

The Characteristic Features of Sultan Baybars in the Arabic folk novel *Sīrat az-Ẓāhir Baybars* and their Relation to Reality

Mária LACINÁKOVÁ, Bratislava

The narration of folk novels passed on orally by generations of storytellers (*ḥakawātī*, pl. *ḥakawātiyyīna*) has been for a long time an inseparable part of the environment of Arabic coffeehouses¹. At first, the narrators recited the stories by heart; then they began to write them down for their own needs as an aid in not forgetting them. These scripts were not left in the writers' pockets and later on gradually began to be published. However, the art of narrating did not lose its importance, not to mention its attractiveness. This was not only because of the rather low level of literacy of its recipients, who in many cases could not read²; the storyteller was also an actor, whose earnings depended on his inventiveness and natural gift for dramatic portrayal of what he was talking about. These earnings were often the only or main source of his living. He drew the attention of people and thus brought customers to the coffeehouses, whose owners paid him some wages in return. If the listeners were pleased with his performance and could afford it, they sometimes rewarded the narrator with a small amount of money. However, this was not obligatory and was of course determined also by the artistic skills of the reciter³.

Arabic folk novels are extensive works abundant with myths and imagination. Their themes self-evidently vary depending on the setting, etc. Still, a lot of motifs occurring in them are very similar, if not the same. Perhaps all the works of this kind also have in common the fact that their authors and reciters

¹ LANE, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, p. 391.

² MADEYSKA, *Delimitation in the Early Sīrah*, p. 255; OLIVERIUS, *Svět klasické arabské literatury*, p. 361; OTT, *From the Coffeehouse into the Manuscript*, p. 443.

³ LYONS, *The Arabian Epic*, p. 2, ref. 1.

deliberately idealized their heroes, who were usually famous figures known from Arabic history. They were assigned archetypal qualities widely spread also in other works of Arabic folk art including such famous works as *One Thousand and One Nights*⁴. This is nothing strange; all the works of this kind have been spread in the same way, i.e. orally by generations of *ḥakawā'iyyīna*⁵ and they served approximately the same purpose, i.e. to amuse listeners and meet their tastes. However, the fictional counterparts of these figures mostly do not correspond to their real prototypes⁶.

One of them is the Egyptian sultan Baybars the First, who ruled from 1260 to 1277. He was a Qipchāq Turk bought as a slave by amīr Aydakīn Bunduqdār. He got into the regiment of *Baḥrī Mamlūks*, established by the Ayyūbī sultan aṣ-Ṣāliḥ⁷. His influence grew after the decisive defeat of the Crusaders at the battle of Manṣūra, where he took command and turned the course of the battle to the Muslims' advantage. He acceded to the throne after disposing of people that constituted a threat to his ambition, among them aṣ-Ṣāliḥ's son Tūrān Shāh and Sultan Quṭuz, who commanded the victorious Egyptian army in defence of the empire against Mongol raids at the battle of °Ayn Djālūt⁸. Baybars played an important part in expelling the Crusaders from the territories they had conquered in the Holy Land and brought Mongol raids on his empire to a halt⁹.

It is no exception in the historical sciences that sources often do not correspond to each other in presenting facts. This is not only due to the different confessions and nationalities of the authors, though these factors are by no means insignificant. In Baybars's case, their importance is even strengthened by the fact that this figure lived in a time of severe national and religious clashes, which decisively affected authors' development. What is more, the character or bias of historical and biographical records can be determined by the characters and social positions of the authors as well¹⁰. However, what the sources do agree on is that Baybars managed not only to achieve great military

⁴ E. g. LYONS, *Epic 1*, pp. 1, 5–7; NORRIS, *°Amr B. Ma°dīkarib al-Zubaydī*, pp. 530, 533–4; OLIVERIUS, *Svět*, pp. 361–363, 369–370; PARET, *Sīrat Baybars*, p. 1127; VIDAL LUENGO, *Conflict Resolution in the Sīrat Baybars*, p. 465.

⁵ KOBZOŠOVÁ, *Odkaz tisíc a jednej noci v modernej arabskej literatúre*, p. 15; OLIVERIUS, *Svět*, pp. 360–361; OTT, *From the Coffeeshouse into the Manuscript.*, p. 443, ref. 1.

⁶ VIDAL LUENGO, *Conflict Resolution in the Sīrat Baybars*, p. 465.

⁷ THORAU, *The Lion of Egypt*, pp. 6, 27–29.

