

Al-Biqā'ī's Self-Reflection: A Preliminary Study of the Autobiographical in His *Unwān al-Zamān*

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1 Introduction*

When discussing the life of Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqā'ī (809–85/1406–80), a 15th-century Quran exegete and historian, modern scholarship has primarily focused on the three controversies in which he became embroiled and which defined the downward trajectory of his later career from 868/1464 until his death in 885/1480. These three controversies were, successively, on the use of the Bible in *tafsīr*, the poetry of Ibn al-Fārīd, and the theodicy of al-Ghazālī.¹ The sole exception to this trend has been the work of Li Guo, who has discussed the role of the autobiographical in al-Biqā'ī's chronicle, the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr li-asrār ahl al-ʿaṣr*.² By analyzing al-Biqā'ī's treatment of three episodes in his life—his infamous divorce case, the harem politics of his concubines, and the premature deaths of his children—Guo provides ample insight into how al-Biqā'ī integrated elements from his own life into his salvation history project.

Nevertheless, however interesting and insightful Guo's discussion is—both in terms of what it reveals about al-Biqā'ī's character and his approach to history writing—all three of these episodes date from after al-Biqā'ī's establish-

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- 1 For the Bible controversy, see in particular Saleh, Fifteenth. For an edition of al-Biqā'ī's treatise in defense of the Bible, see Ibid. *Defense*. For the controversy over the poetry of Ibn al-Fārīd, see Homerin, *Arab* 55–75. For al-Biqā'ī's involvement in the debate on the best possible world, see Ormsby, *Theodicy* 135–60.
- 2 Guo, *Tales*. For a more general study of the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*, see Guo's *Al-Biqā'ī's*. For the edition, see al-Biqā'ī, *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*.

ment in Cairo. That is to say, Guo's focus is still primarily on al-Biqā'ī as a more mature member of the Cairene intellectual elite. The point at which Guo begins his examination of al-Biqā'ī's life is essentially the point at which al-Biqā'ī was at his most successful. Al-Biqā'ī's path to this success is relatively unexplored. His early life has only been discussed with brevity and is included more to provide the necessary context for discussion of his later life than as an object of study in its own right. This is, of course, a result of how our sources, in general, conceive biography. Unlike modern biographers, who focus on the dynamic and contingent development of character, our sources understand character as determined and fixed and are more interested in the ways in which their subject was exemplary or prototypical. Consequently, exploring the formative years of their subjects was less pressing.

In the case of al-Biqā'ī, however, we are in the fortunate position of having an earlier autobiographical notice, which is contained within his *Unwān al-zamān bi-tarājim al-shuyūkh wa-l-aqrān*. The first part of this notice was written in 841/1437 (that is, the year before he received his first appointments as Sultan Jaqmaq's *ḥadīth* teacher and as the *mufassir* at the Zāhir Mosque) when he was 32 years old and covers his life up until that point. To this, al-Biqā'ī added subsequent notes concerning the years 837/1433–4, 842/1438–9, and 845/1441–2. This notice has been discussed before. Muḥammad al-Iṣlāḥī, the editor of a medieval handlist of al-Biqā'ī's works, used it as the basis of his introductory biography of al-Biqā'ī.³ That being said, al-Iṣlāḥī's discussion of it is descriptive rather than analytical and is essentially a quotation of the notice with interspersed editorial remarks. Otherwise, Walid Saleh is the only scholar to discuss this notice, but he uses it only to make minor corrections to Guo's biography of al-Biqā'ī, upon which he based his own brief biography of al-Biqā'ī.⁴

When discussing Arabic autobiography, the main point of reference remains the 2001 volume entitled *Interpreting the self: Autobiography in the Arabic literary tradition*, edited by Dwight F. Reynolds.⁵ This volume, which consists of an analysis of roughly 140 Arabic autobiographical texts written between the 9th and 19th centuries alongside partial translations of 13 autobiographies, argues convincingly both against the supposed rarity of Arabic autobiography and for the vitality of the tradition.

Rather than approaching the Arabic tradition through the lens of the Western tradition, *Interpreting the self* analyzes the texts on their own merits and highlights four recurring features that played an important role in their authors'

3 Al-Iṣlāḥī, *Fihrist* 19–57.

4 Saleh, *Defense* 12–3.

5 Reynolds, *Interpreting*.

self-representations and construction of individual identities. These features are the portrayal of childhood failures and emotions through a description of action, the narration of dreams as reflections of authorial anxiety, and the use of poetry as a discourse of emotion.⁶ In doing so, the study demonstrates that while the texts may appear less personal than modern autobiographies, they, nevertheless, still are exercises in individuation and clearly communicate their authors' personalities. Where they differ, however, is in what they represent. Within the Arabic tradition "[t]he autobiography did not represent a unique moment for self-representation but rather a frame or summation for revealing a certain portrait of the whole, a context within which one's work would then be placed and evaluated."⁷ The primary purpose, then, of many of these autobiographies was to demonstrate their authors' positions within and relationship with the broader transmission of knowledge through, for example, reference to their lineages, the authority they acquired through their education, and their contributions to that knowledge.

An interesting observation is the existence of direct historical connections between many of the texts and their authors. That is, when taken as a whole, the autobiographies reveal a recurring pattern of historical "clusters" of autobiographical production by authors who were either personally acquainted or who had read each other's texts. Moreover, in some cases, the autobiography of a particularly influential or respected scholar seems to have motivated the writing of an entire sequence of autobiographies.

One such cluster appears in the mid-9th/15th century and continues into the 10th/16th century. This cluster, which is particularly large, revolves around Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), who penned a number of autobiographies and who was emulated by a number of his students. For example, al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) included a substantial autobiography in *al-Ḍaw' al-lāmi' fī a'yān al-ḵarn al-tāsi'* and penned an independent autobiography as well, and was followed by his own students, Ibn Dayba' (d. 944/1537) and Zarrūq (d. 933/1493). Another of Ibn Ḥajar's students, al-Suyūfī (d. 909/1505), wrote a substantial autobiography that was emulated by the likes of Ibn Ṭulūn al-Dimashqī (d. 953/1546) and al-Sha'rānī (d. 973/1565). The latter's autobiography is the most expansive premodern autobiography known to modern scholarship.⁸ There was, evidently, something in the air in the 9th/15th century, and it is against this backdrop that al-Biqā'ī's own autobiography was produced. As

6 Reynolds, *Interpreting* 243.

7 Ibid. 247.

8 On his cluster of autobiographies, see Reynolds, *Interpreting* 56.

will be detailed below, he was himself a student of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī and owed much of his success to him.

