

Daily life, catastrophes and strange events in al-Maqrīzī 's *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma[°]rifati duwal al-mulūk*

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Introduction

In the fourteenth and fifteenth century an increase in number and size of chronicles and annals took place in Syria and Egypt. The historiography of the Mamlūk period is immense, only a part of it has been published so far. Donald Little did much to establish the relations between these works, originality was not the first concern of the authors.² They were mainly preoccupied with the political developments and recorded carefully the deeds of the sultans, their followers and their opponents. But al-Maqrīzī 's interest went further, and he reported many events that had no direct political significance. What happens in everyday life is too obvious to be subject of history writing, but the registration of exceptional events sheds sometimes light on what normally remains in the dark. That is what I intend to highlight in this article with a choice of items translated from al-Maqrīzī 's *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma[°]rifati duwal al-mulūk*.

Data about al-Maqrīzī and his works

Taqī al-dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī lived from 766 to 845 (1365-1441/2 c.e.).³ He was born in Cairo from a family with roots in Libanon. The family of his father took its name from a quarter in Baälbek that had been an Italian settlement in Crusader times. After the death of his father, his grandfathers took care of his education. His maternal grandfather followed the Hanafī lawschool, his paternal grandfather was a Ḥanbalī scholar, his father adhered to the Shāfi[°]ī direction, and that was the school he himself chose to adhere to when adult. He got instruction in the standard religious knowledge, but also in a broad range of sciences by many teachers, and he was among the pupils of Ibn Khaldūn. Which explains his interest in sociological and economic topics. He followed the common career for young men of his class: jobs in the administration, and religious offices. Important are his three short periods as muḥtasib, inspector of the markets, in Cairo. After a severe famine he wrote a very critical book about the failures of the administration, *Ighātha al-umma bi-kashf al-ghumma* (Rescue of the nation by uncovering its distress) and after that, and maybe because of that, he moved to Damascus and stayed there ten years. His income from the functions he had there and the inheritance of his father made him financially independent, and when he came back to Cairo he no longer had to take payed jobs. Later in life he stayed five years in Mecca with his family. In Cairo he had a kind of home academy, and devoted most of his time to studying and writing, about religious subjects, about monetary problems and even about bee-keeping. During this last phase of his life he wrote his two major works, the historical chronicle *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma[°]rifati duwal al-mulūk* (Manuel of instruction about dynasties of rulers) and his probably most famous book, about the topography of Cairo and Alexandria, the antiquarian study *Al-mawā[°]iẓ wa 'l-i[°]tibār fī dīkr al-khiṭaṭ wa 'l-āthār* (Exhortations and observation concerning the districts and monuments).

The edition of the *Kitāb al-sulūk* used for this article was published in 8 volumes in Beyrouth in 1997 by Muḥammad [°]Abd al-Qādir [°]Aṭā, but it was not an original work, as he based it on the earlier edition in 4 volumes by two scholars, Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda and Sa[°]īd [°]Abd al-Fattāh [°]Āshūr. [°]Aṭā claims to have added parts from other manuscripts, but it is very disappointing that he did not make annotations of what he had added. His notes, most of biographical or topographical nature, are very limited. Even more disappointing is that he

failed to look with a critical eye to the text, so that it happens more than once that the very same notices are found under two different years. Or that a story does not fit in the year where it is placed. Finally, the introduction, with a short biography of al-Maqrīzī and a list of his works, is almost to the letter copied, without credits, from the some years earlier published booklet of Ḥusayn ʿAṣī, *Al-Maqrīzī, Taqī al-dīn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Qādir al-ʿUbaydī, 766 - 845 h/ 1366 - 1441 m*, Beirut 1992.