⁸ KHOWAITER, *Baibars the First*, pp. 6–10, 20–22; THORAU, *Lion*, pp. 80–92.

⁹ See all the historical sources on Baybars's life mentioned in the Bibliography.

¹⁰ SADEQUE, *Baybars I of Egypt*, pp. 1–11.

successes but also to build up an internally strong empire. He created a well-developed system of state administration and improved the armed forces as far as both equipment and training were concerned. His well-established information and postal system made it almost impossible for enemies to take his troops by surprise. He required perfect discipline and obedience. He not only demanded a lot, but also took an active part in both administrative work and wars and did not avoid being exposed to the danger of death when fighting. Therefore, it is not totally incomprehensible to say that he was viewed by many as a hero in some respects. However, his politics did not lack perfidy and deceit, not to mention the cruelty that made him seen by many as a brutal usurper of power. For example, to unite the empire he took measures that can by no means be considered just. He gained new domains by forcing the minor rulers to submit to his rule and if they opposed he found another way to divest himself of them at all costs¹¹.

There are a lot of chroniclers and historians among both Arabs and Europeans who have devoted their work and research to this distinguished figure of Islamic history. Some of them enrich their historical accounts with detailed analyses of the divergences in former historical sources in relation to circumstances influencing their formation. Among these are al-Khuwayṭir¹², Ṣādiqī¹³ and Thorau¹⁴. Another historian whose work constitutes a valuable source on the study of the history of Egypt including the era of Baybars is Lane-Poole¹⁵.

The panegyric heroic novel *Sīrat aḡ-Ẓāhir Baybars (Sīrat)*, a well-known work of Arabic folk literature, was obviously created to a large degree independently of the sultan's true biography, though according to Oliverius it actually originated on the basis of Egyptian historical chronicles and records¹⁶. It cannot be denied that being a *Mamlūk*¹⁷ and victorious military leader, Baybars was an extraordinary and interesting personality truly apt to be chosen as a main character for a folk novel. However, the work is abundant with an excessive

¹¹ Ref. 9.

¹² KHOWAITER, *Endeavours*, 210 p.

¹³ SADEQUE, *Baybars I*, 79 p.

¹⁴ THORAU, *Lion*, 321 p.

¹⁵ LANE-POOLE, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages*, 382 p.

¹⁶ OLIVERIUS, *Svět*, p. 361.

¹⁷ Mamlūks ('owned') – white slaves of foreign origin who were introduced as members of Islamic armies during the reign of the °Abbāsī Caliph al-Muṭaṣim (833–842 AD) and whose power gradually grew, leading to the establishment of their own dynasty of sultans; LANE-POOLE, *History*, p. 242; <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/360799/Mamluk>.

eulogy of the good and heroic in his nature, regardless of the relation between fiction and fact. The fictional Baybars is celebrated as lacking any frailty at all¹⁸. This phenomenon is not exceptional in this kind of art, which is after all suggested also by the name of its genre, i.e. ‘heroic romance’¹⁹. The obvious similarity of the motives in this novel in particular to those in *One Thousand and One Nights* is even more understandable taking into account that the stories of the Egyptian stratum of this popular collection are thematically set in the times of Ayyūbī and *Mamlūk*, i. e. Baybars’s own dynasty²⁰. The idealization of Baybars as well as of other protagonists of Arabic folk literature in general can easily be explained by the probable motives of storytellers to depict their heroes in the way they did.

Although he was not the first, Baybars is considered to be the founder of the *Baḥrī* dynasty of sultans²¹. This is an important fact to know when considering the purposes pursued by the *ḥakawāiyyīna*. It was necessary to spread a generally positive perspective to those subject to the rule of this dynasty, to make them admire and respect their sovereigns. When we take into account the widespread living conditions and ways of earning a living among Arabic court poets, i.e. composing hymns to praise their ‘employers’²², we are not very far from realizing the possible analogy between these poets and narrators of folk novels under the rule of the *Mamlūk* dynasty. This is the allusion also made by the contemporary Lebanese writer Rabīʿ ʿAlam ad-Dīn in his fictional work *The Hakawati*²³.

Apart from this, the fact that narrators presented him as a perfect character and pious Muslim must also have been intended to inspire the listeners to behave likewise.

