

A Damascus Diary: 1734-35, Ibn Kannan (d. 1754)

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Preface

Mohammad ibn Kannan was a historian, teacher, and a member of a mystical order who was born, raised, and lived his entire life in Damascus, the capital of modern-day Syria. The following excerpt comes from a diary he kept between 1699 and 1740 and covers the year beginning in June 1734. For reasons that are still not clear, a surprising number of chronicles, including Ibn Kannan's, survive from eighteenth-century Syria. Chronicles, unlike the more formal genres of history-writing (like the biographical dictionary) that dominate Islamic historiography, are especially interesting because they allow the writer considerable latitude to explore and comment on events and people of interest to the individual chronicler.

Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. The city is well placed as an agricultural oasis and an entrepôt for both north-south and east-west overland trade. The Barada River, which springs from the Anti-Lebanon mountain range northwest of the city, creates the fertile Ghuta Oasis: Ibn Kannan spent a considerable time visiting gardens, parks, and orchards that are fed by the Barada and its tributaries.

When Ibn Kannan began his chronicle, Damascus had been ruled for almost 200 years by the Turkish Ottoman dynasty with its capital in Istanbul (referred to by the author as Al-Rum). The city had a long history preceding the Ottoman conquest: it had been the capital of the first Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads, who ruled from Damascus between 661 and 750 C.E. The Umayyads built Damascus' first and largest congregational mosque, known as the Umayyad Mosque or the Great Mosque, and it served as the city's religious, social, and even commercial center from their time to the period when Ibn Kannan was writing. Radiating out from the mosque are many of the neighborhoods mentioned in the excerpt below. Public institutions such as markets (souks), public baths, hospitals, soup kitchens, hostels, and schools (*madrasahs*) were established and named after the prominent local and imperial figures who funded their construction and provided for their maintenance through endowment grants known as *waqfs*.

Ibn Kannan's neighborhood of Al-Salihiyya began as a village located on the slopes of Mount Qasyun overlooking the walled city of Damascus and was one of the first neighborhoods to develop outside the city walls. Under the patronage of military and civilian leaders, a whole host of *madrasahs* and other public institutions were built to accommodate the city's growing population. Sultan Selim I (d. 1520), the Ottoman conqueror of Syria, Egypt and the Hejaz, had a mosque complex, the Salimiyya, built here; it figures prominently in the lives of Ibn Kannan and his neighbors. Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731), Ibn Kannan's most celebrated neighbor and one of the most important Arab intellectuals of the early modern period, occupied the teaching position at Al-Salimiyya.

A complex hierarchy of military, bureaucratic, and judicial offices marked Ottoman rule. The Ottoman bureaucracy in Damascus was represented by the governor (pasha) of the Province of Damascus, which included the city as well as a vast hinterland. Traditionally, the governor and the chief judge (*qadi*) were of Turkish origin while the chief jurisconsult (mufti) was of local origin. The *qadi* and chief mufti were appointed by the Shaikh al-Islam, head of the religio-judicial branch of the bureaucracy in Istanbul.

During the eighteenth century, a dramatic transformation occurred in Ottoman provincial administration with the central authorities increasingly entrusting provincial administration to men of local origin. In Damascus, members of the Azm family established an unprecedented dynasty of Syrian governors of the province. One of the governor's major duties was to ensure the security of the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Pilgrims from the farthest northern and eastern Ottoman provinces gathered annually in Damascus to proceed in a

caravan to Mecca. The caravan set out in an elaborate procession led by the governor and a ceremonial litter (*mahmal*). The *jarda* was a body of troops responsible for provisioning the returning pilgrims.

As a teacher of Arabic grammar and Islamic law, Ibn Kannan provides considerable detail about the condition of the city's many *madrasahs*. He is also attentive to the passing of fellow members of the ulema, the body of religious scholars, prayer leaders (imams), and others involved in the religious life of the city. Like most of his colleagues among the ulema, Ibn Kannan was also a member of a Sufi order. Sufism is the mystical aspect of Islam and the variety of orders that evolved over the course of Islamic history developed practices and institutions to facilitate spiritual discipline. Ibn Kannan was a member of the Khalwati order and notes his participation in the *khalwa*, a spiritual retreat, and the hallmark of this order.

