

THE SULTAN AND HIS ŞŪFĪ LODGE: THE BEGINNINGS OF THE ḤĀNAQĀH OF SIRYĀQŪS

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Abstract:

Among the many monuments built by the great 8th/14th-century Egyptian Mamluk sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad, the Şūfī lodge (*ḥānaqāh*) of Siryāqūs only survives in the name of a modern settlement. Based on mediaeval – if possible, contemporary – sources, this article explores the beginnings of the history of this particular institution, focusing on the context and motivation of its construction.

Keywords: Sufism, Mamluk Sultanate, religious patronage, Cairo, mediaeval Egypt, 14th century

Nowadays, to the north of Cairo, the great Ring Road (*aṭ-Ṭarīq ad-Dā'irī*) marks the boundary between the gigantic metropolitan area of the Egyptian capital and the more rural Lower Egypt. The transition is strikingly immediate: it is this area where the dull brownish greyness of the sprawling residential and industrial areas gets interspersed with the greenery of agricultural plots, to soon give way to the fertile lands and myriad villages of the Nile delta.

One of the settlements of this transitional region bears the name al-Ḥānka, the name being a derivation of the classical *ḥānakāh*, or often *ḥānaqāh*, in mediaeval sources.¹ It is a word of Persian origin – a compound of *ḥāna* ('house') and *gāh* ('place').² The Persian name is no accident: it was in Ḥurāsān that the Şūfīs adopted this institution, previously used by Karrāmī missionary ascetics, and thus *ḥānaqāh* became a term that denoted "a dwelling occupied by Şūfīs; used for meetings, as residences, for study, and for communal prayer under the supervision of a Şūfī

¹ In 14th-15th-century Mamluk sources the two versions seem to be interchangeable, many times both appear in the same work. In the present article, for the sake of unity, the version *ḥānaqāh* will be used.

² Homerin suggests other Persian etymologies: "place of the table" or "place of recitation" (Homerin 1999:59).

master” (Ephrat, Pinto 2021:106).³ The main difference between *ḥānaqāhs* and other Ṣūfī venues like *ribāts* and *zāwiyas* during the Mamluk period was that the former were official institutions, created by *waqfiyya* documents. Such lodges were not centred around a particular sheikh or *ṭarīqa* and were only open to a select group of Ṣūfīs, who had well-defined duties and received a salary as stipulated in the founding document (Fernandes 1988:18–19).

In al-Ḥānka city, which is also the seat of the administrative centre (*markaz idārī*) of the same name within al-Qalyūbiyya governorate, there is no trace of a Ṣūfī *ḥānaqāh*. In terms of its historical monuments, only the square-shaped mosque of the sultan al-Ašraf Barsbāy (r. 825/1421–841/1438), finished in 841/1437, is worth mentioning.⁴ Nonetheless, the town indeed owes its name and its origins to an institution of this kind: the *al-Ḥānaqāh an-Nāširiyya*, referred to in medieval sources mostly as *ḥānaqāh Siryāqūs*.⁵ The lodge itself, built in 725/1325, witnessed the end of Mamluk rule at the hands of the Ottomans in 923/1517, as evidenced by Ibn Iyās’s chronicle (Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i* V, 174), but the date of its disappearance remains to be established. Apparently, it still flourished about a century later, but was in ruins by the late 19th century, with no living memory of it among the locals in the 1980s (Williams 1986:118).

In this article, I attempt to explore the beginnings of the history of this particular institution, the context in which it was built and the role it enjoyed during the lifetime of its founder, based on mediaeval – whenever available, contemporary – sources.

1 The first *ḥānaqāhs* in Egypt

It was during the Seljuk period that the *ḥānaqāh* as an institution spread westwards from Ḥurāsān throughout the vast Sunni empire of the Turks, now under the patronage of the rulers who supported the mystics’ communities through rich endowments (Firouzeh 2021:167). Even though the relatively short-lived Seljuk Empire gradually collapsed, the spread of Ṣūfism and by extension the *ḥānaqāhs*, was encouraged by their successors: the first Ṣūfī lodges of Syria were founded by the Zangids in the mid-12th century (Homerin 1999:62, Ephrat, Pinto 2021:107–108).

³ In the Mağrib, such lodges were usually known as *zāwiya* (“corner”), a word that in the Eastern parts of the Islamic world, including Mamluk Egypt, usually denoted smaller, informal gathering spots (Firouzeh 2021:161) linked to a certain sheikh or *ṭarīqa* (Fernandes 1988:13–16).

⁴ The date of its completion was recorded by contemporaries (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* VII, 343, Ibn Tağrī Birdī, *Nuğūm* XIV, 267).

⁵ For brief overviews of its history, see Williams 1986. It is centred on the two endowment documents related to the lodge, while the historical part is rather sketchy and is based on only a few much later sources.

