere of its pride and freshness. And the stars had aligned him to
their good fortune, so that he dismounted [to attain on foot] without the
greatness of his mounts the insurmountable difficulty, not needing the
whitest of camels to [reach] the power of the astronomical pages, trust-
ing in [those pages'] contents [in his struggle] against the doubt manifest
and the suspicion, in action and intention.[38]

This is Shāfiʿ at his most dense, displaying his command of the vast lexical
and proverbial wealth of the Arabic language, playing with richly layered and
ambiguous terms. These lines may be seen as lying firmly within the panegyr-
ical tradition in which astronomical metaphors abound as well, but they also
refract in dazzling prose the major narrative point being made in this section:
the sultan's return to power as proof of his guidance by fate. This was an action
of excelling, attainment of a predestined position by way of overcoming the
doubts and uncertainties and, indeed, the injustice of the sultan's previous
reigns.

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37   BnF MS Arabe 1705 72ʳ⁻ᵛ. ‏وخرج من قلعته في أعدايه منهم وأن أوهموا أنهم أنصاره.
38   BnF MS Arabe 1705 91ᵛ.

2.3   *Analysis 3: Narrating Ideal Rule through Symmetry and Growth*

While the actions described above are both directly related to the sultan, Shāfiʿs symmetry is not always linear and plays with motifs that are spread across the section and attributed to various narrative agents. The Pond of the Well, from which the above-quoted action of the sultan's return emanates is, for example, a site of major importance in the section where much symbolic symmetry is situated. In an earlier part, our author describes the actions of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's very young son at this very same place. The young boy had set out to join his father in Karak, accompanied by the sultan's harem.

وحين خرج الركب من الديار المصرية خرج ولده المشار اليه وصحبته الأدر المصونة وخيموا
ببركة الجب—وهي بركة الحجاج—وخرجت أدر الأمراء في خدمتهم للوداع وبكّر نائب السلطنة
وأستاذ دارها الأميران المذكوران وصحبتهم الأمراء لوداع السلطان الملك [المنصور علاء الدين
علي؟] ولده فمد لهم سماطًا متنوّعًا *وجلس على رأس السماط كعادة أبيه -اعزّ الله سلطانهما -
وهو في دست أبيه متودّعًا مودعا *فلما قضوا الخدمة من الأكل قبلوا الأرض بين يديه *وعادوا
بعد أن أبدوا ما يجب من التعظيم لديه *

When the caravan left the Egyptian lands the aforementioned son [al-Manṣūr ʿAlī] also left accompanied by the Harem women camping next to the Pond of the Well—that is, The Pond of the Pilgrims—and the women of the amirs in their service left to make their farewells.[39] The sultanate's viceroy and *ustādār*, the two aforementioned amirs [Sallār and Baybars al-Jāshnikīr] and their accompanying amirs woke up early to say farewell to the sultan al-Malik [al-Manṣūr] his son, and he laid down for them a varied meal. He sat at the head of the banquet according to the habit of his father—may God strengthen the power of both of them—as he was left in the place of honor of his father as the person who sees off [those left behind]. And when they finished the session as far as the food was concerned [the amirs] kissed the ground in front of him, and they returned after they had expressed the necessary salutations toward him.[40]

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39   Reading *ādur* instead of *adur*. The first is a plural form of *dār*, which was often used to denote noble wives. Another option would be to read *adurr* as an unattested plural form of *durra*. For both forms (though with *durra* only in the singular) cf. ʿAbd ar-Rāziq, La femme 99–101.