The content of the *Kitāb al-sulūk*

First some statistics about the book: it is massive, seven volumes plus an index volume, in total about 3200 pages of text. Volumes 1 - 4 cover more than 200 years, the years 568 - 777 (1172/73 – 1375/6) and are al-Maqrīzī's selection from other sources. Volumes 5 - 7 reflect the period of his lifetime, based on his own experiences and on reports from eyewitnesses. This edition might have its defects, it also has a very useful peculiarity. As mentioned above, al-Maqrīzī's interest was not restricted to the political issues, he had a keen eye for sociological and economical aspects of daily life. But those reports are spread out through the 3200 pages and are not so easy to select. The editor of this edition has done the necessary preparation to facilitate this article: in addition to the usual indexes of personal names and topography and the like, he made also an *Index of natural phenomena and catastrophes*. This index is not a number of entries in alphabetical order, but contains all the relevant notices in full, in chronological order, under the following headings, with the number of notices in each category added by me:

Index of eclipses of the sun: 8

Index of fires: 18

Index of diseases: 59

Index of eclipses of the moon: 12

Index of star positions: 9

Index of rain, flood, storm and lightning: 80

Index of strange happenings and the conditions of the emirs and the army: 115

Index of earthquakes: 22

In total this index fills 35 pages, in a somewhat smaller font than used in the main volumes, so that all in all these notices form only a small proportion of the massive book, no more than maybe 1,5 %. What is not registered in the index is the yearly flood of the Nile, only when it was abnormal it got a remark, but it certainly is mentioned in the text. Missing is also a survey of famines, although they are occasionally mentioned, often in relation to increasing prices. And the reports about the Black Death are not complete.

The plagues of Egypt

When reading this collection of stories, one cannot but be struck by the similarities with the biblical plagues, as if the author (or authors) of Exodus had written an ecological survey of Egypt. The ten plagues as registered in Exodus 7:14 - 12:42 were:

1: Water turned into blood 2: Frogs 3: Mosquitoes or quats 4: Gadflies (Dutch: steekvliegen) 5: Cattle pest 6: Boils 7: Hail 8: Locusts 9: Darkness
10: Death of firstborn sons

Not all the plagues are found, but most of them. Concerning the water turned into blood there is a report of such a phenomenon in Syria (Diseases, 672, II/87), the same with the frogs, they rained from the sky in Ḥoms (Rain etc., 833, VII/203). Of mosquitoes and gadflies there are no reports, but of all the other plagues similar occurrences are recorded by al-Maqrīzī.⁴ As many items fit under different labels, the quotations that follow are not arranged according to the categories in the index, but in an order that suits the interest they have for modern research.

Phenomena in the sky

Eclipses of sun and moon and peculiar starpositions were harmless, but could cause fear and asked for some counter-action. Praying and fasting were usual in such cases, or recitation of pious texts:

Eclipse of almost one third part of the body of the sun. After midday, the earth and what was on it turned yellow until that disappeared. The people did not gather and pray the salāt of the eclipse. Traditionists regarded this as an indication that the people of Syria and of Upper Egypt would renounce the obedience of the sultan. (Eclipses of the sun, 842, VII/384)

The following item poses the question whether the astronomers used the Cordoba astronomical tables without taking into account the difference in longitude:

The astronomers announced an eclipse of the sun, and in Cairo the people were invited to fast and do good deeds. But the eclipse did not take place, and the announcers were blamed. But later a report arrived that the eclipse had taken place in al-Andalus, the body of the sun had been covered completely save one eight part of it. (Eclipses of the sun, 834, VII/228)

Other ashtonishing phenomena in the sky: a case of northern light, or the eruption of a volcano?

Mail arrived from Qūs that in this month of Ramaḍān the sky turned red, even the stars looked coloured, during one hour they were red, then they turned black during an hour and then white during an hour, until the dawn appeared. (..) (Rain etc., 736, III/202)

Something we were not used to happened: from daybreak until sundown a redness spread in the north that the Egyptians call the Baḥrī-side, and that redness in the north spread also one more hour after the sun had set. The earth, the walls and other things looked in those two hours as if they were painted red. That lasted four months, it continued until the end of the month Rajab. (Rain etc., 826, VII/80)

Food and foodquality

Famines were common, they were not reported in the index. But another matter was the control over the quality of food, which was one of the tasks of the muḥtasib. He was confronted with rotten poultry, radiating meat and the sale of fat of human origin:

