MY LIFE WITH SALAH AL-DIN:

THE MEMOIRS OF 'IMAD AL-DIN AL-KATIB AL-ISFAHANI[1]

In a highly original work of medieval Arabic literature, 'Imad al-Din Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad ibn Safiyy al-Din Muhammad, known as al-'Imad or as al-Katib al-Isfahani (1125-1201), recorded his life and work as the highest ranking *katib* (secretary or scribe) at the courts of both Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din [Saladin] in Syria and, through his dealings with them, provided a distinctly personal and authoritative assessment of these two princes and their reigns. The book was affectionately dedicated to Salah al-Din and was completed in 1199, six years after his death (Abu Shama 1962, 2: 234; Ibn Khallikan 1968-72, 5: 152). It was entitled *al-Barq al-Shami (The Syrian Thunderbolt),* an allusion to the brief and intense reigns of Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din, the two heroes of the jihad against the Crusaders, who, 'Imad al-Din implies, were never to be equaled by their successors.

Al-Barq al-Shami is a kind of professional diary; it includes personal memoranda, reflections, and copious quotations from 'Imad al-Din's poems, official letters, and diplomas of investiture woven into a year-by-year chronicle of his service in the administration of the two sovereigns (1167-1193). It originally filled either seven or nine volumes but of them only volumes three and five — covering the years 1177-79 and 1182-83 respectively — remain; they were recently edited and published in Amman (al-Katib [3] and [5] 1987). Also available is the first part of a condensed version entitled *Sana al-Barq al-Shami,* covering the years from 1167 down to 1187, compiled by al-Fath b. 'Ali al-Bundari in 1224, shortly after 'Imad al-Din's death. Al-Bundari seems to have kept all the essential material in his abridgment; he limits himself to shortening the poetic quotations and minimizing the rhyming intricacies of 'Imad al-Din's flamboyant prose in order to make the book accessible to the common reader (al-Bundari 1979: 12-13).[2]

In reading the two original volumes and the abridgment of *al-Barq al-Shami*, it becomes clear that 'Imad al-Din is no ordinary chronicler. His narrative recounts the actions of his patron in a way that gives the events a highly personal touch, relating them mainly in the first person plural and emphasizing the role he himself played in them. He clearly regarded his acts

as complementary, and sometimes even equal in importance, to Salah al-Din's own in achieving the latter's political and strategic aims. Furthermore, 'Imad al-Din writes about himself, his travels and meandering, his talents, his fortunes and misfortunes, his relations with Salah al-Din and other amirs and administrators, especially al-Qadi al-Fadil (1131-1199) his benefactor and Salah al-Din's vizier in Egypt, and his interpretation of the critical events he witnessed. The annalistic structure according to which the narrative material is arranged is thus given an unmistakable autobiographical flavor which offers us the opportunity to sketch a portrait of 'Imad al-Din as courtier, administrator, scholar, and human being, and to probe into the mentality of this proud Muslim intellectual. Such an opportunity is otherwise unusual; only rulers had biographers who recorded the minutest details of their lives and exploits, albeit in a somewhat detached and formulaic ways, during the medieval Islamic period. The lives of those who helped making their achievements possible were for the most part ignored. Extended biographies or autobiographies of men of the sword *(rijal al-sayf)* or men of the pen *(rijal al-qalam)* (i.e., the amirs and the bureaucrats respectively, who formed the basis of political power at the time) are exceedingly rare. The biographies that do exist appear in dizzying alphabetical succession in specialized or general prosobiographies, which became an important and widespread genre in the medieval period. But these entries usually present a fixed set of information —full names, dates of birth and death, family connections, education, employment history, and quotations from poetry, if the person had composed any— and leave out most personal or anecdotal detail about the individual himself (or, very rarely, herself).[3]

But, although *al-Barq al-Shami* displays the quintessential autobiographical qualities of first-person narrative — intimacy, immediacy, and the inevitable hint of vanity — 'Imad al-Din avoids referring to it as an autobiography or a memoir. Instead, he states his objective to be to recount and praise the deeds of his patron Salah al-Din. He ingeniously, however, turns up in the story not only as its narrator, but also as an actor in it and, sometimes, as its central figure. His preface gives us the first inkling of the politely convoluted fashion by which he accomplishes this feat.[4] He begins by saying that he "will report how he originally met Salah al-Din and will describe the beginning of his career until he [al-'Imad] arrived in Syria and

joined his staff, then he will chronicle every year of Salah al-Din's reign and list all of his good deeds." Then he goes on to say that his "pen has accompanied Salah al-Din's sword and helped his dominion; the former providing endorsement, the latter causing death, the former upholding security, the latter inducing fear." Thus, 'Imad al-Din makes sure that the reader will marvel at the deeds not only of Salah al-Din but of the author as well. And, as if to sanction this scenario, al-'Imad has Salah al-Din exclaim in the most conventional literary manner "Thank God, for He did not cause me to be disappointed by al-'Imad, and He coupled my success with his." After this smug remark, al-'Imad goes on to emphasize his loyalty to Salah al-Din both during his lifetime and after his passing. But, even here, he cannot but boast that his writing "perpetuates the good memory of his departed patron, glorifies his deeds, and offers him a second life after death." (al-Bundari 1979: 14).