Unsurprisingly, the fundamentally Sunni phenomenon could not gain a foothold in Egypt until the fall of the Fātimid caliphate. It was the first Ayyūbid sultan, the famed Şalāḥ ad-Dīn, who, having successfully toppled the Ismā‘īlī dynasty, founded the first *ḥānaqāh* in the Egyptian capital (569/1173) – a step that fit well into his project of Sunni restoration (MacKenzie 2016:142). The ruler did not erect a completely new building; instead, he transformed a symbolic place: the residence of the last few Fātimid viziers, the real holders of power in the waning decades of the dynasty. This palace was known by the name of one of its previous owners, the amīr Sa‘īd as-Su‘adā’ (d. 544/1149), and although the new *ḥānaqāh* was known officially as aṣ-Şalāḥiyya after the founder, the name of Sa‘īd as-Su‘adā’ remained prevalent.⁶ Endowing it with a generous trust (*waqf*),⁷ the sultan also appointed a richly salaried official as the head of it, who received the title of *şayḫ aš-şuyūḥ* or grand master, to serve as a mentor to the mystics and also as a liaison between the Sufis and the ruling class.⁸ This was a highly prestigious position, held by many respectable ‘*ulamā*’ over the centuries, but rarely by Şūfīs (Geoffroy 1996:56).

Interestingly enough, it seems that neither Şalāḥ ad-Dīn nor his successors wished to adorn their capital with further lodges during the eight decades of their rule. In fact, minor Şūfī institutions were also quite rare, as only three *ribāṭs* and three *zāwiyas* are known from the Ayyūbid era, of which only the *zāwiya* of the Sheikh Abū l-Ḥayr was a royal foundation (MacKenzie 2016:141–142).

The famous mid-15th century *Ḥiṭaṭ* of al-Maqrīzī enumerates a total of 22 *ḥānaqāhs* in Cairo and its vicinity (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 280–302). It has to be pointed out that al-Maqrīzī’s list is not complete; it does not include buildings mentioned elsewhere in his book, like the Ṭaybarsiyya, built in 709/1309 on the bank of the Nile by the *amīr* ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn Ṭaybars al-Ḥāzindār (d. 719/1319),⁹ which is only recorded in the chapter devoted to the Friday mosque next to it (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 102). Another example is the lodge built by the *nāzir al-ḥāṣṣ* aṣ-Şāḥib Karīm ad-Dīn ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Hibat Allāh al-Kabīr (d. 724/1324)¹⁰ in the Lesser Qarāfa cemetery, which is entirely absent from the work. Nonetheless, the lack of other Ayyūbid and early Mamluk *ḥānaqāhs* is noticeable: while rulers built religious

⁶ For an overview of its history, see Fernandes 1988:21–25. The building still exists in a heavily modified form.

⁷ For its provisions, see al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 282. The *waqfiyya* itself does not survive (Fernandes 1988:22).

⁸ Hofer uses the term Chief Sufi (Hofer 2015:35), as opposed to the “rank-and-file” (Hofer 2015:62).

⁹ For lesser-known personalities mentioned in the article, I deemed it useful to include a reference to the earliest available biographical entry – or entries, in case of works by contemporary authors – on them, indicating their number as well. For Ṭaybars’s biography, see Ibn Ḥağar, *Durar* II, 229 [no. 2054].

¹⁰ For his biography, see aṣ-Şuqā‘ī, *Tālī*, 193–194 [no. 350], an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XXXIII, 35–43, aṣ-Şafadī, *A‘yān* III, 142–154 [no. 1030]; Şafadī, *Wāfi* XIX, 66–77 [no. 7218].

buildings, Sūfī lodges were not among them. Apparently, the only Cairene lodge from the 7th/13th century was the Bunduqdāriyya, built in the Ṣalībā district by the amīr ‘Alā’ ad-Dīn Aydikīn al-Bunduqdār (d. 684/1285)¹¹ shortly before his death.¹²

The second major *ḥānaqāh* in Cairo was built by the amīr Rukn ad-Dīn Baybars al-Ġāšnikīr al-Manšūrī, who later became sultan. Before his ascension to the throne, he held the rank of *ustādār* (‘major-domo’) and ruled the sultanate in tandem with the *nā’ib as-salṭana* (‘viceroys’) Sayf ad-Dīn Salār al-Manšūrī during the second reign of the adolescent an-Nāšir Muḥammad (between 698/1299–709/1310).¹³ The all-powerful *amīr* designed a complex that included a *ḥānaqāh*, a *ribāṭ* and a funerary *qubba*. For this – perhaps in imitation or even as a form of competition with Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn – he chose the former palace of the viziers in Fāṭimid Cairo, close to the Sa’īd as-Su’adā’ lodge. The complex was adorned with a great amount of freshly excavated ancient Egyptian spolia, and also included the grand window (*šubbāk*) of the ‘Abbāsīd palace in Baghdad, brought to Cairo as a prized bounty in the mid-11th century. According to al-Maqrīzī, it was “the most majestically built, most spacious and most masterfully designed *ḥānaqāh* in Cairo”, also adding that ever since its construction, there had been no need of maintenance or renovation (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 275.).

The splendid complex was grandiose, but not merely in its dimensions. According to the *waqfiyya*, 400 Sūfīs were to reside in the *ḥānaqāh* in addition to the 100 soldiers and Mamluks’ sons (*abnā’ an-nās*) who would dwell in the *ribāṭ*. They were provided with regular meals, bread, meat and sweets produced by the kitchen of the complex. Baybars also established hadith lessons and continuous Quran recitation in the dome. The immense costs were to be covered by a charitable trust that provided revenues from several properties in Cairo, Lower and Upper Egypt and Syria as well (Fernandes 1988:25–29).