At this point we must emphasize the overall pro-Muslim atmosphere of the whole work. ‘*Islam is the light, godlessness is the dark,*’ says Sultan aṣ-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb in a dream to a Christian king, who converts to Islam, having been prompted by these words²⁴. When dealing with Christians, no measure is too cruel. When the sultan does treat some Christians well in the novel, they ne-

¹⁸ *Sīrat aṣ-Ṣāliḥ Baybars* 1–5, 3199 p.

¹⁹ LANE, *Manners*, pp. 391, 400.

²⁰ KOBZOŠOVÁ, *Odkaz*, p. 21.

²¹ LANE-POOLE, *History*, pp. 262–263.

²² OLIVERIUS, *Svět*, p. 115.

²³ ALAMEDDINE, *The Hakawati*, p. 441. This work (513 pages) includes frame episodes about the fictional Baybars from the *Sīrat*.

²⁴ *Sīrat* 2, p. 1794.

cessarily convert to Islam later on²⁵. However, we cannot omit to mention that once even a Christian gains Baybars's respect at least for having refused to leave a church the sultan was going to close in the belief that God would take care of him²⁶.

Last but not least, among the reasons that contributed to the creation of this story in no other but its very form undoubtedly belongs the fact that the commoners wanted to hear that they had such a great ruler. Indeed, this was pleasing to hear. It was nothing strange even in those days for the contents of popular works to conform to their receivers' tastes.

On the other hand, as Oliverius aptly remarks, it is actually people's own beliefs and perceptions, or at least ideals, that are reflected not only in Arabic popular novels (*siyar sha biyya*) but in folklore in general. Thus, the works inspired by history are nothing but reflections of what people have believed or at least wanted history to have been like²⁷. However, we cannot forget that the number of opinions and perceptions nearly equals the number of people occupying themselves with these particular matters in their minds and thus even the perception of history as preserved in folk art cannot be generally applied to the whole of mankind.

There are several versions of the *Sīrat*, which were compiled from many manuscripts of various sizes and degrees of detail²⁸; this is why some information may not wholly correspond to that drawn from the Cairene version edited by Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī²⁹. Anyway, it is obviously impossible to re-create only one exact version of a text that has for centuries been orally transmitted as each reciter modifies not only the stylistics but to a certain extent also the story according to what he reckons is worth modifying at the moment of his narration. The same opinion is shared also by Oliverius in his work *Svět klasické arabské literatury (The World of Classical Arabic Literature)*³⁰. A comprehensive study of the manuscripts of the *Sīrat* is included in Herzog's vast work on this novel *Geschichte und Imaginaire: Entstehung, Überlieferung und Bedeutung der Sīrat Baibars in ihrem sozio-politischen Kontext (History and Imagination: The Origin, Tradition and Importance of Sīrat Baybars in Their*

²⁵ E. g. PARET, *Sīrat Baybars*, p. 1127.

²⁶ LYONS, *The Arabian Epic*, p. 108.

²⁷ OLIVERIUS, *Svět*, p. 362.

²⁸ HERZOG, *Geschichte und Imaginaire*, pp. 34–35; ref. 16.

²⁹ Ref. 18.

³⁰ Ref. 16.

Socio-Political Context)³¹. Further literature is provided by Lyons, who gives a detailed description of the *Sīrat*'s contents in his work *The Arabian Epic 3*³².

SULTAN BAYBARS AS DEPICTED IN THE *SĪRAT*

Baybars is a legendary person who acquires the attributes of a saint (*walī al-Lāh*). As early as in his childhood we can see the similarity of Baybars's destiny to those of well-known glorious heroes such as biblical Joseph or favourable fairytale characters.

Once upon a time in a land called Khorāsān there lived a king and his three sons. The youngest son was the cleverest. Therefore, he was the one who was appointed the king's successor. However, his envious brothers drove him out of the country. Once, this exile rescued a king of another kingdom from a lion. The grateful king gave him his own daughter for a wife and the kingdom as an inheritance. His greedy brothers treated their subjects badly and that is why they were expelled and arrived as far as in the court of their brother, who accepted them in a friendly manner. However, when they found out who their benefactor was, they took his youngest son and left him to die trapped in a cave, from where the boy is freed and taken away by a pilgrim who leaves him in a bath house³³. Ill and rejected, he has to bear outrage and disgrace from everybody but °Alī, a man sent by Sultan aṣ-Ṣāliḥ. °Alī notices that the poor patient meets his lord's requirements for a personal servant and this is how the weak boy – Baybars – gets into his famous predecessor's court. Aṣ-Ṣāliḥ protects him even by miracles. He guards him in the shape of a lion. He appears in a dream to the group of *Ismā°ilīyyīna*³⁴ to warn them not to hold him captive and to foretell that this boy will become their king and his reign will be a blessing for them³⁵.

