



Aethiopia 26 (2023)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

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Article

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Aethiopia 26 (2023), 140–158

ISSN: 1430-1938; eISSN: 2194-4024

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob-Ludolf-Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

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Exploring the Ethnicity and Social Condition of Muslim Calligraphers: A Short Note on Two Scribes from the Horn of Africa in the Mamlūk Period*

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Introductory Remarks

Despite some groundbreaking and valuable studies,¹ any image of the calligraphers and scribes of the late medieval and early modern Islamic world remains still quite vague. Only scant information has been available, up to now, on their social and ethnic origin, the manner in which they were educated, what curriculum formed their instruction, the tasks they were set, what social position they held, how their work was appreciated in their actual social environment, and just what meaning and importance was attached to their activities.² Arabic terminology in this field is simultaneously both rich and imprecise³ and researchers and scholars have difficulty in distinguishing the roles and functions of the copyist from those of the calligrapher or the scribe's work from that of the canceller. This confusion results in these figures appearing as members of almost the same cultural land-

* I heartedly thank Julien Loiseau (Aix-Marseille Université), who read a first draft of this article and provided me with insightful comments and precious observations and references. Of course, any shortcoming of the present text must be exclusively attributed to my responsibility.

¹ Şabrah 1990; 'Uṭmān 2018; Behrens-Abouseif 2018, 104–125.

² 'To build up a picture of the oeuvre or career of individual scribe is, in the current state of our knowledge, very much an uphill task' (Déroche 2006, 186). The situation has not changed since then. Some useful data and reflections on this issue can be found in Schimmel 1990, 39–76; Gacek 2009, 235–236; 'Uṭmān 2018, 42–92.

³ As Adam Gacek correctly emphasised (Gacek 2009, 238): 'There is a variety of terms used for scribes and calligraphers and copyists, and the nuances are not always clear'. The same incertitude regarding the roles played by the different actors in the writing process and the appropriate term to describe each of them (*warrāq*, *nassāḥ*, *ḥaṭṭāṭ*, *kātib*) is expressed by Sagaria-Rossi (Déroche et al. 2015), 108–113. For the terminology of penmanship in general see Gacek 2001, 30, 42, 122, 150; Déroche 2006, 185–190; Gacek 2008, 82; Gacek 2009, 36, 43–46, 56, 235–236, 238–239.

scape and social class. At an even more general level, the issue of any precise connection between scribal skills, calligraphy as a *ṣināʿa* and the much-discussed concept of Islamic art remains distinctly unclear.⁴

Aside from the incertitude caused by the technical vocabulary, one of the many reasons for the present unsatisfactory knowledge of the socio-cultural background and personality of Muslim copyists and calligraphers lies in how difficult and cumbersome a task it is to retrieve and collect historical data on them. A major obstacle in gathering basic information about pre-modern Arabic scribes is that copyists and calligraphers are not present in the categories of people comprised in the Arabic-Islamic literary genre of bio-bibliographic dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt*). To my knowledge, only two authors have been credited biographical dictionaries explicitly dealing with calligraphers.

In a much-discussed passage of his *Ḥiṭaṭ* (4, 125),⁵ al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442) writes about an art contest between two well-known painters, al-Qaṣīr and Ibn ʿAzīz, called up in Cairo by *sayyid al-wuzarāʾ* Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Yāzūrī,⁶ from 1050 to 1058 vizier of the Fatimid Caliph Mustanṣir. He compares the two artists to Ibn Muqla (d. 940-941) and Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. c. 1022), the two famous calligraphers and refers the reader to a work called *Ḍawʿ al-nibrās wa-uns al-aḡlās fī aḥbār al-muzawwiqīn min al-nās*, for more details on the biographies of the painters and the artists, in which the issue of the relationship between calligraphy and painting is purported to have been fully analysed. The above *Ḍawʿ al-nibrās* has not survived and is now but a title. Furthermore, the author of the text remains uncertain as the passage does not inform us with any certainty that it was written by al-Maqrīzī himself or by someone else. Nonethe-

⁴ Discussing this issue is definitively outside the scope of this article. In this respect, see Wendy Shaw's judicious observations in her 2015 review of Akın-Kıvanç's wonderful edition of Mustafā ʿĀli's *Epic Deeds of Artists*. Furthermore, any total distinction of calligraphers from scribes in terms of the latter being simple practitioners and the former pure artists seems unjustified. Déroche 2006, 187 proposes 'Professional copyists' as the blanket term proposed for the variegated group made up of 'scribes' and 'calligraphers'. See also the very interesting observation of Vernet 1997, 45 on the links between calligraphy and mysticism, and the mystical brotherhoods and guilds of craftsmen.

⁵ For an analysis of the passage, see Ettinghausen 1956, 267–268; Jenkins 1993, 93.

