

# COMPETENCE, CORRUPTION, AND PATRONAGE IN MAMLUK EGYPT: THE CAREER OF ZAYN AD-DĪN YAḤYĀ

*Máté Horváth*

Independent researcher, Budapest

In 1881,<sup>1</sup> the Egyptian government launched an ambitious programme of preserving and restoring the rich mediaeval architectural heritage of the country, especially the historic monuments located in its capital. Within the framework of the Ministry of Endowments, Khedive Tawfīq (r. 1879–1892) founded the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l’Art Arabe. During the following decades – and, between 1890 and 1914, under the direction of Max Herz Pasha (1856–1919) as the Comité’s chief architect – many Islamic buildings were conserved and restored.<sup>2</sup> A significant portion of the monuments of Cairo date from the Circassian Mamluk period (1382–1517) during which the sultans, as well as members of the military and civilian elites erected numerous spectacular religious complexes. These buildings were meant to display the patrons’ piety and generosity and, alongside various other functions, often housed their tombs. By the end of the 19th century many of the structures became severely dilapidated, and the Comité was put in charge of restoring them to their former beauty.

## 1 One patron, three buildings

Among the extant Mamluk monuments in Cairo, three were commissioned by Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā (d. 1469), who, as demonstrated below, was a particularly influential officer of the Mamluk state. The earliest in date is the mosque incorporating the patron’s mausoleum, completed in 1444. Today, it is located in the unappealing and noisy intersection of Port Said and al-Azhar roads, next to the al-Azhar flyover in the Mūskī quarter. However, it originally stood on the east bank of the Ḥalīǧ canal in the locality called Bayn as-Sūrayn, constituting part of the patron’s residential complex that also included a waterwheel, a *sabīl* (‘fountain’), and a *ḥānqāh* (‘Sufi

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of convenience, in this paper I exclusively use Common Era dates, most of which are converted from the Hīǧrī era dates found in the sources.

<sup>2</sup> On the Comité and Herz’s role in it, see Ormos 2009: 49–106.

lodge’). The heavily damaged mosque was restored by the Comité between 1884 and 1897, with more recent works carried out in 1939–1940 and in 2003.<sup>3</sup>

The second building is the congregational mosque generally known as Ġāmi‘ al-Maḥkama in Būlāq, dating from 1448. This was the largest of the three complexes established by Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā in Cairo. Despite its dangerously ruinous state in the late 19th century, due to financial constraints, the Comité carried out only minor consolidation works on it. Its more thorough reconstruction had to wait until 1983 and some additional restorations have been completed since then.<sup>4</sup>

The third extant mosque of Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā, completed in 1452, is in the Ḥabbāniyya quarter of Cairo. One of its inscriptions identifies the building as a *ribāṭ* (‘hospice’), and it once featured an adjoining *sabīl-maktab* (‘public fountain and school’). Today, the mosque is surrounded by residential and commercial buildings in a densely populated neighbourhood, though it originally stood amongst majestic palaces and gardens in the aristocratic Birkat al-Fīl area. The Comité restored it in 1905, with more recent conservations carried out in 1998–1999.<sup>5</sup>

It merits attention that an individual – and, in particular, someone with no military background – could afford to patronise three significant religious complexes in a period that is generally considered to be one of decline and instability. Furthermore, there were several other buildings financed by Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā. In the words of the contemporary historian, Ibn Taġrī Birdī (d. 1470), “he [established] innumerable properties (*amlāk*), mosques, and drinking fountains outside of Cairo” (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Manhal* XII, 83). The later contemporary, as-Saḥāwī (d. 1497), lists a *ḥammām* (‘bathhouse’), a large tent or parasol for the pilgrims (*saḥāba*), places for washing the deceased, and *ribāṭs* (as-Saḥāwī, *Daw’* X, 234). While Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā surely expected his charitable patronage to evoke praise, his expectation was apparently in vain; all historians record that the patron was corrupt and his wealth ill-gotten. A couplet quoted by Ibn Taġrī Birdī summarises contemporary opinion about him quite pointedly:

He built a mosque for God from the wealth of others,  
Praise be to God, he did not succeed.  
Like a woman, feeding orphans by the toil of her vulva,  
Woe unto you! Fornicate not and do not give alms!  
(Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Nuġūm* XVI, 8).

