Commemoration of the Prophet's Birthday as a Domestic Ritual in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Damascus

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1 Celebrations of the Birthday of the Prophet Muḥammad

A fifteenth-century Syrian devotional work in commemoration of the birthday of the Prophet Muḥammad recounts the following tale:

There was a man in Egypt who used to hold a celebration of the birthday of the Prophet [Muḥammad] (peace be upon him!). Next to him lived a Jewish man; his wife said to him, 'Why is it that this Muslim neighbour of ours expends a lot of money [every year] in this month and gathers groups of people to observe it?' He said, 'He claims that their prophet was born in this month, so he does that to rejoice in him and to celebrate that honour.' At that she was silent and pondered for a long while. The two of them slept that night and the woman dreamt of a beautiful man displaying dignity, pride, serenity and gravity who had entered the door of their Muslim neighbour¹; around him was a group [of men] who came gesturing² to him with reverence and veneration. She said to one of those men, 'Who is that man whose face is like the greatest moon?' He replied, 'He is the Messenger of God (peace be upon him!); he entered this home to greet its inhabitants and visit them because they have rejoiced in his birthday and abounded in delight.'

At this the Jewish woman greets the Prophet and converts to Islam at his hand; she and her husband (who has had the same dream) proceed to spend their wealth on their own celebration of the Prophet's birthday.³

¹ Literally: 'their neighbour who had been honoured with Islam'.

² Reading 'yushūrūn' for 'yasīrūn'.

³ Aḥmad ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Makkīya, *Durar al-biḥār fī mawlid al-Mukhtār*, ms. Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Ta'rikh no. 3807, fol. 14v–15r (28–29 in pagination written on manuscript).

In this narrative, which was widely cited in devotional texts commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad,⁴ the celebration of his birth is an act of personal commitment that attracts the Prophet himself to visit the home of the devotee. In this way, it is integrally related to the Muslim identity of the household. It is also the occasion of hospitality to guests of a more mundane variety. It thus simultaneously sanctifies domestic space, enhances the religious profile of the family dwelling there, and helps to build the social networks in which that family is enmeshed.

Although this story is at least notionally set in Egypt (and presumably in the past), it also reflects the complex of beliefs and practices around the commemoration of the Prophet's birth – the *mawlid al-nabawī al-sharīf*, or more briefly the *mawlid* – in Syria at the time of the manuscript's production. The Prophet Muḥammad neither celebrated his own birthday nor instructed others to do so; nevertheless, Sunni Muslims in Syria were commemorating his birth by the twelfth century of the Common Era, and the fourteenth century saw an upsurge in the production of devotional texts on this theme among religious scholars in Damascus.⁵ By the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, ceremonies commemorating the Prophet's birthday were a widespread feature of the religious lives of ordinary residents of Damascus.

Studies of the Prophet's birthday have focused extensively on the spectacular celebrations of this occasion held under the auspices of rulers;⁶ however, from an early stage in its development the *mawlid* was also a domestic celebration hosted by ordinary people from various walks of life. *Mawlid* ceremonies usually involved the recitation of the narrative of the Prophet's birth, often in a distinctive literary form alternating passages of rhymed-prose narrative with interludes of poetry in praise of the Prophet. Such a ceremony might be led by a professional reciter offering vocal artistry and/or religious expertise; guests would participate by joining in the invocation of God's blessings upon the Prophet, an activity understood to yield bountiful quantities of religious merit. The ceremony culminated with the narration of the Prophet's actual birth, when guests would stand (the *qiyām*) in honour of his symbolic arrival in the gathering. This practice was criticized by some authorities as a religious innovation. However, by the fifteenth-sixteenth century it was so widespread

4 See Katz M.H., *The Birth of the Prophet Muḥammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam* (Abingdon: 2007) 74.

5 Katz, *Birth of the Prophet* 54–56.

6 See for instance, Kaptein N.J.C., *Muḥammad's Birthday Festival* (Leiden: 1993) 76–166; Brown J.A.O.C., "Azafid Ceuta, Mawlid al-Nabī and the Development of Marinid Strategies of Legitimation", in Bennison A.K. (ed.), *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib* (Oxford: 2014) 127–151.

in practice that those who rejected it risked being perceived as deviant or irreverent themselves.⁷ It could be taken to imply belief in the symbolic or spiritual presence of the Prophet at the ceremony (and thus within one's home, if that was the venue of the ritual), although this assumption is rarely made explicit.⁸ Guests would offer gifts or monetary contributions, and would often be served a festive meal. *Mawlid* ceremonies sponsored by private individuals could be held in more 'public' venues such as mosques, but as we shall see, many were held in family homes.