A strange thing happened. A druggist, by name Muḥammad ibn Khalaf, in the quarter of the polishers in Cairo, was arrested on Saturday the 16th of Ramaḍān and brought before the muḥtasib. In his poultry storeroom 34,196 salted pigeons and starlings were found, 1,196 pigeons and 30,300 starlings, all of them stinking and discoloured. He was well-bredd and had a good reputation. All of it was destroyed. (Strange happenings, 742, III/370)

There was a message from Ghaza that in the night of Wednesday the third, a camel was slaughtered in the butcher's market, its meat was hung in the house of the butcher. The meat radiated like a candle spreads light when it is lit. A piece was cut from it, and it radiated on its own, they cut other pieces and they radiated, too, every piece of it radiated, They took the whole of it and buried it without anyone eating anything from it, save that one man cut a piece of meat from it that radiated, he refrained from it and in the morning he threw it to a dog, but the dog did not eat it and refrained from it. If the weight of a dirham was cut from the meat of this camel, it radiated like a star, an innumerable crowd witnessed this. (Strange happenings, 823, VII/17)

Some people came across a group that had many parts of human corpses in store. They went to the governor, and soon it was found out that they excavated the dead from their graves, then boiled the bodies in water on a high fire, so that the flesh loosened, and they collected the grease that surfaced on the water. They sold it to the Franks for 25 dinars the qinṭār. They were put in prison, and their case was forgotten after the people had watched the cadavers they had and the vessels with the fat. They were carried to the sultan for him to see, the rumor circulated in Cairo. (Strange happenings, 827, VII/96)

Weather and earthquakes

Storms and tornado's, heavy rainfall, huge hailstones, floods and earthquakes caused much damage, sometimes even the loss of life. That endangered sometimes the foodproduction:

Near the Gharbiyya a black dark wind blew, so that the heaven darkened. Many houses were turned over, then black hailstones fell with a bitter taste, which the wind blew in from the the seaside until they filled the roads. One hailstone was weighed, its weight was 180 dirham, they found one as big as an orange, [another] the size of an ostrich egg, not counting the many of bullet size. The crops were on the verge of harvesting, the ears were thrown down and cut from the root. Much of its cattle perished. A tree was seen, a very large sycamore, in the middle of which a hailstone like a flatbread - and as big - had fallen and had split it in halves as if done by a saw. A cow was found lying on the ground, its back cut by a hailstone and split into halves. The crops of 28 villages were destroyed. The farmers [of the Gharbiyya] collected their crop, carried it to the sultan and appealed to him for help. The governor of the Gharbiyya ordered an investigation of that district and a report about the crop damage that had befallen [the farmers], and reduced their tax; that became a model. (Rain etc., 739, III/252)

Sometimes a misfortune also had its good sides:

Cold reigned in Cairo and surroundings, so that the water of the ponds and sections of the Nile and neighbourhood froze. For days the ice was sold in the markets. We were not used to that, never had heard about it.

It was very cold in Cairo, so that in several places the waters froze. The ice was sold in the markets on Thursday the eleventh. A pond with stagnant water of the Nile froze in some places, it became one solid piece, geese walked on it. Many beanplants blackened and dried out, they were collected and burnt in the ovens. Many leafs of sycamore and other trees became black as well. (Rain etc., 836, VII/305; 843, VII/471)

How devastating earthquakes can be is obvious:

In the afternoon of Wednesday the seventeenth there was an earthquake that lasted three days and nights. The walls of the city (Damascus) collapsed, all its houses were demolished, there remained no house that did not collapse or had no damage of some sort. From the mountain a part the size of half a pyramid was cut off and fell down on the earth. In Wadi al-Azraq a number of sources overflowed, and a number of rivers flooded. The earthquake came from the west and moved to the east, it made a sound as galloping horses. After those three days the earthquake lasted another forty days, each day it came back once or twice, three times or four, so that the people went to the desert. That lasted a year. (Earthquakes, 822, VI/492)

Rodents, locusts and frogs

Many reports memorize the great damage caused by mice and rats, here together as rodents because the word *far'* used for them is ambiguous. Locusts were a returning plague, vermin of all sorts threatened the crops, frogs fell from heaven. Battles between groups of rats were reported more than once.