<sup>3</sup> Martel-Thoumian 1991: 410; Behrens-Abouseif 2007: 262–263; Williams 2008: 141–142; Ormos 2009: 149–151.

<sup>4</sup> Martel-Thoumian 1991: 410–411; Behrens-Abouseif 2007: 263–264; Williams 2008: 256.

<sup>5</sup> Martel-Thoumian 1991: 410–411; Behrens-Abouseif 2007: 265; Williams 2008: 149.

The present article retraces the career of this controversial figure, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā. In her comprehensive monograph on the personnel of the late Mamluk civil administration, Bernadette Martel-Thoumian has dedicated a section to Zayn ad-Dīn's life, discussing the main stages of his career along with references to certain events of his life (Martel-Thoumian 1991: 112–115). However, while she has written mainly on the basis of the relevant chronicles, for the purpose of this paper, I have consulted both chronicles and biographical compendia.

## 2 The beginnings

Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā ibn 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Ašqar, also known to his contemporaries as Ibn Kātib Ḥulwān, was born in Cairo around 1397/8 and died there on 1 October 1469.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that he held high positions for more than two decades, the first half of his life remains in obscurity. His background, apart from his Coptic origin, is unknown. It is uncertain whether his *laqab* ('honorific'), Ibn Kātib Ḥulwān, refers to his otherwise unknown father. The sources also refer to him as a "relative (*qarīb*) of Ibn Abī l-Faraġ", which, according to as-Saḥāwī, writing decades after his death, meant that he was a nephew of Nāṣir ad-Dīn Muḥammad (d. 1476), a member of the influential Banū l-Faraġ family of administrators.<sup>7</sup> In my view, this assertion should be treated with doubt, as all other sources fail to refer to their relationship, even if the two personages are mentioned together; it also seems that their behaviour was extremely hostile to each other. This all does not disprove as-Saḥāwī's claim, but raises some doubt as to its validity.<sup>8</sup>

The first known position held by Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā was that of the *nāẓir Dīwān al-Mufrad* ('overseer of the [sultan's] special office') sometime under the reign of al-Ašraf Barsbāy (r. 1422–1438). This was a prestigious office in the Mamluk state, and its holder also served as deputy of the *ustādār* ('majordomo'), the man running the sultan's household. The *Dīwān al-Mufrad* was in charge of providing monthly wages for the sultan's Mamluks and fodder for their horses. Therefore, many revenues, most notably the rich and fertile areas of Fāraskūr and al-Manzala in the Delta, were allocated to the office along with several other settlements (Martel-Thoumian 1991: 53–54). Since the royal Mamluks constituted the most powerful force in Egypt, the unimpeded functionality of this *dīwān* was pivotal in assuring the stability of the sultanate. Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā had a rival called Tāġ ad-Dīn 'Abd al-'Aẓīm ibn Ṣadaqa, with whom he constantly vied for the office of the *nāẓir*, losing and

<sup>6</sup> Some of the sources name him 'al-Qāḍī' Yaḥyā, even though he was not a religious scholar or jurist. However, this was not unique in the period among high-ranking administrative personnel; see Martel-Thoumian 1991: 364.

<sup>7</sup> On this family, see Martel-Thoumian 1991: 226–237.

<sup>8</sup> One might also find it curious that the uncle was somewhat younger than his nephew. However, this is entirely possible.

regaining it several times. They even shared the position for a while, which did not lessen their enmity. Ibn Taġrī Birdī wittily likens them to two racing horses (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Manhal* XII, 80; as-Saḥāwī, *Ḍawʿ* X, 233).