Thus, from the beginning of the book, it is clear that we are dealing with a reporter keenly aware of his own talents and eager to show them off both in his style of writing and in demonstrating his impact on the events he is reporting. He is much more boastful by the ethical standards of the time than the nearly contemporary, straightforward autobiographer, Amir Usama b. Munqidh (1095-1188). In his *Kitab al-I'tibar,* Usama admits that his is an autobiography but professes his unease at writing it. He justifies it by saying that he felt his life was worth reporting not because his own deeds were exceptional — although indeed they were in that crucial period of Islamic history, especially his role in the denouement of the Fatimid caliphate— but because lessons could be learned from the events he witnessed and recorded, thus the choice of the term *al-i'tibar* ("learning by example"), as his book's title. He stresses this point further by stating that at the end of an exceptionally long and adventurous life spent in fighting, hunting, scheming, and traveling between the various courts of Egypt, Syria, and Crusader Palestine, he realized that nothing could advance or delay death, the only unpredictable and unavoidable truth. He offers the story of his life as an illustration and confirmation of that overarching conviction (Ibn Munqidh 1930: 160-62; Miquel 1986: 7-11). No such philosophical musing or protestations of humility transpire in *al-Barq al-Shami.* Indeed, one feels that al-'Imad is eager to recount his deeds precisely because they reflect and

illustrate his individual merit and exceptional talents. Why H. A. R. Gibb would consider him rather modest in his claims when he analyzed the same book forty years ago is therefore puzzling (Gibb 1953: 99).

Al-'Imad introduces his chronicle with an inventive maneuver which accentuates its autobiographical outlook. Instead of beginning with the ascent to the throne of the main character or the rise to power of the new dynasty, he starts with a personal incident, his arrival at Damascus in 1167, which falls at an otherwise unimportant moment in the reign of Nur al-Din ibn Zangi. Similarly, he uses the discussion of Nur al-Din's praiseworthy career as a backdrop for presenting Salah al-Din as one of his most trusted aides, and someone who emulated his example, absorbed his qualities, and learned from him the rules of government and the protocols of kingship. This narrative device permits al-'Imad to insure the firsthand quality of his reporting without having constantly to remind the reader that he himself was present. It also, and more importantly, allows him to connect his activities with those of his two patrons, and, in a few instances, even boldly to do the reverse, namely to place his actions at the center and compel his patrons' actions to proceed from them. Hence, the autobiographical quality of *al-Barq al-Shami* is inherent in its method and style, and does not depend solely on the personal nature of documents al-'Imad includes and the poems he cites.

After his introductory remarks, al-'Imad moves on to establish his family's credentials, perhaps to make up for his subordinate status as a simple *katib* in the sultan's court by presenting himself instead as a consultant to Salah al-Din, even a family friend and an ally. He explains how the long relationship between his family and the Ayyubids, which predated his arrival at Damascus, began. His uncle, al-'Aziz Ahmad ibn Hamid, known as al-Mustawfi, a famous *katib* who worked for several patrons in Seljuqid Iraq and was probably 'Imad al-Din's model, was arrested, and his property confiscated; he was then sent by Sultan Mahmud, his last Seljuq employer, to prison in the citadel of Takrit in 1131 when Najm al-Din b. Ayyub, the father of Salah al-Din, was its castellan. There, Najm al-Din and his brother, Asad al-Din Shirkuh, took al-'Aziz under their protection. Sympathy and mutual respect arose between them, although the brothers could not prevent al-'Aziz's eventual execution by strict order of the

sultan (al-Bundari 1889: 111, 163-68; Ibn Khallikan 1968-78, 1:188-89). Al-'Aziz was apparently still well remembered when al-'Imad arrived in Damascus in May of 1167, for Najm al-Din welcomed him into his entourage. Najm al-Din also extended his patronage by accepting a panegyric he composed, in which he claims that he had predicted the conquest of Egypt at the hands of Najm al-Din's son Salah al-Din and his brother Shirkuh, who were then in that country on their second expedition in three years. It was during this second expedition that Salah al-Din distinguished himself by holding out in Alexandria with a small number of troops against the combined forces of the Fatimids and the Franks before a truce could be concluded. Al-'Imad's premonition, however, did not come true then, for Shirkuh and Salah al-Din returned to Syria having gained very little. It was not until the third expedition in October 1168 that the Syrians managed to take control of the country and Shirkuh was installed as the vizier of the Fatimid caliph al-'Adid. Shortly afterward, Shirkuh suddenly died, and in January 1169 Salah al-Din succeeded his uncle as the vizier of Egypt.[5]