2 Domestic *Mawlids* and the Celebration of Lifecycle Events

A unique glimpse of these ceremonies is provided by the diary of Aḥmad ibn Ṭawq, a modestly learned Damascene notary who recorded his daily activities for two decades starting in 1480.⁹ His entry for the sixteenth of Rabi' al-Awwal 887 AH (1482 CE) recounts that:

On [this date] I happened to go to the house of Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Waṭfa the confectioner with the Shaykh Burhān al-Dīn al-Nāḥī. The Shaykh Shams al-Dīn al-Ṣafadī, Nūr al-Dīn the pious man from al-Shāghūr [a neighbourhood in Damascus], and a group of confectioners and others were present, about twenty people in all. First, before the recitation [of the *mawlid*] they served collections of sugar sweets and pastries; after the *mawlid* they set out a meal [including] a bean dish, couscous with chicken and meat, sweet rice with sugar and almond oil, and an apricot dish. After that they served large amounts of sugar [syrup] and [passed around] musk and rosewater.¹⁰

⁷ See Katz, *Birth of the Prophet* 128–39.

⁸ *Mawlid* texts not infrequently feature poems or songs 'welcoming' the Prophet at the moment of his birth, suggesting that the theme of arrival or presence was at least metaphorically in play. For an example from the contemporary Damascene work of 'Ā'isha al-Bā'ūniya see her *Mawlid al-nabī* in Fāris Aḥmad al-'Alāwī, *'Ā'isha al-Bā'ūniya al-Dimashqīya: ashkar a'lām dimashq awākhir 'ahd al-mamālīk* (Damascus: 1994) 152.

⁹ On Ibn Ṭawq, see Conermann S. – Seidensticker T., "Some Remarks on Ibn Ṭawq's (d. 915/1509) Journal *Al-Ta'liq*, vol. 1 (885/1480 to 890/1485)", *Mamluk Studies Review* 11, 2 (2007) 121–135; Guo L., "Al-Ta'liq: *Yawmīyāt Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq*, ed. Sheikh Jaafar alMuhajir (Ja'far al-Muhājir)", *Mamluk Studies Review* 12, 1 (2008) 210–218; Wollina T., *Zwanzig Jahre Alltag: Lebens-, Welt- und Selbstbild im Journal des Aḥmad ibn Ṭawq* (Göttingen – Bonn: 2014).

¹⁰ Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq, *al-Ta'liq: Yawmīyāt Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn Ṭawq*, ed. Ja'far al-Muhājir (Damascus: 2000) vol. 1, 156–157.

Here a man of the merchant or artisan class (a maker or vendor of sweets) celebrates the Prophet's birthday with a festive gathering. Ibn Ṭawq finds it worthy of note that the event brings several men of scholarly or pious reputation into Ibn Waṭfa's home. The gathering involves generous hospitality whose predominantly sugary character reflects both the host's profession and the local convention of celebrating auspicious occasions with sweet food and drinks.¹¹ The repast closes with the use of musk and rosewater; tradition holds that the Prophet Muḥammad's person was redolent of these sweet scents,¹² which must have pervaded the room in Ibn Waṭfa's house where the *mawlid* was held. This event both used the host's connections and resources to bring an auspicious and prestigious aura of religious piety into the space of his home, and utilized the hospitable comforts of his home to reinforce his network in the world beyond its walls.

Domestic *mawlid*s seem to have been fairly common events in Damascus in this period. Over the twenty-year period covered by the surviving pages of his diary Ibn Ṭawq records forty-one *mawlid* ceremonies; one may assume that this is not an exhaustive inventory, but probably reflects his fluctuating interest in attending or recording the celebrations. In terms of location, nine of the forty-one *mawlid*s are explicitly stated to have taken place in homes and ten in other locales; thus, more than half of the locations remain indeterminate.¹³ Of the ten performed in venues other than homes three took place in mosques, five in sufi lodges (*zāwiya*), one at a shrine, and one at the ruler's stable, which was at this time the site of some important governmental functions. Examination of the information Ibn Ṭawq supplies about the *mawlid*s he attended suggests that those held in private homes were distinct in motivation and format from those held in other venues. This is not to say that there were two distinct and clearly demarcated varieties of *mawlid*s, but that, based on these data, domestic *mawlid*s tended to have certain distinctive features as compared with those held in more public places. Specifically, there are clear correlations between the holding of *mawlid*s in family homes, the celebration of life-cycle rituals,