Baybars al-Ġāšnikīr usurped the throne with the title of al-Malik al-Muḥaffar in 708/1309, but next year he was defeated and executed by the deposed an-Nāšir Muḥammad. The sultan shut the freshly built complex down, while abolishing the *waqf* dedicated to its support. He also had the usurper’s name chiselled out from the inscriptions of the buildings – the results of which are still visible today (Hofer 2015:54; Williams 2008:211).

2 A display of royal competition?

As seen in the previous section, Cairo did not have many functional *ḥānaqāhs* at the dawn of an-Nāšir Muḥammad’s third reign (709/1310–741/1341), and the biggest

¹¹ For his biography, see aṣ-Ṣuqā’ī, *Tālī*, 17–18 [no. 26]; aṣ-Ṣafadī, *Wāfi* IX, 275 [no. 2113]

¹² For its description, see Williams 2008:113.

¹³ For its description, see Behrens-Abouseif 1998:104–107 and Williams 2008:210–212.

and most recent one had just been closed at the orders of the sultan himself – to be reopened in early 726/1326, with the reinstatement of all its *waqfs* (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 286). By this time, the sultan had already built his own lodge: the Nāširiyya of Siryāqūs (725/1325), which has been interpreted as an act designed to outdo the former usurper (Hofer 2015:2).¹⁴

One can accept that a certain kind of retaliatory competition could have been among the motives of the sultan, when he opted to build his own *ḥānaqāh*, but I would argue that this had not been the main reason behind it – if the sultan had merely wanted to surpass his predecessor, he would not have waited 15 years, given that he had ample opportunities and funds to do so whenever he wished.¹⁵ Due to internal stability, external peace and favourable economic conditions, the sultan was free to spend the immense revenues of the treasury on construction projects, pomp and leisure, and he indeed did so (Levanoni 1995:156–173).

The question arises: why did the sultan then decide to build this *ḥānaqāh*? The immediate reason is reported to be an oath made during the sultan's illness (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 294), but it also seems worth pointing out that the choice must have been impacted by an architectural trend. During the first decades of an-Nāšir's third reign, several high-ranking members of the court decided to sponsor the creation of Šufī lodges: the *dawādār*, Bahā' ad-Dīn Arsalān an-Nāširī (d. 719/1319)¹⁶ built one on the bank of the Nile (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 295–296), followed by the *nāzir al-ḥāṣṣ* aṣ-Šāhib Karīm ad-Dīn al-Kabīr (d. 724/1324), who erected his in the Lesser Qarāfa cemetery.¹⁷ We can also add the funerary *ḥānaqāh-madrassa* of the *ustādār* 'Alam ad-Dīn Saṅṅar al-Ġāwalī (d. 745/1345)¹⁸, built in 723/1323.¹⁹ As for that of the *mihmāndār* and *naqīb al-ḡayṣ* Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad b.

¹⁴ Homerin argues that closing the complex might have been a form of torture on behalf of the vengeful an-Nāšir, as this way “the sultan had denied his foe the prayers and blessings believed to help the recently deceased” (Homerin 1999:83), while regarding the reopening, Williams suggests “either a high degree of solicitude for Sufis, or an expectation of benefits now and hereafter” (Williams 1986:116) as a motivation.

¹⁵ The third reign of an-Nāšir Muḥammad is generally regarded as the golden age of the Egyptian Mamluk Sultanate. Nonetheless, throughout her work, Levanoni compellingly argues that in fact the seeds of later political instability and economic decline were in many ways sown by the sultan's policies (Levanoni 1995).

¹⁶ For his biography, see aṣ-Šafadī, *A 'yān* I, 449–451. [no. 230].

¹⁷ aṣ-Šuḡā'ī, *Tārīḥ*, 92.

¹⁸ For his biography, see aṣ-Šafadī, *A 'yān* II, 467–470 [no. 738]; aṣ-Šafadī, *Wāfi* XV, 292–293 [no. 5218].

¹⁹ For its description, see Behrens-Abouseif 1998:101–104 and Williams 2008:46–48. According to both, the double-domed building, where the patron and the *atābak* Sayf ad-Dīn Salār are buried, was built in 703/1303–4.

Aqūš al-‘Azīzī (d. 732/1332)²⁰, known as the Mihmāndāriyya,²¹ built in 725/1325 close to the Bāb Zuwayla (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 288), we cannot be sure whether this preceded the Siryāqūs lodge. The *amīr* Baktamur as-Sāqī’s (d. 733/1333)²² *ḥānaqāh* was opened soon after, in 726/1326, at the foot of the mountain next to Birkat al-Ḥabaš, on the edge of the Qarāfa (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 296–298). The sultan’s favourite wife, Umm Anūk Ḥawand Tūgāy (d. 749/1348) also built a burial dome-Šūfī lodge complex in the Northern Qarāfa at an unknown date.²³

Based on all this, it is safe to say that building Šūfī lodges – as parts of larger complexes – had already become fashionable among the members of the Egyptian elite when an-Nāšir Muḥammad decided to build his *ḥāqanāh* in Siryāqūs. Baybars al-Ġāšnikīr’s splendid complex was undoubtedly the direct originator of this popularity.²⁴ This trend was not begun, but was later supported, by the sultan, who, in order to attract more mystics to Cairo, helped the creation of more lodges by the elite (Fernandes 1988:32).