Inspired on the one hand by the observations made in *Interpreting the self* and on the other by the Geertzian concept of “thick description,”⁹ this chapter will move beyond a brief and positivist reconstruction of al-Biqāʿī’s life and treat his autobiography not merely as an innocent record of his early life, through which we can reconstruct the chronology of his formative years, but also as a carefully crafted literary work in its own right. There was a reason why al-Biqāʿī, at 32 years of age, decided to write his autobiography: it is a text with a purpose, and it was designed to communicate. The contention of this article is that al-Biqāʿī’s autobiography can be read in two ways: one simple and textual; the other complex and subtextual. On the one hand, it can be read positively as an account of his formative years; on the other hand, it can be read as an attempt to give meaning to those years. This article will, therefore, take a two-fold approach to the autobiography, dealing firstly with what al-Biqāʿī tells us about his formative years before moving to exploring how al-Biqāʿī sought to give meaning to them and what he intended to communicate.

2 The *Unwān al-Zamān*

A number of manuscripts of the *Unwān al-zamān* survive. A 9th/15th-century copy is held in the Köprülü Library under the classmark 119, covering some 386 folios.¹⁰ An incomplete and undated copy is held in the Aḥmadiyya Library in Tunis under the classmark MS Tarājim 5034, covering 193 folios.¹¹ A second, incomplete copy, dating back to the 11th/17th century, is held in the Maulana Azad Library of the Aligarh Muslim University under the classmark MS ʿArabiyya akhbār 40, covering 166 folios and mistitled as the *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-shāfiʿiyya*. The Dār al-Kutub holds a copy under the classmark MS Taʾrīkh 4911, which consists of four parts (the first consisting of 256 folios; the second 250; the third 264; the fourth 194) and which was copied in 1352/1933 by Muḥammad Qīnāwī.¹² The Taymūr collection, housed at the Dār al-Kutub, also contains a full copy of the *Unwān al-zamān* in four parts (consisting of 500, 426, 447, and 422 pages respectively) under the classmark MS Taʾrīkh Taymūr 2255, which was

9 See in particular Geertz, *Thick*.

10 Şeşen, İzgi and Akpınar, *Fihris* 572.

11 Manşūr, *Fihris* 442.

12 Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, *Fihris* viii, 186.

copied in 1345/1926 by Maḥmūd Şidqī.¹³ Both Qināwī and Şidqī worked from a photographic reproduction of MS Köprülü 119, which is held in the Dār al-Kutub under the classmark MS Ta'riḫ 1001 and which likewise consists of four parts.¹⁴ Reference is also made to a manuscript of the *'Unwān al-zamān* being held in the Iraq Museum, but no details are available.¹⁵

The work has been partially edited by Ḥasan Ḥabashī, with the letters *nūn*, *hā'*, *wāw*, and *yā'* missing.¹⁶ Ḥabashī's edition is, however, problematic because it is not entirely clear upon which manuscripts it is based. Ḥabashī states that he relied upon two manuscripts, the first of which was held in the Taymūriyya Library under the number 119 and which had originated in the Süleymanīye Library; the second was a photographic reproduction held in Tunis of a manuscript located in the 'Ārif Ḥikmat Library in Medina.¹⁷ Concerning the first, it is likely that he worked from MS Köprülü 119. The text of the edition accords well with this manuscript, and al-İşlāḫī suggests that Ḥabashī based his upon a photographic reproduction.¹⁸ Concerning the second, al-İşlāḫī has argued that this cannot be Tarājim 5034 in the Aḥmadiyya Library because that manuscript is not a photographic reproduction and that the manuscript held in the 'Ārif Ḥikmat Library, MS Ta'riḫ 43, is actually a copy of the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr* and thus has no relationship to the *'Unwān al-zamān*.¹⁹ The issue is further exacerbated by the images following Ḥabashī's introduction, which are a combination of images from two manuscripts of the *'Unwān al-zamān* and the manuscript of al-Biqā'ī's chronicle, the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*.

Given the uncertainty over the provenance of the edition, the present discussion relies primarily upon MS Köprülü 119 and MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40. As stated above, MS Köprülü 119 is a complete copy from the 9th/15th century, while MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 is an incomplete and later copy. It was completed on Rabī' 1 12, 1069 (December 8, 1658) by Khalīl b. 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Şamādī and ends midway through the biography of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Anbar. Curiously, the text runs continuously, and there is no indication that Khalīl b. 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Şamādī was aware that his biography of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Anbar was

13 See the information available at: <https://ihodp.ugent.be/bah/mml01%3A000000390>.

14 Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, *Fihris* v, 273.

15 In his edition of Ibn Fahd's *Muġjam*, Muḥammad al-Zāhī notes that Dr. Muḥammad Abū l-Afġān informed him of a copy of the *'Unwān* in the Iraq Museum. See Ibn Fahd, *Muġjam* 338n4.

16 Al-Biqā'ī, *'Unwān*.

17 Ibid. i, 11.

18 Al-İşlāḫī, *Fihrist* 171.

19 Ibid.

truncated or that the entire work was much longer. This suggests that the exemplar from which he worked was itself only partial.

The autobiography as it appears in MS Köprülü 119 covers folios 71^v–9^r and can be divided into two distinct sections. The first of these is the more purely autobiographical, advancing as it does chronologically in the third person from al-Biqā'ī's birth until 841/1437, the year in which we are told the autobiography was written; this section covers folios 71^v–3^r. The second section, which comprises folios 73^r–9^r, begins with a cryptic dream, a reference to his studies with Ibn Ḥajar, and his performance of jihad and the hajj. However, the bulk of it is given over to quoting various of al-Biqā'ī's poems and provides only scant biographical information.

In MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40, the autobiography spans folios 96^r–107^r and contains both of these sections, covering folios 96^r–8^v and 98^v–106^r respectively. To these, it adds a third section, comprising folios 106^r–7^r, which is written in the first person and begins with a remembrance of his mother and then refers to events in 845/1441–2 before moving back in time to discuss his appointment as Sultan Jaqmaq's *ḥadīth* teacher in 842/1438–9. The text in MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 is cleaner, with fewer distortions and mistakes than MS Köprülü 119. That being said, there are occasional passages that have been omitted in MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40. For instance, the material that prefaces the poetry in MS Köprülü 119—the cryptic dream, studies with Ibn Ḥajar, his performance of jihad and the hajj—is not present in MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40.

