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A Tree Without Branches? On Coptic Arab historian Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il and His Conjectural *Stammbaum*

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Abstract. The Coptic Arab writer Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il (d. after 759 AH/1358 AD), author of *al-Nahj al-saḍīd* ("The Correct Path"), a chronicle of the early Mamluk period, is apparently "a historian without history". Indeed, the only known information about his life is the date of completion of his work: the 11th of Shawwāl, 759 AH, i.e. the 16th of September 1358 AD, as the author himself declared in the introduction of his book. Apart from this, he did not provide any information on himself and he apparently left no trace on any writer in his generation or in the following ones. Nevertheless, some modern scholars tried to speculate on possible connections between Mufaḍḍal and some personalities mentioned in sources of the time. In particular, Edgar Blochet, in 1919, argued that some Coptic notables mentioned in other manuscripts should be identified as members of Mufaḍḍal's family. His hypothesis has been accepted by scholars until now, in spite of its merely conjectural nature, and has been the basis for further speculations. In the present paper, we argue that the whole matter deserves to be carefully reconsidered and we endeavour to demonstrate that none of the hypotheses made on Mufaḍḍal's family until now can be considered as conclusive.

Keywords. Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, Mamluk Egypt, Arab historiography of the Mamluk period, Coptic Arab historiography.

1. *Introduction: Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il : an historian without history?*

The Coptic Arab writer Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il (d. after 759 AH/1358 AD) apparently left no trace in any other source than his own book *al-Nahj al-sadīd* ("The Correct Path")¹. This is a chronicle of the early Mamluk period providing regular coverage for the years 658-741 AH / 1260-1341 AD - i.e., from the beginning of the reign of Sultan Baybars until the immediate aftermaths of the last reign of Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn - with an additional final reference to the end of the pontificate of the Coptic Patriarch Peter V, which occurred in 749 AH / 1348 AD².

The only known witness of this work is MS Paris BNF Ar. 4525. According to a note written by seventeenth century scholar Étienne Baluze (*Stephanus Baluzius*)³ in the last folio (f. 270 v.), this manuscript joined the collection of Colbert as early as 1675, coming from an unspecified Eastern location ("ex Oriente")⁴.

However, the text was only edited much later, precisely in the course of the twentieth century, and in two different steps. First, Edgard Blochet, in three different issues of the *Patrologia Orientalis* (1919, 1920, 1929), published the Arabic text of the sections concerning the years 658 AH / 1260 AD to 716 AH / 1316 AD (folios 1 r. to 183 r.)⁵, along with his own French translation of the same sections. Then, half a century later, in 1973, Samira Kortantamer edited the remaining sections of the Arabic text (from year 717 AH /1317 AD onwards; folios 183 v. - 270 v.) along with her own German translation of this part of the book⁶. After almost another half of a century, in 2017, all the sections of the Arabic text (folios 1 r. to 270 v.) were finally edited together by the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Kamāl al-Dīn, who amended the text in several points.⁷

As Mufaḍḍal himself carefully states, his work was completed on the 11th of Shawwāl, 759 AH, i.e. the 16th of September 1358 AD:

1 Mufaḍḍal ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, *al-Nahj al-sadīd wa-l-durr al-farīd fī mā ba'd ta'rīkh Ibn al-'Amīd*, MS. Paris, BNF, Ar. 4525, ff. 1 r. - 270 v.

2 In this notice, the Patriarch is mentioned according to his personal names: "Anbā Būtrus, known as the Priest Dāwūd the Builder". See Mufaḍḍal ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, *al-Nahj al-sadīd wa-l-durr al-farīd fī mā ba'd ta'rīkh Ibn al-'Amīd*, MS. Paris, BNF, Ar. 4525, f. 270 v. This is the last of three short notices concerning the Patriarchs who were appointed during the last decades of Sultan al-Nāṣir's long reign, namely John IX (1320-1327), Benjamin II (1327-1339) and the aforementioned Peter V (1340-1348). These notices are grouped in a separate section in which the author briefly records "what is mentioned in the *Histories of the Christians (tawārīk al-naṣārā*, i.e. much probably the History of the Patriarchs)" for the concerned period. This section is attached to the chapters dealing with the events of the year 741 AH (1340-41 AD) but provides abridged information on events spanning over a certain lapse of time and not previously mentioned in the exact respective year. These special sections are placed throughout the whole book, and this is the main method used by Mufaḍḍal to provide information on Coptic history.

3 On the life and works of the seventeenth century intellectual Étienne Baluze (1630-1718), see Fage 1971.

4 *Codex iste in Bibliothecam Colbertinam ex Oriente delatus est anno MDCLXXV*, MS. Paris, BNF, Ar. 4525, f. 270 v.

5 See Blochet 1919; Blochet 1920; Blochet 1929.

6 See Kortantamer 1973.

7 Kamāl al-Dīn 2017. On Kamāl al-Dīn's contribution in the field of Mamluk studies (both as an author and an editor), see al-Shūrbajī 2017.

The composition of this work was completed (*kāna al-farāgh min jam 'i-hi*) on Monday the 11th of Shawwāl of the year 759 of the Hegira. This date corresponds, according to the Coptic datation system (*al-ta'rīkh al-qibī*), to day 20th of the month of Tūt of the year 1075 from the age of Diocletian (*Dīqlādiyānūs*), who ruled over the Copts in antiquity (*malik al-qibṭ qadīm^{am}*). This corresponds, according to the Byzantine (*rūmī*) dating system, to the 17th day of the month of Īlūl of the year 1670 of the age of Alexander (the Great) son of Philip the Greek the Macedonian, or (also known as) "that of the two Horns" (*Dhū l-qarnayn*)⁸, and (corresponds) to 6850 accomplished years and twenty days (from the creation) of the World, calculated in solar years (*shamsiyyat^{am}*)⁹.

