

*Heirs of the Ayyubids: The Formation of the Rasulid State in Yemen*

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*[This paper was presented to solicit comments on a current project compiling a Handbook of Ayyubid and Rasulid Yemen. It was delivered at a panel bringing together scholars who work on Rasulid Yemen with those who work on the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods in Egypt and Syria. I would appreciate any comments that readers have for this ongoing project. After the paper I give my preliminary table of contents for the handbook. My email is provided above.]*

Historians are fortunate to have a substantial archive of manuscripts and scholarly research on the period of the Mamluks who ruled Egypt and Syria from ca. 1250-1517 CE. But far less attention has been paid to their southern post-Ayyubid rivals, the Rasulids, who came to power in Yemen in 1229 and maintained control until 1454. There are several reasons why historians of the Mamluks should also be interested in Ayyubid and Rasulid Yemen. Most importantly, in both Egypt and Yemen the retainers of the Ayyubid sultans became the new rulers, so a comparative study of this phenomenon is long overdue.

My remarks today are presented to spur interest in the study of Ayyubid and Rasulid Yemen as an integral part of the regional network from the 12th through the 15th centuries. I am currently compiling a *Handbook of Ayyubid and Rasulid Yemen* for Brill and would appreciate comments and advice from colleagues on how best to create a text that will be of broader use for anyone interested in this crucial time period. Ironically, the chronicle of the Rasulid court historian, al-

Khazrajī (d. 812/1410) was edited, albeit poorly in Egypt, and translated by Sir James Redhouse just over a century ago, but apart from the British historian Rex Smith and more recently the young French historian Eric Vallet, there has been limited attention paid to the history of the Rasulids by Western scholars. David King has examined the astronomy, I have focused on agriculture and my fellow panelists have contributed to a better understanding of the Ayyubid and Rasulid era in Yemen, but we are few.

Apart from the major chronicles of al-Khazrajī, Ibn Ḥātim and a few others, our knowledge of the Rasulid state under al-Malak Muḏaffar Yūsuf, the second Rasulid ruler, is facilitated by the so-called late 13th century Yemeni Doomsday book, entitled *Nūr al-ma‘ārif* by Muhammad Jāzm in his edition of the text.<sup>1</sup> This source includes details on taxes, customs, salaries, Yemeni production and a variety of data that flesh out the standard historical accounts of rebellions and political intrigue. Eric Vallet has utilized the financial details in his excellent survey, and I am going through *Nūr al-ma‘ārif* with a fine-toothed comb for the Brill handbook. A tax treatise from the reign of al-Muḏaffar’s son, al-Malik al-Mu’ayyad Dāwūd,

<sup>1</sup>. See Jāzm (2003-2005) for the Arabic edition.

also edited by Muḥammad Jāzm, and the 15th century *Mulukhkhaṣ al-fitan*, edited by Rex Smith, allow for comparative analysis of the evolution of the administrative structure and the tax base.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the mixed manuscript prepared for al-Malik al-Afḍal ‘Abbās in the mid 14th century includes administrative and tax records as well as a range of literary and scientific excerpts and original works.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Ayyubid-Rasulid Transition**

In 1173 CE, when Tūrānshāh, the brother of the Ayyubid founder Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, conquered the Yemeni coast and southern highlands, among his mercenary officers was Shams al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn Rasūl, who fathered four sons. One of these sons, the emir Nūr al-Dīn ‘Umar, was left in charge when the last Ayyubid monarch, al-Malik al-Mas‘ūd, left Yemen in 1229. How could an Ayyubid emir of Oghuz Turkish background break away from Ayyubid control of Yemen, receive the blessing of the Abbasid caliph and create a dynasty that lasted a little over two centuries? First, it seems that Nūr al-Dīn ‘Umar was no ordinary emir; his father and brothers had done much of the fighting and diplomacy in Yemen, since the Ayyubid rulers sent there seldom had any interest in staying. This was especially

<sup>2</sup>. See Smith (2006) for the Arabic facsimile and a translation.