11 Wollina, *Zwanzig Jahre* 167.

12 See, for instance, Schimmel A., *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (Chapel Hill: 1985) 34–35.

13 For *mawlid*s stated to have been held in homes, see Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 1, 60, 156–157; vol. 2, 1052; vol. 3, 1106–1107, 1178, 1255, 1268, 1277, 1456. For *mawlid*s stated to have been held in other locations, see *ibid.* vol. 1, 345 (mosque); vol. 1, 346 (*zāwiya*); vol. 2, 619 (mosque); vol. 3, 1167 (*zāwiya*); vol. 3, 1240 (*zāwiya*); vol. 1334 (Sayyidī Sa'd, probably a saint's shrine); vol. 3, 1344 (*zāwiya*); vol. 4, 1659 (*zāwiya*); vol. 4, 1838 ([royal] stable); vol. 4, 1851–2 (madrasa). The case on vol. 4, 1844 is ambiguous – it is not clear whether the *mawlid* was actually at the *zāwiya*, and if so, whether the *zāwiya* was in fact the residence of the host.

and the serving of food – elements that are minimally represented in *mawlid*s celebrated outside of the home.

The *mawlid* is best known as a calendrical celebration focusing on the Prophet's birthday (usually understood by Sunnis to have occurred on the 12th of Rabi' al-Awwal, the third month of the Islamic lunar calendar), but extending to the entire month of his birth. By the period under consideration here, however, *mawlid* ceremonies were no longer exclusively associated with the day or month of the Prophet's nativity. Of the *mawlid*s referenced by Ibn Ṭawq, eighteen occur in the month of the Prophet's birthday and the other twenty-three at other times of the year.¹⁴ Of the eighteen *mawlid*s held in the month of the Prophet's birth, only three are associated with specific auspicious events: two with dreams of the Prophet (one experienced by the ceremony's host,¹⁵ the other by the host's wife)¹⁶ and one with a circumcision.¹⁷ Of the 23 *mawlid*s held in other months, in contrast, nine are explicitly stated to have been performed in observance of special occasions in the lives of the hosting families: two 'aqiqas¹⁸ (a sacrifice performed for a newborn infant), one engagement,¹⁹ four weddings,²⁰ one funeral,²¹ and one gala arrival in town (by the ruler's wife).²² This distribution suggests that the *mawlid* was an appropriate component of life-cycle celebrations throughout the year. Of the ten *mawlid*s explicitly stated to have been held in venues other than the home, only one was associated with a life-cycle event; this was the congregational prayer held for a deceased person *in absentia*, a rite that is inherently appropriate to perform in the mosque. Location also seems to correlate with gender. Of the six *mawlid*s identified by Ibn Ṭawq as being hosted by women, only one is explicitly stated to have been held in a location outside of the home; it was hosted by the wife of the local ruler in a madrasa.²³

14 Held in Rabi' al-Awwal: Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 1, 57, 156–157, 238, 239, 243 (two *mawlid*s), 345, 346, 347, 353; vol. 2, 599; vol. 3, 1102, 1167, 1240; vol. 4, 1659, 1865 (two *mawlid*s), 1866. Held in other months: *ibid.* vol. 1, 60, 356; vol. 2, 619, 861, 1052; vol. 3, 1106–1107, 1167, 1107, 1178, 1193, 1195, 1255, 1268, 1277, 1334, 1344, 1400, 1456, 1482; vol. 4, 1589, 1838, 1844, 1851–1852, 1852.

15 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 1, 347.

16 *Ibid.* vol. 1, 353.

17 *Ibid.* vol. 4, 1866.

18 *Ibid.* vol. 4, 1844, 1852.

19 *Ibid.* vol. 1, 60. The "(katb al-)kitāb" is the drawing up of the marriage contract, and thus technically a wedding; however, the marriage was customarily not consummated until a wedding party held on another occasion.

20 *Ibid.* vol. 2, 861, 1052; 1193, 1195.

21 *Ibid.* vol. 2, 619.

22 *Ibid.* vol. 4, 1851–1852.

23 *Ibid.* vol. 1, 60.

The performance of *mawlid*s in conjunction with life-cycle celebrations is also recorded by other sources for Damascus in this period. The historian Ibn Ṭūlūn²⁴ refers to a *mawlid* that was recited at the conclusion of a contract of marriage,²⁵ another at the joint wedding of two brothers to two sisters,²⁶ and a third held by the governor of Damascus in honour of the circumcision of two of his sons; the location is specified only in the case of the ruler's celebration.²⁷ These events, falling somewhat after the timespan covered by Ibn Ṭawq, reinforce the patterns suggested by his diary: *mawlid*s were performed in conjunction with a wide range of life-cycle celebrations in all months of the Islamic calendar.