⁶ The spelling of the name of this vizier's name differs in the various editions of the *Ḥiṭaṭ*. The first edition of the book (in Būlāq, al-Maqrīzī 1853, 318), Muḥammad Zaynabū's and Ḥadīga al-Šarqāwī's edition (al-Maqrīzī 1997, 326) and Ḥalīl al-Manṣūr's edition (al-Maqrīzī 1998, 125) all read al-Bāzūrī. The more authoritative edition by Ayman Fūʿād Sayyid (al-Maqrīzī 2002, 290) reads al-Yāzūrī instead, the correct form of the vizier's name, as confirmed by other historical sources.

less, the *Daw' al-nibrās* seems to be the oldest so far recorded text programmatically devoted also (but not exclusively) to the collection of biographical data on calligraphers.⁷

A few decades later, in the introductory chapter to his *Ta'rīḥ al-ḥulafā'*, the renowned Arabic polymath Ḡalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505) states he has written two books of *Ṭabaqāt* devoted to people working in the domain of calligraphy and copying: the *Ṭabaqāt ahl al-ḥaṭṭ al-mansūb* and the *Ṭabaqāt al-kuttāb*.⁸ Later sources⁹ repeat these titles but thus far these texts have not been located and are thus considered lost. Arabic handbooks on booklore, ink production and writing styles as well as manuals of *inšā'* (to do with the activities of the officers working in the chancery) do not normally contain biographic details about scribes and calligraphers but focus on the technical, practical and/or bureaucratic aspects of the scribal activity.¹⁰

A relatively late exception to this is Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī's *Ḥikmat al-išrāq ilā kuttāb al-āfāq*, which includes some laconic information on the most famous calligraphers in the form of a *silsila* mentioning all the main masters of Arabic calligraphy (*ḡūd al-ḥaṭṭ*) from the time of the Prophet up to his own period.¹¹ Only

⁷ See also the observations of Ayman Fū'ād Sayyid in al-Maqrīzī 2002, note 1, 290.

⁸ Al-Suyūṭī 2003, 7. The author defines the *kuttāb* as *Arbāb al-inšā'* precisely. It is extremely interesting to see how the polymath clearly differentiates between chancellery writing style (*kuttāb/inšā'*) and calligraphic expertise in the proportionate style (*al-ḥaṭṭ al-mansūb*). For a quick definition of the different styles of *ḥaṭṭ* and their users, see Gacek 2001, 42; Gacek 2009, 36, 56. Volumes 12 and 13 of the *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* of Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī (d. 1349) are devoted to the biographies of famous chancellery officers of the Mašriq and the Maḡrib. Expertise in calligraphy is seldom mentioned in this source, the author's main interest of the author being an analysis of the literary qualities of the style of the *kuttāb*.

⁹ E.g. Kâtip Çelebi (= Ḥāḡḡī Ḥalīfa) n. d., II, 1099 under *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥaṭṭāfīn* (for which he mentions also a similar work by [Abū 'Alī?] al-Qālī, not attested elsewhere), 1106 under *Ṭabaqāt al-kuttāb* (and also refers to a similar work by the grammarian Muḥammad b. Mūsā al-Ifṣīn al-Qurtubī (d. 921), mentioned also by al-Suyūṭī in his *Ṭabaqāt al-luḡawīyyīn wa-al-nuḥāt*, also not attested elsewhere (al-Baḡdādī 1990, I, 540 under the title *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥaṭṭāfīn*).

¹⁰ Al-Qalqašandī in his short history of Arabic writing (al-Qalqašandī 1914, 13–18) mentions a few of the most outstanding scribes and calligraphers but gives few details. See also the collection of selected texts on the *kitāba* and *ḥaṭṭ* (re)published by Hilāl Nāḡī 2002.

¹¹ Al-Zabīdī 1989–1990, 69–107. The editor of the book (Muḥammad Ṭalḥa Bilāl) correctly notes (al-Zabīdī 1989–1990, 9) that many of the *ḥaṭṭāts* mentioned by al-Zabīdī in this *silsila* are Turkish and the text is directly exemplified on a Turkish *silsila*. For this reason, he was not able to identify the source of this part of al-Zabīdī's text.

well into the twentieth century do the first monographs on a few famous calligraphers come to light and in 2008 an Arabic book was published bearing the unequivocal title, *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥaṭṭātīn*.¹²

Works exclusively devoted to narrating the life and deeds of renowned calligraphers and scribes are more common in Persian and particularly in Ottoman literature.¹³ Indeed, the most comprehensive biographic dictionary of Muslim calligraphers and scribes ever produced in the history of Islamic literatures is the *Tuhfe-i hattâtîn*, compiled in Ottoman Turkish by the scholar, Sufi master, and calligrapher Müstakimzâde Süleyman Sâdeddin (1719–1788), a relatively late book when one considers the extremely long history of calligraphy in the Islamic world.¹⁴

In attempting to overcome these initial obstacles of sources, this paper seeks to shed light on a few, as yet, unnoticed social aspects of the scribes' and calligraphers' profession. Here, the research path focuses on the calligraphers' ethnic/geographical origin and the social status, by means of two copyists with roots

¹² Hanaš 2008. The absence of a fully developed *ṭabaqāt* genre on calligraphers and scribes in Classical Arabic literature does not mean the Arab-Islamic world did not come to consider calligraphy to be an independent branch of the corpus of traditional knowledge to be transmitted from master to pupil, exactly as other branches of knowledge for which Arabic biographical dictionaries were written. Chains of transmission of the calligraphic knowledge (*silsila*) and certificates authorizing its transmission (*iğāza*) existed as evidenced by the above-mentioned example of al-Qalqaşandī. Also al-Sahāwī in his *al-Ġawāhir wa-al-durar* gives his master Ibn Ḥağar al-'Asqalānī's *silsila* in *al-ḥaṭṭ al-ğayyid* and in the writing according to the chancellor's style (*wa-uđina la-hu an yaktuba 'alā ṭarīqat al-kuttāb*; al-Sahāwī 1999, 167–169). It is interesting to note that apparently the *silsila* of the masters was the same for both writing styles and dates back to Ibn Muqla. On the *iğāza* and the *silsila* in the field of *ḥaṭṭ* see also Safwat 1996; al-Naqşbandī 2001; Derman 2002, 258–261; and Manşūr 2006.