³¹ HERZOG, *Geschichte und Imaginaire*, 971 p.

³² LYONS, *Epic 3*, pp. 77–236.

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 81–94.

³⁴ *Ismā°iliyya* - *Shī°ī* sect; its name is derived from *Ismā°il*, the elder son of the sixth imām *Dja°far b. Muḥammad* († 765 AD). *Ismā°iliyyīna* considered *Ismā°il* the seventh imām; <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296133/>. In reality, Baybars made this sect subordinate to him, treating them far less kindly than in the *Sīrat*; KHOWAITER, *Endeavours*, pp. 122–126.

³⁵ *Sīrat 1*, pp. 125–135.

Walī al-Lāh

In accord with the overall Islamic character of the work, Baybars is celebrated as a pious Muslim. He can perform miracles (*karāmāt*), which can be performed by nobody but saints.

He has a special ability to impress people to such a degree that they adopt Islam despite their previous devotion to another religion. Among those converted are often, but not always, his prisoners, who are granted pardons and whose lives are spared. Furthermore, the sultan then accepts them as his courtiers, close friends and servants and protects them against their enemies.

He relies on help from Heaven also in his fights and battles. When he gets into trouble or his life is endangered, he prays for help from God, who always aids him, whether by natural or supernatural forces.

He refuses to accept magical objects offered to him by sorcerers, saying that his victory is guaranteed anyway. His devotedness to Islam is a factor enough to ensure it. However, this cannot be applied generally. As according to the proverb '*the end justifies the means*', or, more poetically, '*all's fair in love and war*', sometimes even witchcraft serves as a means to achieve a good or sacred purpose³⁶.

Humbleness

Baybars does not covet fame. After aṣ-Ṣāliḥ's death, the shaikhs want to appoint him sultan, but he does not consider himself worthy enough to claim this position. This is why he declines this offer despite a written document the dying sultan himself gave the hero as a confirmation of his will that Baybars accept this honour instead of his own son Tūrān Shāh. However, Baybars prefers that the ruling dynasty continue. He does not change his mind even after he finds out that the sultan-to-be is a drunkard, and only warns him to stop drinking alcohol before acceding to the throne.

His fictional relationship with aṣ-Ṣāliḥ in general is full of respect, obedience and devotedness, according to which he could easily be considered an example of an ideal subject servant and thus act as a model for listeners to follow this pattern³⁷.

³⁶ Ref. 32.

³⁷ *Sīrat* 2, pp. 964–975.

A brief glance at how the historical Baybars ‘cleared’ his path to seize power is proof enough of the strong contradiction between this description and reality. The truth about killing Tūrān Shāh is, of course, deliberately twisted in the novel to Baybars’s advantage as well.

Merciful Sovereign

As a truly magnanimous monarch similar to those known from fairytales, he many times shows mercy on offenders. He lets himself be persuaded to grant pardons not only to those subject to his rule and for minor offences, but also to his utmost enemies and traitors who were to be executed for attempts on his life. In most of the cases, this proves not to meet the analogous behaviour on the part of the freed captives, who often abuse the sultan’s generosity, indeed naivety, and only pretend their penitence in order to prepare new conspiracies³⁸.

This cannot be compared to reality due to the perfect espionage system he established for his personal security, not to mention the cruelty with which he treated those obstructing his plans. Sometimes he granted a pardon to somebody, but this could only happen when he was completely sure that it would not constitute a threat in the future or when his motives stemmed most probably from his farsightedness to win favour with important people and his alertness not to make any mistake on his way to gaining the sultanate³⁹.

At His People’s Service

He really cares for his people. They trustfully seek help at his court when they have the feeling of having been wronged and he never rejects or lets them down regardless of their poverty or low-ranking social position. He patiently listens to them and willingly takes steps to solve their problems according to what he reckons to be just.

Baybars cares for justice even after his death. For example, he reveals himself to his son in a dream and instructs him to release an innocent man who has been wrongly sentenced to death.

³⁸ Ref. 32.

³⁹ LANE-POOLE, *History*, p. 274; THORAU, *Lion*, pp. 91–98, 135–138, 152.