Why was the *mawlid* ceremony so well-fitted to transition points in the life of the household, breaking free from its calendrical association with the month of the Prophet's birth? One factor that may help to explain the deep interrelation between the *mawlid*, life-cycle celebrations, and the selection of a domestic setting is that the *mawlid* was a form of pious hospitality; in a basic sense, many *mawlid*s were parties, or more technically feasts (*walā'im*, sing. *walīma*). The association between the two was such that, asked about the legitimacy of the celebration of the Prophet's birth, Abū Zur'a al-ʿIrāqī (d. 826/1423) observed that 'banquets (*al-walīma*) and feeding people are desirable at all times.'²⁸ Hosting a festive meal was not merely a convivial activity that strengthened a household's social network and enmeshed it in ties of reciprocity, but a religiously meritorious and auspicious act that was strongly recommended for joyful or sensitive moments in the life of an individual or a family. The historian Ibn Ṭūlūn produced a composition on the various occasions on which it was religiously commendable to hold a *walīma*. The paradigmatic case was the wedding, the only occasion explicitly mandated by the Prophet. In addition, Ibn Ṭūlūn argues that it is religiously commendable to hold a banquet in honour of a new mother's recovery from childbirth, the *'aḳīqa* sacrifice on behalf of a newborn child, the circumcision of a boy, a child's memorization of part or all of the Qur'an, an engagement, the building of a house, the safe return of a traveller, or even a death. In short, the gathering of people and the serving of food were appropriate to any landmark in a

24 On this figure, see Conermann S., "Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 955/1548): Life and Works", *Mamluk Studies Review* 8, 1 (2004) 115–139. Ibn Ṭūlūn used Ibn Ṭawq's diary as a source (Wollina, *Zwanzig Jahre* 26).

25 In Ramadan of 915 AH. See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat al-khillan fī ḥawādīth all-zamān*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Cairo: 1381/1962) vol. 1, 356.

26 In Sha'ban of 921 (ibid. vol. 1, 386).

27 In Jumada II of 926 (ibid. vol. 2, 110).

28 See Katz, *Birth of the Prophet* 71–2.

Muslim's life trajectory, and to any auspicious incident that might occur along the way.

Of course, this list of banqueting opportunities bears a strong resemblance to the list of occasions for *mawlid*s that emerges from Ibn Ṭawq's diary and other contemporary sources. It would appear from the evidence available in the diary that not all *mawlid*s were banquets, but those held for major life-cycle events often and perhaps almost always were. The close connection between the two is suggested by a case where Ibn Ṭawq reports attending a *walīma* and observes, 'I was told that it was a wedding, but that was not true; it was just a *mawlid*'.²⁹ Banquets appear to be explicitly mentioned only in conjunction with festive domestic *mawlid*s, not with those held in sufi lodges or mosques. However, it is impossible to make a firm generalization because the location of a *mawlid* is often unspecified.³⁰

*Mawlid*s fit seamlessly into the model of pious hospitality associated with the hosting of *walīmas*, as both were focused on the intertwined objectives of earning religious merit and cementing social ties. Ibn Ṭulūn cites his own teacher's declaration that the holding of a banquet 'displays God's blessings and [expresses] gratitude for them, and earns merit and affection'.³¹ Holding a festive gathering in commemoration of the Prophet's birth was meritorious because it constituted a performative expression of love and rejoicing over the Prophet, sentiments that were understood to have salvific value.³²

*Mawlid*s held in celebration of happy life cycle events were thus both pious rituals and parties, and the evidence from this period suggests that some tension prevailed over their proper tone. Ibn Ṭawq's immediate religious circle seems to have promoted a rigidly normative approach to the *mawlid*. Two of the men whose activities as *mawlid* reciters are most often mentioned by Ibn Ṭawq are Burhān al-Dīn al-Nāǧī and his pupil Barakāt ibn al-Kayyāl.³³ Al-Nāǧī's *mawlid* text (which survives in manuscript) is a lengthy sourcebook of learned

29 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 3, 1107.

30 See, for instance Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 3, 1482.

31 Shams al-Dīn Ibn Ṭulūn, *Faṣṣ al-khawātim fī-mā qīla fī'l-walā'im*, ed. Nizār Abāza (Damascus: 1403/1983) 42.

32 See Katz, *Birth of the Prophet* 104–142.

33 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 1, 60, 156–157, 345; vol. 2, 599; vol. 3, 1167, 117; see also Ibn Ṭulūn, *Mufākaha* vol. 2, 101. For a biographical notice on al-Nāǧī, see Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Hawādith al-zamān wa-wafayāt al-shuyūkh wa'l-aqrān*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Ṣaydā: 1419/1999), vol. 1, 384–385. Al-Nāǧī was the student of Ibn Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Dimashqī, one of the most influential *mawlid* authors in Damascus in the fifteenth century. For a biographical notice on Barakāt ibn al-Kayyāl, see Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā'ira bi-a'yān al-mī'a al-āshira*, with notes by Khalīl al-Manṣūr (Beirut: 1418/1997) vol. 1, 167–168.