I am of the opinion that an-Nāšir’s lodge in Siryāqūs was not first and foremost intended to be a testament to his triumph over a long-gone rival (in fact, I would rather consider the magnanimous gesture of reopening of the latter’s *ḥānaqāh* as such) – instead, it could be interpreted as an example of a fashionable form of religious patronage in which the sultan wished to take part, perhaps out of personal conviction.

3 The location

Al-Maqrīzī provides the location of the Nāširiyya *ḥānaqāh* as follows: “outside of Cairo, to the north of it, about one *barīd*²⁵ away, where the Israelites’ desert [*Tih Banī Isrā’īl*] begins, at Samāsim Siryāqūs” (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 293–294). An earlier source – the 14th-century an-Nuwayrī, who was a contemporary of the construction and the opening of the lodge – in fact refers to the location of the *ḥānaqāh* as the “lands of Samāsim, near Siryāqūs” (*arāḍī Samāsim bi-l-qurb min Siryāqūs*; an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XV, 136). One might speculate that the name has a connection to the sesame plant (Ar. *simsim*, plural *samāsim*); however, I could not

²⁰ I have not found any biographical entry devoted to him. His death is mentioned in al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 155.

²¹ For its description, see Williams 2008:97–98.

²² For his biography, cf. aṣ-Ṣafādī, *A’yān* I, 709–714. [no. 407], aṣ-Ṣafādī, *Wāfi* X, 122–124 [no. 2334].

²³ For its description, see Williams 2008:248.

²⁴ It might be worthy to note that both Karīm ad-Dīn and Baktamur as-Sāqī began their careers in the retinue of Baybars al-Ġāšnikīr, one as a scribe and the other as a Mamluk.

²⁵ *Barīd* was also a measurement of distance that in Mamluk times equalled 4 *farsaḥs* or 12 miles. See for instance the contemporary al-‘Umarī, *Masālik* II, 304.

to find any evidence for this.²⁶ It seems that as-Samāsīm was the name of a plain in the area of Siryāqūs, spacious enough for housing major encampments (al-‘Aynī, *Iqd*, 240, 347). Be that as it may, most of the contemporary authors who recorded the foundation of the *ḥānaqāh* referred to its location simply as Siryāqūs.

Before an-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s time, Siryāqūs itself had never been of particular importance. It is hardly even mentioned in earlier works. The settlement is listed in Ibn Mammātī’s 12th-century *Qawānīn ad-dawāwīn* (Ibn Mammātī, *Qawāwīn*, 145) as one of the places belonging to the aš-Šarqiyya region, and while it has its own entry in Yāqūt’s *Mu‘ğam al-buldān*, it merely states that “it is a small town (*bulayda*) in the vicinity of Cairo in Egypt” (Yāqūt, *Mu‘ğam*, 218). It is also mentioned to have had a Christian monastery dedicated to Anba Hor (Abū al-Hūr), famous for the miraculous treatment of the scrofula (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 433).

The township of Siryāqūs still exists and is actually a part of the al-Ḥānka administrative division – however, it lies about five kilometres away to the west from al-Ḥānka city itself, on the bank of the Ismā‘īliyya canal. The distance can be seen in a more striking manner if we look at old maps of the area – for instance, the earliest modern one, found in the famed *Description de l’Égypte* (Jacotin 1818:24). It is evident that already around 1800, Siryāqūs and al-Ḥānka were two separate settlements with agricultural lands between them. Thus, we can assume that the modern town of al-Ḥānka, the inheritor of the name of al-Nāṣir’s *ḥānaqāh*, is on the field originally called Samāsīm, a dependency of neighbouring Siryāqūs.

With this clarified, the question still arises: why would the sultan choose such a relatively unknown and insignificant place for his *ḥānaqāh*? One thing is certainly common among the lodges listed in the previous chapter: all were built in the urban area of Cairo (including the cemeteries). It is all the odder, then, that the sultan would choose a place so far from the city.

It is worth examining why an-Nāṣir chose Siryāqūs to be the location of the *ḥānaqāh*, instead of founding such a representative institution in a more traditional, urban milieu, like those before him. If we take another look at the map of the area, the most striking feature of it is the sizeable lake to the south of al-Ḥānka and to the east of Siryāqūs, called Birkat al-Ḥāğğī.²⁷ This name, along with the variant Birkat al-Ḥuğğāğ has been in use since the Middle Ages. It appears that in the Mamluk period, Birkat al-Ḥuğğāğ was the version predominantly used.²⁸ As the name suggests, it was an important stop – in fact, the first major resting place – for pilgrim caravans headed towards Mecca from Cairo. In my experience, the overwhelming majority of records of the lake are in fact connected to the annual pilgrimages.

²⁶ The word written as سماسيم can have several other meanings as well: a small wolf; a kind of swallow-like bird; a kind of red, stingy ants, but these are less likely. See Lane, 1869 – 1893. IV, 1420.

²⁷ Today, Birkat al-Ḥāğğī [sic!] is a suburb of Cairo with no trace of the lake whatsoever.

²⁸ The earlier name Ġubb ‘Umayra and the combined form Birkat al-Ġubb is also found in the sources.