Document

The Year 1147 AH (1734-35 C.E.)¹

The first of the year fell on a Thursday. The sultan of the Rumi and some Arab and Persian provinces is Sultan Mahmud b. Mustafa Khan b. Mohammad Khan, may God bless him with compassion and His favor.² The governor of the province of Damascus and protector of the hajj caravan is Suleiman Pasha Ibn al-Azm; the chief judge is Husayn Efendi Salih Zad; and the chief mufti is Hamid Efendi.³ The ulema and the teachers are in their proper places of appointment.

On Tuesday the sixth of Muharram, I was invited to an orchard known as the Qattan orchard, where the heat was overwhelming. Unfortunately, we will probably not see a good fruit harvest this year.

On Wednesday the seventh, the scholar Al-Sayyid As'ad b. Mohammad Efendi al-Maliki died. A service was held for him at the Umayyad Mosque and he was buried in the eastern corner of the Dahdah Cemetery near the tomb of the Al-Arif Ayyub al-Khalwati.⁴

On Saturday the tenth -- the day of Ashura, that is -- I was invited along with a group of friends to the Bakri family garden in the village of Jaramana in the Ghouta. I recited a few poems for the occasion...⁵

On Tuesday the thirteenth, I held an Arabic grammar lesson at our house in the Amir Muqaddam quarter of the Salihiyya neighborhood of Damascus. We closed the session by reading the Fatiha and invoking the name of God.⁶

From Friday to the evening of Saturday the sixteenth of the month, I was invited to attend the *khalwa* held in the Manjak Mosque in the Al-Sadat neighborhood. Some friends

¹ The Muslim calendar begins with the migration (*hijra*) of Mohammad and his earliest followers to Medina from Mecca in 622 C.E. This selection from Ibn Kannan's diary covers the year 1147 AH (*anno hegirae*) which began in June 1734 C.E and ended in May of 1735 C.E. The Muslim calendar is a lunar calendar with 12 months: Muharram (1), Safar (2), Rabi' al-Awwal (3), Rabi' al-Thani (4), Jumadi al-Ula (5), Jumadi al-Akhira (6), Rajab (7), Sha'ban (8), Ramadan (9), Shawwal (10), Dhu al-Qa'da (11), and Dhu al-Hijja (12).

² "Rumi" in this context refers to the territories of the former eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire which, by the time of Ibn Kannan, formed the heartland of the Turkish Ottoman dynasty centered on Istanbul (known to Ibn Kannan as "Al-Rum"). "Khan" is an honorific for rulers. The Ottoman sultan Mahmud I ruled from 1730 to 1754. The "b." between names stands for "ibn" which translates as "son of".

³ "Efendi" is an honorific used for prominent political and judicial figures.

⁴ "Al-Arif" is an honorific commonly used for prominent Sufi mystics.

⁵ Ashura is a Muslim holy day.

⁶ The Fatiha is the opening chapter of the Qur'an and is often recited as a prayer.

invited me to go from there to a garden where we stayed until the early morning. This place is known as the garden of the valley and the road to it passes by the Sakakwi public baths.

On the eighteenth, I was invited to attend the wedding of Al-Sayyid Mustafa al-Safadi.

On Tuesday the twentieth, I resumed my grammar lesson and, again, we closed with the Fatiha and a prayer.

On Saturday the twenty-fourth, I went to the village of Balat to visit my friend Yusuf and ended up staying with him for three nights. I left early Tuesday morning and passed by the area of the Shaikh Raslan Cemetery to drop in on the mufti Hamid Efendi who was at home.