Taken together, the differences between the two manuscripts suggest that at least two recensions of the *Unwān al-zamān* were in circulation. It seems likely that MS Köprülü 119 contains al-Biqā'ī's earliest extant attempt to compose his autobiography and represents how he conceived of his formative years in 841/1437. Contrarily, the text of MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40, which must date back to circa 845/1441–2 because it does not mention anything after this year, is the revised version of the autobiography, to which al-Biqā'ī added additional material.²⁰ The following discussion will focus primarily on how al-Biqā'ī presented his formative years in MS Köprülü 119 and will then discuss how the additional material in MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 corroborates or modifies these conclusions.

20 It is unclear whether the material present in MS Köprülü 119 and absent in MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 was omitted by al-Biqā'ī as part of his revision or by Khalīl b. 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Ṣamādī in the process of copying the work.

3 A Positivist Approach

Al-Biqā'ī begins his autobiography with an extended discussion of his lineage before moving to his birth in the village of Khirbat Rūḥā in al-Biqā' al-'Azīzī and thence to the murder of his father, two of his uncles, and six other relatives in Sha'bān 821/September 1418. As a result of this, his mother and maternal grandfather took him to Damascus in 823/1420, where he embarked in earnest upon his *riḥla fi ṭalab al-'ilm*, which concerns the bulk of the autobiographical material. He provides the names of a select few of the shaykhs with whom he studied and copious titles of the books with which he became acquainted. He concludes this first section of the autobiography with a number of dreams and visions.

Al-Biqā'ī thus provides a wealth of information with which we can reconstruct his formative years. The autobiography is furthermore so replete with dates—when he met certain shaykhs and when he visited particular cities—that we can pinpoint his movements in particular periods. We know, for instance, that he first traveled to Cairo in 834/1430–1 and began studying with Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, that he traveled to Jerusalem at the end of 834/1431 to study, among other works, the *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd, before returning to Cairo in early 835/1431. This chronological information has been schematized in Table 10.1. Instead, our focus will be on the information al-Biqā'ī provides about his lineage and his origins and those shaykhs he singles out in his autobiography.

3.1 Lineage and Origins

After recounting his lineage, Ibrāhīm b. 'Umar b. Ḥasan al-Rubāt b. 'Alī b. Abī Bakr al-Biqā'ī al-Shāfi'ī Abū l-Ḥasan al-Ribāt, al-Biqā'ī tells us that he was from a village called Khirbat Rūḥā in al-Biqā' al-'Azīzī and that he was from the Banū Ḥasan, of which there were three branches: the Banū Yūnus, the Banū 'Alī, and the Banū Makkī. These branches settled throughout al-Shām, with groups in the country of Aleppo, Majdal Ma'ūsh—one of the villages in the north of the Biqā'—and in the lands of Karak al-Shawbak. He further states that this village of some 500 inhabitants—presumably Khirbat Rūḥā—was where the Banū Ḥasan originated. It was from this original village that a final group emigrated to the region of Bilbays in Egypt.²¹

21 MS Kōprülü 119 fol. 71r; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 96r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 61.

TABLE 10.1 Chronology of al-Biqā'ī's formative years

Year	Event
809	Birth of al-Biqā'ī in the village of Khirbat Rūhā in al-Biqā' al-'Azīzī.
821	Sha'bān 9 Al-Biqā'ī's family, the Banū Ḥasan are attacked. Death of his father and two uncles; the young al-Biqā'ī is left seriously injured.
823	Al-Biqā'ī and his surviving family members arrive in Damascus, where al-Biqā'ī begins studying the <i>qirā'āt</i> .
826	Al-Biqā'ī begins studying grammar, <i>ṣarf</i> , and <i>fiqh</i> with Abū Ḥamid Tāj al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Bahādur Sibṭ b. al-Shahīd.
827	Arrival of Ibn al-Jazarī in Damascus, with whom al-Biqā'ī studied the <i>'ashr</i> and memorized his didactic poem, <i>Ṭayyibat al-nashr fi al-qirā'āt al-'ashr</i> . Al-Biqā'ī travels to Jerusalem and studies <i>ḥisāb</i> with al-'Imād Ismā'īl b. Sharīf, a student of Ibn al-Hā'im.
	Ramaḍān Death of al-Biqā'ī's mother.
	Dhū al-Qa'da Return of al-Biqā'ī to Damascus. Al-Biqā'ī studies the treatise of al-Ḥawā with Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba.
831	Ramaḍān Death of Ibn Bahādur.
832	Beginning Al-Biqā'ī travels to Jerusalem, and studies with Zayn al-Dīn, one of Ibn al-Hā'im's students, and again with al-'Imād Ismā'īl b. Sharīf.
834	Arrival of al-Biqā'ī in Cairo. Beginning of his association with Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, with whom he studies <i>ḥadīth</i> .
	End Al-Biqā'ī travels to Jerusalem and studies the <i>Sunan Abī Dāwūd</i> and other works.
835	Beginning Al-Biqā'ī returns to Cairo.
836	Al-Biqā'ī accompanies Ibn Ḥajar on al-Ashraf Barsbay's campaign against Qarā Yulūk; he studies with a number of shaykhs, the most prominent of whom was Shaykh Burhān al-Dīn al-Muḥaddith, Ḥāfiẓ al-Shām.
837	While returning to Cairo, al-Biqā'ī stops in Damascus and recites to the shaykhs there. Al-Biqā'ī travels to Damietta and Alexandria. Al-Biqā'ī returns to Cairo.
841	Al-Biqā'ī writes the first part of his short autobiography in the <i>'Unwān al-zamān</i> .
842	On the recommendation of Ibn Ḥajar, al-Biqā'ī is appointed to teach <i>ḥadīth</i> to Sultan Jaqmaq in the Citadel of Cairo. Beginning of his position as the <i>mufasssīr</i> at the Zāhir Mosque in Cairo.