In his *Ḥiṭaṭ*, the prolific al-Maqrīzī, dedicated a section to the most important lakes in and around Cairo (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 269–292). Regarding Birkat al-Ḥuḡḡāḡ, the author opted to list some quotations from earlier works to provide glimpses into the history of the area of the lake, instead of weaving a unified narrative (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 288–289). The relevant part starts with a citation of Ibn Muḡassar’s chronicle, regarding the long reign of al-Mustansīr. According to this, the caliph would visit this ‘place of splendid recreation’ (*mawḍi‘ nuzha bahiyya*) every year, where he and his retinue would engage in lewd and depraved festivities, even mocking the rituals of the pilgrimage.²⁹

It is not known whether later Fāṭimid rulers followed in al-Mustansīr’s footsteps, although it is unlikely, as almost all of them became puppets in the hands of powerful viziers, who relegated them to the background, curbing their extravagant ceremonies and lavish expenditure. Nonetheless, the place did not lose its appeal to later rulers: quoting al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, al-Maqrīzī mentions that Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn and his son, al-‘Azīz ‘Uṭmān both enjoyed visiting the area to hunt and to play polo (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 289).³⁰ Whether this was a conscious revival or continuation of Fāṭimid tradition or simply an obvious choice due to the area’s proximity to Cairo and its pleasant climatic conditions, cannot be decided.

Al-Maqrīzī’s other works contain additional snippets that fill the great lacunae between the events. For instance, in the chronicle dedicated to the Fāṭimids, the son and successor of al-‘Azīz, the famous al-Ḥākīm is recorded to have visited the area several times – along with other sites around Cairo – to hunt (al-Maqrīzī, *Itti‘āz* II, 31), while the history of Ayyūbid and Mamluk times mentions an occasion when aḏ-Ḍāḥir Baybars went to the lake to shoot with crossbows (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* II, 41).

Thus, it is clear that by the time of an-Nāṣir Muḡammad’s third reign, the area of the Birkat al-Ḥuḡḡāḡ had had a long – if not necessarily continuous – history of visits by rulers for leisurely purposes: mostly hunting, but also sports and exercise. More frivolous activities are only attributed to the long-gone Fāṭimids, who were considered heretical usurpers in Mamluk times, but one can surmise that at least a few of the later Sunni sultans also indulged in otherwise reprehensible activities.

4 The royal resort at Siryāqūs

According to al-Maqrīzī, in Ṣafar 722 / February–March 1322, an-Nāṣir Muḡammad went to the Birkat al-Ḥuḡḡāḡ to hunt for cranes. This particular trip had lasting consequences for the area, as the sultan decided to build enclosures (*ḥawṣ*, pl. *aḥwāṣ*) for horses and camels, along with hippodromes (*maydān*, pl. *mayādīn*; al-Maqrīzī,

²⁹ The prelude of the great Fāṭimid crisis (*aṣ-ṣidda al-‘uzmā*) also happened on one such occasion, when racial tensions between different factions of the army erupted into violence. This is elaborated in al-Maqrīzī, *Itti‘āz* II, 265.

³⁰ A specific occasion in 577/1181 is mentioned in al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* I, 185.

Ḥiṭaṭ III, 289–290). In the chapter dedicated to the hippodromes (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 345–350) the one built near Birkat al-Ḥuġġāġ is called *maydān Siryāqūs*. It is in this section that the reader can learn that the project entailed much more than large grounds for riding beasts: the sultan “built majestic palaces and several dwellings for the *amīrs*, and planted a large garden in it, to which he brought all kinds of fruit-bearing trees from Damascus, along with gardeners from Syria, to plant and graft the trees. Grapevines and quince and all other kinds of fruits prospered in it. When it was completed in [7]25/1325, he went out along with the *amīrs* and the notabilities and settled in the palaces there, while the *amīrs* and notabilities settled in their dwellings in the places built for them. He would go there every year until he died, staying there for days, playing polo. His sons who ruled after him did this [as well]” (Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 348–349).³¹ In other words, a resort was built on the hippodrome grounds, thus creating a permanent base for visits by the ruler and the courtiers. By this act, the role of the Birkat al-Ḥuġġāġ – or rather the neighbouring village of Siryāqūs – as the preferred leisure ground was cemented and institutionalized.³²

It seems that the idea of building palaces near the hippodromes only gradually took shape. Regarding the starting date, the contemporary Egyptian al-Fāḥirī laconically recorded that the palace at Siryāqūs was laid out in Rabīʿ II 723 / April–May 1323 (al-Fāḥirī, *Tārīḥ* I, 257). The Damascene author Ibn ad-Dawādārī mentions the beginning of the works: “this year [= 723/1323] the construction began in Siryāqūs. He [i.e. the sultan] built the palace, the *ḥānaqāh*, the baths, the gardens, the nice lookouts (*manāẓir*), the hippodrome and other things here. This took place at the end of *Ḍū l-Ḥiġġa* this year” (Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz* IX, 313). Al-Maqrīzī also reports that it was only at the very end of 723/1323 that the construction of the palaces started (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 67).

The scale of this ambitious plan is well demonstrated by the fact that it also entailed the excavation of a whole new canal.³³ The main purpose of the new al-Ḥalīġ an-Nāṣirī was to provide a navigable waterway to the area of Siryāqūs, “to carry the necessary crops and other things there” (Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 258).³⁴ The construction of the canal was recorded by several contemporary authors, including the Aleppine Ibn al-Wardī and Ibn Ḥabīb, the Damascene Ibn ad-Dawādārī and the Cairene an-Nuwayrī, who all give differing versions regarding the dates. Ibn Ḥabīb

³¹ See also Williams’s translation with minor omissions (Williams 1986:110).