On Sunday the twenty-fifth, the messenger from the hajj caravan arrived in town announcing that letters from the pilgrims would arrive in a few days and that the caravan itself should arrive on Sunday the third of the coming month, followed shortly thereafter by the *mahmal* and the governor. Evidently, the caravan has not been disturbed by nomads and has been able to proceed throughout with security and comfort.⁷ May God be praised.

The first of Safar fell on a Friday and the hajj caravan entered town on the sixth. The *mahmal* arrived on Thursday the seventh with Ibrahim, the commander of the *jardah*...

On Sunday the tenth, Shaikh Ibrahim b. Shaikh al-Rifa'i al-Salihi died and a service was held for him at Al-Salimiyya. He was buried near Shaikh Abd al-Hadi, north of the Azimiyya and Aziziyya *madrassahs*.

My friend Ahmad and I spent the evening of Saturday the second at the Basiti orchard, which belongs to the Samadi family. It is an extraordinary garden and refreshed my heart. The water of the stream glitters as it gurgles from its spring. I composed a few lines of verse on the occasion. We entered the orchard early in the morning with a group and we all appreciated its breathtaking beauty.

The first of the month of Rabi' al-Awwal fell on a Saturday...

The first of the month of Rabi' al-Thani fell on a Monday. On the night of Wednesday the third, I was invited by Shaikh Mohammad b. Abdallah al-Hanbali, the imam of Al-Jarrah Mosque, to his home west of Al-Jarrah with a group of pious colleagues.

On Saturday the twenty-ninth, a number of friends invited me and a group of learned men to Wadi Kiwan, east of Al-Rabwa on the banks of the Barada. I did not compose anything on the occasion. We returned the same evening. There were more people than could be possibly counted in Al-Rabwa as it is a favorite escape for Damascenes. Someone mentioned nightingales because he had been reading *Hayat al-Hayawan*...⁸

On Tuesday the twenty-second, the memorial service for the Master Scholar Shaikh Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi took place at his home and near his tomb. His grandson Shaikh Mustafa took on the awesome responsibility of making the arrangements for this event, which lasted three nights...

On the evening of the next day, Friday, the circumcision of the grandsons of the deceased Shaikh al-Arif Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi took place.

The first of the month of Jumadi al-Ula fell on a Tuesday or a Wednesday...

On Wednesday the twenty-first, the devout learned one Shaikh Tahir, son of our master Shaikh Isma'il Efendi, son of the deceased Abd al-Ghani Efendi al-Nabulusi, died and a service was held for him in the afternoon at Al-Salimiyya. He was buried near his grandfather in the family compound. More people than could possibly be counted turned out to mourn him.

During the latter years of his life while his grandfather was still alive, Shaikh Tahir was affected by a disorder which left him alternately agitated and taciturn and prevented him from going outside so that he retreated within himself. He cut himself off from people and avoided meeting with anyone. He stopped eating and drinking except for tiny amounts. He

⁷ Ibn Kannan uses the term "*arab*" to refer to the nomadic tribal groups of the Arabian and Syrian deserts.

⁸ *Hayat al-hayawan* is the title of a fourteenth century C.E. compendium of animal lore.

remained in this state throughout the remainder of his grandfather's life. Then, about two months before his death, he abruptly stopped eating altogether until he died. Someone was able to keep an eye on him through a window. Once, when he failed to wake, his door was forced open and he was found dead. His body was prepared for a proper burial, a service was held at the Salimiyya Mosque in the afternoon, and he was returned to the family compound where he was buried just to the east of his grandfather.

On Saturday the tenth of Jumadi al-Akhira, heavy rains fell and fierce winds blew from the beginning of the evening to around noon the next day. Praise be to God, the gracious.

On Wednesday the seventh, I was invited along with host of other scholars to attend a lesson given by Shaikh Mohammad Amin Efendi b. al-Kharrat at his teaching spot in the Umariyya *madrasah* in Al-Salihiyya. He had a lavish reception prepared for the occasion at the garden of Shaikh Ahmad b. al-Hakim al-Salihi, which is attached to the Qalansiyya hostel. The lesson focused on an important legal manual.