<sup>3</sup>. See Varisco and Smith (1998) for the Arabic text and Varisco (1996) for a brief survey.

true of the young son of al-Kāmil, al-Malik al-Mas‘ūd, who had been given a trial run at leadership in Yemen, but was finally chosen by his father to take control of Syria. As he left Yemen in in 626/1229 to become governor of Damascus, it is said that he looted much of the royal treasury as well as extorting from merchants and landowners. This included 1,000 eunuchs, 500 crates of clothing, precious wood, gemstones and 70,000 gold embroidered robes, all of which took some 70 ships to transport back to Egypt.<sup>4</sup> In his stead he appointed Nūr al-Dīn as his deputy until a new sultan could be sent from Cairo.

Three years later Nūr al-Dīn ‘Umar took the name of al-Malik al-Manṣūr and initiated the Rasulid dynasty, recognized in 631/1234 by al-Mustansir (d. 1242), the contemporary caliph in Baghdad. With the Ayyubids embroiled in battles with the Crusaders and the caliph upset at the actions of the Zaydī imams in Yemen’s north, it was surely the Machiavellian thing to do in legitimizing a new dynasty in Yemen, especially one that was close to Mecca and had ambitions there. When al-Manṣūr began his own dynasty, the Ayyubid sultan al-Kāmil was in no position to regain control of Yemen, given his trials with the Crusaders and

<sup>4</sup>. This is reported by al-Khazraji (1911(1):42-43).

instability at home. Egypt also depended on the trade route through the Red Sea via the port of Aden to the Indian Ocean. Thus, it was better to accept or at least acquiesce to Rasulid control of Yemen, hardly a threat to the Mamluk control of Egypt and Syria, than risk sending troops to wrest power away from the rebellious emir.

Al-Manṣūr had little problem maintaining control of the Tihāma coastal region and southern highlands, but he was in continual conflict with the Zaydī imams and their tribal supporters in the north. The northern city of Ṣan‘ā’ was especially difficult to hold, although he was able to spend an entire year there in 646/1248. He vied with al-Kāmil for control of Mecca, lavishing gifts on the *ka‘ba* and establishing a *madrassa*. Al-Manṣūr was assassinated by his guards in 647/1249 at the instigation of a nephew. This was an inauspicious start for the dynasty, but his son al-Malik al-Muḏaffar Yūsuf was able to create a stable state structure over his 46 year rule that secured at least nominal control over the bulk of Yemen, including the port of Dhofar, currently on the Omani coast.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Rasulid Bureaucracy**

<sup>5</sup>. See Varisco (1993) for a discussion of al-Muḏaffar’s reign.

As historian Rex Smith has argued, the administrative and fiscal influences on Rasulid government came from a variety of sources.<sup>6</sup> Since the early Rasulids were originally in the service of the Ayyubids, it is not surprising that their administrative structure parallels this earlier system, which in turn had maintained a number of elements from the previous Fatimid rule in Egypt and Zengid practices in Syria. The nominal control of the Ayyubids meant that a number of indigenous Yemeni practices, especially those of the Zuray‘ids, who were displaced from Zabīd, continued. Finally, the ongoing relationship with the Mamluk sultans in Egypt also influenced the development of Rasulid governance.

As a hereditary system, and one in which a sultan’s sons and relatives were placed in high positions of authority, the seat of government was the royal court, generally known as *al-bāb al-sharīf*. Overseeing the royal family required an official secretary (*kātib*) to handle the domestic affairs, keep track of visitors, regulate access to the sultan and work closely with a variety of government officials. The sultan needed a cadre of officials to actually run the affairs of the domain, and many of these enjoyed the luxuries of the elite. One of the main

<sup>6</sup>. Smith (2005:228-229).

authorities was the vizier (*wazīr*), a kind of first minister who would per force need to be trusted by the sultan. The vizier was often chosen to engage in negotiations for the sultan and oversaw collection of the revenues from the various districts.