On 9 September 1438, the atabeg Ğaqmaq was acclaimed as sultan with the title al-Malik az-Zāhir. As a result of exerting much effort and promising to pay a handsome amount of money, Zayn ad-Dīn soon secured the position of the *nāzir al-iṣṭabl* (‘overseer of the [sultan’s] stables’) for himself (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Nuġūm* XV, 50; idem, *Manhal* XII, 80). His tenure, however, here was unremarkable and rather short-lived, lasting for less than a year in 1438–1439. After him, a certain Šams ad-Dīn Našr Allāh al-Wizza was appointed to the office.<sup>9</sup> For some time, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā’s fortune turned for the worse. Since he had run into considerable debt in order to secure his previous appointment as the *nāzir al-iṣṭabl*, after his dismissal in 1439, he became impoverished and would struggle to find employment.<sup>10</sup> Notably, his supposed uncle, Nāšir ad-Dīn Muḥammad, was the *ustādār* in this period, and yet he would not support the career of Zayn ad-Dīn, let alone re-employ him at the *Dīwān al-Mufrad*.

### 3 The first steps towards success

On 9 June 1440, Ğaqmaq deposed his *ustādār*, Nāšir ad-Dīn Muḥammad, and appointed a former *amīr āḥūr* (‘high equerry’), the Mamluk *amīr*, Qīz Ṭūġān al-‘Allānī, to the position.<sup>11</sup> The sources state that Qīz Ṭūġān insisted on the recruitment of Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā as the *nāzir Dīwān al-Mufrad*. Thus, on 25 June 1440, Zayn ad-Dīn returned to his former office, replacing his greatest rival, ‘Abd al-‘Aẓīm ibn Šadaqa. The deposed officials were imprisoned, beaten, humiliated, and forced to pay considerable sums.<sup>12</sup> Ibn Šadaqa would never be reemployed, while Nāšir ad-Dīn Muḥammad, after being temporarily exiled, was reinstated as the *naqīb al-ġayš*, the official responsible for musters and military parades, regardless of Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā’s scheming against him (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Manhal* X, 116).

As Ibn Taġrī Birdī notes, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā’s appointment as the *nāzir Dīwān al-Mufrad* marked the beginning of the apogee of his career. He remained in the position for over two years while serving two consecutive *ustādārs*, and soon managed not only to pay off his debts but even to lay the foundations of his immense wealth. He became instrumental in running the office and reportedly imposed an ever-increasing influence on the *ustādār*, Qīz Ṭūġān. The latter spent much of his

<sup>9</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* VII, 434; Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Nuġūm* XV, 97; idem, *Manhal* XII, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Manhal* XII, 81; idem, *Nuġūm* XV, 112; as-Saḥāwī, *Ḍawʿ* X, 233.

<sup>11</sup> His *nisba* (‘attribution’) is often – and mistakenly – written as al-‘Alā ī. Ibn Taġrī Birdī clarifies that it refers to his former owner, ‘Allān al-Yaḥyāwī, a high-ranking officer and governor of Ḥamā; Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Manhal* VII, 726–728.

<sup>12</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* VII, 457–458; Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Manhal* XII, 81; idem, *Nuġūm* XV, 101–102; as-Saḥāwī, *Ḍawʿ* X, 233.

time away from Cairo,<sup>13</sup> and probably lacked the managerial skills required for sophisticated financial matters. According to the sources, it was at Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā's instigation that at the turn of 1440–1441 Qīz Ṭūḡān suggested levying land-tax (*harāḡ*) on the hitherto exempted *rizq aḥbāsīyya* and *rizq ḡayšīyya* lands around Cairo and Giza. While the sultan was tempted to act accordingly, he also faced fierce opposition by several notables. As a compromise, he demanded the yearly tax of one hundred dirhams per *faddān* (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* VII, 471). However, a year later Zayn ad-Dīn managed to convince the sultan to confiscate most of the estates. Ibn Taḡrī Birdī claims this act to be unprecedented and despicable, and puts the blame on Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā as its purported instigator (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Nuḡūm* XV, 106; idem, *Manhal* XII, 82–83).