Al-Biqā'ī then moves to position himself within the Banū Ḥasan. Although he is forthright about the fact that he does not know his lineage beyond his great-great-grandfather, Abū Bakr, through comparison with the lineages of two of his relatives, whom he refers to as his *ibn 'amm*, he concludes that he is likely from the Banū Makkī. His relatives were called Muḥammad b. Ḥasan b. Makkī b. 'Uthmān b. 'Alī b. Ḥasan and 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. Yūsuf b. 'Alī b. Yūnus b. Ḥasan. Al-Biqā'ī argues that his relatives count only four generations between themselves and Ḥasan and that because they claim descent from 'Alī b. Ḥasan and Yūnus b. Ḥasan, respectively, then he must be descended from Makkī b. Ḥasan. Al-Biqā'ī further notes that while he does not know his lineage beyond Ḥasan, he has been told that the Banū Ḥasan “traced their lineage to Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ al-Zuhrī, one of those who will witness Paradise,” and that the uncle of Muḥammad b. Ḥasan believed that they had a *nisba* that confirmed this.²² Al-Biqā'ī's attempts to discover this *nisba*, however, were confounded. While traveling with Ibn Ḥajar toward Āmid as part of al-Ashraf Barsbay's 836/1433 campaign against Qarā Yulūk, he asked a group of his relatives in Damascus about the *nisba*; although they deemed it credible, the *nisba* itself was unknown.²³

The main point to be made about al-Biqā'ī's knowledge of his genealogy is the “fuzziness” of the link between his extended kin group and their ostensible ancestor, Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ. In many ways, his knowledge of his genealogy recalls how modern Bedouin remember and record their genealogies. Like modern Bedouin, al-Biqā'ī is more knowledgeable about the microgenealogy of his immediate kin group but is otherwise vague about his genealogy. That he “must have been” a descendant of Makkī b. Ḥasan likewise recalls how Bedouin arrange their genealogies according to what is believed rather than what is known. Like modern tribesmen, al-Biqā'ī and his extended kin group remembered what was useful for them—everyday relationships—and forgot that which had no practical import—their links to an ancient ancestor.²⁴

In this way, al-Biqā'ī's genealogical knowledge allows us not only to reconstruct how he conceived his extended kin group but also suggests that he was among the first of his family to make the transition into a more urbanized and literate society. As Zoltán Szombathy notes: “increasing urbanization and literacy seem regularly to result in an ever greater, rather than lessened, care

22 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 71^v; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 96^{r-v}; al-Biqā'ī, *Umwān* ii, 62.

23 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 71^v; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 96^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Umwān* ii, 62.

24 The utility—and problems—of using the genealogical knowledge of modern Bedouin to understand premodern genealogical knowledge has been outlined by Hugh Kennedy. See Kennedy, Oral. On Bedouin genealogy more generally, see Lancaster, *Rwala*.

over genealogies: the more literate and scholarly a community is, the greater degree of precision is needed in formulating *nasab* relationships before they can gain widespread recognition ... the keeping of *nasabs* (*ḥifẓ al-nasab*) is incomparably more meticulous in urban communities than among nomads.”²⁵ That al-Biqāʿī does not have more meticulous knowledge of his *nasab* suggests that he was the first of his family to be exposed to the mores of the scholarly urban communities. This transition is perhaps more fruitfully understood, not necessarily as one from an oral tradition to a literate tradition, as Szombathy and Kennedy suggest, but as a transition from the periphery to the center, both physically and intellectually.

Indeed, the autobiography is fundamentally an account of how he made this intellectual transition. This is, of course, hardly surprising considering that it is contained within a biographical dictionary of his teachers and peers. The autobiography and the *Unwān al-zamān* have the same function: they are designed to underscore his transition from his peasant background to membership in the intellectual elite by memorializing those links he had established with the intellectual elite. Where the *Unwān al-zamān* is the autobiography writ large, the autobiography is the *Unwān al-zāman* writ small. In this sense, we can understand the scholars al-Biqāʿī mentions in his autobiography as particularly influential. That is, these are the links he sought to emphasize over all others. It behooves us, then, to examine further which scholars he chose to mention.

3.2 *Shaykhs*

The shaykhs al-Biqāʿī names in his autobiography can be divided into two categories: those who most influenced the direction of his education and those who were particularly famous in 15th-century intellectual circles. In the case of the latter, his giving pride of place to prominent scholars is one way in which he could gain for himself some measure of the social capital that accrued to their names. These categories, as will be seen, are not mutually exclusive. In terms of balance, however, it is clear that al-Biqāʿī affords more attention to his influential teachers than he does to his famous teachers.²⁶

25 Szombathy, *Genealogy* 27.

26 There is an issue here of circularity when it comes to determining which of the scholars he mentions were prominent; scholars deemed prominent today are not necessarily those who were considered prominent by their peers. Oftentimes, it can come down simply to the vagaries of chance, which allowed the works of one scholar to survive over those of another. This is compounded by the fact that the biographical sources from which we work have interpretative schema—often unarticulated—which in turn delineate “fame” and “importance” in particular ways.

Thus, al-Biqā'ī tells us that after his arrival in Damascus in 823/1420, he began studying the Quran and came to know the seven versions of the *qirā'āt*. He also memorized part of the *Hirz al-amānī fī wajh al-tahānī* of al-Shāṭibī (d. 590/1194).²⁷ His teacher during this time was Sharif al-Dīn Ṣadaqa b. Salāma b. Ḥusayn al-Ḍarīr al-Maṣḥarā'ī (d. 825/1422).²⁸ Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī enjoyed a reputation as a preeminent scholar of the *qirā'āt*, and with him, al-Biqā'ī also began to study the *tajwīd* of the Quran. Very little is recorded about Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī, with his most extensive biographies being provided by al-Biqā'ī and, not unexpectedly, al-Sakhāwī.²⁹ Otherwise, Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī appears in Ibn al-Jazarī's *Ghāyat al-nihāya fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrā'*, a biographical dictionary of Quranic reciters.³⁰ The information provided by all of these biographies is scant and primarily focused upon Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī's own studies and work on the *qirā'āt*.

The year after the death of Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī, al-Biqā'ī began studying grammar and *fiqh* with Tāj al-Dīn Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Bahādūr b. 'Abdallāh al-Jalālī (d. 831/1428).³¹ Much like Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī, Ibn Bahādūr made little impact in the biographical literature of the period. Al-Biqā'ī and al-Sakhāwī are his only biographers of note. Ibn Bahādūr was born at the end of the 8th/14th century and was the grandson of one Faṭḥ al-Dīn b. al-Shahīd, about whom no information seems to have survived. He devoted himself to the study of the Quran and became distinguished for studying it. Al-Biqā'ī continued to study with Ibn Bahādūr until the latter died in Ramaḍān 831/June 1428. Touchingly, al-Biqā'ī tells us of his teacher that he, al-Biqā'ī, "did not profit from anyone as he profited from him."³²

Concurrently, al-Biqā'ī appears to have developed a sustained and fruitful relationship with one al-'Imād Ismā'īl b. Ibrāhīm b. Sharif, with whom he began studying in 827/1423–4 in Jerusalem.³³ Al-'Imād b. Sharif is a rather enigmatic

27 This work is known best as *al-Shāṭibīyya*. It was a versification of al-Dānī's compendium of the *qirā'āt*, entitled the *Kitāb al-taysīr*.

28 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^r; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fols 96^v–7^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 62.

