

Where does the Family Stand?: Contextualizing the Life Story of a Scholar in the Early Modern Ottoman Damascus

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Numerous studies on individual scholars and scholarly life in Syro-Egypt in the early modern era have underscored the importance of familial background and network for individual achievement in scholarship. Those enjoying kinship ties with learned people usually had a better chance to receive the necessary education to become future scholars. Once they achieved it, they became qualified for abundant positions available to and reserved for educated elite in endowments and government services. Their knowledge and lucrative posts secured them social prestige, political influence and financial means. This, in turn, enabled their children to access the means of knowledge relatively earlier and easier, and eventually to replace their fathers as scholars. This cycle of success was established in generations and consequently created distinguished families remembered by brilliant scholarly memories of its members. Thus, “family” appears as a significant meso-level social structure while contextualizing a scholar’s life story in the early modern period.

This presentation deals with the intertwined and dynamic relations between life story of individual scholars and their family history in the example of Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (1570–1651) and his family. Najm al-Dīn was born into a Damascene learned family represented by leading scholarly figures in its last four generations in the mid-sixteenth century. His grandfather Radiyy al-Dīn (1458–1529) was a Shāfi‘ī judge in both the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, and his father Badr al-Dīn (1499–1577) was the eminent Shāfi‘ī mufti of Damascus during the last thirty years of his life. Although Najm al-Dīn started his education as an orphan without enjoying fatherly support, he eventually managed to become one of the most famous Ghazzīs in the history of the family. Today, he is rather known by his centennial biographical dictionary *al-Kawākib al-sā’irā fī a’yān al-mi’a al-āshira* [The Wandering Stars among the Notables of the Tenth Century], an ambitious project that contains approximately one thousand five hundred biographies from the tenth hijrī century (circa. 1495–1592).

Since his early ages, Najm al-Dīn endeavored to appear as his deceased father’s true heir by assuming material and non-material familial heritage. This presentation attempts to highlight the multiple ways in which Najm al-Dīn reconstructed his familial history and contextualized his life story within it with special reference to his aforementioned biographical dictionary and other historical works. Najm al-Dīn utilized biographical narrative to create powerful portraits for his family members retrospectively. He also connected his own life story to theirs by composing an autobiography, narrating accounts of dreams and saintly visions, and utilizing several other intellectual and symbolic means.

Short Biography: Gürzat Kami is a PhD candidate in history at the Marmara University. His research focuses on Syrian scholars during the Mamluk–Ottoman transition period. He received a bachelor’s degree from the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University in 2012. He earned a master’s degree in history at Istanbul Şehir University in 2015. Currently, he is a researcher in the Ulama Database Project in the Centre for Islamic Studies (ISAM) and ERC-funded project OTTOLEGAL at the Sabancı University. His research interests include scholarly networks and mobility, the history of education and scholarly production in Ottoman lands during the early modern period, and the applications of social network analysis in historical studies.