Qīz Ṭūḡān seems to have nurtured ambitions other than serving as *ustādār*, an idea perhaps instilled in him by the ambitious and cunning Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā.<sup>14</sup> The *ustādār* requested to be transferred to the Syrian provinces, for which the sultan arrested both him and his deputy on 21 November 1441. This, however, seems to have been little more than a formality, as Qīz Ṭūḡān was soon sent off to Aleppo as a high-ranking commander. In the meantime, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā was reinstated to his office, this time as the deputy of the former governor of Alexandria, the *ustādār* Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn al-Kuwayz, on 30 November. Ibn al-Kuwayz's tenure was short and ineffective, as the *nāzīr* continued to dominate affairs, and the weak *ustādār* was eventually arrested and dismissed in September 1442. On the next day, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā was appointed as the new *ustādār*. Ibn Taḡrī Birdī comments on his promotion in two scathing couplets:

No rooks remain on the chessboard,  
and the pawns have become the queens;  
The lame donkeys neigh like horses.  
I tell you: this is unprecedented!  
(Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Nuḡūm* XV, 112).

Among the contemporary authors, Ibn Taḡrī Birdī is by far the most biased against Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā, nonetheless, his works contain the most detailed account of the activities of the contemporary elite. In the following sections, I summarise some aspects of Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā's tenure as *ustādār*, assessing whether the author's judgement was rightly deserved.

#### 4 A decade in the sultan's favour

<sup>13</sup> For instance, he spent January and February 1441 collecting taxes in Lower and Upper Egypt, reportedly causing misery and suffering to the locals; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* VII, 470, 473.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Manhal* XII, 81; idem, *Nuḡūm* XV, 112; as-Saḥāwī, *Ḍaw'* X, 234.

Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā served as the *ustādār* for over ten years, until Sultan Ğaqmaq's abdication on his deathbed in early 1453. His main duty was to arrange the provisions for the entire royal court and household. He was in charge of the warehouses, workshops, and the kitchen of the citadel, as well as responsible for the servants and craftsmen working there. This also meant that he had ample funds at his disposal (Martel-Thoumian 1991: 69–70). In this period, he equally remained in control of the *Dīwān al-Mufrad*, as no *nāzir* was appointed, and he personally dealt with the tasks of this office (as-Saḥāwī, *Tibr* I, 113).

The sources record some extraordinary duties that Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā, in addition to his regular responsibilities in Cairo, had to complete. In the summer of 1445, he directed a successful campaign against rebellious Bedouins in the area of Bilbays, returning to Cairo with many prisoners. In 1450, he was tasked with collecting the fines imposed on 'Abd Allāh, the tax collector (*kāšif*) of aš-Šarqiyya province in Lower Egypt. The next year, he was sent to the Delta in the company of a group of high-ranking *amīrs* to supervise the dredging of an estuary there. Later, he spent more than two weeks in the area of al-Manšūra on an unknown assignment, probably in relation to the revenues of his office. (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 270-1, 273; as-Saḥāwī, *Tibr* III, 39).<sup>15</sup>

Alongside this, he held the office of the *muḥtasib* ('market supervisor') of Cairo for a few months in 1449–1450. This appointment, however, was against his will: he tried to reject the position, and even though he was forced to accept it, he never received the robe of investiture. His tenure was short and unremarkable. At some point, he also became the *ustādār* of Faḥr ad-Dīn 'Uṭmān, the son and heir apparent of Sultan Ğaqmaq.<sup>16</sup>

The fact that Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā remained the sultan's *ustādār* for such a relatively long time suggests that he was an able administrator, and indeed, despite the recurrent plagues and inflations, no shortages of money and fodder were reported during his tenure. In order to maintain the sultan's favour, the *ustādār* did not hesitate to present him with sumptuous gifts; four such occasions are recorded in the sources. In 1445, Zayn ad-Dīn gave 300 Arabian horses to Sultan Ğaqmaq, followed by 400 more a year later. In 1448, 600 mounts, many equipped with ornate horse tack, were presented to the sultan (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 111, 123, 164). The herds of horses might be considered as the *ustādār*'s tribute in return for his lucrative office, comparable to similar gifts to the ruler from provincial governors.