For the time, al-'Imad's prophetic poem was neither outrageous in its claims nor a novelty in its form. Contemporary eulogists and propagandists routinely used dream visions and oneiromancy to predict political success and conquests such as the conquest of the Fatimid state or the reconquest of Crusader-held territories. Inspirational texts and poems of this sort played a crucial role in the efforts to rekindle the notion of jihad and unify the Islamic front against the Crusaders which were begun by individual ulama before they were integrated into a state policy by Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din after him (Sivan 1966: 197-224,esp. 207, 210-11; Dajani-Shakeel 1976: 96-113). But al-'Imad, concerned as he was with proving his prominence in Salah al-Din's court, might also have used his eulogy to bolster the idea of an almost preordained and multi-generational association between his family and the Ayyubids. Before citing his poem, he reports having heard Shirkuh in 1167 reminisce about an oracular experience he once had while sitting with al-'Aziz reading the Qur'an in a mihrab (niche in a mosque's wall indicating the place of the prayer leader), presumably in the citadel of Takrit. Shirkuh is said to have heard a voice say, "God has made you an *'aziz* because you have defended al-'Aziz." More extraordinarily, al-'Aziz is reported to have turned to Shirkuh and

commented, "act and know (?)," as if he too has heard the same voice. *'Aziz,* which literally means mighty, is used in the Qur'an as the title of the ancient ruler of Egypt during the lifetime of the Patriarch Joseph, hence the reference is to the rule of Egypt. Shirkuh is supposed to have claimed that, ever since that day, he had hoped and connived to attain that elusive goal of ruling Egypt: a seemingly impossible ambition for an as-yet-minor Kurdish officer living with his brother in a godforsaken citadel on the banks of the Tigris river. But the implication of al-'Imad's recounting the episode in his memoir is clear and direct — and would have been even clearer to a twelfth-century reader than to a modern, more skeptical one: Providence had selected the Ayyubids to rule Egypt, but had also chosen al-'Aziz's family to presage that decree and to help the Ayyubids achieve the goal for which they were predestined.

Nor was al-'Imad's presentation of poetic eulogies to powerful people unusual. It was a conventional method of the time by which learned men drew the attention of patrons to their literary talents and procured rewards or employment as administrators or tutors in their courts or households. Al-'Imad's poetry —stilted and affected but highly literate and figurative— secured him proper introductions to royal and princely courts everywhere from Baghdad to Damascus and Cairo, and, in at least one case, obtained his release from prison after he had been thrown there on the death of his first patron, the vizier 'Awn al-Din b. Hubayra (d. 1165), in Baghdad (Ibn Khallikan 1968-78, 5: 151).[6] His association with Ibn Hubayra, a staunch Hanbali vizier who corresponded with Nur al-Din about the creation of a Sunni state, might have helped al-'Imad find a place at Nur al-Din's court, but he does not say so (Élisséeff 1967, 3: 603, 705).

In Damascus, al-'Imad penned several poems in which he praised the Ayyubid princes, who had apparently taken him under their protection, for he tells us of several incidents in which either Ayyub or Shirkuh included him among his close companions on military campaigns or interceded on his behalf with Nur al-Din. But his most effective patron was Qadi Kamal al-Din al-Shahrazuri, the chief qadi (judge) under Nur al-Din who happened to be the father of Muhiyy al-Din al-Shahrazuri, al-'Imad's classmate from his days at the famous Madrasa al-Nizamiyya in Baghdad. On recommendation of the qadi's, who also suggested that

he present a panegyric to Nur al-Din, al-'Imad was appointed to the chancery a few months after his arrival in Damascus. There, he distinguished himself both in intelligence and wit, and in writing and composition in both Arabic and Persian which earned him the sobriquet *dhu al-balaghatayn* (the doubly eloquent). He was elevated to the highest rank in the bureaucracy and became both the head *katib* and the supervisor of the *diwan al-insha'* (chancery). He also became one of the closest advisers to Nur al-Din and a trusted emissary, especially to courts where al-'Imad still had connections from his days in the caliphal court in Baghdad. He was twice sent to the "East" on diplomatic missions, first to Khilat in 1169 and then to Baghdad in 1170, but neither mission seems to have been particularly successful (al-Bundari, 1979: 46, 48-49).