Also, Mufaḍḍal declares that his chronicle was conceived as a continuation of the historical work of the far more illustrious Coptic writer al-Makīn Jirjis Ibn al-'Amīd (1206 AD - 1273 or 1280 AD)¹⁰. The latter, who had been a high bureaucrat of the Sultanate in late Ayyubid and early Mamluk times, had written a universal history called *Al-majmū' al-mubārak* ('The blessed collection'), spanning from the creation of the world to the beginning of the reign of the Mamluk Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars in 658 AH / 1260 AD. Although adopting a much more "local" focus (mostly Mamluk Egypt and Syria), Mufaḍḍal chooses to start his chronicle from the exact point where al-Makīn had stopped:

As I studied the historical work (*ta'rīkh*) of the late *shaykh* al-Makīn Jirjis Ibn al-'Amīd, I saw that its chronological extension (*mudda*) ends with the very beginning of the reign of al-Zāhir Baybars al-Bunduqdārī (*al-dawla al-zāhiriyya Baybars al-Bunduqdārī*), that is Sunday, the 16th of Dhū l-Qa'da of the year 658 from the Hegira, which corresponds to 6752 accomplished years plus two months and eleven days (from the creation) of the World, calculated in solar years (*shamsiyyat^{am}*). Indeed, the period I am dealing with (*zamānunā*; lit: "our period") extends till the end of the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn (*al-dawla al-nāṣiriyya Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn*), as I found it good to add to that work (i.e. the chronicle by Ibn al-'Amīd) the events and the vicissitudes, both of general and particular interest, which happened from the beginning of the reign of al-Zāhir Baybars al-Bunduqdārī [until the end of the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn]¹¹.

Indeed, continuity with al-Makīn Ibn al-'Amīd is also claimed in the full title of the book, as recorded in its only known extant manuscript: *al-Nahj al-sadīd wa-l-durr al-farīd fī mā ba'd ta'rīkh Ibn al-'Amīd*, i.e. "The Correct Path and the Precious Pearl: On the events

8 See this identification in Qur'ān XVIII, 83-101.

9 MS Paris, BNF Ar. 4525, folio 1 v. (our translation). See also Blochet 1919, Arabic text p. 407.

10 On him, see: Moawad 2012; Cahen and Coquin 2012. As for al-Makīn's death date, the Christian Arab historian Ibn al-Ṣuqā'ī, followed by al-Ṣafadī and al-Maqrīzī, fix it to 672 AH / 1273-74 AD, but some recent studies argue that he died "sometime after 1280. See Moawad 2012, pp. [566]-567.

11 MS Paris, BNF Ar. 4525, folio 1 v^o (our translation). See also Blochet 1919, Arabic text pp. 407-408. The expression *zamānunā* was translated by Blochet literally (*notre période*) and it was accordingly considered by François Nau as an indication that the work was actually completed by the author in 749 AH / 1348 AD, that is the year of the last event mentioned therein. On these grounds, Nau argued that the manuscript BNF Ar. 4525 should be considered as a copy instead of an autograph: see Nau 1927-28, pp. 210-211. However, as mentioned before, Mufaḍḍal himself clearly states that his work was completed in 759 AH (1358 AD). For this reason, Nau's conjecture was not accepted by any of the scholars working on Mufaḍḍal.

(that occurred) after the (end of the) Chronicle (*ta'rikh*) by Ibn al-'Amīd”.

As Johannes den Heijer justly remarked, the aforementioned indication on the date of completion of Mufaḍḍal's work, and the latter's declaration of continuity with al-Makīn's work are the only certainly known elements in the life of Mufaḍḍal¹². Indeed, he might be defined a « historian without a history », as he is apparently not mentioned in any other source than his own book, and this work seemingly left no trace either on Coptic or Muslim writers in his generation or in the following ones.

However, modern scholars tried to infer some additional biographical information on Mufaḍḍal by speculating on possible connections between him and some personalities that are mentioned in Coptic or Muslim sources of the time.

In 1919, Edgard Blochet argued that some Coptic clerics and bureaucrats mentioned in two other Arabic Christian manuscripts in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* should be identified as members of Mufaḍḍal's family¹³.

A few years later, in 1928, François Nau, speculating on some indications from an anti-Coptic pamphlet by the Muslim author Ghāzī ibn al-Wāsiṭī (d. 1312 AD)¹⁴, conjectured that Mufaḍḍal should be a grand-nephew of the aforementioned Coptic historian Ibn al-'Amīd¹⁵. More precisely, on the grounds of Mufaḍḍal's *nasab* « Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il », Nau suggested to identify Mufaḍḍal's father with some Abū l-Faḍā'il that was mentioned by Ghāzī as “son of the sister” of the aforementioned al-Makīn Ibn al-'Amīd (*ibn ukht al-Makīn Ibn al-'Amīd*)¹⁶. Although such hypothesis was generally not contested by later scholars¹⁷, it is worth noting that it is only grounded on Nau's conjectural identification between the Abū l-Faḍā'il mentioned by Ghāzī and the father of Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, so it is far from being conclusively demonstrated.

In much more recent times (1972), Clifford Edmund Bosworth, relying on Qalqashandī's famous chancery manual *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā fī ṣinā'at al-inshā'* (completed in 814 AH /1412 AD), wondered whether Mufaḍḍal himself might be identified with a Coptic

12 See den Heijer, “Mufaḍḍal b. Abi 'l-Faḍā'il”, *EI2*.

13 See Blochet 1919, p. 353-354. We discuss this hypothesis *infra*.

14 Ghāzī ibn al-Wāsiṭī's *Kitāb radd 'alā ahl al-dhimma*, that was first edited by Richard Gottheil, dates back to the late 1290s or early 1300s. See Gottheil 1921, pp. 383-457. On Ghāzī ibn al-Wāsiṭī's life and on his death date, see now Mallett 2010. On anti-Coptic literature and waves of anti-Coptic violence in Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, see El-Leithy 2006. For an historical view on the condition of *dhimma* (lit., “protection”), i.e. the legal status of “protected people” (*dhimmi*) applying to Jews and Christians in Islamic juridical tradition, see: Cahen 1991; Fierro & Tolan 2013.