However, in 1451, he sent a different set of gifts to the sultan, namely five thousand dinars in coin, hundreds of robes made of precious textiles, eight horses, and also smaller presents such as sugar, sweets and fruits carried by twenty porters. In this case, the gifts meant to express Zayn ad-Dīn's gratitude to Ğaqmaq, who, as a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 119–120, 270–271, 273, 323, 327, 329; as-Saḥāwī, *Tibr* III, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Nuġūm* XV, 151, XVI, 7; idem, *Ḥawādīt* I, 219, 224.

rare sign of high esteem, had visited him in his home while he was recovering from injuries (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Hawādiṭ* I, 321–322; idem, *Nuġūm* XV, 178). Notably, the sources record only exceptionally lavish gifts and not the everyday ones that the *ustādār* presumably disbursed to the sultan on a regular basis.

Sultan Ğaġmaq's favour for Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā manifested itself in various ways. For instance, the sultan gave luxurious robes of honour to him on numerous occasions, four of which are recorded only from the year 1448 (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Hawādiṭ* I, 168, 176, 180–181). Despite recurring demands of Mamluks and intrigues of his rival administrators, Ğaġmaq would never dismiss his loyal *ustādār*, and, as a result, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā wielded considerable influence, which he successfully exerted against his rivals. With the notable exception of Nāṣir ad-Dīn Muḥammad, he managed to stunt the careers of all his predecessors. 'Abd al-'Azīm ibn Ṣadaqa and al-Wizza died in poverty, while Qīz Ṭūġān's release from imprisonment was revoked thanks to Zayn ad-Dīn's intrigues (1448). Ibn al-Kuwayz remained unemployed in Syria until (1449), when he was named as *ustādār* of Damascus. However, this appointment did not last long: in a few months, he was imprisoned and would never again rise to prominence (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Nuġūm* XV, 145, 148). When a former tax collector, a certain aš-Šihābī Aḥmad, aspired to secure the position of the *ustādār* for himself, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā used his influence to have him sent into exile. Similarly, it was at his behest that the commander of the Mamluk guards (*ra's nawba*), Asandamur al-Ğaġmaqī, was exiled in 1451 (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Hawādiṭ* I, 195, 338).

## 5 The *ustādār* and the Mamluks

Although Ğaġmaq's reign was, especially in comparison with those of his successors, relatively peaceful and stable, the increasingly insubordinate Mamluks would repeatedly express their dissatisfaction with the government. This would manifest itself in assaults on the sultan's administrators, usually on their way between the citadel and their houses in Cairo. Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā was no exception. In November 1446, he was beaten nearly to death when he eventually found refuge in the house of a leading *amīr* (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Hawādiṭ* I, 135). Two years later, when the Mamluks plotted to attack him and ransack his house, he avoided the threat by staying in the citadel and having his residence safely locked. The sultan himself had to intervene to appease the rebellious Mamluks, and sent someone to escort the *ustādār* to his house. A few days later, when rumours of another such conspiracy against Zayn ad-Dīn spread, it was, once again, Ğaġmaq who eventually settled the situation (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Hawādiṭ* I, 180–181).

Nonetheless, the majordomo was assaulted again on 22 June 1450. It seems that this attack was not directed, in particular, against Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā. After some Mamluks had been accused of insubordination and arrested, their fellows threatened

many notables, including the *ustādār*. Caught near the Mosque of al-Māridānī while on his way from the citadel to his house, he had to leap off his mount to avoid the maces of the soldiers, and was able to escape only with the help of the *muḥtasib*. However, the Mamluks directed their anger mainly towards Abū l-Ḥayr an-Naḥḥās, who was the head of the treasury (*wakīl bayt al-māl*) and *nāzīr* of several lesser *dīwāns*. While the Mamluks intended to kill him, they demanded only the dismissal of Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Nuḡūm* XV, 159; idem, *Ḥawādīt* I, 266–267). Three weeks later, the sultan deprived Abū l-Ḥayr an-Naḥḥās of his offices, after which he was severely tortured and exiled. At the same time, the sultan reconfirmed the majordomo in his position (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Nuḡūm* XV, 164; idem, *Ḥawādīt* I, 275).