As he rose in the Nurid administration, al-'Imad still clung to his scholarly vocation. When he first arrived in Damascus, he had been given the rectorship of the Shafi'ite Madrasa al-Nuriyya al-Sughra (the lesser) inside Bab al-Faraj next to the citadel (it has since disappeared). The madrasa was subsequently called al-'Imadiyya after him, and he seems to have remained rector there until the end of his life.[7] This decision might have been motivated solely by fear and prudence: al-'Imad and his family had all too frequently and painfully experienced the erratic swings of a ruler's favors and the ruination of expulsion from the bureaucracy for him not to appreciate the stability and security of a legally sanctioned and permanent *mudarris* (madrasa professor) income. But he may also have considered scholarship to be his true calling, and his chancery duties as his social obligation and livelihood. This sentiment, unexpressed in *al-Barq al-Shami,* comes across in a comment elsewhere where al-'Imad reports on his first position in the diwan in 1157 that "[the vizier ibn Hubayra] transferred me from the madrasa to the workplace, and put an end to my preoccupation with religious studies, and thought that by employing me he had adorned my inactive existence." (al-Bundari 1889: 255; Richards 1993: 135). By this remark, al-'Imad seems to imply that he was not too pleased with the move although it is clear from his action preceding it (he wrote a long panegyric to the caliph al-Muqtafi Billah) that he also instigated it. The ambivalence was more than personal indecisiveness: it echoed the moral dilemma that he faced as a member of the new

class of bureaucrat/ulama who hesitantly moved from teaching in madrasas to working in the administration and who, perhaps, thought of their dabbling in the tricky affairs of state as a way of influencing political decisions in that critical period to the advantage of the cause of Islam (Humphreys 1977: 377-80). That conviction permeates *al-Barq al-Shami*, and is even more clearly articulated in the correspondence exchanged between al-'Imad and al-Qadi al-Fadil, Salah al-Din's highest and ablest operative. Between the two of them, al-'Imad and al-Qadi al-Fadil stirred Salah al-Din's policies toward what they perceived to be the primary duty of his state: the jihad against the Crusaders (Sivan 1968: 67-70, 102-8; Dajani-Shakeel 1993: 183-84, 217-22, 231-39).

Nur al-Din died after a brief illness in May 1174. His passing left his life project, the jihad against the Crusaders with its utmost aim of liberating Jerusalem, unfinished. Like other pious ulama who had served Nur al-Din with that goal in mind, al-'Imad was genuinely distressed and in total disarray. His sense of loss —both on the personal and collective level— is poignantly expressed in a number of heartfelt elegies to Nur al-Din which count among his best poetry in both style and meaning (Abu Shama 1956-1962, 2: 588, 625-27). In them, al-'Imad laments that the cause of the counter-Crusade cannot be pursued without a leading amir behind whom the chronically divided Islamic forces can be compelled to unite. With Nur al-Din gone, he seems to have seen in Salah al-Din the only amir able enough to unify the Islamic camp— or so he unambiguously asserts in a letter composed on behalf of Nur al-Din's minor son, al-Salih Isma'il, which was sent to Salah al-Din to announce the death of his father and to request his oath of allegiance (Abu Shama 1956-1962, 2: 586).[8] This view was patently contrary to that held by the clique that formed around al-Salih Isma'il, who justifiably feared that if Salah al-Din came to Syria he would strip them of their positions and privileges. Consequently, al-'Imad fell out with them and soon found himself out of work, sick, and in self-imposed exile in Mosul.

In 1175, he decided to return to Baghdad to seek reemployment in the caliphal chancery, when he heard that Salah al-Din was back in Syria. He rushed to Damascus where he learned that Salah al-Din had gone north to besiege Aleppo. He started on his way to Salah al-Din, and

midway to Homs sent him a eulogy as soon as he heard that he had taken the city of Baalbek. He followed this first poem with many more, written while he traveled in Salah al-Din's company around central Syria, hoping that the sultan would finally employ him. But, despite his unrelenting poetic adulations and his much-vaunted friendship with and support for Salah al-Din, al-'Imad did not readily gain entry into his court, possibly owing to lingering misgivings about his Zangid associations at a time when al-Salih Isma'il (or at least his handlers) were firmly resisting Salah al-Din's hegemonial plans in Syria. It was not until al-Qadi al-Fadil, whom al-'Imad had met for the first time and probably managed to impress with his poetry and prose, recommended him that he was appointed to the secretariat of the sultan on the excuse that al-Qadi al-Fadil was needed in Cairo and the sultan required an able *katib* with him in Syria. Afterward, al-'Imad rose again to become the *katib al-sirr,* or the private secretary, of the sultan and accompanied Salah al-Din on all but three of his campaigns (the exceptions were Ramla, Askalan, and Jerusalem) despite his relatively old age and his repeated complaints about his frailty. He also became the sultan's ghost-poet, supplying verses on command so that Salah al-Din could adorn his personal letters with them as expressions of his feelings toward his brothers and friends or, in one instance, his longing for Cairo (al-Bundari 1979: 23, 107, 158 [longer citation in al-Katib 1987(3):140], 179-80).