In Manfalūt many rats appeared when the crops had just been harvested and destroyed the threshing floors, in one night a fourth of the threshingfloor was gone. The people stayed awake the whole night with burning torches to kill the rats, during the day another group took over and did not stop killing them. Then they put [the rats] they had killed in a net and burned them in a fire at a distance, and some threw them into the Nile. A strange thing was observed: a great group of white rats emerged and filled the field, and opposite them black rats emerged. They formed two rows on a surface of two faddāns, then they screamed and one party attacked the other and they fought each other during an hour. The black rats were defeated, the white rats pursued them to kill them and they tore them to pieces in those fields. Many people witnessed that, and they wrote a letter about it to the sultan and the emirs. About 60,000 ardabs of beans of the sultan were destroyed near Manfalūt. (Strange happenings, 739, III/252)

A strange thing happened. On the threshingfloor of Carpentershill in the Gharbiyya, a number of rats came together that only Allāh the Elevated can count. They fought each other from the afternoon until near the evening of the next day, and the following day about 5,000 dead rats were found, they were collected and burnt. The rats had destroyed the melonbeds and the like, and had eaten the grain that was in the ears. And they had eaten most of what was in the barns of the regions of the Gharbiyya, so that in some of the regions no seeds were in store. In one place more than 300 rats were collected. (Strange happenings, 834, VII/228-9)

There were fires in many places. There was fire in the threshingfloors near Shābīn al-Qaṣr, much grain was burnt for it was threshing time. A rat dragged the wick of a lamp into the hold of a ship loaded with clothes, sesame-oil and other goods, that had made a stop at the quay of al-Miṣr on the way to Upper Egypt. The fire set all that was in the ship in flames, spread to [the ship] itself and burnt it completely while it was in the water until it was charred. The fire struck also many houses in Cairo and Miṣr. (Fires, 836, VII/254)

Locusts were a threat to the foodsupply:

Locusts appeared that blocked the horizon with their multitude, they swarmed in the direction of Ṭarā and had done much damage to part of the crops, but Allāh sent down on them the Marrīsiyya wind that threw them into the Nile and tore them to pieces so that they all perished until the last one, praise be to Allāh. (Strange happenings, 830, VII/149)

Measures against harmful animals are seldom reported, but here is the exception.

The mailbearers came from the east (Mashriq) to Damascus with bottles filled with water from a local well. It had the peculiarity that it was followed by birds called locusteaters (samarmar, L. Pastor roseus), the size and colour of a starling, with yellow feathers, to eat locusts. [The bottles] were hung at a kiosk on the citadel, on the Minaret of the Bride and on the Qubbat al-Naṣr of the °Umayyad mosque. There were lots of locusts in the districts of Damascus, damaging its plantations. The emir Mankalī Baghā al-Shams, the deputy of Syria, had ordered to fetch that water, and when it came and was hung, the number of locusteaters in Damacus grew and destroyed the locusts that were there, not a single one remained. The bottles with water were kept hanging in those places until their content dried out, but the birds remained. (Strange happenings, 766, IV/280)

But what about the job a group of weasels did to provide a poor family with food:

Something rare happened that is an admonition for those with intelligence and insight. A poor man, one of those who find scarcely food, had a wife, and daughters with her. They lived in the ruins of the Ḥusayniyya outside Cairo. When the Day of Immolation came, well-to-do people slaughtered their sacrificial animals and roasted their meat. The daughters of this man longed very much to eat meat, they asked for it but there was no way to fulfill their desire. He tried to distract them, but they cried and wept, his grief for them tore his heart in pieces the whole day of the feast until the night fell and they went to bed. During the night a movement was heard that went on the whole night, he and the mother of the children could not sleep from the intense grief. But when it became morning, behold! there was a big pile of meat in their house that weasels had transported during the night, they did not know from where they had brought it. They were very glad about it, he woke his daughters, they roasted a part of this meat and ate their fill, and cooked what remained of it, that was sufficient for several days. "Allāh provides for whom he wants without bill." (Strange happenings, 825, VII/69)

Epidemic diseases and plagues

Most dramatic were the many diseases that made large numbers of victims among the population. The nature of the diseases is no easy matter to establish, the words used, wabā' and ṭā'ūn, are container words which are rendered as neutrally as possible, with disease and epidemic disease, epidemic in the sense of widespread, not in the modern definition. The word maraḍ is translated with illness. Only when boils (the sixth plague) are expressly mentioned the word pest is used. Recognizable diseases (not all of them translated here) that occur are: non-deadly bleedings, fever and cold, and the whooping cough (Diseases, 672, II/87; 802, VI/20; 806, VI/107), but the number one killer disease was of course the Black Death. The index provides some of the reports, but in book IV/80-91 is a long description of this deathly epidemic. This section is a combination of short citations with summaries of the longer notices.