Pity for the Poor

It is nothing strange that he gives alms to the poor as this is one of the five Islamic religious duties (*arkān ad-dīn*), which were to be taught to all members of the Muslim society. What is worth mentioning is his deep social feeling that can be illustrated by his compassionate dealings with criminals in distress.

Thieves who were compelled to steal by necessity find mercy in his heart, and instead of punishing them he employs them in his service for wages.

An indebted owner of a collapsed bathhouse gains his financial help, by which Baybars enables the poor man to pay his debts and rebuild the bathhouse, which had been the source of his income.

To make merchants and servants obey the law and prevent them from resorting to racketeering, he offers to compensate for their illegal profit by providing them with a salary. Those who have been made redundant after their employers had switched to the use of magic are taken into the sultan's service for double their previous salary⁴⁰.

Historical sources confirm that he did actually give generous alms⁴¹. However, we are of the opinion that it cannot be said that this description fits reality perfectly as it is highly improbable that Baybars would have selflessly borne in mind other people's welfare to such an extent as is ascribed to him in the *Sīrat*. Moreover, taking certain steps to improve the social conditions of the citizens should be an inseparable part of every statesman's policy; that is why even if he undertook some measures in this field they are not to be considered anything extraordinary. Anyway, such measures could not but help him gain important popularity and support among his subordinates.

Not a Slave of the Golden Calf

Money is no object. Baybars does not put wealth in first place in his life. He is morally strong enough to waive the possibility of enriching himself at the expense of others. This can be demonstrated by his fight against business rackets as well as by his resolution to leave his homeland if Sultan aṣ-Ṣāliḥ does not close the richly decorated Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Baybars insists on its closure in spite of the big profit its visitors bring to Muslims and their empire. His generosity can be grounded in the fact that when he does

⁴⁰ PARET, *Sīrat Baybars*, p. 1127, ref. 32.

⁴¹ LANE-POOLE, *History*, p. 274.

not have cash with him and runs into debt, the next day he pays his creditor much more than needed⁴².

It cannot be said that this quality of his has nothing in common with reality. The real Baybars also did not want to enrich himself at all costs; during his reign, alcohol and drugs were forbidden despite the profit they had brought to the state treasury via taxes⁴³.

A J u s t b u t C r u e l J u d g e

Baybars punishes sinful or unjust behaviour cruelly, though mostly not without warning. He is not afraid of admonishing even persons of a higher rank or his direct superordinates, as is the case for example with Sultan Aybak, whom Baybars criticizes for avoiding his duty to participate in battles⁴⁴, and aṣ-Ṣāliḥ's son and sultan-to-be Tūrān Shāh for his fondness for getting drunk.

He bears in mind very seriously the Islamic ban on drinking alcohol. Even his close friends are exposed literally to his fists for not obeying this prohibition⁴⁵.

The next article of law he pays great attention to in adherence is financial justice. Cheaters who are not willing to give up the vice of rackets even after having being warned expose themselves to the risk of losing their lives in a very cruel way. For example, Baybars puts one of the incorrigible bakers to death by putting him into an oven.

He does not stop himself from killing sinners, not only for crimes of the same severity but also for less serious offences. To give an instance, after his warning proves to be useless, he kills an ill Persian in a hospital for praying for help to Fire instead of God.

It is his custom to eliminate criminality by eliminating the culprits. This habit earns him a degree of criticism and as he often applies this 'cure' to bandits, Sultan aṣ-Ṣāliḥ nicknames him '*the cleaner of roads*'.

Baybars many times kills offenders who afterwards prove to have been Christians in secret. This means that killing them is not perceived as a crime by the society in the novel.

⁴² LYONS, *Epic 3*, pp. 87, 107–108.

⁴³ LANE-POOLE, *History*, p. 273.

⁴⁴ LYONS, *Epic 3*, pp. 106, 209.

⁴⁵ *Sīrat 2*, pp. 970–975.

He even fights against a mere indication of non-courteous behaviour⁴⁶. In respect of chastity let us mention Robyn Young, a contemporary British writer, who in her historical novel *Brethren* alludes to Baybars's effort to completely rid the Islamic world of Western influence in general as moral debauchery is something he definitely considers a part of Western 'culture'⁴⁷. This is not improbable as it is known from historical sources that apart from his ban on alcohol, the real Baybars closed brothels and expelled European women from Cairo⁴⁸.