Throughout his career in Salah al-Din's court, al-'Imad, ever the proud and unrestrained single-minded *katib*, nevertheless always deferred to al-Qadi al-Fadil as his benefactor, superior, and model in both administration and epistolary style. *Al-Barq al-Shami* is replete with letters that the two men exchanged over the years; from them it is clear that although they had become intimate friends, al-'Imad remained loyally subordinate to al-Qadi al-Fadil and dependent officially and financially on his largesse (al-Katib 1987(3): 3:24-28 [a panegyric to al-Qadi al-Fadil], 110-126). Al-'Imad gives the impression that he considered al-Qadi al-Fadil a patron, albeit one equal to him intellectually, even after he had become securely attached to Salah al-Din's court. For instance, he composed eulogies in al-Qadi al-Fadil's honor and translated books from Persian to Arabic on his order.[9] He also received gifts of money either directly from al-Qadi al-Fadil or from a circle of high officials including al-Qadi al-Fadil and

such leading amirs as al-'Adil, Salah al-Din's brother, which suggests that a clientage bond existed between al-'Imad and al-Qadi al-Fadil similar to the one that predictably defined the relationship between al-'Imad and the Ayyubid amir. Al-'Imad almost admitted as much in the obituary he penned for al-Qadi al-Fadil, in which he writes, "I was counted among his people and depended on his support and my epistolary style was derived from his." (Dajani-Shakeel 1993: 348).

After the death of Salah al-Din in 1193, al-'Imad did not find the respect he expected in his sons' courts, so he returned to private life and spent his remaining years writing and teaching at the Madrasa al-'Imadiyya. In addition to *al-Barq al-Shami*, he compiled at least three historical tracts during those years, all now lost except for some excerpts in later historical compilations. They appear to be addenda to *al-Barq* elegizing Salah al-Din and pessimistically describing the events following his death and the disagreement between his sons and their uncle al-'Adil (al-Bundari 1971: 20-22). It seems that al-'Imad, by then an old man of sixty-eight, considered Salah al-Din's passing the end of the heroic age in which he had played an important part. He shared his grief and despair with al-Qadi al-Fadil, his soulmate, associate, and tireless correspondent whose own death in Cairo in 1199 came as another major blow (Dajani-Shakeel 1993: 343-48). Perhaps as a last token of recognition to a departed friend, al-'Imad intended to write al-Qadi al-Fadil's biography, but he died in 1201 before he had completed it. He was buried in Damascus in the famous cemetery of the Sufis to the west of the city outside the Bab al-Nasr (it has unfortunately disappeared in the wake of modern urban expansion).

The events related in *al-Barq al-Shami* in which al-'Imad plays a central role vary widely, but as a whole they provide a fair portrayal of the duties of a medieval Muslim *katib*. They ranged from the mundane and expected functions of a busy chancery— consulting, communicating the orders of the sultan to provincial authorities, and writing treatises, letters of appointment, and diplomas of investiture— to the complementary ones that stem from his religious madrasa training such as preaching, teaching and entertaining in literary or religious settings, and composing panegyrics to the sultan, his family, and grand courtiers; to the extraordinary moments of private dealings with the sultan, especially those in which the *katib*

assumes the role of the sultan's alter ego. These last moments are more than a function of the *katib*/sultan dyad. They reflect the particular relationship that developed between al-'Imad and Salah al-Din, who was clearly a superb judge of character and knew how to delegate responsibility, and they also reveal the mixture of arrogance, steadfastness, resourcefulness, solemnity, and clarity of vision that made up al-'Imad's character.

One such example al-'Imad reports under the heading, "A Shared Good Deed." (al-Bundari 1979: 200). The sultan had a concubine, who was also the mother of some of his children. He married her off to one of his great amirs, probably around the end of 1182, and assigned her an allowance and income-yielding properties. One day, he instructed al-'Imad to write to Egypt to cancel this income, but the latter pointed out the hardship that would befall the woman and the negative effect on the sultan's own image. Salah al-Din saw his point, was convinced by his argument, thanked him for it, and rescinded his decision. The woman received her income for the rest of his life. Al-'Imad comments, "I knew neither the woman nor her husband, and I had no ulterior motive for my intervention. She was never informed of this incident, and she had no chance to thank me for my deed. I am reporting the story here as an example of the sultan's charitable attitudes towards his own people." A similar assertion concludes another "Shared Good Deed" which took place in 1178 when al-'Imad managed to convince the sultan to retain a number of charitable allowances in Damascus which other courtiers wanted to scrap so the money could be saved for emergencies (al-Bundari, 1979: 155-56; al-Katib 1987(3): 137-38). The story emphasizes the difference in vision between the ordinary *katib*s and al-'Imad who, unlike them but in harmony with the sultan, is concerned about something more than saving negligible sums for the state treasury. He was keen on bolstering the distribution of alms, which he considered a duty of the Islamic state and its head, and, parenthetically but definitely, in maintaining the reputation of the sultan as a magnanimous sovereign.