15 See Nau 1927-28, pp. 208-211.

16 Such an hypothesis was charged with several important implications, as this Abū l-Faḍā'il was described by Ghāzī as actively cooperating with his uncle al-Makīn Ibn al-'Amīd in plotting with the Mongols of Hulagu, and trying to facilitate their conquest of Syria in exchange for the promise to abolish the discriminating system of *dhimma* and granting Christian full equality with Muslims. As Professor Reuven Amitai kindly pointed out in a conversation we had in June 2019, this narrative is apparently not found in any other source and it is probably to be seen as a « légende noire » reported by Ghāzī to support his stern anti-*dhimmi* views. However, Nau himself took this narrative as a reliable ground for developing a conjectural reconstruction Mufaḍḍal's early life and even a full-fledged psychological explanation for the latter's choice to resume Ibn al-'Amīd's historical work. On this, see Nau 1927-1928, pp. 210-211 and Cecere 2020, pp. 216-219.

17 See, in particular: Kortantamer 1973, p. 4-5; den Heijer 1993, p. 305; Moawad 2013, p. 119.

Patriarch who was appointed in the 1360s¹⁸.

While Bosworth's suggestion was apparently not followed by any of the subsequent scholars (and was openly contested by Mathilde Cruvellier in 2010: see below), the identifications proposed by Blochet and Nau respectively were instead more successful among specialists (see *infra*). Nevertheless, this matter deserves to be carefully reconsidered, especially in the light of some relatively recent findings concerning the two manuscripts on which Blochet had based his reconstruction of the supposed genealogy of Mufaḍḍal. In point of fact, as I endeavor to demonstrate below, none of the hypotheses made on Mufaḍḍal's family until now can be considered as conclusive.

2. The conjectural Stammbaum of Mufaḍḍal: from Blochet to Kortantamer

Edgard Blochet, in introducing his edition of *al-Nahj al-saḍīd*, suggested that Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il belonged to a family of Coptic priests, bureaucrats and scholars, whose names he believed to detect in two Arabic Christian manuscripts held by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, namely: MS Paris, BNF Ar. 283¹⁹, and MS Paris, BNF Ar. 12²⁰.

MS Ar. 283 contains an anonymous compilation of religious texts, but one of them, a short collection of edifying stories on saintly monks (ff. 68-92), is based on an hagiographic work whose author is mentioned thereby: the *Firdaws* ("Paradise / Garden") attributed to a named "Abū l-Faḍā'il al-Ṣaḥī", whom Blochet proposed to identify with Mufaḍḍal's father.

MS Ar. 12, probably one of the finest exemplars of Coptic-Arabic book art²¹, provides an accurate Arabic translation of the Pentateuch, based on the Septuagint. The manuscript was completed in 1353 AD by some Jirjis Ibn al-Qiss Abī l-Mufaḍḍal Ibn Amīn al-Mulk Luṭf Allāh, who proved to have extensive linguistic skills and a remarkable philological attitude: as stated in a marginal note in the last folio (f. 290v), he copied this Arabic version of the Pentateuch from a manuscript written by "the priest Ibn Kabar", but collated it with Hebrew, Greek and Coptic versions. Probably relying on Jirjis' *nasab* (patronymic) "Ibn [...] Abī l-Mufaḍḍal", Blochet speculated that Jirjis was an otherwise unknown brother of the aforementioned Abū l-Faḍā'il, and thus considered him to be a paternal uncle of 'our'

18 See Bosworth 1972, p. 204, n. 3.

19 See Graf 1947, p. 397. A digitised copy of the manuscript is now available in the online catalogue of the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (BNF), *Department des Manuscrits*: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11004666q> (Last accessed on April, 11th, 2020). The manuscript description, by G. Troupeau, is also available in the Catalogue: [home/chronos/u-54a55963ff441bfca9b9095426d15d43108b92a1/MyFiles/Downloads/Mufaddal%20MSS/BnF%20Ar.%20283.mhtml](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11004666q) (Last accessed on April, 11th, 2022). For codicological study of this manuscript, see now Hunt 2009.

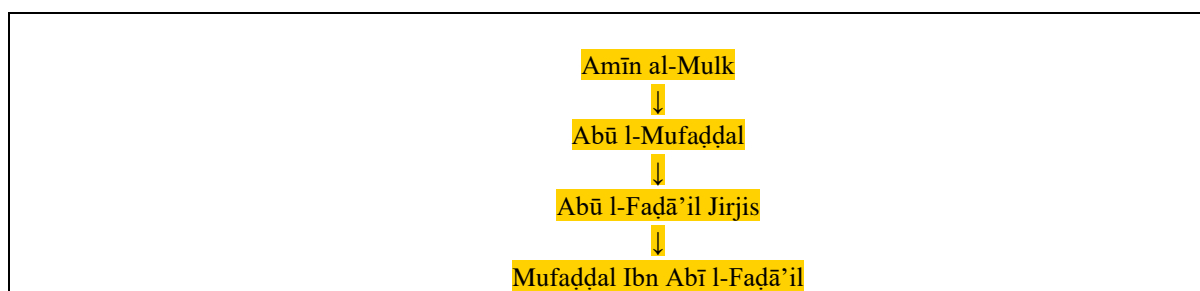
20 See Graf 1944, p. 104. A digitised copy of the manuscript is now available on the online catalogue of BnF: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84192173> (Last accessed on April, 11th, 2020), as well as a digitised reproduction of the MS notices typewritten by Georges Vajda: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84526694> (Last accessed on April, 10th, 2020). A general manuscript description by G. Troupeau, is also available in the Catalogue: <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc346452> (Last accessed on April, 11th, 2022).

21 On this aspect, see in particular: Guesdon and Vernay-Nouri 2001, pp. 104-105, n° 73; Boud'hors 2004, n° 2, p. 32; M. Cruvellier 2010; Vollandt 2015, pp. 265-266. With regard to the identity of this copyist, see also Samir 1991.

Mufaḍḍal. Accordingly, Blochet found it good to compare the elements composing Jirjis' name chain in MS. Ar. 12 with those composing the name chain of the aforementioned Abū l-Faḍā'il in MS Ar. 283, in order to reconstruct some branches of the family tree of the two supposed brothers. In other words, by crossing the name chains of two otherwise unrelated persons, Blochet conjectured that four members of Mufaḍḍal's family could be identified, spanning over three consecutive generations:

- 1-2) Mufaḍḍal's father Abū l-Faḍā'il and Mufaḍḍal's paternal uncle Jirjis;
- 3) Their father (thus, Mufaḍḍal's paternal grandfather), the priest Abū l-Mufaḍḍal;
- 4) The latter's father (thus, Mufaḍḍal's great grandfather), known by the *laqab* Amīn al-Mulk ("secretary of the Government"), which suggests that he must have played some important role in the financial administration of the (Ayyubid or Mamluk) Sultanate²².