It was noticed that diseases were more frequent in summer than in winter:

Doctors explain this by the flow of the four humors of the human body in the spring, and their frozen state in the winter. (Diseases, 833, VII/204)

The tenth plague, death of the firstborn sons, corresponds maybe with the following observation:

The quick fast death by the pest was horrible, as was the catarrh that descended from the brain to the breast. The [infected] person dies within less than an hour, without progress of illness. It happened most to infants and young people, then to male and female slaves, least to [adult] women and men. (Diseases, 833, VII/208)

In 748, pest came from China, the land of the Great Khan, and spread through the Middle East:

In the land of the Goths rain fell the like of which had not been seen in other times, their riding animals and their cattle died after that rain and vanished, then the people died, the birds and the wild animals, so the land of the Goths became empty. Within three months sixteen of their kings perished. The people of China passed away, only a few were left. The destruction in the land of India was less than in the land of China. This disease did not prevail in only one area, it was general in all the areas of the earth, east and west, north and south, among all the races of humankind, and even among the fishes of the sea, the birds of the air and the wild land animals. (748, IV/80)

[The disease] began in the land of the Great Khan, that is the first climate, and spread thereafter in six months from Tabriz to the end of it, that is the land of the Goths and the Mongols. Its inhabitants worship fire, the sun and the moon, they are divided in more than 300 tribes. They all perished, without reason (or: illness), in their winter- and summerquarters, on their pastures, on the back of their horses, their horses died, too. The cadavers lay on the earth. That happened in the year 742, according to the tidings from the land of Azbak [north of the Black Sea]. (748, IV/82)

It began in Egypt at the end of the tilling season, in the autumn of the year [7]48, and immediately at the beginning of Muḥarram in the year [7]49 the disease spread through the whole region, in Sha^cbān and Ramaḍān it became worse in the district of Miṣr and at mid-Dhū l-Qa^cda it increased. (748, IV/80)

In Cairo and Miṣr every day from 10,000, 15,000 to 20,000 souls died. People produced coffins and benches to wash the dead without payment, most of the dead were carried on wooden panels, ladders and doors, they dug pits and threw [the dead] into them. In one pit 30, 40 and more [corpses] were buried. Death of the plague [happened as follows]: a person spits blood, gives a cry and is dead. There was a rise in prices in the whole world. (748, IV/81)

The first symptom of the disease in Damascus was that a pimple appeared behind the ear of a human being and soon started to erupt, then a plague boil appeared under the armpit of the human being, and then it did not last long before he died. Thereafter the people were affected by the khiyāra (bumps) that made many victims. They endured that for some time, then they spat blood, the fright increased because of the many deaths, at most one stayed alive for about fifty hours after the spitting of blood. (748, IV/82)

Also animals succumbed to diseases:

The locusts devastated in the neighbourhood of Cairo many plantations, like gherkins, melons, cucumbers and pumpkins. The pest hit the cattle and the riding animals, in the Nile many fish were found floating, killed by the pest. (Strange happenings, 841, VII/358)

The reaction to the pest, in 748/9 as in other times, was the advice to pray and fast, and to stay away from the infected city:

The sultan rode to Siryāqūs and stayed there from the first to the twentieth Rajab, and had then the intention to return to the citadel, but was advised to stay in Siryāqūs and to keep fasting there during the month of Ramaḍān. (748, IV/86)

And to recite pious texts:

"Recite the Sūra Nūkh 3360 times and ask Allāh to lift from you what has befallen you." (748, IV/85)

(..) a number of days the recitation of al-Bukhārī continued in the Azhar mosque and other places. (748, IV/86)

Another countermeasure, to remedy sin:

Wine to the value of more than 500 dinar was poured out. (748, IV/84)

As the number of registered and unregistered victims increased (a registration that we would like to have at our disposal for research), the citylife became totally disrupted. The economy stopped, the shopkeepers and artisans had to take upon themselves the task of caring for the dead, and made a profit on it, as al-Maqrīzī could not neglect to mention. But the situation went out of control, the number of biers and objects as doors or ladders to carry the dead to their graves was insufficient, helpers fell ill and died, and it came so far that the dead bodies lay in the deserted streets and stank.