Finally, for unknown reasons, Zayn ad-Dīn was again attacked upon leaving the citadel in April 1451. This time the Mamluks injured his head so badly that he needed to be carried home in a critical condition. It was on this occasion that the sultan visited him in his house, and, two days later, reaffirmed him in his office (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Nuḡūm* XV, 178; idem, *Ḥawādīt* I, 321–322).

## 6 Downfall

Sultan Ğaqmaq fell ill in early 1453 and, on 1 February, abdicated in favour of his son, Faḥr ad-Dīn ‘Uṭmān. Upon becoming sultan with the title al-Malik al-Manṣūr, the latter found the treasury empty. This posed a serious problem, especially since it was customary for a new sultan to hand out significant amounts of money to the Mamluks (*naḥḥā*), thereby securing the loyalty of the military. In order to alleviate the situation, a council of high-ranking officials convened on 6 February. After a long debate, they decided that the *nāzīr al-ḥāṣṣ wa-l-ḡayṣ* (‘overseer of the sultan’s private treasury and the army’), Ibn Kātib Ğakam,<sup>17</sup> should pay 100,000 dinars from his personal wealth, while Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā was obliged to hand over 30,000 dinars to the royal treasury (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 403; *Nuḡūm* XVI, 6).

<sup>17</sup> Ğamāl ad-Dīn Yūsuf ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm, known as Ibn Kātib Ğakam, was the *nāzīr al-ḥāṣṣ/hawāṣṣ* (the official in charge of the sultan’s private treasury and of providing clothing for the Mamluks), superintendent of the royal mint (*dār aq-ḍarb*), and later, also *nāzīr al-ḡayṣ* (in charge of the soldiers’ *iqṭā’* lands and administrative affairs of the army). For his short biography, see Martel-Thoumian 1991: 285. His high standing in the consecutive courts is underlined in Ibn Taḡrī Birdī’s works, who repeatedly calls him *‘aẓīm ad-dawla* and *ṣāhib al-‘aqd wa-l-ḥall* (e.g. Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Manḥal* XII, 225–227; *Nuḡūm* XVI, 169–170). He and Zayn ad-Dīn seem to have been on good terms, as he interceded on the *ustādār*’s behalf several times (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 458, 483). On two occasions, he was in charge of collecting the fines imposed on Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā, which he did rather leniently, probably because of their amicable relationship; Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 458, 483, 503, 588.



According to Ibn Taġrī Birdī, as Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā had already been the personal *ustādār* of the new sultan under Ğaqmaq's reign, he thought that he could exploit their amicable relationship. When the council demanded 30,000 dinars from him, he, in expectation of the 'Uṭmān's support, persistently refused to pay. However, his enemies persuaded the young ruler to act against him (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Nuġūm XVI*, 7). Zayn ad-Dīn was deposed, arrested, and consigned to his freshly appointed successor as *ustādār*, the *amīr* Ğānibak az-Zāhirī, who took him along with some of his relatives and members of his retinue to his palace, while his wealth was impounded. Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā spent four days in the rather lenient custody of the new *ustādār*, who in the end reported the successful confiscation of 97,000 dinars, while his prisoner admitted possessing 100,000 in total (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Ḥawādiṭ I*, 403–405; *Nuġūm XVI*, 7).

On 14 February, Zayn ad-Dīn was transported to the citadel with the demand of an additional 400,000 dinars from him, though this amount was soon reduced to 300,000. This time, the sultan handed him over to his supposed uncle, Nāṣir ad-Dīn Muḥammad, who had him severely tortured for days, almost to death, notwithstanding his repeated denials of having any more money. In the meantime, his properties were sold, his charitable foundations were taxed, while his Mamluks – whose number, as a sign of extraordinary affluence, was over 80 – were either attached to the royal household or dismissed. As for the endowments he had established, a council of the four chief judges convened in the presence of the sultan on 28 February, aiming to decide their fate. The pretext for this council was an alleged promise by the former *ustādār* to transfer more than 10,000 dinars to Ğaqmaq every month. On that basis, the new sultan demanded an exorbitant 1,930,000 dinars. The judges passed the verdict that Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā's *waqfs* were illicit because his debt was over a million dinars at the time of their establishment. As a result, his *waqfs* were nullified and the endowed properties sold (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Ḥawādiṭ I*, 406–407, 410–411; *Nuġūm XVI*, 9–10).