In spite of their conjectural nature, these identifications have not been questioned by scholars until now. In particular, Samira Kortantamer based on Blochet's indications to provide a graphic representation of Mufaḍḍal's supposed family tree (*Stammbaum*)²³:



3. Reconsidering Blochet's hypothesis: New elements on Mufaḍḍal's supposed father and uncle.

In spite of the wide acceptance that it received until now, Blochet's conjectural reconstruction of Mufaḍḍal's genealogy should not be taken for granted. Indeed, some relatively recent findings concerning the two manuscripts on which Blochet had based his hypotheses do call for questioning the whole 'family tree' that he proposed.

First of all, the author of the *Firdaws*, that was copied in MS Paris BNF Ar. 283 (ff. 68-92) is now identified, in the relevant notice of the Library's catalogue, with the well-known writer Abū l-Faḍā'il al-Ṣafī Ibn al-'Assāl (active in the first half of the thirteenth century)²⁴. This was one of the famous Awlād al-'Assāl, the learned members of a prominent

22 See Blochet 1919, pp. 353-354.

23 see Kortantamer 1973, pp. 3-4.

24 See the manuscript description provided by G. Troupeau, available on the online Catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France:

Coptic family which left an indelible mark in Medieval Christian Arab culture. As Otto Meinardus points out, Abū l-Faḍā'il al-Ṣafī, his brother al-As'ad Abū l-Faraj Hibbat Allāh and their stepbrother al-Mu'taman Abū l-Iṣḥāq composed “the nucleus of thirteenth-century Coptic theology”²⁵. They dominated the Coptic intellectual scene in the last decades of the Ayyubid period, most of their works having been composed between 1225 and 1240. Also, their family played an important role in the administration of the the Ayyubid Sultanate: their father Abū l-Faḍl Ibn al-'Assāl, also known as *al-kātib al-miṣrī* (“the Egyptian scribe/secretary”), was given the honorific title of *Fakhr al-Dawla* (“Pride of the State”), and their fourth known brother al-Amjad Abū l-Majd Ibn al-'Assāl was Secretary of the financial administration of the Army (*diwān al-jaysh*)²⁶.

With all evidence, Abū l-Faḍā'il Ibn al-'Assāl could not have been the father of “our” Mufaḍḍal, for at least two main reasons:

- 1) Mufaḍḍal had apparently no genealogical ties with the 'Assāl family;
- 2) more importantly, Mufaḍḍal was active in the second half of the fourteenth century, whereas Abū l-Faḍā'il Ibn al-'Assāl died in mid-thirteenth century.

Therefore, the identification proposed by Blochet for Mufaḍḍal's father is to be rejected.

Conversely, Mufaḍḍal's supposed uncle Jirjis ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal, i.e. the learned copyist of MS. Paris BNF Ar. 12, was actually active in the same period as Mufaḍḍal, but for this very reason he could not have been the brother of the Abū l-Faḍā'il mentioned in MS Ar. 283, as Blochet had erroneously speculated.

Moreover, recent research on MS. Paris BNF Ar. 12 provided elements for further identification hypotheses that deserve to be taken into account.

In the early 1990s Samir Khalil Samir suggested that, in addition to MS Paris BNF Ar. 12, Jirjis ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal should be also attributed the production of MS Cairo, Coptic Museum Bibl. 90²⁷. This manuscript, containing the Arabic Gospels, was copied (and, as recently pointed out by Lucy-Anne Hunt, illuminated) in Damascus in 1340 AD²⁸. The script of Bibl. 90 shares some graphic peculiarities with Ar. 12, and the copyist is indicated as “the priest Jirjis Abū l-Faḍl ibn Luṭfallāh”²⁹. According to S. K. Samir, the name “Jirjis Abū l-

home/chronos/u54a55963ff441bfca9b9095426d15d43108b92a1/MyFiles/Downloads/Mufaddal%20MSS/BnF%20Ar.%20283.mhtml (Last accessed on March, 14th, 2022).

25 See Meinardus 2002, pp. 59-60.

26 Atiya, “Ibn al-'Assāl”, *EI2*.

27 See Samir 1991. On “the insight the manuscript offers into Christian cultural, artistic, and intellectual concerns of the middle of the fourteenth century”, see now Hunt 2009.

28 “The illuminated manuscript of the Arabic Gospels (Cairo, Coptic Museum MS Bibl. 90) [...], written and illuminated in Mamluk Damascus in 1340, is a major expression of Christian religious and artistic practice and scholarship in the Mamluk period”. Hunt 2009, p. 105.

29 Samir 1991. As Lucy-Anne Hunt remarks, the copyist provides many important details on his work: “The manuscript is very informative [...] The note at the end of the book [...] records that it was copied during the primacy of Anbā Buṭrus, the metropolitan of the Copts of Jerusalem and Syria, by the priest Jirjis Abū al-Faḍl; the text was copied and collated with an autograph manuscript written by the Egyptian scribe al-As'ad ibn al-'Assāl. The copyist, Jirjis Abū al-Faḍl, points out that he has not included any of the words added in the Arabic manuscripts, as they do not appear in the Coptic, Greek, or Syriac. He goes on to say that the present manuscript was collated in the presence of this metropolitan and the monk Tūma, known as Ibn al-Ṣā'igh” (Hunt 2009, p. 106).

Faḍl” should be read as “Jirjis ibn Abī Mufaḍḍal”. This identification hypothesis evidently implies that the *nasab* “ibn Luṭfallāh” should be taken as a *crasis* for “ibn Amīn al-Mulk Luṭfallāh”³⁰. This hypothesis sounds plausible *per se*, but it does not provide any conclusive evidence to support the supposed family ties between the copyist of MS Paris BNF Ar. 12 and Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Faḍā’il.