In reporting a number of other instances of the same category of "Shared Good Deeds" involving the remuneration of poets, al-'Imad seems completely to take over as the decision maker, while the sultan is almost reduced to implementing policy aimed at perpetuating his own

good reputation. In one such case, al-'Imad is asked to decide on the merits of almost a

hundred poems delivered to the sultan in Mosul. He tells us they would almost all have had to

be discarded had he been strictly academic. But since his aim was both more political and

charitable —to support his fellow poets and to maintain the time-honored tradition of

patronizing poetry in the ruler's court— al-'Imad advised the sultan to reward all the poets

regardless of the quality of their poetry, and Salah al-Din, agreeing, obliged (Al-Bundari 1979:

270-71). Al-'Imad must have relished the irony of facilitating such a course when he had

needed luck, perseverance, and talent to advance from bard singing the praise of the sultan in

the hope of his munificent reward to judge of other poets competing for the sultan's bounty.

One other incident shows al-'Imad at his closest to becoming a patron himself; it may

also be construed to reveal traces of *'asabiyya* (ethnic solidarity) still animating an otherwise

thoroughly assimilated and universalistic Islamic sense of identity that he manifests more

openly throughout the *al-Barq al-Shami*. An acquaintance of his who was "a *faqih* (religious

scholar) who had learned *adab* (literature) and a Persian who had studied Arabic" (a description

that would have applied equally to al-'Imad himself) composed a panegyric to the sultan and

asked al-'Imad to deliver it on his behalf. Al-'Imad waited for a favorable evening and

presented it to Salah al-Din. When it was read, it turned out to be a bizarre blend of Persian and

Arabic so strange in composition and meaning that everyone, including the sultan, was soon

laughing uncontrollably. Only al-'Imad did not laugh because, he explains, he had a moral duty

to speak favorably on behalf of the poet who had trusted him, and could not mock him. When

the time came to distribute the reward, al-'Imad convinced Salah al-Din to double the

compensation for his Persian poet, on the grounds that "laughter was worth a sum equal to what

the poem deserved on its own." (al-Bundari 1979: 270-71).

The expressions, ideas, and feelings reported in these episodes cannot be taken as

necessarily authentic; certainly no other sources verify them. But, for our purposes, they do

throw light on the symbiosis that developed in the Zangid, Ayyubid, and early Mamluk polities

between the men of the sword and the men of the pen as represented by Salah al-Din and al-

'Imad. The men of the sword ruled through military power, while the men of the pen

administered by utilizing their religious and epistolary learning; the men of the sword made the political decisions, while the men of the pen finessed, justified, and implemented them. The relationship was not new; it went back to the early Islamic period. But it assumed a more clearly differentiated binary form after the Abbasid caliphate degenerated into a minor regional power having little more than the religious luster of its commanders and a new independent military class rose to dominate the central Islamic lands.[10] The leading members of this class were almost all descendants of newcomers to the region and its established patterns of government who had arrived with or after the Seljuqid expansion in the late eleventh century. Their sons took advantage of the desintegration of the Seljuq empire during the twelfth century and carved out small principalities for themselves in Anatolia, Syria, and Jazira. They led armies made up of non-Arab, mostly Turkish and Kurdish, tribal and manumitted cavalry, and expanded their principalities through war and conquest.[11] They also distinguished themselves in the jihad against the Byzantines, Crusaders, splinter Shi'ite states, and, later, the Mongols.

These new men of the sword employed their men of the pen as administrators, counselors, advisers, and even as propagandists and apologists, but excluded them from executive positions in the government (al-Qadi al-Fadil is among the rare men of the pen who were officially recognized to be decision makers). The new men of the sword also needed their men of the pen to act as mediators between them and the people, especially since they themselves were unacquainted with the predominant laws and customs in the regions they ruled, and, in many instances, with the language as well.[12] This may explain why the Zangid, Ayyubid, and early Mamluk rulers hired ulama as their administrators rather than depending only on those trained solely in the chancery diwans, as used to be the case under the Abbasids and Fatimids. The ulama held the intellectual and legal authority in medieval Islamic societies, and this made them indispensable to the military rulers. The rulers in turn sought to cajole and control them by attaching them to their administration and by, among other things, founding madrasas with lavish *waqf*s (endowments) that paid salaries to the teachers, themselves handpicked by the founders.[13] Both Salah al-Din's and al-'Imad's world view, values, and tastes had developed within this frame of reference, which was also embedded in the protocol and

language they used when dealing with one another and reflected in the way al-'Imad recorded that interaction.

Seen in this light, the sentence al-'Imad uses to introduce his narrative referring to the complementarity between his pen and the sultan's sword acquires a new significance. It expresses the aspirations of a proud intellectual aware of his marginalization in the power structure but still seeking to maintain at least a symbolic and interpretive hold on the authority he had left. He thus depicts the role of the *katib* —who was in a way the epitome of the men of the pen— as more than that of the interpreter of the sultan's wishes and orders. He is also his equal interlocutor, and, in specific instances, his mentor, defender, and promoter. The topics for discussion between the *katib* and the sultan, as reported by al-'Imad, make a point both of the intellectual qualities of the *katib* and the sultan's acknowledgment of them. When the sultan was informed that al-'Imad had bought a number of precious books and manuscripts from the Fatimid palace library, he paid him back their price and in addition offered him books from among the large number of folios he had been examining in his private quarters. Al-'Imad records this gesture as further evidence of Salah al-Din's generosity, but he may also have meant for it to show off his own scholarly leanings (al-Bundari, 1979: 115-16).