On Wednesday the fourteenth, a promising youth with considerable literary talents named Sa'di, son of the deceased luminary Abd al-Qadir b. Abd al-Hadi al-Shafi'i died. He had been a teacher at the Al-Ashrafiyya *madrasah* in the Asruniyya neighborhood. He had gone to Istanbul and returned with an appointment to this teaching post... A service was held in the evening at the Umayyad Mosque. He was buried near his father and his family near the Abu Shama plot in the Dahdah Cemetery.

The first of the month of Rajab fell on a Saturday, although some say it was a Friday. On Sunday, the second or third, we received news of the death of the Shaikh al-Islam in Istanbul. He was known as Ishaq Efendi. He was succeeded by Bayri Efendi who became the mufti of the central state. The death of the Shaikh al-Islam actually took place on the sixteenth of the previous month.

We also received news of the death of the most renowned memorizer of the Qur'an, Al-Hafiz al-Khalili, the *hafiz* of the Jerusalem region.⁹ He studied with the masters at the Azhar University in Cairo and demonstrated remarkable skill as a scholar of Hadith and sincere devotion as a loyal friend. He visited Damascus and stayed at the home of Shaikh Mohammad Dakdakji near the Great Mosque. When he was in town, he gave very thorough lessons between the two evening prayers and would stick to this schedule throughout his stay. His lessons were always packed with locals and took place in the courtyard of the Great Mosque in the direction of the Kallasa *madrasah*, which was attached to the mosque itself. I demonstrated my knowledge of two treatises for him and he wrote in his own hand a certificate of his approval on the treatises themselves...

On Friday the twenty-first, the venerable scholar Shaikh Abd al-Salam b. Mohammad al-Kamidi al-Shafi'i died. He was tireless in his pursuit of knowledge and a master of texts and their meaning. He studied legal methodology and theology with the finest teachers in Damascus including the devout Hamza al-Hanbali and Abd al-Qadir b. Abd al-Hadi. He also studied with Ibrahim al-Fattal and attended lessons with Yahya al-Shawi al-Maghribi under the central dome of the Great Mosque. I, along with many of the city's scholars, attended his lessons opposite the tomb of the Prophet John at the Great Mosque. He taught a whole host of students at the Badra'iyya *madrasah*. A service was held for him at the Great Mosque and he was buried near his father at Small Gate, east of the tomb of Bilal.¹⁰

Monday the twenty-fourth was the first day of the *khalwa al-Barbakiyya* in Damascus. It concluded on Thursday the twenty-seventh. Two weeks earlier, the *khalwa al-*

⁹ A *hafiz* is one renowned for his or her ability to recite the Qur'an.

¹⁰ Bilal, an Ethiopian slave was one of the Prophet Mohammad's first companions and the first to make the call to prayer.

Banu Ayyub al-Khalwati had been held. I was invited, attended, and asked God for his acceptance.

The first of the month of Sha'ban fell on a Sunday. During this month, Suleiman Pasha returned from his annual tax collecting rounds and the newly appointed chief judge of Damascus, the Rumi Mustafa Efendi Ali Zadahu, also entered town.

During this month, Al-Sayyid Ahmad b. Shaikh Nasri al-Hussayni al-Khalwati died. He had been one of my father's students. He inherited an enormous fortune and managed to ascend to the post of *qadi* as soon as he acquired his newfound wealth. God is supreme and all will return to Him.

On the second, I was invited to the home of a dear friend Al-Sayyid Ahmad, a student of the author of this very history.