40   BnF MS Arabe 1705 75^r–v.

The passage is interesting on several levels. In the manuscript, the name of the son whose actions are described here is consistently erased. This may have been the case because al-Manṣūr ʿAlī, who is the most likely candidate to have performed this role, died shortly after the return of the sultan from Karak.[41] This would either suggest that this part was written before 709/1310, but the manuscript as a whole only finished later, or that a later reader erased these names from the manuscript for an unknown reason. One presumes that the name was erased so as not to provoke the sultan's grief.[42] On a narrative level, the account is interesting because of the ways in which it plays with the performance of power and the relationships between those who held power. The fact that the two most highly placed amirs in the sultanate, those who effectively directed the affairs of the sultanate, are here portrayed as humbling themselves before the sultan's infant child creates a complex questioning of the nature and rituals of power. That the very young son of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad is said to have behaved "according to the habit of his father" (ka-ʿādat abī-hi) not only shows him to be a worthy heir of the sultanate but also highlights the contextual logic of that power. Perhaps, most importantly, the scene is mirrored and extended at the end of the section when al-Nāṣir Muḥammad returns to Cairo, just before the earlier quoted laudatory excerpt on the sultan's celestial good fortune:

ولم يزل حتى وصل إلى بركة الجب فكان الأمير الإسفهسلار سيف الدين سلار نائب السلطنة المعظمة قد خرج ممن بقي بالقاهرة من العساكر المنصورة * فتلقى مولانا السلطان على ظاهر قبل النزول بالبركة هو والعساكر المنصورة * وترجّلوا جميعًا وقبّلوا الأرض ويده الشريفة * وغدت طوائفهم بموكبه مطيفة * وترجّل خلد الله سلطانه للأمير سيف الدين سلار إيناسًا لوحشته * ووفاءً بعهد أمانه وتسكينًا لدوعته * فإنّ المشار إليه كان خائفًا مترقبًا * لا يجد دون مهلكه مطلبًا * على أنّه ما خرج عن الطاعة ولا خلع ربقتها من عنقه * ولا أغبّ بمواصلات تراميه إلى الخدمة بسلوك منهج النصح وطرقه * ثم إنّ مولانا السلطان أقام ببركة الجب يوم نزولها

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41   Al-Malik al-Manṣūr ʿAlī (d. 710/1310) was only five or six years old at the time. Bauden, Qalawunid.

42   The son is mentioned three times on folios 75ʳ, 75ᵛ, and 76ʳ, all erased. The much-later historian Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī notes that this son came to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad from Karak when the latter had returned to Cairo (which would mean that the son did indeed join his father before the sultan's reascension) and was loved by his father because he was his only child at that point. He is said to have died while his father was hunting. Al-Durar iii, 115 (nr. 262).

وهو يوم الثلثاء التاسع والعشرين من شهر رمضان المعظّم وبات بها وأصبح وقد أحضر المنبر

وخطيب الجامع الحاكمي القاضي عماد الدين ابن السكّري فصلّى بمولانا السلطان صلاة عيد

الفطر بدهليزه المنصور وبه مد سماط العيد المتنوع من المآكل مما تشتهيه الأنفس وتلذ الأعين

وخلع مولانا السلطان على العادة

[The sultan] did not stop [going from resting place to resting place] until he reached the Pond of the Well. And the army commander Sayf al-Dīn Sallār, viceroy of the glorified sultanate, had come out from among those who had stayed in Cairo of the victorious armies, and he and [these] victorious armies met our lord the sultan outside before they alighted at the Pond. They all dismounted, and they kissed the ground and [the sultan's] noble hand, and their groups became encircled by [the sultan's] convoy. [Then the sultan] dismounted for the amir Sayf al-Dīn Sallār in friendliness to his cheerlessness, fulfilling the agreement of his security and pacifying his anxiety. For the aforementioned [Sallār] was frightened and fearful, searching for a way out of his [imminent] destruction, entreating that he had not left obedience [to the sultan], and had not taken off its noose from his neck. He did not tarry with the communications that came to his service by way of the procedure and methods of good advice. After that, our lord the sultan stayed in the Pond of the Well for the day of his alighting. This was Tuesday the 29th of the glorified month Ramaḍān and he stayed the night there, and the pulpit and the preacher of the Ḥākim mosque, the *qāḍī* ʿImād al-Dīn b. al-Sukkarī, were brought. He prayed with our lord the sultan the prayer of the Feast of Breaking in his victorious *dihlīz* tent, where the Feast banquet was laid out with all the varieties of food souls may desire and by which eyes may be pleased. And our lord the sultan distributed *khilʿa*s in the usual way.[43]