The same concern about the image of the *katib* may be read in al-'Imad's prose. It deserves a more careful look than the commonly dismissive one that tends to see it as only a series of verbal acrobatics (Massé 1963-: 1158). Gibb has already noted that al-'Imad's rhymed prose in no way interferes with the precision of his expression and clarity of his statements. But al-'Imad's choice of words coupled with their synonyms and homonyms, of archaic expressions, of allusions, of axiomatic expressions and quotations, and of images is not only a function of his talent or his use of the scholarly and mannered style of the high-ranking *katib*s going back to Hilal al-Sabi' (who served as *katib* in the Abbasid court of Baghdad at the second half of the tenth century). It is, as Jacques le Goff asserted in a similar context, a reflection of the dominant intellectual *topoi* of the period, which made up the structure of the *mentalités* of the entire social class of the men of the pen (Le Goff 1974: 85-86). Thus the complex and elaborate formulae, which appear to be mechanically applied in al-'Imad's text, may be seen as attempts

not only to display his own virtuosity to his peers, but also to show off the art and the intricacies of the métier of the men of the pen in general. They are in a way comparable to the elaborate exercises of *furusiyya,* or horsemanship, such as polo *(ukra)* and *qabaq* (lit. pumpkin, a game where horsemen shoot a pumpkin-like object hanging on a high pole while riding past it) which were codified at the same time and which were exclusively reserved to and representative of the men of the sword.

Al-Barq al-Shami uncovers aspects of al-'Imad's character that were regarded by other commentators, both contemporary and modern, as weaknesses. He was noted for his aversion to violence, which was often construed as cowardice; he worried about money, which was interpreted as avarice; and he exaggerated unnecessarily in eulogizing his patrons, which was considered servility. But, if these traits are judged in terms of the mentality of the social class he belonged to, then they can be explained as arising from the overcautious calculations of a *katib* who knew his limitations and where his opportunities lay in a sultan's court. This is clear from al-'Imad's own remarks when he recounts a story that illustrates both his dislike of killing and his readiness to take advantage of a situation to augment his wealth. One day in 1178, the sultan ordered a group of Franks, captured while raiding the environs of Hama, to be publicly beheaded by men of piety. Many *faqih*s and *sufi*s complied, and al-'Imad lists the names of three who each tried to kill a Frank but failed to do so in one blow, which caused the troops to laugh at them. Al-'Imad refused to kill anyone, and told the sultan, "I am a man of the pen and I do not compete with the sword; I announce victories, but I do not cause death." However, lest the reader think that al-'Imad is only proclaiming his aversion to bloodshed, and perhaps making a humanitarian gesture, he goes on to say, "but grant me this Frankish boy as a slave, and let some other of your warriors kill the captive you have designated for me." The sultan laughed, released him from his task, and promised him another slave from among the prisoners brought by the Egyptian fleet, for the boy he wanted was being saved for an exchange of prisoners. He instantly took advantage of the sultan's offer and sent a letter to Qadi al-Fadil asking for what the sultan had granted him. Al-Fadil sent him a hundred dinars instead and wrote, "I realized that the slave you are requesting is impossible to find, and those brought by

the fleet are of inferior quality. The best among them is not worth more than thirty dinars.

Therefore, I decided to send you the money as compensation. I have taken from the state purse

fifty dinars instead of the slave, added to it thirty from the privy purse of al-'Adil and twenty

from my own money." Al-'Imad ends by saying matter-of-factly, "My heart was delighted by

this turn of events after my sword had turned against killing. I have not lost anything by my

decision not to spill blood. I turned from that deed lest the company laugh at me as they did the

others." (al-Bundari 1979: 155-56; Lyons and Jackson 1988: 132).

 Al-Barq al-Shami provides us with many more anecdotes showing the various facets of

al-'Imad's personality and his relations with his contemporaries, especially Nur al-Din, Salah

al-Din, and al-Qadi al-Fadil. The geniality, intimacy, and even boastfulness of al-'Imad's

remarks are what make this book almost unique among medieval Arabic chronicles. Aside

from the earlier and much different *Kitab al-I'tibar* of Amir Usama b. Munqidh, only one work

from the same era warrants comparison with *al-Barq al-Shami*. This is Abu Shama's *al-Dhayl*

'ala al-Rawdatayn, a combination chronicle and biographical dictionary in which this late-

thirteenth-century author also mixes the account of public events with the affairs of his private

life, including his feelings and meditations upon the illfortune that befell him and his family