29 For al-Biqā'ī's biography of Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī, see MS Köprülü 119 fol. 112^r. Curiously, Sharif al-Dīn al-Maṣḥarā'ī is missing from MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40. See also al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* iii, 47–8. For al-Sakhāwī's biography, see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'* iii, 317–8. Al-Sakhāwī's obsession with al-Biqā'ī is well known, and it was so extensive that he provides substantial biographical information about those who crossed paths with al-Biqā'ī. On this, see Saleh, *Defense* 8–10.

30 Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat* i, 304, no. 1461.

31 For al-Biqā'ī's biography of him, see MS Köprülü 119 fols 233^v–4^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* v, 112–4.

32 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^r; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 97^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 63.

33 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^r; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 97^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 63.

figure.³⁴ Al-Biqā'ī himself knew little about him beyond an approximate birth-date of 782–3/1380–2. The lack of a death date suggests that he was still alive when al-Biqā'ī wrote the *Unwān al-zamān*. Al-ʿImād b. Sharif was a student of Ibn al-Hā'im (d. 815/1412),³⁵ himself an expert in *farā'id* and *hisāb*, and was responsible for directing al-Biqā'ī's studies concerning *hisāb*. These studies involved memorizing two *manzūma* of Ibn al-Hā'im: one on algebra and the other on the formulas of the Bedouin. Later in 832, al-Biqā'ī returned to Jerusalem and studied Ibn al-Hā'im's *al-Wasīla* with another of Ibn al-Hā'im's students, Zayn al-Dīn. He also studied mathematics, *fuṣūl*, and the division of estates with him. During this visit, al-Biqā'ī resumed his studies with al-ʿImād b. Sharif, focusing on the *Sharḥ nukhba al-muḥaddithīn* of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī.³⁶

During this period, al-Biqā'ī encountered two prominent scholars: Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429) and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (d. 851/1448).³⁷ Al-Biqā'ī was particularly impressed by Ibn al-Jazarī, who visited Damascus in 827/1423–4 and whom he lauds as the “most learned of the time, the Shāṭibī of the age.”³⁸ With Ibn al-Jazarī, al-Biqā'ī read aloud from the *ʿashr* and also memorized Ibn al-Jazarī's didactic poem, the *Ṭayyibat al-nashr fi al-qirāʾat al-ʿashr*. Al-Biqā'ī showed Ibn al-Jazarī his first *muṣannaḥ* and was authorized by Ibn al-Jazarī to read what they had studied together. Later, in 831/1427–8, he studied *al-Ḥāwī*—a textbook of Shāfiʿī *fiqh* composed by Najm al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī (d. 655/1266)—with Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba. This seems to be a continuation of his earlier studies of a versification of *al-Ḥāwī* by Ibn al-Wardī (d. 749/1349). Neither of these relationships seems to have endured, at least insofar as his autobiography suggests.

This was followed in 834/1430–1 by the beginning of al-Biqā'ī's association with Ibn Ḥajar, with whom he studied extensively. Among the works he studied with Ibn Ḥajar were the *Sharḥ nukhbat al-muḥaddithīn* (from which al-Biqā'ī tells us he benefited greatly), *al-Taʾrīkh al-mufannan*, and the majority of *Sharḥ al-fyṣṣat al-irāqī fi ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*. Ibn Ḥajar authorized al-Biqā'ī to teach and defended al-Biqā'ī during the judicial contest concerning his future recitation of al-Bukhārī (likely a reference to al-Biqā'ī's appointment as Sultan Jaqmaq's *ḥadīth* teacher) by commending a composition by al-Biqā'ī, *al-ʿAllāma*.³⁹ The

34 For al-Biqā'ī's biography of him, see MS Köprülü 119 fol. 92^v; MS ʿArabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 123^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 135.

35 Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, *Ṭabaqāt* iv, 17–8.

36 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^r; MS ʿArabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 97^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 63.

37 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^r; MS ʿArabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 97^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 63.

38 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^r; MS ʿArabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 97^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 63.

39 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^r; MS ʿArabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 97^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 64.

closeness of their relationship is suggested by their traveling together to Āmid as part of al-Ashraf Barsbay's 836/1433 campaign, and its simple longevity.

Other names are mentioned in the autobiography. He makes references to studying with the shaykhs of Aleppo and Damascus, though the onomastic information he provides is too scant to permit the identification of them all. Additionally, al-Biqā'ī tells us of the traditionists with whose students he studied. This is essentially a list of primarily 14th-century scholars: Abū l-Faṭḥ Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Maydūmī (d. 655/1257), 'Alā l-Dīn Mughlāṭay (d. 762/1361), al-Ṣalāḥ b. Abī 'Amr b. Amayla, al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), Ibn Nubāta (d. 768/1366), and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Khalīl b. Kaykaldī l-'Alā'ī (d. 761/1359).

It is clear that al-Biqā'ī was more interested in recounting his interactions with those teachers who fundamentally shaped his intellectual life than he was in co-opting the social capital of prominent 15th-century scholars. Of the three scholars who are regarded by modern scholarship as particularly famous, only Ibn Ḥajar is afforded anything approaching prominence. Al-Biqā'ī's biography of Ibn Ḥajar is expansive,⁴⁰ his biography of Ibn al-Jazarī barely five lines,⁴¹ and his biography of Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba nonexistent.

When we read the autobiography positively, we can begin to reconstruct al-Biqā'ī's social and especially his intellectual contexts, outline the curriculum he followed, and see in which particular intellectual traditions he operated. Yet this is only one approach of the autobiography: it also functions more explicitly as an attempt by al-Biqā'ī to give meaning to his formative years. To explore this further, we will focus our attention on three elements of the autobiography. Firstly, we will return to his account of his lineage. Secondly, we will turn to his use of dreams. Thirdly, we will explore how he treats the attack on his family in Sha'bān 821/September 1418.

4 Semiotizing the Self

4.1 *Lineage Revisited*

It was, of course, not unusual for scholars to recount their lineages. Within the highly competitive environment of 15th-century Cairo, lineage as one aspect of *ḥasab wa-nasab* was of central importance.⁴² It was a marker of social status and prestige, one of the ways in which membership of the intellectual elite was both recognized and reproduced. What is curious, though, is why al-Biqā'ī

40 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 18^r–34^v; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 26^v–49^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* i, 115–80.

41 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 348^r.

42 On this, see Ed., *Ḥasab*.

chose to include the information he does. While it allows us to reconstruct how he understood his genealogy and the geographical range of his extended kin group, the process of writing it down made the lacunae in his genealogical record—unimportant in his original social context—highly visible. That is, by recording his genealogy, al-Biqā'ī highlights the “fuzziness” of his knowledge of the link between himself and Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās. Al-Biqā'ī draws attention to the fact that his lineage was categorically *not* illustrious. It could not, therefore, serve to highlight his social status. The question, then, is why he included it at all.