¹³ The most famous text on the biographies of the calligraphers in Persian is the *Golestān-e Hunar* by Qāzi Aḥmad b. Şaraf-al-Din Ḥosayn Monşi Qomi Ebrāhimi (d. after 1607; see Minorsky 1959; Akimushkin and Norik 2016). In Ottoman Turkish the main works in this field before Müstakimzâde is the *Menākib-ı Hünerverân* by Mustafa 'Âli's (d. 1600; first published 1926; partial new edition in modern Turkish orthography in 1982; full critical edition Akın-Kıvanç 2011); the *Gülcâr-ı Savâb* by Nefeszâde Ibrahim (d. 1650; published partially in 1939) and the *Devhatü'l-küttâb* by Suyolcuzâde Mehmed Necib (d. 1758; partially published in Suyolcuzade 1942). For a survey of the literature produced after the *Tuhfe-i hattâtîn* see Stanley 2006.

¹⁴ On Müstakimzâde and his literary production, see Kellner-Heinkele 2005, 1–90. The *Tuhfe-i hattâtîn* was first published in 1928 with a bio-bibliographical introduction on the author written by the editor İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal bey. A modern Turkish edition with the transliterated (not simplified) Ottoman text, a very detailed introduction and numerous very useful explanatory notes was produced by Mustafa Koç (Müstakimzâde 2014).

in the Horn of Africa (*ḥabašī/zayla* ʿī),¹⁵ from whom I have managed to sort out pertinent details from a magmatic bulk of data, scattered in a variety of Mamlūk historical sources. By critically analyzing the laconic information gathered in this way, I hope to contribute to draw a clearer picture of the personality of scribes and calligraphers in the Islamic world.

Calligraphers and Scribes from the Horn of Africa in Mamlūk Times: Collecting Some Information

In the absence of any well-established tradition of writing *ṭabaqāt* works on scribes and calligraphers, scholars must collect information in this field searching general biographical dictionaries of famous personages. This is precisely what ʿAfāf Sayyid Ṣabrah, David James, Doris Behrens-Abuseif, and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Sattār ʿUtmān did to identify and describe the life and activities of the most outstanding scribes, calligraphers and copyists of the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk times.¹⁶ In this kind of painstaking investigative practice, al-Saḥāwī’s *al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmi* ʿ has proven to be a particularly abundant source of knowledge¹⁷ while other Mamlūk historians have provided minor but nonetheless extremely valuable information.¹⁸

In Behrens Abuseif’s analysis of Mamlūk calligraphers there is mention of two individuals from the Horn of Africa: Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Zayla ʿī (d. 1400) and Bilāl b. ʿAbdallāh al-ʿImādī al-Biqā ʿī (d. 1471). Following the path opened by this outstanding contribution, I have collected and analyzed the Arabic sources, containing information on these two calligraphers here and added new details to the data collected to this point in time.

Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Zayla ʿī¹⁹ is first mentioned in the biographical dictionary *Inbāʿ al-ġumr* of the renowned polymath Ibn Ḥaġar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449)²⁰ among the famous people who died in the year 803 AH (1400–1401 CE):

¹⁵ The *nisba* Zayla ʿī refers to the port-city of al-Zayla ʿ, on the shores of the Indian Ocean in today’s Somaliland and was often used in Arabic sources as a generic term indicating the Muslims of the Horn of Africa. Ḥabašī is of course the relative adjective derived from the anthropological/geographical concept of al-Ḥabaš(a). For a first analysis of the distribution and usage of these two *nisba* in Arabic historiography, see Loiseau 2019.

¹⁶ Ṣabrah 1990; James 2009; Behrens-Abuseif 2018, 126–143; ʿUtmān 2018.

¹⁷ Ṣabrah 1990; ʿUtmān 2018, 5–9 on the importance of *al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmi* ʿ as a source for Mamlūk calligraphy and calligraphers; ʿUtmān 2018, 167–176 lists the names of 173 calligraphers mentioned in al-Saḥāwī’s work.

¹⁸ ʿUtmān 2018, 9–10 on other sources yielding data on calligraphy.

¹⁹ Behrens-Abuseif 2018, 132 and note 39.

²⁰ For a detailed description of Ibn Ḥaġar’s biography and works see the monograph by Jaques 2009 and the recent article by Mochtari de Pierrepont 2021.