B a y b a r s t h e D e f e a t e r

In accordance with what is expected of a true folk hero, Baybars almost always wins. Even sorcerers and magicians fear to meet this brave warrior in battle. Together with only a small group of companions he manages to defeat enemy armies much bigger in number⁴⁹.

P r u d e n c e a n d B r a v e r y

He does not plunge into clashes recklessly or act without considering the possible consequences of his deeds. This is evident for example from his obedient behaviour towards Vizier Shāhīn's warnings not to meet the shaikhs who have aroused the vizier's suspicion of plotting against Baybars⁵⁰.

However, he can by no means be considered a coward. He faces the accusations and threats resolutely and fearlessly. This applies even to the situations when his deed does not altogether comply with the general law but 'his own law'. When a high-ranking official wants to have him executed for killing a faithless person, he does not attempt to flee but stoutly and angrily confirms this murder and insists on a trial⁵¹.

Tūrān Shāh, having been deliberately misinformed that Baybars is the killer of his father, wants to seek vengeance. Despite being aware of this intention, Baybars confronts the sultan-to-be with no trace of fear and denies his guilt. Furthermore, he makes use of this situation to admonish Tūrān Shāh for drin-

⁴⁶ LYONS, *Epic 3*, pp. 82–101, 207.

⁴⁷ YOUNG, *Bratstvo*, pp. 220–221.

⁴⁸ Ref. 43.

⁴⁹ Ref. 32.

⁵⁰ *Sīrat 2*, pp. 964–975.

⁵¹ LYONS, *Epic 3*, p. 83.

king alcohol and instructs him to give up this shameful habit so that he can accede to the throne and govern Muslims as is right and proper. This is what the fictional sultan-to-be promises and right afterwards appoints Baybars as his close ally⁵².

Baybars and Women

He does not hesitate to take advantage of women's aid and assistance. In fact, throughout the novel women themselves often voluntarily and vigorously take an important part in the story either by offering their help to the sultan or otherwise. Even a Christian girl goes and warns him of her father's intention to harm him. The only thing by which she has been prompted to do so is a dream. However, we cannot leave out mentioning that in this society there is a prevalent persuasion of women's inferiority which can be grounded for example in the fact that greater distress is caused by the theft of a horse than by the kidnapping of Baybars's friend's bride right from the wedding.

As far as women from enemy tribes and nations are concerned, Baybars does not show a flash of mercy towards them. When he is looking for one of his adversaries, he learns about the place of his hideaway from women whom he had been beating until they told him what he wanted.

When angry, he does not stop himself from treating female citizens very harshly even if they belong to his own kin and country. For example, when he repeatedly fails to arrest one thief, he instructs his wife to gather the old women of Cairo to ransack the town and if they do not manage to find the thief, Baybars will have them burnt to death.

This aspect of the novel cannot be compared to reality as in accordance with our presuppositions, the historical sources we have studied do not provide us with information on such facts.

Like a Human Being

Although the previous paragraphs may indicate the opposite, he is not completely deprived of sensitivity. This can be proved for example by the tears he sheds expressing his sorrow at his friend who has been killed. At this point, another feature of his character comes to light. Grief-stricken, Baybars loses his temper and swears to take vengeance, tear apart the murderer and never let any

⁵² Ref. 45.

Christian free himself by payment as had been done many times up to this moment. However, later he proves unable to carry out this oath.

It cannot be said that his courage never fails. It does. He gains money from the inhabitants of Damascus and Cairo by means of new taxes to arrange further raids. However, he suffers repeated defeats and thus the money is wasted. Having realized this, he cries like a child and is even so ashamed as to hide himself in a cave for some time instead of appearing in front of the Damascenes. It is only when a messenger from Heaven comes to encourage him and promise divine help that he stands up, goes and wins another battle and then pledges to pay all the debts back to his creditors⁵³. This is a big contradiction to the bravery he shows elsewhere, which perhaps serves the purpose of displaying the sensitive part of his personality and the fact that he is not merely a robotic ‘superman’ but also a real human being not lacking emotions.

To make a comparison with reality, he probably was totally deprived of emotions. On this matter, let us mention for example his oath not to harm one of the Ayyūbī princes, whose mother came to beg mercy for her son. This oath was, ‘of course’, not fulfilled and the prince was killed after his mother had ensured him that there was no need to worry⁵⁴. However, this could not come to light if Baybars was to be presented in as good a light as possible to the audience of the storytellers.