That he goes to such lengths to provide any and all information that he can about his lineage suggests that he was aware of how limited his knowledge was, but also of how valuable lineage could be. At the very least, the inclusion of this material is his way of demonstrating that while he may have come from a peasant background, he was not ignorant. He would also have been aware that given his relative lack of social standing, any attempt to claim or generate a prestigious *nasab* would likely have been rejected and ridiculed. As Szombathy notes, genealogy was a marker of prestige, not a generator of it, and attempts to use it to generate prestige on the part of lowly groups did not end well.⁴³

It is in this light that we should read the suggestion that Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās was the ultimate progenitor of al-Biqā'ī's kin group. The attraction of Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās is obvious: he was one of the first Muslims and, as al-Biqā'ī himself tells us, one of those to whom Paradise has been promised.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Prophet was reported to have acknowledged him as his maternal uncle. “Jābir b. ‘Abdallāh said, ‘Sa'd approached,’ so the Prophet (ṣ) said, ‘This is my uncle, so let a man show me his uncle.’”⁴⁵ Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās and the Prophet's mother, Āmina bt. Wahb were both members of the Banū Zuhra, a clan of the Quraysh. Who better to be descended from than one of the first converts, a relative of the Prophet, and member of the Quraysh?

That al-Biqā'ī's kin group was descended from Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās is likely a family myth or legend, one which al-Biqā'ī was happy to recount but was reluctant to unilaterally accept and propagate, likely for the reason just mentioned. This is a tentative attempt at “genealogical parasitism,” a term coined by Dennis D. Cordell in his study of Dar al-Kuti and applied by Szombathy to medieval Muslim societies, which refers to the practice of grafting new lineages and fam-

43 Szombathy, *Genealogy* 12, 16–8.

44 Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi'* vi, 100, no. 3747; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan* 144, no. 133; Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan* vii, 46, no. 4649.

45 Al-Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi'* vi, 104, no. 3752.

ilies onto the standardized medieval genealogical stem.⁴⁶ While categorically claiming descent from Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās would have opened him up to the risk of censure, al-Biqā'ī mentions the family myth in order to preserve the possibility of his kin group's descent from Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās. He did so on the chance that he and his descendants would prove illustrious enough for their genealogy to become accepted. The prestigious have always found the preservation of spurious lineages easier than the lowly.

An apposite example of this is provided by Jo Van Steenberg in his discussion of Ibn al-Qaysanārī's (d. 1352) panegyric for al-Mālik al-Šāliḥ Ismā'īl. The panegyric was Ibn al-Qaysanārī's attempt to demonstrate his historiographical and belletristic skills, as part of which he emphasized his own administrator's pedigree as a member of a longstanding Syrian family that claimed descent from Khālīd b. al-Walīd (d. 21/642), the Sword of Islam.⁴⁷ This was despite the fact that by the 14th century, Khālīd b. al-Walīd's line was considered long extinct by the scholars of *nasab*.⁴⁸ Evidently, this was no concern for Ibn al-Qaysanārī because he had the symbolic capital of his prestigious forebears behind him. Al-Biqā'ī had no such resource, and so he could not risk making any definitive claims vis-à-vis Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās but nevertheless hoped that he and his descendants would generate such capital. That this did not happen is amply demonstrated by the silence of his later biographers concerning his ostensible descent from Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās.

Al-Biqā'ī's extended discussion of his lineage, despite his inability to provide much detail, was thus intended to provide the foundation for his entry into the intellectual society of 15th-century Cairo by demonstrating that he did have knowledge of his lineage, while simultaneously attempting, circumspectly, to arrogate for himself and his kin group the prestige of Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās. That he sought to do so suggests a degree of authorial anxiety on the part of al-Biqā'ī, which is underscored by his use of dreams.

4.2 Dreams

Reynolds notes that the narration of dreams in biographical and autobiographical literature is primarily tied "in one way or another, to issues of authorial anxiety: the author argues in dream narrations (dreamed by himself or others) points that he feels he cannot argue on his own authority."⁴⁹ Now, al-Biqā'ī

46 Szombathy, *Genealogy* 5.

47 Van Steenberg, *Qalāwūnid*.

48 Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, *Masālik* iv, 177.

49 Reynolds, *Symbolic* 261–86, 276. This chapter is a much expanded version of Reynolds's discussion of dreams found in *Interpreting* 88–93.

can hardly compete with the sheer volume of dreams some scholars included in their autobiographies,⁵⁰ but his dreams nevertheless perform a similar semi-otic function. Only two dreams are narrated in any great detail; the first explains the origins of his grandfather's peculiar *laqab* "al-Rubāt,"⁵¹ while the second is recounted by his maternal cousin concerning a head injury al-Biqā'ī received when he was younger. It is to the second dream that we will turn our attention.

Al-Biqā'ī introduces it by explaining that God blessed him in numerous ways, the greatest of which was perhaps that this head injury was cured by the Prophet. The account proceeds thus:

God Almighty rewarded him [al-Biqā'ī] from His Grace with many and obvious kindnesses of His miracles, amongst the greatest of which—or the greatest—was that he was injured in the head when he was small, and the Prophet (ṣ) cured him, which is to say that the daughter of his maternal uncle, Maryam bt. Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. Sulaymān, saw him (ṣ) in a dream, wherein he said to her: "You have one wish from me." She said to him: "The son of my paternal aunt is injured in his head." So he said to her: "Take this remedy to him, and shortly afterwards it will be healed, as if his head had never been injured." His maternal cousin remained after the dream unable to raise the hand to which he had given the remedy.⁵²

Within Islamic oneirocriticism, dreams of the Prophet Muḥammad were deemed to be both unequivocally true and divinely inspired: they could—and did, as Leah Kinberg has demonstrated—function in a similar manner to *ḥadīth*.⁵³ True dreams correlate closely with issues of authority—particularly of a spiritual nature—and social rank.

Al-Biqā'ī's inclusion of a "true" dream, the meaning of which is obvious, was designed to substantiate his status. Given the broader framework of the autobiography, this was likely his intellectual status. It is significant that his recovery from what was, evidently, a serious injury is presented as miraculous and facilitated solely through the intervention of the Prophet. The truth of the dream, in no need of confirmation due to it being of the Prophet, is nevertheless corroborated by the subsequent physical impairment of his cousin.

50 For example, Abū 'Abdallāh al-Tirmidhī and Abū Shāma included 17 and 14, respectively.

51 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 71^v; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 96^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 61.