disquisitions on matters associated with the *mawlid* from which, he explains, a reciter can select at will for the needs of a specific occasion.³⁴ It is deeply concerned with issues of religious orthodoxy and factual correctness. For instance, al-Nāḥī dismisses the practice of standing at the mention of the Prophet's birth as an illegitimate ritual innovation,³⁵ and more generally laments the 'catastrophic innovations' that have been introduced into the *mawlid* ceremony.³⁶ He indignantly dismisses some of the more vivid accounts of the Prophet's birth even where they had been accepted by prominent earlier scholars³⁷ and uses the *mawlid* story as a hook for legal digressions.³⁸

However, scholars of the censorious cast of al-Nāḥī competed with reciters who presented themselves more as pious entertainers than as didactic religious guides.³⁹ A surviving work by Ibn al-Kayyāl inveighs against the 'reciters at gatherings and funerals' who chant the Qur'an with 'the tunes of sinners', which he defines as 'melodies borrowed from music' (*al-anḡhām al-musta'āra min al-mūsīqā*).⁴⁰ Our sources suggest that there were indeed other *mawlid* reciters in Damascus at this period who were famed precisely for their musical skill and the beauty of their voices. Ibn Ṭūlūn notes the performance of a *mawlid* recited by Muḥammad al-Ju'aydī, whom he identifies as a muezzin and who is described in another source as 'the head of the *mawlid* [reciters] in Damascus (*ra'īs al-mawlid bi-dimashq*)' and a master of 'the science of melody' (*ilm al-naghma*).⁴¹ He also describes a head muezzin of the Umayyad Mosque who died in 885/1480 as the possessor of a proverbially lovely voice and as a reciter of *mawliids*.⁴² Indeed, over the course of the sixteenth century prominent *mawlid* reciters seem to have been associated both with the office of muezzin

34 Ibrāhīm ibn Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Nāḥī, *Kanz al-rāghibūn al-'ufāt fī al-ramz ilā al-mawlid al-muḥammadī wa'l-wafāt wa'l-shamā'il wa'l-mu'jizāt wa'l-dalā'il wa-mā fāta bihi al-awā'il wa'l-awākhir*, ms. Cairo, al-Maktaba al-Azharīya, khāṣṣ 4363, 'amm 8545, accessed from <http://www.alukah.net/library/0/69001/> [last accessed 13 June 2016].

35 Nāḥī, *Kanz* fol. 24v.

36 Ibid. fol. 26b.

37 E.g. Ibid. fol. 57r.

38 E.g. Ibid. fols. 74r, 84r.

39 A similar tension affected life-cycle celebrations in general. The weddings attended by Ibn Ṭawq range from 'a feast, singing, eating and drinking' (vol. 2, 964) to one he notes to have been celebrated without musical instruments (vol. 4, 1731). It is unclear to what extent these differences arose from financial constraints rather than religious scruples about the legitimacy of music.

40 Zayn al-Din Barakāt ibn Aḥmad, known as Ibn al-Kayyāl, *al-Anjum al-ḡawāhir fī tahrīm al-qirā'a bi-luḥūn ahl al-fisq wa'l-kabā'ir*, ed. Mash'al ibn Bani al-Jabrīn al-Mutayrī (Beirut: 2009) 21–25.

41 Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufaḥkaha* vol. 2, 110; Ghazzi, *Kawākib* vol. 3, 70.

42 Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufaḥkaha* vol. 1, 22.

and with the art of music that Ibn al-Kayyāl so deplored.⁴³ Reciters from these circles might also be known for qualities such as the entertaining sharpness of their wit.⁴⁴

In addition to providing religious instruction and religiously respectable entertainment, *mawlid* ceremonies addressed the concerns of Muslims at critical junctures in their biological and social lives by generating vast quantities of religious merit. This merit (*thawāb*) accrued particularly from the invocation of blessings upon the Prophet Muḥammad, which constituted the central component of guests' participation in the ritual. Burhān al-Dīn al-Nāǧī's *mawlid* text begins with a long disquisition on the comparative merits of different forms of blessing upon the Prophet.⁴⁵ The distribution of the merit accruing to *mawlid* participants was a potentially significant matter.⁴⁶ The dynamic of symbolic gift-giving and the ties of loyalty it reinforced were not limited to the living participants in the ceremony. It was customary to donate the merit generated by the *mawlid* ceremony to one's deceased kin; another widespread contemporary custom dictated the donation of merit to the Prophet Muḥammad himself. These two customs were not mutually exclusive, as religious merit was not understood to be a zero-sum affair. Like other gracious patrons, the Prophet was expected to reward the humble gifts of his devotees with far greater boons, specifically, intercession on the Day of Judgment.⁴⁷ Burhān al-Dīn al-Nāǧī and Ibn Ṭūlūn both acknowledge the objection that this practice was not only a religious innovation but an implicit insult to the Prophet, whose posthumous status required no enhancement. However, they both affirm the underlying devotional logic by affirming that the Prophet receives credit for each subsequent performance of the meritorious deeds he mandated.⁴⁸