محمد الزيلعي شمس الدين الكاتب المجدود، كان عارفاً بالخط المنسوب وبالميقات، تعلم الناس منه وأخذ عنه غالب أهل البلد، وانتهت إليه رياضة الفن بدمشق، وكان ماهراً في معرفة الأعشاب، أخذ ذلك عن ابن القماح، وكان ابن القماح يقول إنه أفضل منه في ذلك. مات في شعبان

Muḥammad al-Zayla‘ī, Šams al-Dīn, the scribe of quality.²¹ He was knowledgeable in the proportionate style and in timekeeping.²² People learned from him and most of the students of the country were his disciples. He acquired leadership in this field in Damascus. He was versed in herbalism: he was a disciple of Ibn al-Qammāh,²³ who said that he was the better of him in this domain. He died in the month of *ša‘bān*.²⁴

Sometime later, Taqī al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl al-Makkī (d. 1466) simply confirms, in a very cursory way, the date of Muḥammad al-Zayla‘ī’s death in his *Lahz al-ilhāz*²⁵ adding that the scribe died in Damascus.²⁶ Finally, one of the most famous later Mamlūk historians, Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Saḥāwī (d. 1497) includes al-Zayla‘ī in his magnum opus *al-Ḍaw‘ al-lāmi‘*, repeating almost *verbatim* the text of his beloved teacher Ibn Ḥaḡar al-‘Asqalānī.²⁷ Moreover, al-Saḥāwī also mentions Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ġiṣṣī, a Syrian pupil of al-Zayla‘ī, who became an expert in copying the Qur‘ān and famous ‘in the two Šām’ (i.e. historical Syria and Palestine).²⁸

As for Bilāl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (or b. ‘Abdallāh),²⁹ the information which can be collected from the sources is more abundant and detailed. He is first mentioned by Ibrāhīm b. Ḥasan al-Biqā‘ī (1406–1480) in his biographical dictionary *‘Unwān*

²¹ *Al-kātib al-muḡawwid*: for a discussion of this concept in connection with the writing according to the style of the *ḥaṭṭ al-mansūb* see Behrens-Abuseif 2018, 103–104.

²² *‘Ilm al-mīqāt* was the specialty of the *muwaqqit* (or *mīqātī*, the timekeeper), who had the task of fixing the prayer times observing the position of the sun and the stars in the sky. Often this position was combined with that of muezzin (see on this, among others, King 1998).

²³ I have not been able to identify this expert in herbal medicine.

²⁴ Al-‘Asqalānī 1994, 194.

²⁵ Basically a supplement to Abū al-Maḥāsin al-Dimašqī’s continuation al-Dahabī’s *Taḍkirat al-ḥuffāz*.

²⁶ Abū al-Faḍl al-Makkī in al-Dimašqī 1998, 128.

²⁷ Al-Saḥāwī n.d., X, 111.

²⁸ Al-Saḥāwī n.d., X, 38.

²⁹ Behrens-Abuseif 2018, 142 and note 96. In sources both Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān and Ibn ‘Abdallāh are attested (see also *infra*).

*al-zamān bi-tarāğim al-šuyūḥ wa-aqrān*³⁰ and in its abridged version (*muqtaḍab*) called ‘*Unwān al-zamān bi-tağrīd asmā’ al-šuyūḥ wa-ba‘ḍ al-talāmīda wa-al-aqrān*. Here are the two Arabic texts:

بلال بن عبد الله بن عبد الله، العمادى، فتى عماد الدين اسماعيل بن خليل
نقيب القاضي الحنبلى ثم الشافعى بحلب، نشأ على مذهب أحمد بن حنبل
وكتب الخط المنسوب، وكان أول عمره يقرىء مماليك الناصر فرج بن برقوق ثم
ترك الأكابر وأقبل على الفقراء، وأثر الانجماع والتربص، وهو ممن يأكل الدنيا
بالدين اجتمعت به فى ذى القعدة سنة ست وثلاثين وثمانمئة بحلب فى رحلتى
اليها، ثم قدم القاهرة بعد سنة أربعين وثمانمئة فأقام بالمؤيدية على عادته فى
الخلوة والانجماع عن الناس ثم لما ولى الظاهر جقمق أقام عند ولده بالغور وتردد
الى الأكابر بعزّة وعدم مكاثرة، وهو من دهاة الصوفية.

Bilāl b. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abdallāh al-‘Imādī, servant of ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā-
‘īl b. Ḥalīl,³¹ was deputy *qāḍī* of the *ḥanbalī* and then of the *šāfi‘ī* school
in Aleppo. He grew up according to the law school of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal.
He wrote in the proportionate style. In his youth, he was the teacher of
the *mamālīk* of al-Nāṣir Farağ b. Barqūq. Then, he abandoned the high-
ranking people and came closer to the poor. He preferred to stay apart
and wait for an occasion, as he was one who was trying to be successful
in this world at the cost of his religion. I met him in the month of *dū al-
qa‘da* of 836 AH (June-July 1433 CE) in Aleppo during my trip to that
city. He moved later to Cairo, after 840 AH (1436–1437 CE), and stayed
in al-Mu‘ayyadiyya,³² in retreat and away from people, as it was his cus-
tom. Later, when al-Zāhir Ġaḥmaq came to power, he stayed at his son
in al-Ġūr (al-Ġawr)³³ and he frequented the important people with pride
but without exaggeration, as he was a sly among Sufi.³⁴

بلال بن عبد الرحمن بن عبد الله الحبشى الحنبلى العمادى، فتى عماد الدين
اسماعيل نقيب القاضي الحنبلى ثم الشافعى بحلب، وهو يكتب تارة ابن عبد

³⁰ On al-Biqā‘ī’s personality and works a relatively abundant research literature is available: Goudie 2020 and 2021 are the latest and most insightful articles available.