Situation of women

Women are almost invisible in the chronicles, if they were not spouses or mothers of sultans. They were even forbidden to leave their houses at some point. But that did not prevent that they were a part of the economic life, and even could embark on a criminal career. That fashion causes problems does not really surprise:

With that all sorts of painful events happened. The son of a woman who had no other children died of the plague, and when he was washed, shrouded and taken to be laid in the coffin to be buried in the desert, the mother wanted to go behind the bier, but she was prohibited to do that, because the sultan had decreed that a woman was not allowed to leave her house. She found this prohibition unacceptable because it dishonoured the bier of her son, and she threw herself from the top of her house to the earth and died. Another woman had left her house for an urgent matter that occurred to her, the chief of the ḥisba caught her, and cried to his assistants to bring her to him to be beaten. No sooner had they arrested her, or she went out of her mind and lost consciousness from fear. One of those present intervened for her and pleaded not to punish her, and he let her alone and went away. She was carried to her house, but she was left alone, her mind was affected and she was ill for a period of time. (Strange happenings, 841, VII/354)

In the days of al-Mālik al-Nāsir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn, near Ṭabbāla a woman in the company of a gang of falconers worked to win over women and arouse their desire to go with her to a place where they expected to be employed as harlots. When the [seduced] woman arrived there, she was captured by men that the temptress had organised, they killed her and took her clothes. The temptress got arrested, the [men of the gang] were nailed [on a cross], and so was she also. She said - while she was led around Cairo nailed on the camel - seeing the women that made merry about her: "Oh whores! If I had been enjoying myself, then you had the right to have fun, but for me it is not funny." (Strange happenings, 751, IV/103)

A stupendous thing happened. A woman saw in her sleep the messenger of Allāh (peace be on Him) who informed her not to wear the shāsh. That was a headscarf that women had created since about the year 780, like the humps and the fat of a Bactrian camel. The front of the shāsh was on the forehead of the women, and the bottom on her back, the length of it reached, stretched out, about three quarters of a cubit in height. But she did not stop wearing it. Then she saw Him (peace be on Him) a second time in her sleep saying to her: "I informed you not to wear the shāsh, but you did not listen, and put it on. You will die as a Christian." Her mother went with her to the Shaykh al-islām Sarrāj al-dīn ʿUmar al-Balqīnī, to tell him her vision. He instructed her to go to a Christian church, to pray [a number of] prostrations and to ask Allāh the Elevated to show her mercy, and then to come back to him to get his blessing. Her mother went with her after the seance with al-Balqīnī to the church, and she prayed and then dropped dead immediately. Her mother left her there and went away from her. The Christians buried her in their graveyard. Let us seek the protection of Allāh against the bad outcome of fate. (Strange happenings, 787, V/177)

Al-Maqrīzī reported two cases of gender transformation:

A letter arrived from the emir Aytamash, the deputy of Tripoli, with a convincing report by its judge. It stated that a woman from Tripoli named Nafīsa, beautiful to see, had been married to three husbands, but none of them had been able to take her virginity, not through restraint on their part. They thought that she was sewn up, and divorced⁵ her one after the other. When she had reached the age of fifteen years, her breasts disappeared, sleep descended on her a day and a night, and out of her vulva a tiny tiny thing started to come that took the form of a little penis and testicles. She kept her case hidden until a fourth man married her and when only the contract rested to be made, she informed her mother about her situation. That became known in Tripoli, and came to the knowledge of Aytamash the deputy, who wrote a report about it and prepared it for the sultan. (Strange happenings, 754, IV/183)