Such descriptions of ceremonial are not exceptional, and that similar things would happen at these moments is also self-evident in the context of a strongly codified courtly habitus, but the positioning of these excerpts more or less at either end of the section highlights Shāfiʿ's symmetrical construction, as well as his play with motifs of the ideal rule to construct an engaging narrative. In the first excerpt he does so by transplanting these practices to the young boy ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn, who admirably performs his father's duties, but in the second excerpt, the sultan himself, now a fully grown man, is presented as a paragon of

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43   BnF MS Arabe 1705 90ᵛ–91ᵛ.

the ideal rule. There is an element of physical growth that is creatively played with here: Shāfiʿ suggests that it is the sultan's coming of age that allows him to finally triumph over his oppressors and come into his own as the ideal ruler. Furthermore, in this scene, the return to obedience—a veritable topos of the period's historiography—is interwoven with the sultan's own performance of his magnanimity. The enemies who made him believe that they were allies are finally either chased off or brought under the sultan's newly asserted authority.

The symmetry of the "story" is as such unequal and spread out across the sections in various ways. Recurring motifs, places, and discourses are used as a means to stress growth and excellence. Sometimes the symmetry also works as a contrast: The most obvious example of this is the respective portrayal of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (and by extension the son in the account above) and Baybars al-Jāshnikīr, who reigned as sultan for nine months while al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was in Syria. While the first is portrayed as having fortune and fate by his side—for example, by way of the celestial metaphors noted above or in an anecdote involving a miraculous escape from a crumbling bridge—the latter is from the start portrayed as an incompetent ruler who only sits on the throne by the grace of his supporters.[44] Once those supporters start switching sides to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's camp, Baybars' authority crumbles. This is again symbolically refracted: When the news of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's move toward Cairo with growing military support reaches Baybars, he is said to have thrown his turban on the ground in anger.[45] Considering the widely attested importance attached to headgear by sultans in this period, this can be read as a highly symbolic relinquishment of authority.[46]

The contrasting symmetry is also structurally clear. Consider, for example, the titles of these four consecutive section titles:

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44   The anecdote about the crumbling bridge may be found at BnF MS Arabe 1705 74ʳ⁻ᵛ. Other versions of this anecdote are related by, among others, al-Mufaḍḍal, *Histoire* iii, 141; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya* xviii, 79; Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Manhal* x, 272–3.

45   ولما بلغه أنّ الماء من العساكر من المنصورة قد رجع إلى مجاريه * وأنّ حديث عزم الملك الناصر الممتع عدم مجاريه * أخذ بعمامته فرمي بها الأرض * وغضّ طرفه عن قصد معاندة مولانا السلطان وما كان أحقّه من أوّل أمره بالعض *

   BnF MS Arabe 1705 86ᵛ. Note also that Baybars is only rarely referred to by his regnal title and more often by a reference such as "the aforementioned" (*al-mushār ilay-hi*) or by his personal name Baybars, whereas al-Nāṣir Muḥammad is either called by his regnal title or by the reverential *mawlā-nā al-sulṭān* (our lord the sultan). Furthermore, the whole section includes a lot of word play on the roots *n-ṣ-r* and *ẓ-f-r*, which both denote victory.

46   Fuess, Sultan.

ذكر امر ركن الدين بيبرس وما جرى له من النزول عن الملك والخروج من القلعة.

ذكر عدم مساعدة الاقدار للمذكور.

ذكر سعادة نطق مولانا السلطان وحدسه الصحيح ولا شبهة ان الملوك نقيه الاذهان.

ذكر حلول مولانا السلطان بكرسي مملكة بقلعة الجبل المحروس.

The case of Rukn al-Dīn Baybars and what befell him in descending
from kingship and leaving the citadel.

The lack of support of fate for the aforementioned [Rukn al-Dīn Bay-
bars].

The bliss of the utterance of our lord the sultan and his correct
surmise—and there is no doubt that kings are pure minded!