The confiscation process (*muṣādara*) continued until the end of al-Manṣūr 'Uṭmān's short reign, lasting for about seven weeks. And yet, the proceeds were not enough to appease the Mamluks. A revolt broke out, which placed the former commander-in-chief (*atābak*), al-Aṣraf Īnāl on the throne on 19 March 1453. The new sultan soon released the ailing Zayn ad-Dīn, presenting him with robes of honour and a splendid mount. In return, he promised to deliver 100,000 dinars in addition to the sums already taken from him. In total, he was forced to pay a quarter of a million dinars in less than two months after the death of his patron, Ğaqmaq, beside losing most of his private estate and *waqfs* (Ibn Taġrī Birdī, *Ḥawādiṭ I*, 431). From this time on, he would lose and regain the *ustādār* position several times, while also suffering further trials and tribulations under the consecutive sultans and their increasingly vicious Mamluks.

## 7 Corruption and competence

The Mamluks greeted Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā's downfall with joy. In their view, he had committed many acts of injustice and oppression (*zalama wa-'asafa*) against them. He allegedly took *iqṭā'* estates and other revenues to allocate those to the *Dīwān al-Mufrad*. Nor did he refrain from seizing *waqf* estates and other properties, probably inheritance, that were to be occupied by profiteering people (*arbāb at-takassub*). Afterwards, the *ustādār* would buy these properties for a low price and then sell them with a considerable profit (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Nuḡūm* XVI, 7–8; *Ḥawādīt* I, 404). Ibn Taḡrī Birdī also recounts that when Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā became *muḥtasib*, he announced selling wheat at a lower price than usual, which soon turned out to be a lie.<sup>18</sup>

However, it is important to note that the Mamluks' rancour against Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā was not because he ever fell short on his duties. No delays in handing out wages or fodder were recorded during the sultanate of Ğaqmaq, while this would soon become a recurrent problem. Conversely, Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā's competence was always acknowledged by his contemporaries, as demonstrated by his repeated appointments to the position of *ustādār* after 857/1453. The most telling sign of the controversial public opinion about him is an event from early 1454. On his second appointment by Sultan Īnāl, the same soldiers, who had cheered at his downfall a year earlier, celebrated his return to office (Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 483).

There is no reason to doubt that Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā was involved in corruption and used his office for personal gain. He was reportedly bankrupt before becoming *nāzīr Dīwān al-Mufrad* in 1440, and yet, within four years, he completed his funerary complex and delivered 300 horses to the sultan, followed by several other construction projects and lavish gifts. These facts highlight an exceedingly rapid growth of wealth, which understandably provoked the envy of his contemporaries.

The *ustādār's* corrupt conduct enabled him to finance his ambitious building projects and *waqfs* for their upkeep.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that in a way it also ensured the smooth operation of the state, since many of the unjustly taken revenues were at least partially directed towards the *Dīwān al-Mufrad*, to cover the allowances of the soldiers. Corruption was apparently vital for maintaining the relative stability of the state under Ğaqmaq's reign. One might also regard Zayn ad-Dīn's extravagant tributes to the sultan as an essential means of helping out the royal treasury to avoid bankruptcy. As a consequence, some of the historic monuments surviving in Cairo might equally be viewed as by-products of the flawed systemic operations of the Mamluk state.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibn Taḡrī Birdī, *Ḥawādīt* I, 219. It seems that the author's condemnation of Zayn ad-Dīn Yaḥyā is based on moral and religious grounds, combined with some anti-Coptic and anti-civilian sentiment, while he records no personal conflict between them.

<sup>19</sup> Only one of his *waqf* deeds survives, which attests to the opulence of his residential complex; Behrens-Abouseif 2007: 263.

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