Thus, both directly through the donation of merit to kin and indirectly through the cultivation of a relationship with the Prophet as intercessor for the ceremony's patron and his or her family, a *mawlid* held in a domestic setting could be understood as an act of care directed towards a broad and intergenerational household. Some sense of the vivid and homely ways in which this care was imagined in contemporary Damascus can be gleaned from the text of a book that Ibn Ṭawq reports having borrowed from a friend in 903/1497, Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf al-Hakārī's *Hadīyat al-aḥyā' ilā al-amwāt* ('Gift of the Living

43 Ghazzī, *Kawākib* vol. 3, 67, 145.

44 See Ghazzī, *Kawākib* vol. 3, 44.

45 Nāǧī, *Kanz* fols. 8r–14r.

46 See, for instance, the incident in Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufaḥḥa* vol. 1, 109.

47 See Katz, *Birth of the Prophet* 87–96.

48 Nāǧī, *Kanz*, fols. 109r–113r; Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Faṣṣ al-khawātīm* 56.

to the Dead').⁴⁹ In this work, the merit donated by the living to their deceased relatives is presented to them in their graves in the form of food, clothing and other gifts.⁵⁰ Through the generation and donation of merit, a *mawlid* was thus a form of familial care embracing both the kin assembled in the home and those currently residing in the graveyard.

3 Women's *Mawlid* Celebrations

The *mawlid*'s character as a religious ceremony that both could be performed within the home and served as a form of care for the household may have been among the factors that enhanced the celebration's enduring appeal to women. Women's enthusiastic participation in *mawlid* ceremonies is mentioned in some of the earliest polemics against the practice in the early fourteenth century.⁵¹ Women in Syria this period did have access to mosques, or at least to many major mosques.⁵² However, obstacles including menstruation, household duties, and modesty ideals may often have kept them away, giving domestic rituals such as the *mawlid* a comparatively more prominent place in the overall shape of women's piety. As we have already seen, Ibn Ṭawq mentions a number of *mawlid* celebrations hosted by women. Other sources also occasionally mention women's *mawlid*s; the contemporary Syrian historian Ibn al-imsi records that in the month of the Prophet's birthday of 922/1516 the daughter of the governor of Damascus held a *mawlid* that was attended by 'all the ladies of the town, both great and small'.⁵³

Ibn Ṭawq's scant information only allows us to speculate about the distinctive lineaments of women's piety. Interestingly, none of the *mawlid*s Ibn Ṭawq specifies as being held by a woman is explicitly identified as occurring in celebration of a life-cycle event. (One *mawlid* held in conjunction with a wedding is stated to have occurred in the home of the bride's mother; however, it is not clear that it is 'her' *mawlid*, unlike several others mentioned by Ibn Ṭawq.)⁵⁴ Nevertheless, I hesitate to conclude from this that women were less involved

49 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 4, 1556.

50 See Katz, *Birth of the Prophet* 92–3.

51 See the comments of Tāj al-Dīn al-Fākihānī (d. 1331), translated in Kaptein, *Muhammad's Birthday Festival* 53, and those of Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 1336), *al-Madkhal*, ed. Tawfiq Ḥamdān (Beirut: 1995) vol. 2, 235.

52 On women's mosque access in Syria, see Katz M.H., *Women in the Mosque: A History of Legal Thought and Social Practice* (New York: 2014) 145–166.

53 Ibn al-Ḥimsī, *Ḥawādith al-zamān* vol. 2, 281.

54 See vol. 1, 239, 243; vol. 4, 1865. There is also one *mawlid* held by a woman, for an unstated reason, in the month of Rajab (vol. 1, 239).

than men in *mawlid*s as life-cycle rituals. Ibn Ṭawq tells us very little about the specifics of celebrations hosted by women, although he mentions attending at least one. For instance, he notes of one wedding that the men's banquet included the recitation of a *mawlid*; whether the same was true of the women's banquet held on the following day goes unrecorded.⁵⁵ We also do not know whether most or all domestic *mawlid*s were single-sex affairs.

Some sense of the role of the *mawlid* in women's piety in Ibn Ṭawq's time is offered by his Damascene contemporary ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya (d. 922/1516), 'one of the most learned and prolific women scholars in all of Islamic history'.⁵⁶ Much of her impressive literary output comprised devotional works about the Prophet Muḥammad, including two preserved *mawlid*s.⁵⁷ Her literary works of course lack the fine quotidian detail of a diary like Ibn Ṭawq's, as well as its specificity about spatial locations. However, her framing comments about the inspiration and objectives of her *mawlid*-related works offer some evidence of their relation to domestic space and concerns.