The ascension of our lord the sultan to the throne of his kingdom in the
Citadel.[47]

In these titles, and even more so in the content they signpost, Baybars is por-
trayed as having destiny against him, in large part due to his own actions, which
are, among other things, described with the important signifier "corruption"
(*fasād*),[48] while al-Nāṣir Muḥammad is basically flying on the wings of fortune.
The third of these sections, which contains a speech in *sajʿ* by the sultan, is even
concluded by the statement that "there is no doubt that Egypt['s future] is aus-
picious and this good omen is a confirmation [of that]."[49]

The return of the sultan to his throne is as such shown to have been a tri-
umph of fate, but the narrative also suggests that this attaining of the right-
ful position was not just a given. To achieve his goal, the sultan needed to
take action and overcome his limitations. The section can be read as a moral
exemplum, a literary meditation on the nature of power. The good and bad
choices of power-wielding and their consequences are, as it were, sprinkled
across the dense prose in a contrastive and engrossing narrative that leads the
reader into a literary universe that is not only rich in rhetoric but also in mean-
ing.

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47   BnF MS Arabe 1705 86ʳ–90ʳ.

48   Ibid. 89ʳ.

49   BnF MS Arabe 1705 90ʳ. ‏ولا شك في أن مصر بفالاتها ومصداقه هذا الفال.

2.4   *Analysis 4: The Caliphal Taqlīd*

Conspicuously absent from this narrative, and indeed from much of the *sīra* in general, is Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī himself as the *kātib* whose presence was so dominant in his other texts. Although it is not spelled out, it is likely that our author, at this point, did not enjoy the same position toward the sultan as he did a few decades earlier. Of course, he is always present by way of his intricate prose, but he also makes his presence as a narrative agent felt at one crucial point at the end of this section, as the author of the caliphal *taqlīd* reasserting the sultan's dominance. This document is introduced as follows:

وأنشا المملوك جامع هذه السيرة التي هي في الحقيقة عنوان السيّر والمتضمنة ما أرى به ملكها
على من عبر من الملوك وغير تقليدًا مناصبًا للواقعة ترتاح إليه كل أ ذن سامعه وضمنه صورة العهد
المجدّد من أمير المؤمنين لمولانا السلطان خلد الله ملكه

> The *mamlūk* who compiled this *sīra*—which, in truth, is the epitome of *sīra*s, and it details its king's deeds which exceed those of kings whose days have elapsed—composed the diploma of investiture to be declared for the occasion, which satisfied every ear that heard it, and its contents take the form of the renewed contract from the Commander of the Faithful for our Lord the Sultan—may God perpetuate his kingship.[50]

The statement is, of course, significant as a claim to historiographical authority and an insight into the author's general evaluation of his biographical project, but it is also contextually significant because of its relation to the preceding part and the text of the *taqlīd* itself. However, we need to read beyond the pages of the *sīra* itself to evaluate the full weight of this statement. Al-Ṣafadī tells us that when Baybars al-Jāshnikīr ascended the throne, he too had a *taqlīd* written for his ceremonial investiture and that this *taqlīd* was written by Shāfiʿ's relative ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir (d. 717/1317), a leading *kātib* himself and grandson of the famous Muḥyī l-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir.[51] The present *taqlīd* even seems to refer to ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn's text by stating that "this contract (ʿahd) that invalidates

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50   BnF MS Arabe 1705 96ʳ.

51   In fact, two *taqlīd* documents were composed for Baybars II, the second apparently as a last-minute attempt to assert his authority against al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's rising support for a return to power. For a discussion of the contents of these contracts (though not of their authors), see Banister, Abbasid 397–8. On the first contract, see also Nielsen, Secular 88.