Private Life

As far as his family life is concerned, according to Lyons, *ḥakawātiyyīna* even go as far in his idealization as to ascribe him only one wife, so that in terms of fidelity the fictional Baybars can be considered an example of the ideal husband. Although Islam permits a man to have four wives, Baybars goes further in his morals and promises his wife to be his only one for good and he never breaks this promise despite a wedding proposal from a queen. In this respect, we may suppose that he simply did not want to make any new commitment, which would, moreover, result in new and by no means inconsiderable responsibilities. What is more worth noticing is that he resists also the temptations of a beautiful female warrior, whose physical gifts make it very easy for her to win the affection and support of men; even a lot of enemy

⁵³ LYONS, *Epic 1*, p. 36; LYONS, *Epic 3*, pp. 86, 102, 154–155, 181, 208, 216, 219, 231–232.

⁵⁴ KHOWAITER, *Endeavours*, pp. 33–34; THORAU, *Lion*, pp. 135–138.

soldiers take her side eventually. However, the importance of stressing this fact seems rather strange within Muslim society.

The sultan also acts with full responsibility in the role of father. He does not spoil his children, but really brings them up. He teaches them good manners and how to get along well with each other. For example, when they have an argument over who will get a present, he rather gives the object to the servants than support their inclinations to rivalry. He rebukes his son for throwing a turban down from a shaikh's head, which is a sign of the high esteem he feels for old people⁵⁵.

In connection with his behaviour towards seniors, there occurred an interesting event in his real life; when the ninety-year-old leader of *Ismā'īliyyīna* came to complain about the sultan's decision concerning the administration of certain regions, Baybars took pity on him and appointed him part-owner of the particular area in spite of the resistance the old man had several times put up against the sultan⁵⁶.

The Other Side of the Coin

However, some of his deeds and qualities described in the novel do not evoke an image of such a perfect character in our minds.

He is extremely trusting or, more precisely, naive. He has confidence even in totally strange people and does not change his attitude towards them despite being warned by his close friends and family, particularly if the strangers pretend to be Muslims converted from non-believers. When his relatives express their suspicions about some of them, he rebukes them for their lack of trust even if the 'penitents' he protects are his former enemies whom he had sworn to kill as soon as possible. Therefore he usually falls victim to the various intrigues of kidnappers and has to rely on his friends' help. He goes so far as to send his own son to welcome a tramp who claims to be the sultan's wife's brother in spite of she herself denying that she has a brother. Furthermore, he gives this foreigner charge of the sultanate for the time of his absence. This gullibility stems from his religiousness and endless belief in the righteousness of all who claim to be or to have become pious Muslims. This often gets him into trouble and many times his foes turn this 'virtue' of his to their advantage and use Islam as a disguise to win favour with the sultan and thus entrap him.

⁵⁵ LYONS, *Epic* 3, pp. 161, 170, 200, 220.

⁵⁶ KHOWAITER, *Endeavours*, pp. 124–125.

Among the characteristic features that cannot be apprehended as wholly in accordance with his otherwise perfect character is the vice of anger. When he loses his temper even his friends are exposed to insults. To achieve his goals, he does not stop himself from cheating and lies⁵⁷. Unlike most of his fictional qualities, these correspond to reality very well⁵⁸.

As one may have already noticed, the sultan's conduct throughout the story contains a lot of actions that can hardly be considered appropriate or at least respecting basic moral principles and human rights⁵⁹. However, it must be pointed out that these were by no means perceived in the same way either by Baybars's environment in the period of his life or by subsequent reciters of his deeds and exploits who gave birth to this work of Arabic folk art (unless they were in such a bad financial situation as to praise him just to gain some money even against their own conviction of the contrary).

I n c o n s i s t e n c i e s

Even within the *Sīrat* we can find many discrepancies in the deeds and behaviour of this hero. Let us mention at least a few of these.

He has confidence in strangers but often does not believe his own friends and family⁶⁰. He is naïve, but on the other hand there is a lot of cases when he acts cautiously enough not to expose himself to any kind of danger. When he suspects his companions of intending treason behind his back, he follows them at night in disguise to detect their plans⁶¹. This is what he does also to make sure if everything is running well in the empire. How well his espionage system and secret postal service is established can be seen when a reference is made in the novel to his obtaining a secret message hidden in a loaf of bread.

