“Our Sorry State!” Al-Būṣīrī’s Lamentations on Life and an Appeal for Cash

Sharaf al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Būṣīrī is the most celebrated poet of the Mamluk period, having composed Al-Burdah, the “mantle ode” to the prophet Muḥammad. The Burdah has been the focus of many commentaries, imitations, and translations, and it is arguably the most famous poem in the Arabic language today. Its author was born on 1 Shawwāl 608/7 March 1212 in Upper Egypt, at either Abū Ṣīr or Dalāṣ. As a young man, al-Būṣīrī studied Arabic and some religious sciences in Cairo, while following the Sufi teachings of Abū al-ʿAbbās Ahmad al-Murṣī (d. 686/1287) and the Shādhilīyah order. He settled for a time in the Delta city of Bilbays, where he was a minor administrator, serving as a steward (mubāshir). Al-Būṣīrī later returned to Cairo, where he composed poems in praise of the prophet Muḥammad, al-Murṣī, and various Mamluk officials. He died there sometime between 694/1294 and 696/1297.

Al-Būṣīrī was regarded as a fine poet by several of his contemporaries, and his poems were collected in his Dīwān. This work contains over fifty poems employing a range of rhymes and meters as well as various literary devices (badīʿ) for clever word-plays. The influence of earlier poets, particularly the Egyptian Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235), is apparent in several poems, including the Burdah in praise of the prophet Muḥammad. In this poem’s 160 verses, al-Būṣīrī recounts events in the life of Muḥammad including his birth, the washing of his heart by...
angels, his receiving revelation from God, his ascension to heaven on the mythical steed al-Burāq, and his struggles with the infidel Meccans. Al-Būṣirī also relates many of the Prophet’s miracles and blessed virtues and then ends his poem by praising the Prophet’s family and companions, while praying for Muḥammad’s intercession on Judgment Day. As Suzanne Stetkevych has argued persuasively, al-Būṣirī’s Burdah lauds the eternal triumph of Islam over unbelief as manifest destiny.5 More significantly for believers, perhaps, is that the poem also presents a ritual spiritual exchange, as the poet offers his prayers and praise to the Prophet, who in turn may grant his intercession on Judgment Day. The intercession invoked by the Burdah was extended to others in a frame story that came to accompany the poem within a century of its composition, no doubt enhancing the poem’s popularity.6

According to this story, al-Būṣirī once suffered a debilitating stroke. He prayed and cried out to God for help, and composed a new ode praising Muḥammad. Then he fell asleep and dreamed of the Prophet Muḥammad, who touched his face and wrapped him in his cloak (burdah). Upon waking, al-Būṣirī found that the effects of the stroke had vanished, and he had been restored to health. As he walked out of his house for the first time after his dream, he was met by a Sufi who asked him for a copy of his poem in praise of Muḥammad. Al-Būṣirī had composed several such odes, so he asked the man which poem he meant. The Sufi replied that he wanted the poem that al-Būṣirī had composed during his recent illness. Al-Būṣirī was stunned because he had told no one about the new ode or the miracle. The Sufi replied that the night before he had dreamed of the Prophet and saw him listening to and enjoying the poem. After the recitation, the Prophet threw his cloak over its author. Al-Būṣirī gave the man a copy of his new ode, and as word spread of this miracle, others made copies and recited the poem. Soon, more instances of prophetic intercession occurred after the poem’s recitation; copies of al-Būṣirī’s ode, now named the Burdah, were believed to possess miraculous healing powers. As a result, this poem has been copied many times, and its verses have been used in amulets and inscribed on walls to ward off misfortune.7

In one of the earliest biographies of al-Būṣirī, the biographer and litterateur Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī (696–764/1297–1363) cited the frame story of the Burdah in which al-Būṣirī speaks in the first person. Unfortunately, al-Ṣafadī did not give a source for the story, though he did note that he had learned all of al-Būṣirī’s