any contracts like it drawn up for whom is like [the sultan]."[52] This statement positions the diploma as a reaction against a former contract, which we can contextually surmise to have been ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn's diploma for Baybars II. While ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn was extremely influential at several points during the late 7th/13th century, his relationship to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad seems to have been a troubled one, and the sultan is even said to have hated him, among other things, because he composed the *taqlīd* for Baybars II.[53] Shāfiʿ never actually mentions ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn, although he does mention ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn's father (and his own cousin) Fatḥ al-Dīn b. ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir repeatedly in *al-Faḍl al-maʾthūr* and *Ḥusn al-manāqib*. These mentions have made P.M. Holt conclude that "for his uncle and cousin [Shāfiʿ] had clearly little affection, even if he showed them formal respect."[54] Although other evidence suggests that the relationship between him and his relatives was probably more complex, there does seem to have been a significant degree of competition between the various members of the Banū ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir. That ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn held positions at times when Shāfiʿ himself likely did not due to his blindness, and that the former's position may have been in real danger considering the well-known purging of the court's elites at the start of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's third reign, may explain why Shāfiʿ here reproduces a *taqlīd* written by himself.[55] Indeed, it is even possible to read this *taqlīd* as a showpiece in which the author presented himself as a worthy successor to this informal position of leading *kātib* of the realm.

The question of whether this *taqlīd* written by Shāfiʿ was also effectively used in the sultan's ceremonial third investiture or was only a textual exercise, in line with a number of other documents quoted by the author in *al-Faḍl al-maʾthūr*, is not relevant within the context of the *sīra*.[56] Here, the *taqlīd* serves to perform Shāfiʿ's claim of being a masterful *kātib*, as part of what may be called a sort of creatively constructed resumé: a performative document that was meant to convey to its reader the wide-ranging writing abilities of its author. While the manuscript of the *sīra* is very likely a presentation copy, we do not know to whom it was offered. However, considering the time frame and the highly demanding register in which the text was written, one is tempted to imagine it being offered to an important agent at the court of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad—perhaps even the sultan himself—at a time when elite circles were being purged and replaced by close confidants of the sultan. As such,

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52 BnF MS Arabe 1705 96ᵛ. .هذا عهد ناقض ما سواه لمن سواه من العهود

53 Al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfī* xv, 216.

54 Holt, Chancery 678.

55 On these events, see Levanoni, *Turning* 28–30.

56 I discuss this practice in detail in section 6.2.3 of my dissertation.

Shāfiʿ may have intended his text to facilitate either the receiving of a new position or the strengthening of his relationship with leading elites. To do so, he simply displayed that type of labor for which he could be relied on: the composition of excellent prose celebrating the sultan's achievements.

3   Conclusion

Literary, historical, and even documentary elements cannot be separated in this section, and indeed in this *sīra* in general. They are all fundamentally interwoven and communicate across their respective discursive boundaries. It is exactly the literary approach to these events which drives Shāfiʿ's historical emplotment of both the narrative in the *sīra* and the *taqlīd*. Of course, such an approach is not unprecedented in Islamic historiography, but the specific format it takes may be said to amount to a slightly different type of literarization, which is more related to von Grunebaum's definition of the term than Haarmann's: a fundamental entanglement of style and content. Instead of von Grunebaum's negative evaluation of this tendency, however, we can see how such a literary approach could, in fact, be a very powerful narrative tool by which authors not only presented important historiographical interpretations of the past but also performed their own authorial agency. All the evidence suggests that Shāfiʿ b. ʿAlī was not actually active anymore in the chancery in this period, so we may see this text, as well as the two other *sīra*s he wrote, as performances of his authorial abilities and a way of showcasing the continued excellence of his prose despite his failing eyesight. Perhaps it even suggests how worthy it would be to reinstate the author at court, or at least how important it would be to maintain close relations with him. Patronage in this context is not simply about legitimization anymore, but it is about a complex negotiation of social status by way of performative displays of linguistic dexterity because it was this superior command of language and meaning that was required of leading *kuttāb*.

   Although it was written by a contemporary author, this particular account of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's abdication and reascension may not tell us much that is new about the motives of the political agents involved and maybe not even much about what wide segments of society in the period thought about these doubtlessly tumultuous events, but it is highly informative of the ways in which historians emplotted meaningful versions of the past.

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