In 2010, another suggestive hypothesis on possible identity of the copyist Jirjis ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal was made by Mathilde Cruvellier, within her comprehensive codicological, artistic and historical study of MS Paris BNF Ar. 12³¹. In particular, Cruvellier carefully analyzed information provided by four other Coptic-Arabic manuscripts, either copied by Jirjis ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal or however related to him. The first manuscript she examined is MS London, British Museum Or. 1331, which contains the Digest of Canons of the Coptic Church, a work authored by Abū Iṣḥāq B. Ibn al-‘Assāl (one of the aforementioned Awlād al-‘Assāl) in mid-thirteenth century³². As indicated by Charles Rieu (1894), this manuscript was completed in 756 AH /1355 AD by some « Jirjis ibn al-Qiss Abī l-Mufaḍḍal ». In the colophon, *this* Jirjis precises that he realized the manuscript in two steps: first in Damascus, where he copied the first thirty-three chapters from an autograph by Abū Iṣḥāq, and later on in Cairo, where he completed his task by working on a copy written by Anbā Kīrillus, Bishop of Asyūt, also known as Ibn al-Ṣā’ig³³. Cruvellier argues that *this* Jirjis ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal should be identified with the copyist of MS Paris, BnF Ar. 12. The three other manuscripts examined by Cruvellier are all copies of an Arabic translation of the Book of the Prophets attributed to the Alexandrian priest al-‘Alam al-Iskandarī (fl. tenth century AD)³⁴ which were realized in the late sixteenth century.³⁵ As can be inferred from their respective colophons, all of them derived from one and the same archetypal copy, written by Jirjis ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal in 757 AH / 1356 AD³⁶. After convincingly arguing that one and the same Jirjis Ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal was responsible for producing the manuscripts BnF Ar.12, British Museum Or. 1311 and the archetypal copy of the other manuscripts she analyzed, Cruvellier went so far as to suggest that this copyist might be identified with the Coptic Pope John X, who is mentioned as « Jirjis ibn al-Qass Mufaḍḍal » in two different areas of the *Ṣubḥ al-A’shā* by al-Qalqashandī³⁷.

30 See Samir 1991.

31 See Cruvellier 2010, pp. 207-236.

32 According to the editor Charles Rieu (1894, p. 18), the author Abū Iṣḥāq ibn al-‘Assāl « completed the present work, as stated in the colophon, on the 10th of Baramhat, A[nn]o Martyrum 952 (A.D. 1236) ».

33 Rieu 1894, p. 18 (notice 23); Cruvellier 2010, p.11-12.

34 On ‘Alam and his translation activity, see Vaccari 1921, pp- 408-411, and now Halm 2016, pp. 385-386.

35 Namely : MS Vatican, BAV (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana) Ar. 445, dated 990 AH / 1583 AD; MS Cairo, COP (Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate) Bibl. 79, dated 993 AH / 1585 AD; MS COP (Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate), Bibl. 80, dated 995 AH / 1586 AD.

36 More precisely, both MSS Cairo, COP Bibl. 79 and COP Bibl. 80 were copied directly from Jirjis’ manuscript, whereas MS Vatican, BAV Ar. 445 was the copy of a copy of this “archetype”, as reconstructed by Mathilde Cruvellier : « Le colophon du livre des Prophètes de la bibliothèque vaticane indique qu’il a été achevé en 990/1583 et qu’il aurait été rédigé “d’après une copie de l’original de la main du révérend Ğurĝus, bien aimé fils du vénéré prêtre Abū Mufaḍḍal en date de l’année 1072 des Martyrs (...)”. Ce manuscrit est donc la copie d’une copie du texte transcrit par Ğurĝus ibn Abū Mufaḍḍal en 757/1356 ». Cruvellier 2010, p. 217.

37 Al-Qalqashandī, Abū l-‘Abbās Aḥmad, *Kitāb Ṣubḥ al-A’shā. Al-juz’ al-ḥādī ‘ashar* (= vol. XI), Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Sultāniyya, 1335 AH / 1917 AD, p. 400.

With all evidence, Cruvellier's proposal to identify Jirjis ibn Abī l-Mufaḍḍal as the Coptic Pope John X does revive interest around Blochet's supposition on possible family ties between the same Jirjis and "our" Mufaḍḍal. In fact, if both Cruvellier and Blochet were right in their respective hypotheses, Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī l-Fa, for at least two main reasons: ḍā'il would turn out to be a nephew of the Coptic Patriarch John X.

However, both hypotheses are from being conclusive

1. First of all, Blochet's identification of Jirjis as Mufaḍḍal's paternal uncle is only based on his speculation on Jirjis' name chain in MS BNF Ar. 12, whereas Blochet's proposal to identify Mufaḍḍal's father with the copyist of MS BnF Ar. 283 is to be rejected, as demonstrated above.

2. Furthermore, Cruvellier's hypothesis to identify Jirjis Ibn *Abī* l-Mufaḍḍal with the Patriarch mentioned by Qalqashandī has an inherent weak point: while the copyist of the various manuscripts that she analyzed is called « Jirjis Ibn al-Qass *Abī* l-Mufaḍḍal », the Patriarch mentioned by Qalqashandī is simply called « Jirjis ibn al-Qass Mufaḍḍal ». In other words, Qalqashandī makes no mention of the term *Abū* (meaning: "father") before the name Mufaḍḍal, and such detail is far from being negligible. On the one hand, the absence of a small (though meaningful) term like *Abū* in two otherwise similar name chains might conjecturally be explained as a copy accident³⁸. On the other hand, however, in this specific case this seems to be too weak an explanation, for at least two main reasons:

a) it is not easy to imagine that the same copy error (i.e. the fall of such a meaningful word as *Abū*) may have occurred in two different and distant areas of the text by Qalqashandī;

b) one of the two mentions of the name is made in the solemn context of the official letter of appointment sent by the Sultan to the newly elected Coptic Patriarch John X, and it seems unlikely that a mistake in the name's addressee could get unnoticed to the bureaucrats charged with the drafting of such an important document.

4. An isolated hypothesis by Clifford Bosworth: Mufaḍḍal as a Patriarch?

In 1972, the chancery manual by al-Qalqashandī had already been evoked in connection to the identity of Mufaḍḍal ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il, in the framework of a study by Clifford Bosworth on instructions provided by the Mamluk author on how to write official correspondence with non-Muslim religious dignitaries³⁹. In particular, Bosworth analyzed some letters of appointment (*tawqī'*) of Coptic Patriarchs that al-Qalqashandī presented as the exact reproduction of the letters actually sent to the addressees mentioned therein, and he noted that one of them, which he (mistakenly) dated back to « 760 [AH] / 1359 [AD] », was « specifically addressed to some *Jurjis al-Qass Mufaḍḍal al-Ya'qūbī* »⁴⁰.