Her account of the inspiration for the composition of the longer of her two *mawlid*s has already attracted the attention of scholars. She writes:

When God bestowed upon me a vision of the Prophet, I was in residence in Honored Mecca (may God increase her in honor and glory!). I experienced a ritual disability⁵⁸ that prevented me from going down to the Noble Sanctuary. It was a Friday eve [i.e., Thursday night]. I lay down on a bed in a porch overlooking the Honored Kaʿba and the Glorified Sanctuary; it happened that a resident of Mecca⁵⁹ was reciting the *mawlid* of the Messenger (peace be upon him!), and voices were raised invoking blessings upon [the Prophet] – until I nodded off and dreamed that I was among a group of women. Someone said, 'The Prophet has come!' There befell me an awe that took me away from myself until the Prophet (peace be upon him!) passed before me [...].⁶⁰

55 Ibn Ṭawq, *Taʿlīq* vol. 2, 86i.

56 Homerin Th.E., *Emanations of Grace: Mystical Poems by ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya* (d. 923/1517) (Louisville: 2011) 16.

57 See Ḥasan Muḥammad al-Rabābiʾa, *ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya, shāʾira* (Irbid: 1997) 59–65, esp. 60.

58 *ʿArid*, pl. *ʿawārid*, one of a set of disqualifiers or disabilities that renders one incapable of bearing or validly discharging an obligation in Islamic law (see *al-Mawsūʿa al-fiqhiyya*, s.v. *ahlīya*, ¶¶ 25–43).

59 *Mujāwir*, a term that implies intentional pious residence in Mecca or another sacred site (rather than designating a person who is simply Meccan by birth).

60 Cited in Rabābiʾa, *ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya* 53; translated in Homerin, *Emanations* 13. My translation diverges from Prof. Homerin's in several places, and is based on al-Rabābiʾa's transcription of this passage.

She then asks for (and is promised) his intercession. In this anecdote, a ritual disability – we may safely assume it to have been menstruation – forestalls al-Bā'ūniyya from entering the mosque. She remains in a liminal space secluded from the precincts of the sanctuary but auditorily accessible to it. Her visionary dream occurs within her home (albeit a temporary one), the only place where a high-status woman would be likely to lie down and slumber (we may imagine that absent her ritual disability, she might have attended the *mawlid* in the mosque but perhaps would not have slept and dreamed).⁶¹

In the self-narrative of 'Ā'isha al-Bā'ūniyya, as for the Jewish woman in the tale with which this chapter began, exposure to the *mawlid* ceremony induces a dream encounter with the Prophet Muḥammad that draws him at least notionally within her own domestic space. In his diary Ibn Ṭawq records two *mawlid*s held in private homes that were inspired by dreams of the Prophet, one of which was experienced by a woman.⁶² Dreams of the Prophet were particularly cherished because the Prophet is reported to have declared that 'whoever sees me in a dream, will see me while awake [i.e., among the blessed on the Day of Resurrection]; the Devil cannot take on my form'.⁶³

Al-Bā'ūniyya is best known as a Ṣūfī, and certainly the elaborate rhymed prose introduction to her *mawlid* text *al-Mawrid al-ahnā fī'l-mawlid al-asnā* is saturated with mystical terminology.⁶⁴ It also prominently invokes her Ṣufī lineage as well as her biological one.⁶⁵ However, the overtly articulated

61 For women attending a public *mawlid* in the Sacred Mosque of Mecca somewhat later in the sixteenth century, see Katz, *Women in the Mosque* 210.

62 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq* vol. 1, 347, 353.

63 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: 2000) vol. 3, 1415 (*Kitāb al-Ta'bīr; Bāb man ra'ā al-nabī ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallam fī'l-manām*). On attitudes towards the significance and authority of dreams in Islamic sources, with particular attention to dreams of the Prophet Muḥammad, see Kinberg L., "Dreams", in Fleet K. – Krämer G. – Matringe D. – Nawas J. – Rowson E. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Third Edition (Leiden: 2016), and the literature cited there.

64 I used the version of this text edited by Fāris Aḥmad al-'Alāwī and Lu'ayy 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Ghannām in Fāris Aḥmad al-'Alāwī, *'Ā'isha al-Bā'ūniyya al-dimashqīya ashhar a'lām dimashq awākhir 'ahd al-mamālīk* (Damascus: n.d.) 117–179. In order to confirm the content of the marginal notations discussed below, I also consulted a digitized copy of the original manuscript from the Ma'had al-Makhtūṭāt, Cairo (Tārikh-534, bar code 5685). I thank Guy Burak for obtaining this copy.