The exact powers of the vizier varied according to the sultan. Some were delegated power to act on their own and others were limited to doing the sultan's bidding. It is clear that they often served an advisory role at the sultan's court.

The royal princes had advisors that could be called by the term *wazīr* as well.

Another official with a similar role was the *nā'ib* or deputy, a term that appears to have been introduced during the reign of al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad for a newly arrived Mamluk emir.

As the Rasulid holdings were consolidated and expanded, the bureaucracy evolved. The government administration as such is referred to in the time of al-Muzaffar by several terms (*al-dīwān*, *al-dīwān al-khāṣṣ*, *al-dīwān al-sa'īd*) as distinct from the specific official structure associated with the ruler (*al-dīwān al-sulṭānī*). The usage of *al-dīwān al-sa'īd* was also found in Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt. Eric Vallet believes that this term reinforces the legitimacy of the administration as something stable and permanent and at the same time inseparable



from the ruler.<sup>7</sup> G. Rex Smith suggests that the term *dīwān* pragmatically refers to the civil service as a whole.<sup>8</sup> A wide variety of officials at various levels evolved, as noted in the list in Table 1.

Table 1. Officials and Bureaucrats in Rasulid Yemen<sup>9</sup>

Arabic term	translation
<i>'āmil/ 'ummāl</i>	comptroller
<i>amīr</i>	prince
<i>amīr-ākhūr</i>	head of stable
<i>amīr 'alam al-bāb al-saīd</i>	standard bearer of the august court
<i>bawwāb</i>	gate-keeper
<i>dā'lī</i>	irrigation official
<i>dhārī</i>	measurer
<i>faqīh</i>	legal official
<i>ḥawā'ij-kāsh</i>	provisions officer
<i>jābī</i>	tax collector
<i>karrānī</i>	secretary or clerk
<i>kātib</i>	secretary or official in general
<i>kātib al-wuṣūlāt</i>	recorder of those arriving at the port
<i>khazzān</i>	treasurer
<i>mashā'ikh al-furḍa</i>	heads of the custom service
<i>masīh</i>	land surveyor
<i>mubāshir</i>	steward
<i>mubashshar</i>	messenger
<i>mufattish</i>	examiner
<i>muḥaṣṣil</i>	tax collector

<sup>7</sup>. Vallet (2010:254-55).

<sup>8</sup>. Smith (2005:230).

<sup>9</sup>. For more details, see Smith (2005:237-244).

<i>muqaddam</i>	chief
<i>muqṭi'</i>	holder of revenue estate ( <i>iqṭā'</i> )
<i>mushārif</i>	supervisor
<i>mushidd</i>	inspector
<i>mushidd al-bāb</i>	inspector general
<i>mustakhrij</i>	revenue collector
<i>mustawfī</i>	accountant, comptroller
<i>mustawfī al-bāb</i>	comptroller general
<i>mutaṣarrāf</i>	financial officer
<i>nā'ib/nuwwāb</i>	deputy
<i>naqīb</i>	officer
<i>naqqād</i>	auditor, assayer
<i>nāzīr</i>	overseer
<i>qādī</i>	appointed religious judge
<i>sār-ākhūrī</i>	veterinary surgeon
<i>shāhid</i>	bookkeeper
<i>shāhid ṣundūq</i>	book keeper
<i>'urafā' al-sāhil</i>	coastal inspectors
<i>ustādh al-dār</i>	marshall of the household
<i>wālī</i>	governor
<i>wazīr</i>	minister
<i>zimām</i>	head

Within Yemen the sultan could confiscate land and property and do with it as he pleased, although in theory he had to operate within the strictures of Islamic law. The main concern, although to a lesser sense than under Ayyubid rule, was the revenue from annual taxes and the customs at the port of Aden. To ensure that the

revenue was collected, the sultan would appoint a *muqṭi'*, a person in charge of a revenue estate or *iqṭā'*, a term often erroneously translated as a “fief” in the medieval European sense.<sup>10</sup> Under the Rasulids this was essentially a usufruct right and was not permanent. Like the Mamluk system, the *iqṭā'* in Yemen was closely monitored in the administrative structure, since local rebellions against authority of the state were always a threat, even with trusted emirs. This appears to have been a greater problem in Mamluk Egypt and Syria than Rasulid Yemen. The most important tax regions were often given to relatives of the sultan or to powerful emirs known for their ability to win battles or influence the locals. In areas that were difficult to control, such as Ṣan‘ā', the *muqṭi'* rarely lasted long in his post.