³² In fact, the hippodrome of al-Qabaq near the Bāb al-Naṣr was demolished, while the *maṣṭaba* next to the Birkat al-Ḥabaš was abandoned, as they became obsolete after the completion of the Siryāqūs complex (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 258).

³³ Regarding the Nāṣirī canal, see Levanoni 1995:163–164.

³⁴ Interestingly enough, the canal did not in fact reach Siryāqūs, as stated by the contemporary al-Fāḥirī (*Tārīḥ* I, 260), as it merely brought additional water from the Nile at Fam al-Ḥawr (near the Northern end of the Rawḍa island) to the ancient Great or Ḥākīmī canal (*al-Ḥalīġ al-kabīr* / *al-ḥākīmī*) from the west, in the place known as *arḍ at-Ṭabbāla* (around the present-day Ġamra metro station).

only records the year 724/1323–4 (Ibn Ḥabīb, *Taḍkira* II, 145), Ibn al-Wardī gives the month as Ġumādā II (= May/June 1324; Ibn al-Wardī, *Tārīḥ* II, 266), while according to Ibn ad-Dawādārī, it happened in Ša‘bān (July/August 1324; Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz* IX, 315). An-Nuwayrī, while providing more details, lists the construction among the events of the following year (an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XV, 135–136.) According to the *Ḥiṭaṭ*, the construction works were carried out between 1 Ġumādā I–30 Ġumādā II 725/15 April–13 June 1325 (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 258).³⁵

The chronology of the events we can establish from the information reviewed above is that an-Nāṣir Muḥammad decided to build hippodromes and animal enclosures in the area between Siryāqūs and the hunting grounds of the Birkat al-Ḥuġġāġ in the spring of 722/1322. This must have been a great success, adding to the appeal of the area, as in 723/1323 the sultan decided to develop the area into a special resort with palaces and gardens for himself and his retinue, with the works starting at the end of the year. This entailed an expansion of the canals to the west and northwest of Cairo starting from 724/1324. The *ḥānaqāh*, however, is rarely (if at all) mentioned in connection with these events.

5 The foundation of the *ḥānaqāh* and the opening festivities

It appears that erecting a *ḥānaqāh* had not been a central idea to an-Nāṣir’s project in Siryāqūs – in fact, the function of a Šūfī lodge, no matter how majestic the building, did not really befit a place of royal recreation. Due to the lack and/or silence of contemporary records, we must again turn to the *Ḥiṭaṭ* as to what exactly drove the sultan to create a Šūfī lodge near this new resort. As the author reports, during the construction of the enclosures, an-Nāṣir fell ill on one of his hunting trips. The abdominal pain was so severe that the sultan swore an oath: he would build a place of worship on that certain spot if God healed him. When the ruler recovered after a few days, he returned to the area with architects and outlined the location of a *ḥānaqāh*, “about a mile from the district of Siryāqūs” (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 294). In his *Sulūk*, al-Maqrīzī gives the distance more realistically as “about a farsaḥ”, and also provides a date – confirming that the *ḥānaqāh* was a late addition to the Siryāqūs project, as the works started in Rabī‘ II 725 / March-April 1325 (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 80).

Even though the lodge was quite large – described as spacious and lofty (*fasīḥa*, *mušayyada*) by Ibn Ḥabīb (Ibn Ḥabīb, *Taḍkira* II, 149) and simply as large (‘*aẓīm*)

³⁵As to why the Syrian writers recorded the previous year, a plausible explanation can be that they either confounded or linked the construction of the Nāṣirī canal with the extension of the older Ḍikr canal, that indeed had happened a year earlier. The Nāṣirī canal then superseded the Ḍikr canal which had disappeared by al-Maqrīzī’s time (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 257).

by the traveller Ibn Baṭṭūta (Ibn Baṭṭūta, *Rihla*, 61)³⁶ – and was meant to contain a hundred *ḥalwas* for a hundred mystics, along with a Friday mosque, a place to accommodate guests, baths and a kitchen, it is said that the construction was carried out in a mere 40 days (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 80).

The grand opening of the *ḥānaqāh* took place in early Ğumādā II 725 / end of May 1325, according to most authors, even though there are differences as to the exact day: Ibn Kaṭīr writes the “beginning” of Ğumādā II (Ibn Kaṭīr, *Bidāya* XVIII, 255), Ibn al-Ġazarī and al-Fāḥirī record the 6th (Ibn al-Ġazarī, *Tārīḥ* II, 72; al-Fāḥirī, *Tārīḥ* I, 263), an-Nuwayrī the 9th of Ğumādā II (an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XV, 136.). Ibn ad-Dawādārī gives the date as the 9th of Ğumādā I, wherein the month seems to be erroneous (Ibn ad-Dawādārī, *Kanz* IX, 319). In the *Ḥiṭaṭ*, al-Maqrīzī brings up a third date, the 7th of Ğumādā II (*Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 294), but in the *Sulūk*, a more nuanced description seems to reconcile some of the inconsistencies. According to this narrative, the sultan himself went to the new *ḥānaqāh* on the 6th of the month, and the opening festivities were held on the 9th (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 81).³⁷