Evidently impressed by the almost perfect homonymy and the strong chronological

38 Indeed, this is exactly what S. K. Samir implied when he proposed to read the name "Jirjis Abū l-Faḍl" in MS Cairo COP Bibl. 90 as equivalent to "Jirjis *ibn* Abī Mufaḍḍal", i.e. the name provided in MS Paris, BNF Ar. 12 (see *supra*).

39 Bosworth 1972

40 Bosworth 1972, p. 204. Indeed, the year is to be read "764" AH, i.e. 1363 AD. See below.

proximity between the Patriarch addressed in that letter and the author of *al-Nahj al-sadīd*, Bosworth wondered whether these two figures were not one and the same person:

Is this man [i.e., the Patriarch addressed in the letter] identical with the author Mufaḍḍal b. Abī l-Faḍā'il, who wrote a history of the Mamlūk Sultans [...], the whole work being completed in 1358?⁴¹.

Unfortunately, this fascinating hypothesis was based on slightly but crucially incorrect reading of the source text. In fact, comparison with the Cairo 1913-1918 printed edition of the al-Qalqashandī's *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā* on which Bosworth explicitly relied in his study, shows that he probably misread two important points:

1) the letter's date should be read as “the year seven hundred and *sixty-four* [AH]” (*sana arba' - wa-sittīn wa-sab'a-mi'a*), and not “seven hundred and *sixty*”⁴²;

2) even more important, the name of the addressee should be read as *Jirjis Ibn al-Qass Mufaḍḍal* (i.e. “Jirjis the Son of the Priest Mufaḍḍal”) and not as *Jirjis al-Qass Mufaḍḍal* (“Jirjis the Priest Mufaḍḍal”) ⁴³.

With all evidence, Bosworth overlooked both the word *ibn* (son) between *Jirjis* and *al-Qass* (“the Priest”) and the word *arba'* (“four”) between *sana* (“year”) and *sittīn* (“sixty”). As he was apparently not relying on alternative readings than those provided in the aforementioned edition, one has to infer that, for some reasons, Bosworth had a small drop in attention either while writing down the information from al-Qalqashandī or while reporting it in his article. Be that as it may, these discrepancies do invalidate Bosworth's hypothesis to identify “our” Mufaḍḍal with the Patriarch mentioned by al-Qalqashandī.

In addition to this, further evidence in support of the readings “year seven hundred *sixty-four*” and “Jirjis *ibn* al-Qass” is found in another area of al-Qalqashandī's work. In the list of Coptic Patriarchs provided in the fifth volume, al-Qalqashandī indicates “Jirjis Ibn al-Qass Mufaḍḍal al-Ya'qūbī” as the eighty-fifth Coptic Patriarch and states that he was appointed “in one of the months of the year seven hundred *sixty-four* [AH]”⁴⁴.

As early as 1923, Eugène Tisserant and Gaston Wiet, by comparing al-Qalqashandī's indications on the eighty-fifth Coptic Pope with those provided in the *History of the Patriarchs*, proposed to identify the aforementioned Patriarch as Pope John X “the Syrian” (*Yuḥannā al-Shamī*), who was appointed in 764 AH / 1363 AD. However, they also noticed that the Patriarch's personal name provided by al-Qalqashandī, i.e. *Jirjis* (“Georges”), does not appear at all in the relevant notice of the *History of the Patriarchs*.⁴⁵ For this reason,

41 Bosworth, 1972, p. 204, note 3.

42 « This is the reproduction (*nuskha*) of a letter of appointment (*tawqī'*) (that was sent) to the Patriarch of the Coptic (lit.: “Jacobite”) Christians (*Baṭrak al-Naṣārā al-Ya'qūbī*) [...] in one of the months of the year seven hundred and sixty-four [A.H. ; 1362-1363 AD] ». Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā. Al-juz' al-hādī 'ashar* (= vol. XI), 1335 AH / 1917 AD, p. 397 (our translation).

43 «Jirjis Ibn al-Qass Mufaḍḍal al-Ya'qūbī». Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā. Al-juz' al-hādī 'ashar* (= vol. XI), 1335 AH / 1917 AD, p. 400. Bosworth's error in the name reading was first noticed by Cruvellier 2010.

44 See Tisserant and Wiet 1922-1923.

45 On the complex textual history of the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, and on the problems and cautions that this complexity implies in approaching this monumental work as an historiographic source, see in particular Pilette 2013 and Hamdi 2015.

Tisserant and Wiet suggested that the word *جرجس* (*Jirjis*) in both the aforementioned passages from al-Qalqashandī might be considered as a mistake for the word *يوحنس* (*Yuḥannis*, an alternative form for *Yuḥannā*)⁴⁶. This hypothesis is rather plausible at the paleographical level, and one may easily admit that al-Qalqashandī could misread the Patriarch's personal name provided in the letter of appointment, or (less plausibly) that he was working on a copy of the letter already affected by this mistake. Both these hypotheses might explain how one and the same mistake appears in two different and quite distant areas of al-Qalqashandī's work, a fact which could be hardly attributed, conversely, to casual copyists' errors⁴⁷. However, the discrepancy between al-Qalqashandī and the *History of the Patriarchs* concerning the personal name of Pope John X may be more apparent than real. In fact, another hypothesis could be made, which would conciliate the two apparently conflicting names: maybe, the name provided in the *History of the Patriarchs* was merely intended as the Pope's pontifical name, whereas his personal name was left unmentioned. Indeed, the text of the remarkably short notice concerning Pope John X does not present any decisive obstacle to such an interpretation:

John (*Yu'annis*) the Patriarch - and he is the eighty-fifth of (their) number. This trustworthy father, known as As-Shāmī, was consecrated patriarch on the twelfth day of the month of Bashuns (in the) year one thousand and seventy-nine of the Martyrs [1363 A.D.]. He remained patriarch for six years and two months. He was learned (and) virtuous, and he went to his rest on the nineteenth day (of the month) of Abīb (in the) year one thousand and eighty-five of the Martyrs [1369 A.D.]⁴⁸.