³¹ I was not able to identify this personage, who was the owner of Bilāl and freed him.

³² Al-Mu‘ayyadiyya, the funerary mosque and madrasa of al-Mu‘ayyad Ṣayḥ (d. 1420) at Bāb Zuwayla, Cairo.

³³ One of the caserns (*tabaqa/tibāq*) of the Mamlūks in Qal‘at al-Ġabal, Cairo: see Ayalon 1951, 12.

³⁴ Al-Biqā‘ī 2004, 148–149.

الرحمن بن عبد الله وتارة ابن عبد الله بن عبد الله ولعله يقصد بذلك إخفاء كونه رقيقا ولد في حدود سنة تسعين وسبعمائة تقريبا، ورأيت بخط النجم أنه ولد سنة خمس وثمانين تقريبا وهو الظاهر، فإنه حكى أنه باشر القتال مع من قاتل بجيش تمرلنك في سنة ثلاث وثمانى مائة ومات في جمادى الآخرة سنة ست وسبعين وثمانى مائة بالقاهرة.

Bilāl b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥabašī al-Ḥanbalī al-‘Imādī, servant of ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl, was deputy *qāḍī* of the *ḥanbalī* and then of the *šāfi‘ī* school in Aleppo. He writes sometimes ‘Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abdallāh’ and sometimes ‘Ibn ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abdallāh’ and he possibly tries in this way to hide that he was a slave.³⁵ He was born before 790 AH (1388–1389 CE) circa, and I saw a writing of Naḡm al-Dīn,³⁶ where he states that he was born in circa [7]85 AH / 1383–1384 CE and that is an obvious assumption, as he tells that he took part in the combat against the fighting army of Tamerlane in 803 AH / 1400–1401 CE. He died in *ḡumādā al-āḥira* 876 AH / November–December 1471 CE.³⁷

A further interesting mention of Bilāl b. ‘Abdallāh/‘Abd al-Raḥmān can be found in the *Mu‘ḡam al-šuyūḥ* by Naḡm al-Dīn ‘Umar b. Muḥammad b. Fahd al-Makkī (1409-1480):³⁸

بلال بن عبد الله الحبشي الحلبي الحنبلي، فتى العماد اسماعيل بن خليل الأعرابي. ولد في حدود سنة خمس وثمانين وسبع مئة. وسمع من البرهان بن صديق بافوات وولى النقابة بحلب، للقاضي الحنبلي ثم الشافعي. وكان في ابتداء امره يُقْرئ مماليك الناصر فرج بن برفوق، ثم انعزل عن الناس، وتريض وأحب

³⁵ In this connection, it is interesting to note that all the Mamlūks carried the *nasab* Ibn ‘Abdallāh as a marker of their servile origin (on the names of the Mamlūk see Ayalon 1975, in particular on the name of the Mamlūk’s father, 210–217). The same practice is attested for the eunuchs of the Mamlūks: Ayalon 1977, 279. It is interesting in this connection that Ayalon 1977, 277 considers the name Bilāl ‘rare or very rare’ among the eunuchs of the Mamlūks.

³⁶ Certainly a reference to Naḡm al-Dīn ‘Umar b. Muḥammad b. Fahd al-Makkī and the passage from his *Mu‘ḡam al-šuyūḥ*, which I also quote in the next paragraph.

³⁷ Al-Biqā‘ī 2010, 93–94.

³⁸ A learned Meccan man who studied in Egypt: see Brockelmann 1902, 175; Brockelmann 1938, 225. The *Mu‘ḡam* is the work where Ibn Fahd describes all his teachers.

الخلوة والفقير. واشتغل بعلم الكيمياء وكتب الخط المنسوب. وكان خَيْرًا معرفة بعلم الحرف والتصوف.

Bilāl b. ‘Abdillāh al-Ḥabašī al-Ḥalabī al-Ḥanbalī, servant of ‘Imād al-Dīn Ismā‘īl b. Ḥalīl al-A‘zāzī. He was born within the year 785 AH (1383–1384 CE). He heard the teaching of Burhān al-Dīn at intervals.³⁹ He obtained the position of deputy-*qādī* in Aleppo for *ḥanbalī* and later for the *šāfi‘ī* school. At the beginning of his career, he was teaching the *mamālīk* of al-Nāṣir Faraġ b. Barqūq. He then separated from the people and made ascetical exercises. He loved seclusion and poverty. He engaged himself with alchemy and wrote in the proportionate style. He was generous in spreading the knowledge of science of the letters and Sufism.⁴⁰

In his *al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’*, al-Saḥāwī sums up the information available on Bilāl, adding interesting information not mentioned in previous sources and thus providing us with a concise but relatively detailed biographical note:

بلال الحبشي العمادي الحلبي الحنبلي فتى العماد اسماعيل بن خليل الاعزازي ثم الحلبي. ولد في حدود سنة خمس وثمانين وسبعمائة وسمع على ابن صديق غالب الصحيح وحدث به سمعه عليه الفضلاء سمعت عليه الثلاثيات وغيرها وكان ساكنا متقنا للكتابة على طريقة العجم بحيث لم يكن يعجبه كتابة غيره من الموجودين؛ تعانى علم الحرف واشتغل بالكيمياء مع إمامه بالتصوف ومحبة في الفقراء والخلوة وأقرأ في ابتداء أمره ممالك الناصر فرج ولذا كان ماهرا باللسان التركي ثم ولى النقابة لقاضي الحنابلة بحلب ثم لقاضي الشافعية أيضا ثم أعرض عن ذلك كله، وقطن القاهرة وصحب جمعا من الاكابر وانتفع به جماعة من المماليك فى الكتابة وتردد للجمالى ناظر الخاص ثم الاتابك أربك الظاهرى، وتقدم فى السن وشاخ. مات فى جمادى الثانية سنة ست وسبعين وشهد الاتابك وغيره من الامراء الصلاة عليه بجامع الازهر عفا الله عنه.

Bilāl al-Ḥabašī al-‘Imādī al-Ḥalabī al-Ḥanbalī, servant of ‘Imād (al-Dīn) Ismā‘īl b. Ḥalīl al-A‘zāzī, then al-Ḥalabī. He was born within the year

³⁹ Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Mufliḥ, chief *qādī* of Damascus for the *ḥanbalī* school. He visited Tamerlane’s camp during the siege of the city in 1400 to negotiate a surrender. He died in 803 AH/ 1400–1401 CE.

⁴⁰ Ibn Fahd 1982, 104–105.

785 AH (1383–1384 CE). He studied under Ibn Šiddīq⁴¹ most of the *Šaḥīḥ* and he transmitted its *ḥadīṭ*. Excellent students learned from him. I learned from him the ‘Threes’ (*ṭulāṭīyyāt*)⁴² and other type of *ḥadīṭ*. He was calm, a perfect master in the writing according to the style of the Persians, as he did not like the writing of any other of his contemporaries. He devoted his attention to the science of the letters and he engaged himself with alchemy, together with his mastering of Sufism and his love for the poor and the seclusion. At the beginning of his career, he taught the *mamālīk* of al-Nāšir Farāğ⁴³. Therefore, he was proficient in the Turkish language. Then he was appointed as deputy *qāḍī* of the *ḥanbalī* school in Aleppo and successively also of the *šāfi’ī* one. Later he abandoned all that, and resided in Cairo and became connected to a group of notables. A flock of *mamālīk* benefitted of him in learning calligraphy. He frequented al-Ġamālī *Nāzir al-ḥaṣṣ*,⁴⁴ then the *Atabek* Uzbek al-Zāhir.⁴⁵ His aged advanced and he became old. He died in the month of *ġumādā al-tāniya* in the year 876 AH (Nov-Dec. 1476 CE). The *Atabek* and other emirs attended the prayer for him at the mosque of al-Azhar.⁴⁶ May God forgive him!⁴⁷

Later historical sources seem to keep only a vague memory of Bilāl b. ‘Abd-allāh/‘Abd al-Raḥmān, fully quoting or quickly summarizing the information provided by al-Saḥāwī.⁴⁸

⁴¹ This expert in the *Šaḥīḥ* of al-Buḥārī could be identified as Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad b. Šiddīq (d. 806 AH / 1403–1404 CE), who taught *ḥadīṭ* in Aleppo and Damascus, where he was also muezzin in the mosque of the Omayyads (Saḥāwī n.d., I, 147–148).

⁴² *Ḥadīṭ* that have *isnād* (chains of transmission) with only three narrators between the Prophet and the one who registered them (e.g. al-Buḥārī).

⁴³ I.e. al-Nāšir Farāğ b. Barqūq (d. 1412), second ruler of the Burġī (Circassian Mamlūk) dynasty.

⁴⁴ Most likely it is Ġamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf Ibn Kātib Ġakam, *nāzir al-ḥāṣṣ* of al-Zāhir Ġaqmaq (d. 1453; on the latter see al-Saḥāwī n.d., X, 322–323). On the *dīwān al-ḥāṣṣ* (the Keeper of the Privy Purse, that is the head administrator of the sultan’s private revenues) and its *nāzir* see Martel-Thoumian 1991, 49–53.

⁴⁵ Sayf al-Dīn Uzbek Mīn Ṭataḥ al-Zāhirī (d. 1499), initiator of the Azbekiyya quarter in Cairo.

⁴⁶ It is noticeable that the funerary prayer was carried out at al-Azhar, which was not yet the famous institution it was to become. It could be surmised a connection with the presence of Ethiopians in the Riwaq al-Ġabartiyya, on which see Loiseau 2019.

⁴⁷ Al-Saḥāwī n.d., III, 18.