On Sunday the twenty-first, many Rumi pilgrims entered the city. That evening I was invited to the home of one of my friends, Al-Sayyid Ali al-Mallah. Umar Agha al-Nashifi, may God protect him, was also there. On the same day, someone reminded me of two *mawwals* by Abd al-Ghani Nabulusi that I had memorized...¹¹

On Sunday the twentieth of Ramadan, I had a dream in which I was sitting as though I were dressed in a new robe of honor. I had got my arm into one sleeve but had not yet slipped the second into the other. I heard someone cry, "Praise your Lord and ask for His forgiveness." Then I awoke. Only God knows! But, here's how I explained the dream the next morning. One of the city's notables owed me a quantity of animal fodder. I learned from the dream that the one who was supposed to transport the fodder to me had failed to bring me all of what I was owed.

The first of Shawwal fell on a Thursday.

On Thursday the twenty-fifth, the *mahmal*, accompanied by the governor, set forth on the annual pilgrimage. They carried 120 banners with them. The governor was Suleiman Pasha, the brother of Isma'il Pasha, the former governor of Damascus who perished in Crete and was buried in a mosque there.

The month of Dhu al-Qa'dah began on a Saturday. Ibrahim Pasha al-Kurdi, head of the *jardah*, arrived and stayed temporarily at the Dome of the Hajj because the area around Al-Marjah was flooded. He then moved to the hostel of Ahmad Pasha al-Kajak.

During this month, the wife of the *qadi* Mohammad Ibn al-Khayyat al-Salihi died. She left a huge number of descendants and was, in fact, a great grandmother, a very rare occurrence. It was said she was over 100 years old when she died.

On Monday the nineteenth, the hajj caravan set off with stragglers from Aleppo who had arrived in Damascus only two days earlier.

At the end of the month, news arrived of the murder of Amir Isma'il Ibn al-Harafush, the governor of Baalbak, at the hands of Ibrahim Pasha al-Kurdi, governor of Tripoli...

During this month, I attended the *khalwa* of Sayyid Yusuf al-Maliki in his building across from the Damascus citadel and the Qazmaziyya *madrakah*. We attended the *dhikr* ceremony from mid-afternoon to the evening.¹² This took place on either a Wednesday or a Thursday.

On Saturday the twenty-second, Hajj Mohammad invited me and a number of friends to the Sharibishat Garden inside Al-Sarija Gate near the tomb of Khammar, one of the companions of the Prophet Mohammad, and near the market. This was during spring when lots of flowers were in bloom. We attended another Sufi ceremony. We then returned to the tomb of Khammar where we recited the *Fatiha*.

On Tuesday the twenty-fifth, I held a grammar lesson in our home in the Amir Muqaddam neighborhood of Al-Salihiyya.

The first of the month of Dhu al-Hujjah fell on either a Sunday or a Saturday. On that day, we were on an outing with my dear friend Bakri b. Mustafa b. Sa'd al-Din al-

¹¹ A *mawwal* is a poem often put to music and often improvised.

¹² A *dhikr* is a ritual prayer practiced by Sufis as a means of achieving oneness with God.

Midani at the family mansion on the Thawra River near Jisr al-Abyad. Spring was in full swing and a virtual cascade of blossoms surrounded us. Bakri demonstrated his profound sense of generosity and we lingered at his place until the evening. His father was staying at a home now named for the Safajalani family and he joined us. We were overwhelmed by the father's strength of spirit.

On Monday the second, the *jarda* left town to meet the main hajj caravan. We heard on this day that Bedouins had harassed the caravan. We prayed that there was no basis to this rumor.

On Tuesday the third, I held my lesson very early -- at sunrise -- and then went to visit Hamid Efendi and, later on, the *qadi* of Damascus, Ali Zadahu who is thoroughly versed in all subjects as well as being a gracious and humble human being.

On Thursday the fifth at sunrise, I went to the Khadijiyya *madrasah* in Al-Salihiyya where I conducted a lesson in legal principles.

I found the following in the margins of a collection of writings: "To get rid of oil stains in clothing, dip them in boiling milk. For plum juice, wash the clothing in the juice of one crushed onion and then use soap. For mulberry stains, daub the stain with sour milk three or four times before leaving it to dry in the sun." Only God knows for sure.

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