The description of the ceremonies is basically the same everywhere. At the order of the sultan, all the chief judges, members of the ‘*ulamā*’, the sheikhs of all *ḥānaqāhs*, *ribāṭs* and *zāwiyas* of Cairo along with al-Fuṣṭāṭ and al-Qarāfa and their Šūfīs were present, who were joined by an-Nāšir, the viceroy, and the high-ranking *amīrs* and officials.³⁸ At the ceremony, the sultan listened to 20 hadiths from the *Tusā’iyyāt* of the qāḍī Badr ad-Dīn Ibn Ğamā’a, recited by his son, ‘Izz ad-Dīn Ibn Ğamā’a. The ruler then presented several of the notabilities with honorary robes, then offered a luxurious feast to the guests with all kinds of meats, sweets, and drinks, and finally distributed about 60.000 dirhams worth of silver and gold to the Šūfīs (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 294; *Sulūk* III, 81).

Initially forty mystics were placed in the new *ḥānaqāh*, but later their number was increased to hundred, as reported by an-Nuwayrī (*Nihāya* XV, 137).³⁹ The gradual increase in the number of the residents might explain the amazing speed at which the building was erected; I am inclined to think that the complex was not in fact finished after only two months of work, and was only completed later. The Šūfīs

³⁶ It seems that the Mağribī traveller, who arrived in Egypt in 726/1326, either did not see the building – which he tellingly calls *zāwīyat Siryāquṣ* [sic!] – or was not particularly awed by it, as the brief mention he dedicated to it is only an excuse to extol the virtues of the Marīnid ruler Abū ‘Inān and his *zāwīya*.

³⁷ The *waqfiyya* itself, which, among its provisions, includes the appointment of al-Aqṣarā’ī as grand sheikh, is dated 7th of Ğumādā II. (Williams 1986:112); however, it is entirely possible that the document was issued before the ceremony itself.

³⁸ No governors or vassals were invited; nonetheless the subordinate ruler of Ḥamāh, Abū l-Fidā’ decided to offer suitable gifts for the *ḥānaqāh*, e.g. books, carpets and the like (Abū l-Fidā’, *Muḥtaṣar* IV, 94).

³⁹ The *waqfiyya* that made provisions for settling an additional 60 mystics in the *ḥānaqāh* was issued on 12 Jumādā I 726 / 16 April 1326 (Williams 1986:114).

were paid a monthly stipend of 40 dirhams and were entitled to have three *raṭls* of bread every day, along with a daily meal (*simāt*) served for both those living there and the visitors (an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XV, 137).⁴⁰

In the end, the *ḥānaqāh* accommodated 100 mystics – a mere quarter of the capacity of al-Muzaffar Baybars’s lodge. Again, should al-Nāṣir Muḥammad have intended to compete with his predecessor, he would have certainly built an institution of equal size if not bigger. There were also some differences regarding the governing rules: the Ṣūfīs of Siryāqūs were not allowed to live outside the lodge, which at this point would not have been feasible anyway, as there were no dwellings in the vicinity. This might have been a reason why resident mystics were employed for tasks within the lodge instead of outsiders. Guests were welcome only for three days, and unlike Baybars’s *ḥānaqāh*, foreigners did not enjoy special privileges (Fernandes 1988:31). Such features do not suggest an attempt to outshine the rival complex.

6 The sultan, the lodge and the first sheikhs

At the opening ceremony, a certain Maḡd ad-Dīn Abū Ḥāmid Mūsā b. Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd al-Aqṣarā’ī al-Ḥanafī (d. 740/1339)⁴¹ was appointed as the head of the new *ḥānaqāh*. This new function came with the title of *ṣayḥ aš-ṣuyūḥ*, indicating a position similar to that of the leader of the prestigious Sa’īd as-Su’adā’ lodge. He was also to receive enviable wages: out of the 7000 dirhams that the *ḥānaqāh* received each month, 2000 was his due (an-Nuwayrī, *Nihāya* XV, 137). If there is one domain in which al-Nāṣir’s lodge undoubtedly surpassed that of Baybars, it was the salaries and remunerations provided to the residents (Fernandes 1988:71) – however, this might have also been a necessity due to the remoteness of the location, which could have made procuring everyday goods more expensive.

The new grand master was a personal acquaintance of the great biographer aṣ-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363) – in fact, the latter was initiated into Ṣūfism by him in 738/1337–8. Aṣ-Ṣafadī’s biography of al-Aqṣarā’ī, full of hyperbolic praise, does not contain much exact information about him, apart from the fact that he used to live in Alexandria, then came to Cairo, where he became the sheikh of Baktamur as-Sāqī’s *ḥānaqāh* in the Qarāfa (aṣ-Ṣafadī, *A’yān* V, 474). This, however, is an error on aṣ-Ṣafadī’s part, as Baktamur’s *ḥānaqāh* was opened later than the Nāṣiriyya in

⁴⁰ For a detailed listing of the buildings along with the offices, duties, and salaries of the residents, see Williams 1986:111–116.