(Abu-Shama 1947; Pouzet 1985-86: 115-26). Abu Shama presents us with the portrait of a

modest observer who sees the world through the rather limited horizon of his native Damascus

and his status as a modest religious scholar with no direct royal patronage, while 'Imad al-Din

comes across as the resourceful royal *katib* to two sultans and a participant in, or eyewitness to,

the events of their turbulent reigns. Between 'Imad al-Din and Abu Shama, it seems to me, we

can begin to understand the two poles of the mentality that characterized the medieval Muslim

ulama. But each of them alone offers us a lively and uninhibited portrait of himself as more

than just an intellectual or representative of a professional class. They each, through completely

different structure and prose, provide glimpses into the experiences, feelings, and reflections of

their personal lives which gave them their palpable and colorful human dimensions that are as

fresh and accessible to us today as they were when they were first felt, enjoyed or suffered, and

then recorded.

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Rabbat

<u>Notes</u>

[1] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 27th annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) in Research Triangle Park, NC, on November 12, 1993. The title I chose then and here, "My Life with Salah al-Din," is exactly the title that Bernard Lewis suggests 'Imad al-Din himself would have chosen for his book *al-Barq al-Shami*, had he been a "modern," see Lewis 1991: 25. This coincidence is to me less a surprise and more a confirmation of interpretable evidence.

[2] Al-Bundari, *Sana al-Barq al-Shami* manuscript has been published twice. The first edition was that of Ramazan Sesen (Beirut, 1971) and the second by Fathia al-Nabrawi (Cairo, 1979).

[3] A recent study (Chamberlain 1994), argues that these dictionaries should be seen less as prosopographies and more as registers of the practices by which the influential social classes manipulated power. Another study, which makes an interesting and innovative use of a subset of the medieval biographical dictionaries, stresses nonetheless their usefulness to understanding the mentality of an entire category rather than individuals; see Malti-Douglas 1989: 211-37.

[4] For a similar assessment, see Richards 1993: 144; also Lewis 1991: 25, calls the book an "autobiographical biography: at the same time the biography of the ruler and the autobigraphy of the writer."

[5] Details of the three expeditions can be found in al-Bundari 1979: 39-43; Ibn-Shaddad 1964: 36-41; Ibn al-Athir 1965-67, 11: 298-301, 324-27, 333-43; Ehrenkreutz 1972: 50-68; Lyons and Jackson 1988: 6-29.

[6] Al-'Imad first sent a poem imploring the caliph al-Mustanjid (1160-70) to set him free, but this did not work. He sent a second poem to the caliph's chamberlain, 'Imad al-Din b. 'Adud al-Din, who interceded on his behalf with the caliph and won his release. For the two poems and the story, see al-Katib 1955-81, 1: 56, 63, 172.

[7] al-Bundari 1979: 27-28, where another example of the importance of visions in steering actions is cited when Nur al-Din appeared to 'Imad al-Din in a dream to exhort him to

rehabilitate the Madrasa al-'Imadiyya, see also 85. On the location of the madrasa, see Élisséeff 1959: 135, n. 3 and 4, and 136, n.2.

[8] Al-Bundari 1979: 32-33, ironically omits the section of the letter in which al-'Imad clearly beseeches Salah al-Din to come to Syria to take over the leadership in the jihad against the Crusaders. The omission is particularly dubious in view of the fact that Bundari condensed the book for al-Mu'azzam 'Issa, Salah al-Din's nephew, but also the one who usurped the crown of al-Afdal, Salah al-Din's son, in Damascus through the scheming of his father and Salah al-Din's brother, al-Adil.

[9] Al-'Imad translated Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Kimiya' al-Sa'ada* (an abbreviation of his magnum opus *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din)* from Persian to Arabic in Cairo in 1179-80 on order of al-Qadi al-Fadil, see al-Bundari 1979: 183.

[10] On the relationship between men of the sword and men of the pen during the medieval period, see al-Sayyid 1989: 13-51; for a peculiar interpretation of the relationship in the period under consideration, see Chamberlain 1994: 37-66.

[11] See the general remarks on the "Turkish" penetration of Anatolia, Syria, and Jezira in Cahen 1946-48: 61-66; Musatafa 1974: 303-4.

[12] For a discussion of one aspect of this mediation see Rabbat 1995: 3-28.

[13] It is no coincidence in my opinion that the reforms of Nizam al-Mulk, the great vizier of the Seljuq sultans Alp Arslan and Malikshah, especially the official sponsorship of madrasas, reconciled the differences between the ulama and the *katib*s and permitted, even encouraged, the former to join the ranks of the latter. The dependence of both Seljuq and post-Seljuq rulers on the ulama was not only an intended policy but also a necessity. For Nizam al-Mulk's ideas, see Nizam al-Mulk 1987. For further discussion of the question of madrasa, see Tibawi 1962: 225-38; Bulliet 1972: 47-60. For the case of Damascus see Gilbert 1980: 105-35; Humphreys 1989: 151-74; Chamberlain 1994: 69-74.