The key to Rasulid success lay in the ability to raise revenue. In addition to the allowed Islamic taxes, the sultans reserved the right to raise other kinds of taxes. Al-Malik al-Manṣūr, the first ruler, created a special tax on farm produce in 1247 CE, which was very unpopular and later abolished by his son, al-Muẓaffar.

As a result of the continual need to replenish the royal treasury, a bureaucratic

<sup>10</sup>. As Cahen (1971:1088) notes, the nature of this *iqṭā'* system varied over time and from place to place.

administration was necessary. One of the most important government offices was the royal crop tax bureau (*dīwān al-kharāj al-sulṭānī*), for which there were designated districts. An account of the revenues from crop taxes by region exists for the reign of al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad near the start of the 14th century.<sup>11</sup> Customs levied on ships in the major Yemeni ports, most notably in Aden but also in al-Shiḥr and the coastal port for Zabīd, provided substantial income for the Rasulid state. At the time of al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad in the early 14th century the annual revenue was almost 3.9 million dinars, with 20% coming from the port of Aden, 3% from the southern port of al-Shiḥr, 35% from the mountain crop taxes and 42% from the Tihāma crops.<sup>12</sup>

The 15th century *Mulakhkhaṣ al-ḥitan* mentions three other specific administrative bureaus.<sup>13</sup> One is simply called *dīwān al-khāṣṣ*, a “special bureau” that Smith suggests was a kind of statistical office for registering taxes. A second is the *dīwān al-ḥalāl*, in charge of the property of the sultan, whose personal income is derived from it. The third is the military or *dīwān al-jaysh*. There was no single

<sup>11</sup>. This is edited by Jazm (2008).

<sup>12</sup>. Vallet (2010:249), who has an extensive analysis of the commerce and taxation during the Rasulid era.

<sup>13</sup>. See Smith (2005, 2006) for more details.

military force, but rather a variety of groups, including the palace guard known as the Bahriyya mamluks.<sup>14</sup> Mercenary slave corps, which were continually renewed, were at the disposal of the monarch, but local emirs usually had their own militia as well. At times the *ad hoc* tribal militia would side with the sultan, usually for a price. The history of the dynasty suggests that the sultan could not have complete trust in these groups, so he tended to lavish gifts to win their support. The bureau included a number of financial officers and bookkeepers to regulate salaries and supply needs for the soldiers and officers.

There were a number of special offices with varying administrative functions. One of the most secretive government offices was that of the royal treasury (*al-khizāna al-ma'mūra*), spread out in various strongholds, including the well fortified fortress of al-Dumluwa. The port customs house (*furḍa*) was responsible for storing and assessing goods on which customs were due. A special building was dedicated to this in Aden. In addition to commercial activities, both the Ayyubids and Rasulids protected the sea travel lanes from pirates through the use of a state-sponsored coast guard, the *shawānī* ships. Supervisors were also

<sup>14</sup>. This term is derived from Egypt.