⁴¹ For his biography, see aṣ-Ṣafadī, *A’yān* V, 473–476. [no. 1888]. He is mentioned in passing among an-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s great *‘ulamā’* as “the grand master of the recitators” (*ṣayḥ ṣuyūḥ al-qurrā’*) by Ibn Baṭṭūta (*Riḥla* 64), but I am inclined to think that the word *al-qurrā’* is merely a corruption of *al-fuqarā’* (“the poor”), a term often used to denote the Ṣūfīs – which may be a sign of the traveller’s lack of information regarding the Nāṣiriyya.

Siryāqūs.⁴² Al-Aqşarā'ī in fact had been the master of another lodge built a few years earlier: that of Karīm ad-Dīn, also in the lesser Qarāfa (aş-Şuġā'ī, *Tārīḥ*, 92; Ibn Ḥaġar, *Durar* IV, 373).⁴³ From this position, he was transferred to the new lodge in Siryāqūs. It seems that the ruler was satisfied with his services, as in 727/1327, when the head of the Sa'īd as-Su'adā' lodge became chief *qāḏī* and grand sheikh in Damascus, al-Aqşarā'ī was given his *maşyaḥa* as well. This new position appears to have been nominal, with presumable financial advantages, as the new grand sheikh was ordered to appoint a certain individual as his deputy at the Sa'īd as-Su'adā' (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 100), which most probably means that he was not involved in the direction of the urban *ḥānaqāh*.

Al-Aqşarā'ī died on 17 Rabī' II 740 / 22 October 1339, in his seventies (aş-Şafadī, *A'yān* V, 476; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 289). The special position of the lodge for an-Nāşir Muḥammad is evident from his personal involvement in appointing the grand master's successor, even if we have conflicting narratives regarding that event. The contemporary biographer aş-Şuġā'ī simply states that after the sheikh's death the sultan appointed his servant, Rukn ad-Dīn al-Malaṭī. This, however, caused dissatisfaction with the Şūfīs, who did not wish to accept the lowly servant as their master – upon which an-Nāşir said that the deceased al-Aqşarā'ī himself had recommended al-Malaṭī as his heir, and offered the possibility to leave for those who did not like the decision (aş-Şuġā'ī, *Tārīḥ*, 67). A more detailed and quite different version is preserved by al-Maqrīzī, whose source in this case is not identified. According to this, a few days after al-Aqşarā'ī's death, the sheikhs Şams ad-Dīn al-Işfahānī and Qawām ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī arrived at Siryāqūs with a group of Şūfīs from the Sa'īd as-Su'adā' *ḥānaqāh*. The sultan himself rode to the gate of the lodge on 28 Rabī' II / 2 November, where the mystics came forth to greet him. There he asked them to elect a new sheikh, but as they refrained from nominating anyone, the ruler decided himself. His choice was a certain ar-Rukn or Rukn al-Dīn al-Malaṭī (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 277). Either way, the sultan was visibly involved in the selection of the new leader of his lodge.

Al-Malaṭī seems to have been low-profile compared to his predecessor. Very few details are known about him – I have not even found information regarding his full name. Whether or not the ruler chose him at the behest of al-Aqşarā'ī, one thing is certain: he was not a temporary solution, as he remained in his position until an-Nāşir's death about two years later. The sheikh was then sent off to India on an official mission in 744/1343 (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* III, 398), only to return ten years later, in 754/1353. He was soon reinstated as grand sheikh with some opposition by influential courtiers (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* IV, 175), but it is unclear how long he held

⁴² On 8 Raġab 726 / 10 June 1326 (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 287).

⁴³ Ibn Ḥaġar also specifies that already in Alexandria he used to serve as the head of a local Şūfī lodge, founded by a certain Bīlik al-Muḥsinī.

on to it or even when he died – similarly to how the records of the Nāširiyya *ḥānaqāh* become sporadic and sketchy after the death of the founder.

Epilogue

Interestingly enough, the Siryāqūs resort, to which the *ḥānaqāh* was a late and outlying addition, disappeared well before the lodge, without any trace. The later Qalāwūnid sultans and even the first Circassian ruler, az-Zāhir Barqūq, maintained the custom of regularly visiting al-Nāšir's resort in the autumn months. However, after Barqūq's last visit in 800/1397 it was abandoned (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* V, 407), became dilapidated and in early 825/1422, less than a hundred years after the construction began, the formerly glorious complex was sold for a mere 100 dinars to be reused as building material (al-Maqrīzī, *Ḥiṭaṭ* III, 349).

As for the *ḥānaqāh*, its importance seems to have diminished after the death of the founder – at least we might infer from the relative lack of records that the sultans did not pay as much attention to it as an-Nāšir had. However, the institution flourished and soon became a nucleus for a settlement. Already al-ʿUmarī (d. 749/1349) reports that the first station (*markaz*) of the royal post on the road between Cairo and Bilbays was relocated from the remote and isolated al-ʿUšš to the vicinity of the *ḥānaqāh* in Siryāqūs, where several markets had sprung up (al-ʿUmarī, *Taʿrīf*, 272). Thus, the main road between Egypt and Syria was diverted to pass through the settlement around the lodge, which quickly developed into a bustling market town with several houses, caravanserais, inns and baths as attested by al-Maqrīzī's description (*Ḥiṭaṭ* IV, 294). This rapid growth created the settlement, which the sultan al-Ašraf Barsbāy deemed worthy enough to adorn with a Friday mosque – the one that stands as the lone reminder of al-Ḥānka's golden age.

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