---


poetry from his teacher Athīr al-Dīn Abū Ḥayyān (654–745/1256–1354), who had received the poems directly from al-Būṣīrī. Abū Ḥayyān also related that al-Būṣīrī was of Berber ancestry and was “short in stature, but of great nobility.”⁸ Al-Ṣafadī and most later biographers present al-Būṣīrī as an accomplished poet and pious supplicant blessed by the Prophet, but some sources also reveal another side to the man. The historian and biographer al-Maqrīzī depicted al-Būṣīrī as a frustrated poet who was forced to work as a scribe because he could not find sufficient patronage for his verse.⁹ Significantly, al-Būṣīrī does not appear to have ever held one of the many teaching positions in the various educational establishments in Cairo or elsewhere in Egypt, suggesting that he either lacked an extensive training in the religious sciences or the proper contacts to secure a position as a religious scholar. As a result, he was forced to adapt his extensive Arabic poetic skills to menial secretarial work, which he hated. Supporting this view is one of al-Būṣīrī’s poems in which he declared that he served as an administrator only to support his family. He then offered a scathing critique of minor bureaucrats, particularly Christians and Jews who, he claimed, were rapacious in order to support their opulent lifestyles replete with wine and fine clothes.¹⁰

Al-Būṣīrī harshly criticized the beliefs and practices of Jews and Christians in other verse as well, and perhaps this was due to a professional rivalry with Christian and Jewish scribes. But al-Būṣīrī’s polemics may also reflect the religious tensions in Syria and Egypt during his lifetime, resulting from on-going Crusades and the Mongol invasion of Iraq and Syria.¹¹ Nevertheless, Muslims, too, felt the wrath of this misanthrope. Invective poetry was among al-Būṣīrī’s specialties, and al-Maqrīzī quoted one of al-Būṣīrī’s contemporaries, Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-Thanāʾ Maḥmūd,¹² as saying: “Despite (al-Būṣīrī’s) many virtues, he was loathed for loosing his tongue against people with any insult, and he would say

---

⁹ Al-Maqrīzī, Al-Muqaffā, 5:666, 669.
¹⁰ Al-Būṣīrī, Diwān, 266–71, and see Kīlānī’s introduction to it, 11–16.
bad things about them in the company of amirs and viziers.” Moreover, when Abū al-Thanāʾ Maḥmūd visited al-Būṣīrī, the latter complained bitterly about his poverty and many needs, and how one of his patrons was haughty and thought little of the scribal class. In line with his account, al-Būṣīrī depicted himself in some of his poems as penniless and hen-pecked, with hungry children to feed and a nagging wife who gave him little respect:

\[\text{in zurtuhā fi-l-ʿāmi yawman antajat wa-atat li-sittati ashhurin bi-ghulāmi}\]

If I visit her for only a day per year, she gets pregnant and brings forth a boy in six months!

Not surprisingly, al-Būṣīrī directed such poems and their complaints to perspective patrons among the Mamluk ruling elite, including Bahāʾ al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad, known as al-Ṣāḥib Ibn Ḥannā. He had served as a vizier to the Ayyubids and was reappointed to that position by the Mamluk sultan Baybars I in 659/1261; Ibn Ḥannā held the position until his death in 677/1278. Ibn Ḥannā was said to have been quite wealthy and generous, and this, together with his position and power, undoubtedly drew al-Būṣīrī to him. According to the frame story of the Burdah, al-Būṣīrī would compose poems in praise of the prophet Muhammad for Ibn Ḥannā, who greatly admired the Burdah. Moreover, al-Būṣīrī addressed several poems to him and recited a short elegy at the funeral of one of Ibn Ḥannā’s sons. In the following poem to Ibn Ḥannā, al-Būṣīrī describes his troubled family life and his desperate need for support, for which he begs the vizier:

\[\text{yā ayyuhā-l-mawlá-l-wazīru-lla-dhī ayyāmuhu ṭāī ṭāīʿatun amrah}\]

14 Ibid., 5:664–66, and also see Kīlānī’s introduction to al-Būṣīrī’s Diwān, 8–11.
15 Al-Būṣīrī, Diwān, 254, and also Kīlānī’s introduction, 22–24.
20 I follow al-Ṣafadī’s reading of ṭāʾʿatun for ṭāʾʾatun to fit the meter sarf. For the Arabic text, see Article: http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_XIV_2010-Homerin-pp19-28.pdf
O my lord, the vizier,  
whose days obey his command,  

Whose rank on high  
exhausts the mind to describe!  