52 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^v; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 98^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 65.

53 Kinberg, *Literal*.

Al-Biqā'ī does refer to other dreams, though he merely tells us that he saw the Prophet in many dreams (in some of which he kissed his hand) and that he also saw Abū Bakr, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Al-Biqā'ī tells us that he "kissed the left hand of 'Alī."⁵⁴ Why al-Biqā'ī chooses not to describe the events of these dreams is unclear, though they still have a legitimizing function, which is enacted by listing the names of those who appeared and by positioning these names after his narration of the dream of his cousin, Maryam bt. Muḥammad. Much like the reference to Sa'd b. Abī Waqqās was an attempt to arrogate for himself some measure of Sa'd's prestige, so too are these dreams attempts on the part of al-Biqā'ī to enhance his prestige through association with the Prophet and three of the rightly guided caliphs. In this way, they are meant to assuage the problem of his lack of social standing.

4.3 *The Attack on His Family*

It is clear that the attack on his family, which resulted in the death of his father, is the crux of the autobiography, though he does only describe it briefly. He states that "the *ṣāhib al-tarjama* was born in approximately 809 in Khirbat Rūḥā ... There, he read the Quran and laboured in it. Then an event committed outrage against them, in which his father, his two uncles, and six of his relatives were treacherously killed in Sha'bān 821. Thereupon his mother and her father took him to Damascus in 823."⁵⁵ Although he does not explicitly link the death of his father with the serious injury he received as a child, we can infer from his treatment of the events that they were both consequences of the attack on his family because they are semiotized in the same way.

Concerning the death of his father, al-Biqā'ī tells us that he heard an unseen voice when he was younger. The notion of the unseen voice, the *hātif*, is closely related to dream symbolism and functions in a similar way. He states that

when he was a boy in Khirbat Rūḥā he attended a mosque called the *zāwiya* of Shaykh Mūsā, wherein he studied by himself. He heard therein a speaker, and he could not see anyone; there was no place for anyone to conceal himself. He [the speaker] said to him: "They will kill your father!" verbatim and repeatedly. And therefore he used to hear this

54 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 72^v; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 98^r; al-Biqā'ī, *Umwān* ii, 66. Why 'Uthmān was the only one of the *Rāshidūn* not to appear in al-Biqā'ī's dreams is unclear, as is the significance of 'Alī's left hand.

55 MS Köprülü 119 fol. 71^v-2^r; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 96^v; al-Biqā'ī, *Umwān* ii, 62.

phrase whenever he would pass the graveyard of the companions of the *zāwiya*; then his father was killed shortly thereafter.⁵⁶

This is clearly a portent of future events and is intended to give meaning to the death of his father. The warning transfers it from the realm of the mundane and the random into the realm of prophecy. It is no longer an act of meaningless violence but an event pregnant with meaning. Likewise, when he introduces his maternal cousin's dream of the Prophet, this is framed within the context of the Prophet's intervention being one of the "many and obvious kindnesses" that God had bestowed upon al-Biqā'ī; his injury, much like the death of his father, was purposeful.

The meaning behind both events is revealed in a statement attributed to one of his anonymous companions:

One of his companions expressed the opinion to him that the Prophet (ﷺ) had, in his opinion, sent to the *ṣāhib al-tarjama* a gift. It was one of the greatest of the graces which he had witnessed concerning trials, amongst the greatest of those was the killing of his father and his uncles, for it was a reason for his moving to Damascus. And it was the starting point of his attaining the happiness of searching for knowledge and learning about the lands of men, and witnessing miracles.⁵⁷

The meaning, then, is simple: the attack on his family was neither meaningless nor purposeless. Rather, it was the greatest gift that had been bestowed upon him, for it was the driving force behind his move from the village of Khirbat Rūḥā to Damascus and thence to Cairo.

Our discussion thus far has been based on MS Köprülü 1119. How, then, does the additional material in MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40, which was added some four years after his appointments as Sultan Jaqmaq's *ḥadīth* teacher and as the *mufassir* of the Zāhir Mosque, modify this picture? Covering folios 106^r–7^r, this additional material makes a notable departure by switching to the first person. The effect of this is to make the additional material read in a more introspective and personal manner. Al-Biqā'ī begins with a remembrance of his mother. He states that she "was a good woman, but there was a severity in her character, a quality inherent in most—or all—of our relatives. When she was angry with me, she used to pray that I would die as a highwayman on the streets."⁵⁸

56 MS Köprülü 1119 fol. 73^r; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 98^v; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 65.

57 MS Köprülü 1119 fol. 72^v; MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 98^{r-v}; al-Biqā'ī, *Unwān* ii, 66.

58 MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 106^r.

He continues by discussing his love for jihad, which expands upon his earlier reference to his activities as a *mujāhid*. Thus, he tells us that he struggled with his bodily appetites and sought to gain mastery over them; he would pray to God that He would help him in this endeavor. So great was his passion for jihad that he devoted himself to the practice of archery and swordsmanship, hoping to master both, and he began to compose a work on the science of the sword, which he hoped would become paradigmatic.⁵⁹ There is thus no ambiguity that al-Biqā'ī devoted himself to military jihad and not to the more pacifist and ascetic *mujāhida*.⁶⁰ While it does suggest, in particular, a somewhat more deep-seated interest in the practice of jihad than is otherwise known, this new material does little to change our semiotic reading of the autobiography so much as it adds nuance to the more positivist traditional reading.

This is, however, not the totality of the new material. The most significant part concerns his appointment as Sultan Jaqmaq's *ḥadīth* teacher. Al-Biqā'ī tells us that

when Sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir Abū Sa'īd Jaqmaq obtained the sultanate in the year 842/1438, I enquired of the *qāḍī l-quḍāt*; and therefore did he speak on my behalf concerning the reading of al-Bukhārī in his—the Sultan's—presence because he who had been reading in that capacity was no longer competent for it. He assented and described me in my absence with reference to many attributes, amongst which was that the handsomeness of my reading was excellent. The slanderers sought to undermine that, exerting themselves and acting deceitfully.

And so, on the day on which he would select someone to read, the *qāḍī l-quḍāt* enquired of the Sultan before the reading. He said: "The one about whom you have spoken—may he be greatly reward." And he praised me concerning my knowledge and my compositions, and said: "Tomorrow, he will read and he will astonish the Sultan."⁶¹

Al-Biqā'ī continues by noting that "God Almighty was kind" and proved the truth of the sultan's statement by making his reading successful and that he made no "barbarism of speech" during it. He does admit that, occasionally, he would misread *'an* as *ibn* and vice versa. He concludes the biography by noting

59 Ibid. fol. 106^{r-v}.

60 More commonly referred to in Western scholarship as *jihād al-naḥs*, the preferred term in premodern writing is *mujāhida*. For discussion of this, see in particular Neale, *Jihad* 47–55.