needed for the Rasulid fortresses (*al-ḥusūn al-maḥrūsa*), which could also serve as prisons. These would submit annual reviews of the state of each fortress and meet with the *wazīr*, who was the link between them and the sultan. Officials were also needed for the state stables (*al-iṣṭablāt al-saʿīda*) to house the mounts of the sultan, his family, officials and soldiers and for veterinary services. For the immediate service of the sultan and his officials, there was also an office in charge of provisions (*ḥawāʾij-khāna*), including the royal kitchen (*al-maṭbakh al-kabīr*) and official scribes. Several of the sultans maintained royal gardens, especially in the two capitals, and these required gardeners and other officials.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Briefly, what were the major differences in the formation and evolution of the Rasulid state from the Mamluks, the latter gaining power almost two decades after the Rasulids? My reading of early Mamluk history, which is still in a preliminary stage, suggests several factors. First, the Mamluks faced opposition from the Crusaders and then from a sequence of Mongol invasions. It was difficult enough to try to control both Egypt and Syria, let alone opening a new front to retake Yemen. While the Rasulids were in continual conflict with the northern

Zaydīs, there was no outside threat to their rule. Second, the Mamluk phenomenon has been characterized as a “highly urbanised society” (Irwin 1986:156), given the importance of Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo. Yemen boasted no major urban centers throughout the Rasulid era; the population was mostly rural and the majority were sedentary tribal farmers. Although Zabīd was a major educational and trade center, it never developed into a cosmopolitan city. The lack of potable water at Aden mitigated its expansion into a large port town.

Third, the succession of sultans in Yemen was relatively stable compared with the violent rivalry that characterized the Mamluks. Levanoni has argued that Mamluk polity conceived of the sultan as leader of a coalition, which was caused by the incessant factional strife, rather than a hereditary dynasty,<sup>15</sup> but in Yemen the succession was clearly dynastic from the start. The Rasulid sultan was styled as both *malik* (“king”) and sultan. By the time of al-Malik al-Afḍal in the mid 14th century, the epithets had expanded to the point where he is lauded as *al-sultān al-mu‘aẓẓam* (the exalted sultan) and *al-imām al-a‘ẓam* (the supreme religious leader), the latter perhaps a dig at the troublesome Zaydī leaders who were called

<sup>15</sup>. Levanoni (1994:374).

imams.<sup>16</sup> While al-Manṣūr was killed by his own troops, his son al-Muẓaffar ruled for over four decades, longer than any Ayyubid or Mamluk sultan. Upon the sultan's death in 1295 CE, the Zaydī imam al-Muṭahhar ibn Yaḥyā is reputed to have said: "The mighty Tubba' has died; the Mu'āwiya of the age has died; the one whose reed pens have broken our swords and our spears has died." This was indeed a left-handed compliment, comparing his rival al-Muẓaffar to the legendary pagan Himyarite king Tubba' and the hated Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya. Unlike the Mamluk case, where emirs were rarely trusted and easily replaced or killed, there was less rivalry between the emirs and the ruling family in the Rasulid state. Fourth, the Rasulid emirs and sultans built up better relations with the local population than most of the Mamluk rulers did in Egypt or Syria. The chronicles record a stream of diplomatic moves and truces between the Rasulids and the Zaydī imams.

One of the key factors that influenced cooperation, or at least a minimum of conflict, was the importance of international trade through the port of Aden to India

<sup>16</sup>. These terms, among other glowing attributes, are recorded in the introduction to a work by al-Malik al-Afḍal on the duties of rulers (Traini 2005).



and beyond, an issue studied in depth by Roxani Margariti.<sup>17</sup> The Kārimī syndicate, which monopolized several key imports, was able to work with both regimes, at least during the 13th and early 14th centuries. This trade network was very important soon after the Rasulids came to power, given the turmoil of the overland route created by the initial Mongol invasions. While my handbook is not intended to compare the Rasulids with the Mamluks directly, this is obviously a significant research topic that I hope other scholars will pursue. We would certainly welcome more colleagues, especially young scholars looking for a niche, to join the Bani and Ibna Bani Rasul guild.

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<sup>17</sup>. See Margariti (2007).

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**Preliminary Table of Contents** : This will probably change somewhat as the material is added. I provide a few subheadings for illustration at this stage. My idea is to provide enough information so that each volume could in theory stand on its own.

## **Handbook of Ayyubid and Rasulid Yemen: Volume 1: General**

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