65 al-'Alāwī, *'Ā'isha al-Bā'ūniyya* 123–126. She commences the main body of *al-Mawrid al-ahnā* by stating that it was written at the request of those (masculine plural) to neglect whose wishes would constitute unfilial conduct, and that 'What I ask from God Most High is that he include me, them, and those who are present with me within the blessings of this Beloved [i.e., Muḥammad] and give us the best portion and share of the gifts of proximity [to him]'. It is unclear whether the (symbolically?) parental figures to whom she obliquely attributes the impetus for the composition are the older generation of her

goals of her *mawlid* texts relate less centrally to the distinctively Ṣūfī objectives of moral self-refinement and ecstatic unification with the divine than to more conventional aspirations to evoke the Prophet's blessings and intercession for herself and her household. The central narrative emphasizes the milestones of the Prophet's ancestry and early life, including (but not limited to) the lifecycle events (such as birth, *ʿaqīqa*, marriage, and death) that contemporary Damascenes often observed with *mawlids*. It severely compresses the main events of his prophetic mission – the onset of revelation, his ascent to the heavens (*miʿrāj*), and the emigration to Medina all occur in a single sentence⁶⁶ – and omits any mention of the Prophet's many battles or the institution of any feature of Islamic ritual or law. The most prominent *foci* of the story are thus the lifecycle events and salvific role of the Prophet, not religio-legal edification or mystical insight.

In another place in this *mawlid* text, ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya overtly consecrates the auspicious power of her devotional writing on the *mawlid* to the welfare of her family. The surviving manuscript, written in her own handwriting, closes with a note listing the birthdates of her children; she states that she has done so in order that her children can partake of the *baraka* of the Prophet's birth.⁶⁷ We cannot know if she ever used her *mawlid* text in the context of a life-cycle celebration (she seems to have entered her children's birthdates retrospectively, not on the occasions of their births), nor can we know whether any ritual performance that did occur took place within her home, but this note suggests how *mawlid* piety could bring to bear the auspicious aura of the Prophet on one's own familial concerns. Of course, the point is not that domestic concerns were specific to women. However, it seems possible that the division of religious and affective labour may have disproportionately assigned to women the expression of such concerns. Much of ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya's œuvre addresses the most ethereal dimensions of the Sufi tradition,⁶⁸ but the *mawlid* seems to have been a congenial site for her more homely preoccupations.

family or her Sufi mentors; parents, spiritual mentors, and offspring are all mentioned in the immediately preceding blessings. (al- ʿAlāwī, *ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya* 126).

66 al-ʿAlāwī, *ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya* 161.

67 al-Rabābiʾa, Ḥasan Muḥammad *ʿĀʾisha al-Baʿuniyya, shaʿira* (Irbid: 1418/1997) 47. Al-Bāʿūniyya considered her children particularly eligible for the Prophet's blessings because, through their father, they were his descendants; her notation also reflects concern that they receive the material benefits that at that time accrued to registered descendants of the Prophet (see al-Rabābiʾa, *ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya* 47).

68 See, for instance, ʿĀʾisha al-Bāʿūniyya, *Emanations of Grace*, trans. Homerin.

4 Conclusions

Overall, domestic *mawlid* ceremonies in fifteenth – and sixteenth-century Damascus appear as occasions where the resources of the household were mobilized to bless the home and family with the presence of pious persons, the recitation of holy texts and perhaps the symbolic presence of the Prophet Muḥammad himself. *Mawlid*s projected the pious profile of the household and garnered social goodwill at moments of family transition, as well as maximizing the propitious forces of religious merit (*thawāb*) and powerful blessing (*baraka*). A Damascus native who composed a *mawlid* text several generations before the figures discussed here claimed that the experientially proven blessings of his composition included the fact ‘that it is never recited in a house but that its owner experiences security for himself, his wealth and his family and is not harmed in that year, and until the same time [of the next year]’.⁶⁹ An anonymous devotional text that circulated widely in later centuries claimed that:

any house, mosque, or quarter where the Prophet’s *mawlid* is recited, the angels surround that house, mosque, or quarter, the angels invoke blessings on the people of that place, and God envelops them with [His] mercy and satisfaction [...]. Any Muslim who recites the Prophet’s *mawlid* in his house, God removes drought, pestilence, fire flood, blights, afflictions, hatred, envy, the evil eye, and thieves from the people of that house [...].⁷⁰

In both direct and indirect ways, domestic *mawlid* ceremonies were understood to enhance the well-being of both house and household.

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69 Katz, *Birth of the Prophet* 82–3.

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