⁴⁸ The *šāfi’ī* learned man, vice-*qāḍī* and chronicler Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥimšī (d. 1528) records Bilāl with a short note in his *Ḥawādiṭ al-zamān* (Ibn al-Ḥimšī 2000, 125). Later, in the nineteenth century, the renowned Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Ḥumayd al-Nağḍī (d. 1878) mentions Bilāl in his biographical dictionary (*al-Suḥub al-wābila ilā ḍarā’ih al-*

Scribes from the Horn of Africa in Mamlūk Times: A Marginal but Interesting Phenomenon

The information presented in the previous paragraph allows us to think that the presence of people of the Horn of Africa among calligraphers and professional copyists in Mamlūk times was not completely unknown but still very rare. The little data available about Muḥammad al-Zayla‘ī and Bilāl al-‘Imādī provide a series of inputs for a small bunch of reflections.

Bilāl was originally a *ḥabašī* slave (maybe a Christian or a follower of a traditional religion). He was freed and took the *nisba* (al-‘Imādī) of his former owner and manumitter, as it was the common practice. He received a serious high education in various different branches of the traditional Islamic knowledge and specialized in law, having a brilliant career in this domain up to the post of vice-*qādī* and even changing law school in the course of his office. Aside from which, he taught young Mamlūks (*kuttābiyya*) during their training and education in the caserns (*ṭibāq*) of the citadel Cairo, learning ‘Turkish’ thanks to this activity, and was a scribe, excelling in the ‘*aḡamī*’ style. It is not clear the role that calligraphy played in his education initially and later in his functions as judge and teacher but sources highlight his scribal skills and his being a teacher of *ḥatt* underlining that the Mamlūks benefitted from his command of writing.⁴⁹ Bilāl’s connections with Sufism, the ‘science of letters’ and alchemy are also interesting, as they indicate his belonging to a mystical milieu, where the practice of apotropaic rituals is often combined with and supported by the preparation of amulets for which the command of different writing styles can be a strong advantage point.

From a social perspective, the case of Bilāl al-Ḥabašī al-‘Imādī can be meaningfully compared with what may be read about Badr al-Ḥabašī (ninth century AH /fifteenth century CE), a manumitted slave of Ġamāl al-Dīn al-Maḡribī mentioned by al-Saḥāwī in these terms:

بدر الحبشى مولى ابى جمال الدين المغربى . رباه سيده وعلمه القرآن والخطوط
المتنوعة مع فصاحة ثم صار لابن عليبة ثم للسلطان واغتبط به وعول عليه فى
اشياء، وصار يكثر السفر لمكة واسكندرية فى التجارة مع عقل وتؤدة.

Badr al-Ḥabašī⁵⁰ manumitted slave of Abū Ġamal al-Dīn al-Maḡribī.
His master educated him and taught him the Qur’ān and different writing

ḥanābila, basically an addition to Ibn Raḡab’s *Ṭabaqāt al-ḥanābila*) citing extensively the text of al-Saḥāwī (Ibn Ḥumayd n.d., 342–343).

⁴⁹ Copying manuscripts was also a skill taught in the *ṭibāq*: on this see Flemming 1977. For the education of the young Mamlūks in general see Loiseau 2014, 79–85.

⁵⁰ It is interesting to notice that Ayalon 1977, 276 considers the name Badr as ‘rare or very rare’ among the eunuchs of the Mamlūks.

styles. He moved to Ibn ‘Ulayba and later to the Sultan who was happy with him and relied on him in some affairs. Badr ended up travelling a lot to Mecca and Alexandria trading with intelligence and carefulness.

His master taught him the Qur’ān and the different writing styles, together with eloquence. Having acquired this education including scribal proficiency, Badr passed to other masters up to the sultan himself. He apparently never had a public office but worked for the sultan practicing trade, from Cairo to Mecca and Alexandria, proficiently.⁵¹ Al-Saḥāwī’s brief note on Badr confirms that calligraphy could be a subject in the educational process of a manumitted slave without necessarily becoming one of the principal domains of his activity. In fact, Badr, who worked as a trader on behalf of the sultan,⁵² is not remembered as having any particular outstanding position among scribes.

The fact that freed slaves could be so well instructed as copyists and calligraphers and thus become experts in this domain is testified by some scanty and dispersed information retrievable in later non-Arabic sources. For instance, the above-mentioned Müstakimzâde in his *Tuhfe-i hattâtin* cursorily mentions three manumitted slaves named Yāqūt from al-Ḥabaša,⁵³ who were calligraphers in Cairo: Yāqūt [Mas‘ūdī Muqrī] (d. 654/1256-57),⁵⁴ Yāqūt Şayḥī (d. 777/1375-76),⁵⁵ and Yāqūt Argūn (d. 830/1426-27).⁵⁶ Even the very renowned Yāqūt al-Musta‘şimī, one of the most outstanding virtuosi in the history in Arabic calligraphic art, is credited of *ḥabaşī* origin in some Persian⁵⁷ and Turkish Ottoman sources.⁵⁸ It can thus be concluded that Bilāl al-‘Imādī did actually belong to a very specific socio-cultural constellation composed of manumitted slaves and eunuchs who learnt calligraphy as one of the fields of their education.

As for Muḥammad al-Zayla‘ī, the available information, albeit extremely scanty, certainly points to a very much different social environment. Muḥammad is clearly a member of the well-known diaspora of learned men from al-Zayla‘,

⁵¹ Al-Saḥāwī n. d., III, 3.