He usually acts as a brave man in fighting as well as in other life circumstances, but the attribute of courage can hardly be attached to him when taking to account his cowardly hiding in a cave from angry Damascenes after lost battles. Neither can his nearly constant falling victim to kidnappers and plotters, resulting in the need to be rescued by his friends, evoke an image of a hero in our minds.

⁵⁷ Ref. 32.

⁵⁸ E. g. ref. 54; THORAU, *Lion*, pp. 65–66, 169.

⁵⁹ E. g. *Sīrat 3*, pp. 1992–1993.

⁶⁰ LYONS, *Epic 3*, pp. 146, 223.

⁶¹ *Sīrat 4*, pp. 2186–2187.

Sometimes he behaves compassionately; he feels pity even for a *ghūl*. He has mercy upon the worst of his enemies of many years' standing and grants pardons for serious crimes, but sometimes he treats culprits very cruelly and punishes even minor religious misdemeanours by killing the 'criminals' without giving them a chance to explain their motivations. His compassion and mercifulness strikingly contrast also with the strictness with which he brings up and punishes his children. Let us mention his pitiless condemnation of his own son to death with no adequate proof of guilt.

His prescience enables him to sense whether a defendant is guilty. However, he is not as unerring as one may presuppose. Even innocent people become victims of his false condemnation⁶².

Sometimes a person is admonished first and given chance to repent and change for the better, but in other cases Baybars punishes immediately and without allowing transgressors to deny their guilt or defend themselves in trial. This is the case for example with a Persian maidservant, whom Baybars kills without warning for nothing more than offering him a glass of wine. It is too late to learn what had happened, i. e. that some of the enemy sorcerers had assumed the sultan and his companions' shape and had asked this servant several times to bring wine for them. In this respect, we cannot but perceive this difference in treating people as determined by his religious bias, though taking to account that even a Persian is warned before being killed by the sultan we must admit that this factor is not generally applicable. Even the possible assumption of this opposition being caused by the different view on men and women is very disputable as we can witness also cases when his behaviour towards females is entirely respectful.

In some cases he achieves his goals by means of bribes, but on the other hand, he threatens his subordinates with killing them should they make use of the same course of action; however, it must be said that in a lot of cases he provides them with wages to compensate for their illegal profit.

He exhibits his devotedness to Islam by many pious deeds, but he commits also various acts that are not in accordance with the principles a devout Muslim should cling to. Although he condemns magic as the devil's means, he does take advantage of supernatural powers from time to time⁶³.

⁶² Ref. 32. In Islamic belief, *ghūl* is a demon that eats people.

⁶³ LYONS, *Epic 3*, pp. 82, 86, 97, 189, 193, 222–223; *Sīrat 3*, pp. 1992–1993; *Sīrat 4*, pp. 2188–2189.

As can be seen, Baybars is a character full of inconsistencies and his behaviour is often totally unpredictable. This applies to both the fictional holder of this name and his real prototype, which is, after all, the case also with a very large number of other mighty warriors and sovereigns known from the history of mankind. The feature of being a legend as depicted in Baybars's literary interpretation may be considered a sign of a widespread positive approach to this historical person in the Islamic world. However, it is undeniable that the true Sultan Baybars the First, who ruled Egypt and Syria in the 13th century, deservedly is the source of much controversy among both contemporary and past scholars.

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R e s u m é

**Charakteristické črty sultána Bajbarsa v arabskom ľudovom románe
Sīrat az-Zāhīr Bajbars a ich súvislosť so skutočnosťou**

Mária LACINÁKOVÁ, Bratislava

V tomto článku porovnáваме historickú postavu sultána Bajbarsa (vládol v r. 1260 – 1277) s jej obrazom tak, ako nám ho predkladajú neznámi tvorcovia a rozprávači arabského ľudového románu *Sīrat az-Zāhīr Bajbars*. Po krátkom priblížení ľudových románov vo všeobecnosti stručne predstavujeme skutočného nositeľa tohto mena známeho z islamských dejín a snažíme sa odhaliť pohnútky, ktoré viedli rozprávačov k tomu, aby ho vo svojich príbehoch vykreslili tak, ako ho vykreslili. Následne uvádzame niektoré znaky a povahové vlastnosti románového hrdinu Bajbarsa spolu s konkrétnymi príkladmi zo sultánovho života, aby si čitateľ mohol porovnať skutočnosť s niektorými predstavami či presnejšie ideálmi ľudových rozprávačov, zástupcov širokých vrstiev arabského ľudu.