



**Martyrdom in the Mamluk Egypt in the Early Bahri Period  
(1252-1299)**

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**Abstract**

Martyrdom for the faith (“istishhādiyya(t)”) is one of the most important concepts in Islam, which got a detailed theological discussion in the Middle Ages and continues to be of high significance in the present period. However, its meaning was a subject to changes depending on a historical period and geographical area.

The paper argues that the institution of martyrdom was simplified as much as possible in the early Bahri period (the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century). Moreover, it has become an element in the process of glorification and legitimization of the reign of the sultan al-Mansur Qalawun [1279-1290] in many aspects regardless the actual contribution of a proclaimed ‘shahid’. Thus, this gap between the considerations of the ruling elite and views of the Islamic circles on martyrdom was deepened. For example, For the attribution of a Mamluk amir, it was preferable that he demonstrate his loyalty to the sultan and even more preferable that he be from among the amirs of the sultan al-Mansur Qalawun.

**Keywords:** Mamluks; Bahri period; martyrdom; shahid; Egypt.

## **Introduction**

The Mamluk period is a key period in the history of Islamic Egypt. It is peculiar due to the Turks domination in political sphere. Historiography defines its chronological frames since 1248/1250 to 1517 AD. The first date is linked to the Mamluk penetration into the highest echelons of power (joint reign with the last Egyptian Ayyubid), the second one is related to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt when the independent Mamluk state stopped to exist. Institutionally the Mamluk period continued till the 19th century having been the longest period in the history of Islamic Egypt.

In this period many Islamic institutions were transformed, while many of such transformation were a ground for conflicts between the ruling political and military elite from one side and religious circles from the other side, as, for example, in the case of Ibn Taymiyya (Filippov, 2021).

Martyrdom for the faith (*'istishhādiyya(t)*) occupies a special place in Islamic studies. This is probably largely due to the importance that this institution has acquired in the media space in the modern world. It is all the more interesting to look at its status in different historical periods and in different regions of the Islamic world.

## **Methodology**

This paper examines the institution of *'istishhādiyya(t)* in Mamluk Egypt as it is reflected in the pages of the historical work of one of the representatives of the Mamluk elite, Baybars al-Mansuri al-Nasiri (died in 1325), *'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t) fī Ta'rich al-Hijra(t) / The Cream of Thought in the History of the Hijra'*.

Methodologically, the work is based on the selection of all references to shahids or *'istishhādiyya(t)* in this chronicle from 650 A.H. (1252 AD) to 699 A.H. (end of 1299 AD), that is, from one of the

accepted dates of the beginning of the Mamluk state to the second battle of Homs, at which the Mamluk army suffered a crushing defeat from the troops of the Ilkhanate.

In Islamic tradition, it is believed that “shahids” in the meaning of “martyrs / martyrs for the faith” are mentioned directly already in the Qur'an (e.g., 4:69 “And he who obeys Allah and the Messenger - they shall be with those whom Allah has favoured -the Prophets, those steadfast in truthfulness, the martyrs, and the righteous." How excellent will they be for companions!").

Subsequent religious literature is full of detailed descriptions of the benefits that await martyrs in Paradise. In addition, the authors of such works discussed in detail various aspects of who should be classified as martyrs, how to treat their bodies, etc. (Kohlberg, 1998, pp. 204-205). In particular, which is important for the present work, many authors distinguished “martyrs who fell in battle” and “warrior-martyrs who died not in battle” (Kohlberg, 1998, pp. 204-205). Later, in the martyrological literature, the classifications became more complicated; it is obvious that this topic was of great interest to Muslim scholars.

## Results

In this context, Baybars al-Mansuri's information regarding martyrs looks much less intricate and far removed from the detailed studies conducted by experts in this field.

In total, during this period, ‘Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...’. mentions 26 individuals named as ‘shahids’ or characterized as “martyred for the faith.” Their list is presented in the following table:

AH	Name	Social function	Circumstances of death or mentioning
655	al-Musta‘şim bi-‘llāh	Caliph in Baghdad	Killed under the order of Hulagu. Appeared in Paradise, lives in eternity.
656	Abu al-Hasan ben al-Niyyar al-Baghdadi	Shaykh of the shaykhs	Describes as ‘Shaykh of the shaykhs’ by