61 MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fols 106^{v-7r}.

the closeness of his relationship with Ibn Ḥajar, a point more than evidenced by Ibn Ḥajar's pivotal role in the advancement of al-Biqā'ī's career.⁶²

Two points need to be made. Firstly, al-Biqā'ī's emphasis of his gratitude that he made no mistakes during the first recitation, coupled with his candid admission that he occasionally misread *ʿan* as *ibn* and vice versa, suggests that much of his anxiety revolved around his speech and, by extension, his peasant background. This, in turn, suggests that al-Biqā'ī was consciously marked as an outsider by the Cairene intellectual elite, unnamed members of which opposed his appointment because of his less cultured background. That al-Biqā'ī felt the need to return to this and stress that he deserved his appointment on the basis of the excellence of his reading, and to furthermore invoke the authority of Ibn Ḥajar, suggests that the opposition continued to be a factor in his life.

Secondly, and strikingly, the involvement of God within the direction of his life continues. Thus, while Ibn Ḥajar was the one to secure his appointment, it was through neither his nor al-Biqā'ī's agency that his recitation was successful. Rather, it was God who decided to be beneficent and ensure al-Biqā'ī's success and thereby, al-Biqā'ī continues, demonstrating to the sultan the blessings God had bestowed upon al-Biqā'ī.

5 Toward an Ontology of History

The notion that his life was shaped by the Divine is highlighted by Guo in his discussion of al-Biqā'ī's chronicle, the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*. Guo makes two points about the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr* that bear mentioning here. Firstly, he argues that the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr* is fundamentally eschatological and that this can only be understood in the context of Islamic salvationist history, the central concern of which had, by al-Biqā'ī's time, become

more about the internal threats to the realm, about the concept of the superiority of the righteous Muslim scholars (himself included of course) and just rulers (such as Sultan Īnal) to those unjust rulers (such as Sultan Jaqmaq), corrupt officers, and phony *ʿulamāʾ* ... the paramount concern for him was naturally the internal turmoil and self-destruction that was eating away at the already feeble Mamluk system (*fasād*, *ẓulm* are the buzzwords in the Chronicle throughout).⁶³

62 Ibid., fol. 107^r.

63 Guo, *Al-Biqā'ī's* 139.

Secondly, Guo argues that al-Biqā'ī juxtaposes and explains events from his own life with Quranic exegesis and dream symbolism. In doing so, he interprets his life symbolically within the context of this eschatological salvation history. Essentially, al-Biqā'ī sees the trials and tribulations that he undergoes as parallels to the trials and tribulations of the Muslim community at large and that just as the Muslims will be triumphant, so too will he triumph over his opponents and detractors. In both cases, Guo argues, this is because these triumphs are predictable in accordance with the "Heavenly Plan": for al-Biqā'ī, the Divine was guiding the course of his life.⁶⁴

The parallels between this sense of Divine immanence in both the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr* and the autobiography are obvious. In the autobiography, al-Biqā'ī casts his life as fundamentally guided by God and defined by trial and hardship and singles out the death of his father and the opposition that he met in Cairo. In both cases, however, he is triumphant. The eschatological element is also present in the autobiography, though somewhat more muted. Al-Biqā'ī notes the following:

At the end of the 23rd night of the month [Dhū l-Ḥijja] in the year [845/4th of May 1442], I saw whilst dreaming a reciter reading in my house: "The Hour [*al-sā'a*] drew near and the moon was cleft in two." Thus is it auspicious from its beginning with the imminence of *al-Amr* and its end with the attainment of benefit. And God Almighty makes near the realization of that, because He is over all things capable.⁶⁵

The reciter quotes Q 54:1 verbatim, which has intrinsic eschatological meaning. The Hour, for which *al-amr* is frequently a synonym,⁶⁶ refers to the period immediately preceding the end of the world. The splitting of the moon asunder is one of the more dramatic signs of the imminence of the end. Al-Biqā'ī's commentary on his dream, wherein he expresses his hope for the realization of this, suggests that he believed himself to be living in the End Times. The autobiography demonstrates that al-Biqā'ī's belief in the imminence of the Divine in his life and the eschatological future were not unique to the *Izhār al-ʿaṣr*. Rather, it suggests that these were fundamental elements in al-Biqā'ī's ontology of history, which had developed at least some fourteen years earlier when he wrote his autobiography.

64 Ibid.

65 MS 'Arabiyya akhbār 40 fol. 106v.

66 Lawson, *The Quran* xxi, xxiii, 33.

6 Conclusion

Al-Biqā'ī's autobiography can thus be read in two ways. On the one hand, it can be read positively as an account of his formative years; on the other, it can be read as an attempt to give meaning to those years. In truth, both of these aspects work together to support al-Biqā'ī's position within the intellectual elite of 15th-century Cairo. It is no accident that we find it included within his biographical collection. The writing of biographical collections is fundamental to the formation and maintenance of group identities. The periodic updating and compilation of these works is an attempt to assert continuity between the present and the past because the present gains its authority by virtue of the weight of memory. Biographical collections were the battlegrounds on which membership in the intellectual elite was fought. Inclusion in them was a marker of success; exclusion a marker of failure.

Thus, if we read the autobiography positively as a record of his early years, his choice to focus on his *riḥla fi ṭalab al-ʿilm* communicates and underscores his membership in the intellectual elite by stressing and memorializing the links he developed between himself and the members of the intellectual elite, particularly his relationship with Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī. By including himself within his collection, he claims for himself a place within that intellectual community.

When we read the autobiography as an attempt to develop meaning, it becomes not merely an attempt to justify his membership among the intellectual elite but also the record of how al-Biqā'ī sought to rationalize and make sense of a traumatic event from his childhood. For al-Biqā'ī, the only way he could make sense of this was to interpret his life within a symbolic and eschatological framework that gave meaning to the attack on his family by emphasizing the greatness of the miracles and kindness that was bestowed upon him and by asserting that he would, with divine favor, triumph over those trials and tribulations that afflicted him. The dream symbolism emphasizes that the attack on his family was the beginning of a series of coherent events that led to his emigration to Cairo and then his appointment as Sultan Jaqmaq's *ḥadīth* teacher. In this context, the recounting of his lineage takes on new meaning because it highlights how humble his origins were. All of this serves not only to justify his position within the Cairene intellectual elite but also to make his rise to membership of the intellectual elite all the more impressive.

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