Your spotless character called us  
to make a plea unexpectedly,  

For you still pardon those who offend  
and deem forgiveness with power to be wise.  

So, perhaps, people do not know  
what it is you love and what you despise.  

To you we appeal about our state:  
we are a family big as can be.  

I will speak to my lord in pen and ink  
telling the tale of what came to pass.  

They fasted like others,  
but they are a warning for all who see.  

When they drink, their well remains  
earthen jugs and jars of clay.  

Everyday they eat boiled bread  
like dead grass revived by rain.  

Whenever they gather round it, I say:  
“Tarry awhile amid the water on the green!”  

The holiday drew near, and they had  
no pastry, no bread, no wheat.

the appendix.

21 I follow al-Ṣafadi’s reading of ʿāʾilatun for ʿaʾilatun to fit the meter.
Have mercy on them, for when they spy a child
with a little cake in hand, or see a date,

Their eyes fix on it, gasping,
followed by a sigh.

How oft I have suffered their torment;
how often I have felt their grief.

How often they have said: “Daddy,
You’ve cut off our bread again!

“You never give us money,
not a dollar, not a dime, not a cent.

“And you’re in service to the folk, daddy.
How can you serve them? You’re a joke!

“O, what a waste it is if we never get
your wages or the rent.”

I am amazed how sharp this boy is;
it comes to him so naturally.

Yet why shouldn’t he be clever,
for everyone born has their nature.

One day their mother called on her sister,
who is as jealous as a second wife,

And she came in complaining of her state
and her patience with me in our poverty.

Her sister said: “Why do women act with their husbands so?
O, such a disgrace! 22

“Get up and demand your rights from him.
Do it now; don’t wait,

22 Following al-Ṣafadi who gives yāʿurrrah in place of yā ghirrah.
“And if he says no, then grab his beard, and hair by hair jerk it out!”

Their mother said: “That’s not my way; my husband gets annoyed.

“I fear if I say a word, he’ll divorce me.”
“Bullshit!” her sister said.

So my wife thought less and less of me, and when she came home was she ticked,

When she got in my face, I threatened her, so she bashed my head with a brick.

Then from early eve till morning light, we went round and round in a fight.

The slave never sees his salvation until he cries himself dry,

So on one whose sorry state is this, O, my lord, please cast your eye!

Al-Būṣīrī begins his poem in praise of the vizier whose authority is so grand that time itself submits to his decree. Though powerful, the vizier rules with forbearance and forgiveness, and so the poet takes the liberty to plead his case to him (vv. 1–7). Al-Būṣīrī depicts his large family as destitute, lacking even fresh water, and forced to eat stale, moldy bread. Though they fast during Ramaḍān, this is due more to poverty than piety, and when the ʿĪd al-Fiṭr occurs, his family cannot enjoy the festivities and sweets because they have no flour; they can only look on in envy of others (vv. 8–14). Al-Būṣīrī concludes this section and moves to the next with his lamentations on their dire condition (vv. 15–17). Then one of his young children complains of their plight and their penniless father. His son points out that al-Būṣīrī is poorer than the Sufi ascetics (qawm) whom he claims

to serve, making him a laughingstock (sukhrāh; vv. 17–19). Al-Būṣīrī marvels at how perceptive his son is at such a young age, and then he ends this section with an allusion to the hadith that all children are born with a natural disposition (fitrāh; vv. 20–21).24