5. Further hypotheses: Mufaḍḍal as an Ibn al-'Assāl ...converted to Islam

In his critical edition of the *Nahj al-sadīd*, published in 2017, Muḥammad Kamāl al-Dīn presents two further hypothesis on Mufaḍḍal's life and family, which, if proven correct or at least admissible, might shake the whole building of 'traditional' representation of Mufaḍḍal from the foundations. Therefore, these hypotheses deserve to be carefully considered, although, as we shall endeavor to demonstrate in the present section, they are not supported by any decisive evidence, and are instead contradicted by some significant arguments.

(1). In the book's title, as well as in other passages, the author is named "*Ibn al-'Assāl Mufaḍḍal b. Abī l-Faḍā'il*". The reason behind this unexpected *nasab* is provided in a short introductory section on the author's personality: Kamāl al-Dīn states that Mufaḍḍal's father was a member of the famous al-'Assāl family, namely Abū l-Faḍā'il al-Ṣafī Ibn al-'Assāl, the

46 See Tisserant and Wiet 1922-1923, p. 143, n. 3.

47 For evident reasons, one has to exclude that the Patriarch's name provided in the *History of Patriarchs* was mistaken. However, such a hypothesis would be intriguing in purely text-critical terms. In fact, if *Jirjis* and *Yuḥannis* were regarded as two variant readings, *Jirjis* would perhaps be preferable, as it should be regarded as *lectio difficilior*, while the reading *Yuḥannis*, being analogous with the Pope's pontifical name, should be regarded as *facilior* - in other terms, it could be seen as a sort of unconscious "analogical reconstitution" of the Pope's personal name on the basis of his pontifical name.

48 Quoted according to the English translation provided in Khater and Burmester 1970, p. 234.

author of a famous collection of Church canons (*qawānīn*) known as *al-Majmū‘ al-Ṣafawī*, so he argues that Mufaḍḍal himself was known as “Ibn al-‘Assāl”⁴⁹ (although the text of the *Nahj* does not provide any positive evidence for this).

(2). In the first part of the same introductory section, Kamāl al-Dīn points out to the many “Islamic expressions” (*ta‘bīrāt islāmiyya*, p. 7) that are found throughout all the text, and correctly argues that Mufaḍḍal was “one of those Christians who lived in peace” with Muslims (*min musālimat al-naṣārā*, p. 7), i.e. accepted and loyally supported the Islamic political framework of the society they lived in (a point that will be developed *infra*). A few lines after, however, Kamāl al-Dīn goes much further: he actually implies that Mufaḍḍal had converted to Islam.

In fact, he argues that Mufaḍḍal’s “conversion to Islam (*islāmuhu*)” might have been, precisely, the reason why Mufaḍḍal was not mentioned as a member of the ‘Assāl family by the modern Coptic scholar Jirjis Fīlūthā’us ‘Awaḍ in his critical edition (published in 1908) of the aforementioned collection of canons composed by Abū l-Faḍā’il al-Ṣafī Ibn al-‘Assāl. As mentioned above, Kamāl al-Dīn identified this Abū l-Faḍā’il al-Ṣafī Ibn al-‘Assāl with nobody else than Mufaḍḍal’s father, so he must have found very strange that Fīlūthā’us made no mention of any family link between this author and Mufaḍḍal, and that, in point of fact, he did not mention Mufaḍḍal at all. So, Kamāl al-Dīn suggested the following explanation,

“Maybe his (i.e., Mufaḍḍal’s) conversion to Islam (*islāmuhu*) [...] was the reason why Jirjis *Efendi* Fīlūthā’us abstained from mentioning him among the most famous personalities of the al-‘Assāl family (*mashāhīr min Awlād al-‘Assāl*) in the introduction to his edition of *al-Majmū‘ al-Ṣafawī*”⁵⁰.

Intriguing as it may be, however, this explanation seems to be somehow a circular argument, in which two conjectures apparently reinforce each other while none of them is actually supported by positive evidence.

First of all, the qualification of Mufaḍḍal as an “Ibn al-‘Assāl” seems to be based only (and implicitly) on the crossing of two elements that we already dealt with above: Blochet’s identification of Mufaḍḍal’s father with the author of the *Firdaws* contained in MS Paris BNF Ar. 283, and the attribution of this *Firdaws* to al-Ṣafī Ibn al-‘Assāl in the Catalogue of the BNF. Regrettably, the first element (Blochet’s hypothesis) is actually merely conjectural, and so one may hardly build upon it for any further speculation. Moreover, as we already mentioned, al-Ṣafī Ibn al-‘Assāl was active more one century earlier than Mufaḍḍal, so it seems very difficult (although not completely impossible) that the latter might have been the former’s son.

As for the hypothesis of Mufaḍḍal’s conversion to Islam, a much wider discussion would be required. In fact, the presence of Islamic expressions and somehow “pro-Islamic” attitudes in the text has been remarked – and variously interpreted – since the very beginning of modern studies on Mufaḍḍal and until nowadays, from Blochet to Haarman, from Den Heijer to Moawad. Unfortunately, Kamāl al-Dīn’s introduction does not deal with these authors’

⁴⁹ See Kamāl al-Dīn 2017, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁰ Kamāl al-Dīn 2017, p. 9. The work referred to by Kamāl al-Dīn here is.

different interpretations, and he seemingly overlooks the terminological and ideological complexity of Mufaḍḍal's work, which is actually characterized by what Blochet labeled as a "bewildering alliance of Christian and Muslim formulas"⁵¹.

Although this issue cannot be analyzed in detail in the present paper, some key points are worthy to be evoked here, also because they may shed light on some features of Coptic Arab culture of the time.