⁵² The role played by Ethiopians as traders for the sultan is well attested: both the Ḥabaşī eunuchs of sultan and the Ġabartī students of al-Azhar were involved in commerce of spices and slaves: on this see Loiseau 2019, in particular 10–12.

⁵³ According to Ayalon 1977, 276 qualifies the Yāqūt as ‘frequent’ name among Mamlūk eunuchs. Moreover, Yāqūt was typically given to eunuchs from al-Ḥabaša (Ayalon 1977, 278–279).

⁵⁴ Müstakimzâde 1928, 578; Müstakimzâde 2014, 518.

⁵⁵ Müstakimzâde 1928, 578; Müstakimzâde 2014, 517.

⁵⁶ Müstakimzâde 1928, 578; Müstakimzâde 2014, 517.

⁵⁷ Qāzi Aḥmad in Minorsky 1959, 57; Akimushikin 2016, 64.

⁵⁸ Mustafa ‘Ali’s *Menakib-i hünervaran*: ‘Âli 1926, 18, 44; ‘Âli 1982, 42, 83; Akın-Kıvanc 2011, 188, 234, 313, 359.

the city on the Indian Ocean nowadays on the coast of Somaliland, whose presence in Egypt and Syria has been attested in various historical sources.⁵⁹

Despite their different social origin, however, Bilāl and Muḥammad show at least one shared characteristic, namely, they specialized in other fields aside from calligraphy, that permitted them to earn a living. In the case of Bilāl, it seems that his expertise in law provided him with his most significant source of income as a *qādī* and a teacher, while Muḥammad is presented as a specialist in timekeeping and herbal medicine, which could also have provided him with daily sustenance.

Finally, it is apparent that these sources about scribes from the Horn of Africa do not highlight to any great extent their geographical/ethnic origin: racialization seems not to be a relevant component in regarding the manner in which historians describe these calligraphers. However, al-Biqā'ī underlines that Bilāl sometimes used his patronymic in the form of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Abdallāh and at other times in the form of Ibn 'Abdallāh b. 'Abdallāh in an attempt to conceal his servile origin, a clear hint that a servile background may well have been a drawback and an obstacle in pursuing a public career.

Some Tentative Conclusions

It is not easy to collect data about professional scribes and calligraphers in Arabic historiography. Following the path paved by some pioneering studies, I have tried here to systematize some scattered information about calligraphers originating from the Horn of Africa, focusing on two personages, so far known only very superficially. Analysis of the gathered data indicates that the two calligraphers Muḥammad al-Zayla'ī and Bilāl al-Ḥabašī al-'Imādī belonged to two different social landscapes. Bilāl was a manumitted slave, whose education had trained him in calligraphy, a subject apparently not so unusual in Mamlūk times, as sources of a different type confirm that manumitted slaves were educated in *ḥaṭṭ*.

Muḥammad was a representative of the learned group of the Zayālī'a, which is well attested in Egypt and Syria. Despite this crucial social difference and aside from their shared geographical origin, what the two also have in common is the

⁵⁹ For the Zayla'ī learned men in Cairo see Loiseau 2019, in particular 7–8. Zayālī'a are attested also in Damascus by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, who visited the city in August-September 1326: Ibn Baṭṭūṭa 1987, 106 'وفي شرقي المسجد صومعة كبيرة فيها صهريج ماء وهي لطائفة الزبالعة السودان'. Gibb 1958, 128 'On the eastern side of the mosque is a large railed-off enclosure, within which there is a tank of water. This enclosure is appropriated to the blacks of Zayla'ī'. Our Muḥammad could be a descendant of this group.

combination of the practice of calligraphy with other activities. Particularly interesting is their involvement with Sufism, alchemy and herbal remedies, which points to a proximity of scribal expertise and mystical knowledge.⁶⁰

From the data I collected and analyzed, it can be inferred that calligraphy was certainly a part of traditional Islamic education at the same level as law and Sufism, no matter if one was a scion of a learned family or a simple, freed slave. It also cannot be excluded that those mastering calligraphy could well have made a life from it alone. More commonly, however, it seems that calligraphy was one of the competences an individual could make use of to find a source of revenue possibly in combination with other socially more requested skills such as expertise in *fiqh*, traditional medicine, and occult sciences.

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⁶⁰ The combination of calligraphy and Sufism is confirmed by the biographies of many calligraphers mentioned by Müstakimzâde. As stated above, Müstakimzâde himself was mystic and a scribe.

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Summary

Thus far, very little is known of the social origin and position of scribes and calligraphers in the pre-modern Islamic world. The difficulty in finding data on the biographies and activities of the professional practitioners of calligraphy in historiographical works is probably one of the main causes of this regrettable situation. Taking as a starting point the results of some previous groundbreaking research, the present article gathers scattered information retrieved from different sources about two calligraphers from the Horn of Africa that lived and worked in the Middle East during the Mamlūk period. In the analysis of these two cases, it is hoped that some light will be shed on the presence of calligraphic masters from the Horn in the Arab world from which may be gained, on a more general level, a better picture of the personalities of calligraphers in the Islamic world.