Al-Būṣīrī next moves from his children to their mother, who visits her sister and bemoans her impoverished life with her husband. Her sister denounces such ne’er-do-well men in general and tells his wife to stand up and demand her rights. When his wife frets that he may then divorce her, her sister rebukes her and urges her to disgrace al-Būṣīrī publicly by pulling out his beard (vv. 22–28). Buoyed by her sister, al-Būṣīrī’s wife returns home angry and fired up, and when al-Būṣīrī does indeed threaten her with a divorce, she clobbers him with a brick, and they fight throughout the night (vv. 29–30). Al-Būṣīrī then concludes his poem, citing another maxim—that the slave is never set free until he has suffered greatly, perhaps unto death—and he begs the vizier to look upon him with mercy (vv. 32–33).

Although al-Būṣīrī’s begins this poem as an ode of praise and supplication, his focus quickly shifts from the vizier and his exalted rank to al-Būṣīrī’s own debased and desperate condition. The editor of al-Būṣīrī’s Diwān, Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī, cites this poem as evidence that al-Būṣīrī’s home life was a living hell.25 While that is always a possibility, al-Būṣīrī clearly intended the poem to be a humorous parody, as he reverses various family roles and relationships. Ideally, fathers should be wealthy and wise, and children happy and innocent; yet here the poet is poor and powerless, as his young son sagaciously discerns when he worries about the family’s lack of food and rent. Traditionally, husbands are to be in charge of obedient wives and family members; yet here al-Būṣīrī is demeaned by his sister-in-law, who riles up his wife, leading to a nasty fight that leaves the poet reeling and feeling not like a king in his castle, but like a suffering servant desperately in need of the vizier’s beneficence. The poem, then, is not so much a panegyric (madīḥ) as it is an example of a witty poem (mulḥah), which tells of a disagreeable wife and harried husband.26 Given the references to fasting and the ‘Īd, perhaps al-Būṣīrī offered Ibn Ḥannā this poem as an amusing tale at the end of Ramaḍān, when Muslims are to give alms and be generous to the less fortunate. While the Burdah sought prophetic intercession on the Judgment Day, this poem on al-Būṣīrī’s sorry state aimed for intercession of a more material sort. For al-Būṣīrī’s sake, I hope he received it.

25 Kīlānī’s introduction to al-Būṣīrī’s Diwān, 22–24.

Appendix

يا أيها الموالي الوزير ألقى أعيانه طابعة أمره وتذكر عن أوصافها الفكره أحقلاك الغر دعتنا إلى الله بإلها في القول على غرره وتؤثر العمق مع الغدره تجرب من أمر وما تكره عايلة في غاية الكدره جرى لهم بالخيط والإبره كانوا ليمن يصيرهم عيره ما برحت والشرية الجره في كل يوم تشبه النشره تنزهوا في الماء والخضره قمع ولا خنز ولا فطره في يد طلله وأراوا تدوره بشهقة تتبهها زفره وكم أقاسي منهم حضره قطعت عنا الحذر في كره بدرهم ورق ولا نقره تخدمهم يا أنت سخره يجرى لنا أجر ولا أجره أتى بها الطكل بلا جره لقد تمحببت لها فنته
وكيف يُخلَو الطفل من فطنة
ويَوم زارته أمهم أَخْتَها
ْوَأَقْبَلَتْ تَشْكُو لَها حَالَّها
قالت لها كيف تكون السما
قُومي أطلبي حَقُك منه بلا
وإِنْ تَأْبَى فَخُذْي دقَّته
قالت لها ما عادتي هكذا
أَخافُ إِنْ كَلْمَتُه كَلمَه
فَهُوَيَت قَدْرِي في نفسها
فَقَابَلْتُ فَتَهْدِدُتْها
وَبَاتَت الفَتْنَة ما بَينَا
وَمَا رأى العَبْدُ لِه مَحَلَّصًا
فَحَقَّ مَن حَالَّته هذه