(1). As mentioned above, Mufaḍḍal explicitly conceived his chronicle as a continuation of the work of the renowned Coptic historian al-Makīn Jirjis Ibn al-'Amīd. Yet, Mufaḍḍal relied almost exclusively on Muslim historians, his most important references having been identified as Ibn al-Dawādārī (fl. first half of the eighth / fourteenth century), Baybars al-Manṣūrī (d. 725/1325), al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333), Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 738/1338)⁵². On the one hand, Mufaḍḍal's openness to Muslim sources has nothing surprising in itself, and it is even very much in line with the attitude expressed by the same al-Makīn. The latter had heavily relied on Muslim historiography, in particular on Ṭabarī. As a consequence, as already noted by Claude Cahen, al-Makīn's language presented a somewhat "non-confessional" attitude ("détachement confessionnel") which would make it hard to recognize the author's religious affiliation, if not for his interest in the history of the Copts and for his use of the Coptic datation system in addition to the Islamic one⁵³. Even more importantly, al-Makīn's case is far from being unique. Rather, it seems emblematic of a much wider phenomenon of cross-confessional intertextuality which characterized Medieval Arabic historiography, as Johannes den Heijer conclusively demonstrated in a study focused on the Coptic side of this complex relation⁵⁴. On the other hand, Mufaḍḍal's relationship with his Muslim sources does however have some peculiar traits: in fact, the author proves remarkably willing to accept not only "factual" indications from his sources, but also linguistic formulas and ideological representations that are strongly connoted in an "Islamic" sense.

The ensuing terminological and ideological complexity of Mufaḍḍal's chronicle was harshly criticised by Blochet, who considered this work mostly as a vehicle of Islamic system of representations, except when the author tried to mitigate some anti-Christian attitudes of his Muslim sources. However, subsequent scholarship (Haarmann 1970, Kortantamer 1973, den Heijer 1993, Moawad 2013) justly called for revision of this judgment, and highlighted a significant critical capacity in the author. In particular, Ulrich Haarmann convincingly argued that Mufaḍḍal adopted a conscious strategy of adaptation of his sources, aimed at weakening the "anti-Christian" components of the source texts, primarily through omission procedures⁵⁵. In a similar vein, Samira Kortantamer explicitly spoke of a "Christian censorship" ("Christlicher Zensur") on the part of Mufaḍḍal⁵⁶.

Indeed, as we endeavoured to demonstrate in a previous study (Cecere 2018), it would be more appropriate to speak of a "Coptic censorship" rather than a simply "Christian" one. In fact, Mufaḍḍal makes a constant effort to « dissociate » Egyptian Coptic Christian,

⁵¹ Blochet 1919, p. 360.

⁵² On this issue, see in particular: Kortantamer 1973, pp. 34-39; Haarmann 1970, p. 108.

⁵³ Cahen 1957, p. 113.

⁵⁴ See den Heijer 1996, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁵ See Haarmann 1970, p. 144.

⁵⁶ See Kortantamer 1973, p. 39.

portrayed as loyal *dhimmi*-s devoted to the Sultan and to the Islam-based political system, from other Christian denominations, especially those ones (such as Franks, Armenians, Georgians) that were at war with the Mamluk Sultanate and were thus threatening the political order of the whole Egyptian society⁵⁷. In this respect, it is worth noting how the author develops a significant rhetorical procedure of « de-Christianization » of the image of the enemies of the Mamluk 'state': at a close reading of the work, what may be defined the « Christian others », from Armenians to Georgians to Franks, are constantly characterized in an ethno-political sense and virtually never in a religious one. Such "de-Christianization" of the image of the enemies appears to be functional, in the first place, to weaken the perceived religious dimension of the conflict, so that it may be represented as a basically ethnic-territorial opposition.

In other words, the author aims to completely dissociate the image of the Copts from that of "foreign" Christians, also to prevent any possible accusation of "intelligence with the enemy". The real clash, Mufaḍḍal seems to say, is not between 'Muslims' and 'Christians', but between enemies and supporters of the socio-political order which the Sultan « embodied » and preserved.

All this notwithstanding, Haarman and Kortantamer had however the great merit to pave the way for better appreciation of the complex system of representations built by the author, and most recent scholarship confirmed and amplified their interpretations. In particular, Johannes den Heijer, in the entry « Mufaḍḍal » of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Second Edition), agrees with Haarmann and Kortantamer on « Mufaḍḍal's omission of details which discredit his coreligionists », but he also emphasizes the author's « undeniable originality », reflected in his providing first-hand valuable material and in organizing older sources « in a coherent and meaningful manner »⁵⁸. More recently, Samuel Moawad states that the author, though willing to write a work of « secular history » with only limited interest in the events of the Coptic Church, « is inclined to omit anti-Christian passages found in his Islamic sources » and that he provides valuable information on « certain matters of importance to the history of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt »⁵⁹.

Far from demonstrating Mufaḍḍal's alleged conversion from Christianity to Islam, all this indicates the existence of a complex "cross-confessional" relation between Islamic and Christian elements in his chronicle, which reflected the author's basic attitude as « a loyal Christian *dhimmi* », as well as much wider processes shaping the Coptic Arab culture of the time.

5. Conclusions

As we endeavored to demonstrate in the present article, all of the hypotheses advanced by scholars until now on Mufaḍḍal's identity and on his family ties are far from being conclusive.

On this background, if we were bold enough to venture into the risky terrain of

⁵⁷ See Cecere 2018, pp. 36-39; Cecere 2020, pp. 247-249.

⁵⁸ See den Heijer 1993.

⁵⁹ Moawad 2013, pp. 119-122 (here, p. 121).

speculations on the possible identity of the Patriarch mentioned by al-Qalqashandī, we might be tempted to hazard a new hypothesis concerning “our” Mufaḍḍal. By merely relying on al-Qalqashandī’s indications, in fact, one might go so far as to imagine that the Patriarch in question might have been an otherwise unknown *son* of “our” Mufaḍḍal. This hypothesis, as reckless as it may be, would at least fit the Patriarch's name chain as presented by al-Qalqashandī: "Jirjis *son of the priest Mufaḍḍal*".

Yet, all this would be nothing else than one conjecture more. Actually, we have evoked this further possible speculation only for heuristic purposes, just as a demonstration more, if needed, of the extreme difficulty of issues concerning Mufaḍḍal’s family and personal identity.

Indeed, no conclusive statement can be made on these issues in the present state of scholarly research, and the different hypotheses accepted by scholars until now do not resist historical criticism.

So far, therefore, Mufaḍḍal’s *Stammbaum* is deemed to be a tree without branches.

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