			Sadr al-Din, died in Baghdad during the attack of Tatars.
656	Abu al-Muhasin Yusuf ben Abu al-Farj ben al-Juzi	Shaykh, ambassador istadiriyya al-dar in Baghdad	Circumstances are not mentioned directly
656	A son of the above mentioned	Not described	Became a martyr with his father
656	Abu al-Munaqib Mahmud ben Ahmad	A famous faqih and alim, the Shafite leader in Baghdad	Died in Baghdad during the attack of Tatars
658	Abu al-Fadl ben Abu al-Mukarim al-Taratusi	Shaykh	Died in Halab during the attack of Tatars
658	An unidentified number of people	Many righteous, pious, scribes and scholars	Died in Halab during the attack of Tatars
659	Al-Mustansir bi-'llāh	Caliph	Died with glory during his unsuccessful campaign against Tatars in Iraq Imam al-Mustansir bi-'llāh died as a 'shahid' at the hands of the infidels, killed by the swords of the Tatars (mentioned again in 661 AH).
662	An unidentified person		The madrasah of Baybars in Cairo is built near his tomb
669	Rukn al-Din Manqurs al-Dawadari	Amir in Baybars's troops	He was praying in his tent when a stone flew in and Rukn al-Din died (during the successful siege of Akkar)
676	Al-Zahir Baybars	Sultan, malik	Mentioned as a 'shahid' in one of the mourning poems
688	Izz al-Din Maghana	Amir in Qalawun's troops	During the successful capture of Tripoli
688	Rukn al-Din Menqubars al-Fariqani	Amir in Qalawun's troops	During the successful capture of Tripoli
688	Badr al-Din Shaka al-	Amir in Qalawun's	During the successful

	Ala'i	troops	capture of Tripoli
688	Shihab al-Din Ahmad ben al-Asl	Amir in Qalawun's troops	During the successful capture of Tripoli
689	Al-Mansur Qalawun	Sultan, malik	Because of disease, at start of military campaign
690	Ala al-Din Qashtaghadi al-Shamsi	Mamluk amir	Died during the successful capture of Akko
690	Badr al-Din al-Bilik al-Masudi	Mamluk amir	Died during the successful capture of Akko
690	Sharaf al-Din Kayran al-Saqqazi	Mamluk amir	Died during the successful capture of Akko
699	Sayf al-Din Qard	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs
699	Nasir al-Din Muhammad	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs
699	Badr al-Din Bilik al-Mansuri	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs
699	Sayf al-Din Balaban al-Taqawi	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs
699	Rukn al-Din Baybars al-Alami	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs
699	Sarim al-Din Azbek al-Taghrili	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs
699	Sayf al-Din Nukiya al-Salahdar al-Tatari	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs
699	Jamal al-Din Aqqush al-Kurdi	Mamluk amir	Died during the second battle art Homs. And among those who fell as 'shahid' amirs were those who fell in battle and those who were wounded and then died.

## Discussion

The following observations can be made from the table:

Certainly the list of 'shahid's, particularly taken into consideration that 'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...', albeit with peculiarities, tries to describe the global history, is far from exhaustive. The 'shahids' mentioned by Baybars al-Mansuri are predominantly Mamluk amirs with whom the author was at least acquainted in absentia, two caliphs, one sultan, and a group of religious figures who died during the Mongol invasion of Baghdad and Halab (Aleppo). Obviously, he had little interest in martyrdom outside the social group close to Baybars al-Mansuri, and the inclusion of persons from outside the circle was apparently based on hearsay (e.g., from the refugees who streamed into Egypt after Hulagu's campaign).

In cases where the information was less detailed, such as when describing the struggle between Muslims and Christians on the Iberian Peninsula or when characterizing the events in Asia Minor, no 'shahids' appear in Baybars al-Mansuri's work, and he himself refrains from assessments. The reasons for this restraint, perhaps, can only be speculated about.

The author of 'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...' does not make any distinction in terms of social status among 'shahids', although the emphasis on Mamluk amirs is obvious; ordinary soldiers, who also apparently died in campaigns against infidels, for example, during the unsuccessful Iraqi campaign of the Caliph al-Mustansir bi-'llāh in 1261, are not mentioned even in any unnamed group of people.

One can only become a 'shahid' in the course of a war against the infidels (in the context of the realities of 'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...' - the Mongols or the Crusaders); death in the course of conflicts between Muslims, even if it concerns a person who had previously made a great contribution to the cause of fighting the infidels, does not make him a 'shahid'. Thus, for example, the malik al-Mudzaffar Qutuz, who defeated the Mongols in the battle at Ain Jalut (1261 AD) and effectively stopped their advance in the Middle East, was killed on his return to Egypt by conspiratorial amirs and thus, despite all his merits, did not become a 'shahid'. Amir Sayf al-Din Balaghan al-Ashrafi, who

died in 655 A.H. in the struggle between the malik in al-Karak and the malik al-Mudzaffar Qutuz, though belonging to the al-Bahri faction that gave the name to the first (and the only one known to the author of this chronicle) period in the history of the Mamluk state, was not honored by Baybars al-Mansuri to be called a 'shahid'.