A strange thing happened, like one that was reported before. The emir Sharaf al-dīn ʿĪsā ibn Bāb Jak, gouvernor of the Ashmūnīn, had a daughter. When she had reached the age of fifteen, her vulva got blocked and a penis and testicles descended. She reached puberty as do men. This became known in Ḥusayniyya - where he lived - and in Cairo, it came to the knowledge of Manjak, who summoned her before him and inquired after the truth of the rumor. He ordered to take the women's clothes from her and dressed her in men's clothes, of soldiers, and called her Muḥammad. He made him a courier of the infantry in his service and favoured him with a fief. Everybody came to observe him. ⁶(Strange happenings, 776, IV/375)

Entertainment

Life was not only serious, reports about entertainment are scarce, but there are some:

Two men showed amazing acts. One of them, from the Frankish new muslims who dress as soldiers, attached a rope at the top of the minaret of the Madrassa Nāsiriyya Ḥasan near the Horsemarket below the citadel, stretched it and fixed it to the top of the Ashrafiyya in the citadel. The distance was a bowshot or more, on a height of more than 100 cubit in the air. Then he appeared at the top of the minaret, and walked over that rope until he reached the Ashrafiyya, and during the walk he showed different tricks. The sultan sat there to watch him, people from districts of the town were

assembled there. This was one of the extraordinary things that you don't believe unless you have witnessed them. The sultan bestowed a dress on him, and sent him to the emirs, there was no one who did not give him anything.

A Persian merchant attached a rope between the two minarets of Madrassa Ḥasan to perform the act that the afore mentioned two men had done. He left the top of one of them and walked over the rope a number of steps, then returned to where he had started. He walked a second time on his feet to the other end, and showed wonderful things, he sat down on the rope and let his feet hang down, in that position he took a bow he had over his shoulder, took two arrows from his quiver and shot one after the other, then he rose and stepped, still standing on the rope, in a ring. (Strange happenings, 829, VII/132; VII/133)

The following story is not meant as entertainment, but it is a good story for the end of the article, with a moral lesson into the bargain:

[..] a man traveled through the Gharbiyya on a she-ass, with a bag of cloth under him. A robber attacked him and threw him on the ground to murder him. The man said to him: " By Allāh, let me drink some water before you murder me." Allāh the Elevated inspired [the robber] to show mercy and grant him what he wanted, he opened the bag of the man and took out a cup and stepped into the water to scoop water into it. But a crocodile snatched him, got into the water, tore him apart, and ate him. The man saw that, stretched out on the ground, with his ass waiting with the horse of the robber, both standing near him. That was the situation until people passed him at a distance. He called them for help, and informed them about what had happened to him, how his enemy had perished. They undid his shackles and went with him, the ass, the horse and the bag to the gouvernor. He told him his story, the gouvernor took the horse and let him go his way, and he went with his ass and his bag. This is an admonition for who want to hear it. Allāh is sufficient as protector. (Strange happenings, 828, VII/119)

¹ Full name Th.M.Koornwinder-Wijntjes

² Donald P. Little, *An Introduction to Mamlūk Historiography. An Analysis of Arabic Annalistic and Biographical Sources for the Reign of al-Malik an-Nāsir Muḥammad ibn Qalā'ūn*. [Freiburger Islamstudien Band II] (Wiesbaden: , 1970).

³ Ḥusayn °Aṣī, *Al-Maqrīzī, Taqī al-dīn Aḥmad ibn °Abd al-Qādir al-°Ubaydī, 766 - 845 h/ 1366 - 1441 m* (Beiryout, Dār al-kutub al-°ilmiyya, 1992). The year 1366 is not correct. Also in his biography in *EF* by F. Rosenthal, vol. VI, p. 193-194 is some confusion about his dates.

⁴ The references are to the category, the year of occurrence and the volume and page of the main tekst, not to the index as the items are not numbered.

⁵ I translate divorced, in the text the word is ṭbq , which does not make much sense, it might have been a misreading for ṭlq.

⁶ Some humans don't have xx or xy chromosomes, but xxxy, and so young persons can start life as apparently female, but in fact have male organs, which come to expression during puberty. See *NRC-Handelsblad*, April 23, 2011.