On the contrary, amir Rukn al-Din Manqurs al-Dawadari, who died during the successful siege of Akkar, did not die in battle but while praying in his tent. But if in the case of this amir at least there is a causal link between his death and the war with the infidels, in the case of the sultan al-Mansur Qalawun there is outwardly no such a link. The ruler died at the beginning of another campaign against the Crusaders, but from illness, and in 'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...' no open and explicit attempt is made to connect, for example, this illness with the hardships of the journey. Nevertheless, the martyrdom of al-Mansur Qalawun is beyond any doubt and is repeatedly emphasized in the chronicle.

However, even death in a combat encounter with infidels did not guarantee that the author of 'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...' would call the deceased a 'shahid'.

For example, amir Alam al-Din Jaqam al-Ashrafi died in 659 A.H. during a skirmish with the Tatars, but was not characterized by Baybars al-Mansuri as a 'shahid'. This is probably due to the fact that he was in the army of the rebellious amir Shams al-Din Aqqush al-Barli al-Azizi, who had previously opposed the new malik, al-Zahir Baybars.

The situation with the amir Fakhr al-Din al-Tunba al-Faisi, who was killed in 668 A.H. during a raid organized by the sultan al-Zahir Baybars against the crusaders of Akka ("Also in this year, the Sultan raided the Yaqub Meadow and the lands around Akka. He captured a group from the retinue of the Franks, killed naib Francis at Akka, and of the Muslims only the amir Fakhr al-Din al-Tunba al-Faizi was killed. The Sultan returned to Safed, and ahead of him the heads of the slain were carried strung on spears"). Amir Husam al-Din, 'killed by

the Franks', is not called a 'shahid' as well, even despite his high rank of ustaz al-dar ('Also in this year (in 670 - A.F.) the fedayeen went with gifts to Edward, the malik of the Franks. One of them rushed upon him and killed him, and the fedain himself was killed at the same time. This was in response to what he made of the attack on Qaqun, killing in particular Husam al-Din, the ustaz al-Dar, repaying evil with similar evil').

The most notable, apparently, is the case of the sultan al-Zahir Baybars. In the period under consideration, this ruler conducted the largest number of military campaigns against infidels, both Mongols and crusaders. In fact, his reign was the peak of foreign policy activity of the early Mamluk state. The sultan died of illness (a common version is that of poisoning) in Damascus, when, as Baybars al-Mansuri notes, he was 'sure that the whole world was in his hands'. Nevertheless, the death took place against the backdrop of the sultan's numerous military campaigns and while he was preparing to repel the proposed campaign of the Ilkhan Abaqa. For his inner circle, the status of al-Zahir Baybars as a 'shahid' was apparently beyond doubt, as one of the poems composed on the occasion of the sultan's death attests. However, the author of 'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...', being a mamluk of al-Mansur Qalawun and later of his son, al-Nasir Muhammad, seems to have been much more reserved about al-Zahir Baybars' 'shahid' status, although he was not stingy in his praise and glorification of him.

But the group of amirs who died in the second battle of Homs is universally called 'shahids', although technically they fought against an army led by a Muslim commander - in 1295 Ilkhan Ghazan Khan [1295-1304] accepted Islam, after which many Mongol commanders followed his example (Amitai-Preiss, 2015; *The Cambridge History ...*, 2023, p. 208). As we can see, Baybars al-Mansuri was not embarrassed at all.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, we can make the following conclusions:



The institution of martyrdom was simplified as much as possible in the chronicle of Baybars al-Mansuri, despite the existence of a long martyrological tradition in Islam.

The author of the 'Zubda(t) al-Fikra(t)...' did not strictly distinguish between any types of martyrs, but he limited the circle of 'shahids' themselves to people associated with the caliph (and the caliphs themselves) and the Mamluk amirs.

For the attribution of a Mamluk amir, it was preferable that he demonstrate his loyalty to the sultan and even more preferable that he be from among the amirs of the sultan al-Mansur Qalawun.

A prerequisite was death as a result of participation in a war against an external enemy, and, as the case of Ilhan Ghazan Khan shows, it did not necessarily have to be a fight against the infidels.

Death as a result of internal conflicts in the Mamluk state or natural death did not confer martyrdom, regardless of the previous merits of the deceased.

In fact, the institution of martyrs was considered by Baybars al-Mansuri as one of the auxiliary elements of the ideological assertion of the superiority of the state of al-Mansur Qalawun and his descendants, among others, in relation to Islamic states. In this context, the previous and foreign 'shahids' were not singled out (although their status was certainly not directly denied), and the new Qalawunid 'shahids' were celebrated in every possible way.

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