Sirāj al-mulūk, The King’s Shiner

al-Ṭurtūshī, Muḥammad ibn al-Walīd

Beginning of 6th/12th century

Alexandria (Fatimid)


ARABIC TERMS:

Muḥammad ibn al-Walīd al-Ṭurtūshī (in the following Ţ.) was born in 451 AH in Tortosa, an Andalusian city east of Valencia and Cordoba. All authors of entries on al-Ṭurtūshī (in the following Ţ.) in biographical literature characterize him as a pious, world-renouncing scholar. In 476/1083-84, he travelled to the East, finally settling in Alexandria where he taught until he died, most probably in 520/1126. Hence, he lived in an historical period distinguished by several transformations: the beginning of the era of the ʿtawāʿif-kingdoms in Andalusia, the decline of the power and charisma of the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt and the beginning of the Crusades in northern Levant and its seacoasts.

Al-Ṭurtūshī composed numerous works such as al-Nihāya fī furūʿ al-malikiyya, Nafāʾis al-funūn, Mukhtaṣar tafsīr al-thālabī in the realms of fiqh, adab, and exegesis. However, in this case we are interested in his encounter with his benefactor, the vizier al-Muʾmūn al-Batāʾīḥī al-Fatīmī who honored and cherished him, so that Ţ. had to return this favor by writing his book entitled The Kings’ Shiner (Sirāj al-mulūk) as a gift for his patron.

The Sirāj al-mulūk contains a preamble and 64 chapters in which the author treats various issues concerning political advice (naṣiḥa), the Sultan’s status and role (makāna), the condition and needs of the subjects (raʾāya), the reasons for the stability of sovereign power (sulta) and the factors for its collapse. Likewise, he discusses the Sultan’s executive administration, including ministers, governors, employees (ʿummāl) and so
forth. Other matters treated regard the ruler’s ethics, the requirements (*lawāzim*) for his service, state finances etc.

In our summary, we do not intend to keep to the outline of a book distinguished by the large number of its (64) chapters, an enormous diversity of themes and various digressions. We will rather concentrate on its essence by presenting four axonal perspectives related to the principle of counsel, and the relationship between religion the political sphere, between the ruler and his subjects as well as between the elite (*al-khaṣṣa*) and the ruler.

1- Principle of Counsel

“Just as rule (*mulk*) will not be sound when it is shared, decisions based on judgement (*ra’y*) will not be sound when taken alone.” (p.156, ch. 7). This is the introductory formula with which the counselor of kings tries to gain admission to the Sultanic court. T’s book is clearly built upon the principle of counsel. The title *The Kings’ Shiner* itself becomes the light necessary to clear up the darkness (*ẓūlma*) of politics and to protect against the evils of civil strife (*fitna*). As T. mentions in the introduction, the rulers’ reading of the book may substitute the consultation (*mushāwara*) of ministers (p.52, introduction). It is not strange therefore that the author dedicates more than one chapter to the issue of advice/guidance and counsel (*istishāra, naṣīḥa*), as he discusses the exhortation of kings (*mawā‘īz al-mulūk*, ch. 1), the reprimand brought forward by scholars and authorities of righteous piety against state agents (*umarā*) and rulers (ch. 2), the rulers’ need for knowledge (ch. 21), and consultation and counseling (*mushāwara, naṣīḥa*) (ch. 27).

We do not want to inquire about the relationship between the counselor and the counseled since that is an often treated and complex issue. It not only concerns the rapport between intellectuals (*muthaqqaḥ*) and the Sultan, but also regards the latitude given for offering and receiving counsel. In this respect, we observe that most of the advice does not exceed the limits of morality and good intentions (*al-nawāyā al-ṭayyibā*). This may make
us recognize that the author’s attitude is, in its essence, not more than soliciting the unjust ruler to apply justice, to be clement with the subjects, despite the fact that he could humiliate them, and to be forbearing, when he could be severe.

2- Religion and Politics

Ṭ. establishes an important distinction between norms and rules (ahkām) and policies (siyāsāt). The former concerns the regulation of sales, marriage, divorce, hiring/leases and suchlike, as well as the fees set for these transactions and the fines for those who violate these rules. With respect to these rules, Ṭ. absolutely rejects to borrow from others, since God awarded him the sharia, which explains in all detail what is right and what is not. The term policies refers to public affairs, such as directing the military, the state’s financial affairs etc. He believes that some nations (umam) of the past strolled on the path of justice and thus could rejoice a political practice not contradicting rationality. It would therefore not do harm to Muslims, if they borrowed from them for their worldly affairs, while abiding by their religious norms. They thus would gain for this world and in the hereafter (p.50-51, introduction).

Another distinction that books of the genre “counsel of kings” often evoke using various notions regards Prophetic justice and compensatory justice (ʿadl istilāḥī). Ṭ. naturally advocates fervently the first which he sees ethically superior. However, he is well aware that the period of the Prophet and his companions is already over. He solves this dilemma by holding to compensatory justice based on compensatory political practice (siyāsa istilāḥiyya), which regulates the profane affairs, even if it is based on tyranny (p.170-173, ch. 12), since it is grounded in observing the conventional laws (qawānīn maʿlūfa) recognized by common people. He even asserts, rather farfetched, that “the infidel ruler who preserves the tenets of compensatory politics will prevail and will be more powerful than the one who is a believer, personally upright and just, but unaware of the politics
applying the Prophet’s concept of justice (*siyāsa ‘adliyya*). In this vein, well organized tyranny or injustice (*jawr*) is more permanent than negligent justice” (p.174, ch.12).

3- The Sultan and the subjects

Ṭ.’s attention is particularly attracted by the issue of the relationship between the Sultan and his subjects, as a series chapters makes manifest (6-9-38-40-42-43). He tends to embark upon defending the ruler by emphasizing his rank and the difficulty of his mission. He explains that the Sultan is “distressed” (*maghbūn*) by his subjects and not the “one who causes distress” (*ghābin*) and that he is “the one who is losing (*khāsir*) and not the one who is winning (*rābih*)” (ch. 6). He praises the kings who work tirelessly so that the others may rest and stay awake so that the subjects may sleep in security. In his explication of “the Sultan's position with regard to the subjects” (ch. 9) he reverts to a series of metaphors illustrating the Sultan's precedence over his subjects. He is the spirit and they are the body, he is the fire while they are the wood, he is the water and they are the earth, he is the “shiner” without which people would remain in the dark (ch. 7).

But what if the Sultan does not have the required level? Ṭ. wonders “what the subjects have to do if the Sultan acts unjustly” (ch. 40) and “what power the Sultan has towards his subjects”? (ch. 43). We do not find an answer to these questions besides a series of traditions which urge to remain patient, so “if one misprizes something what the ruler does, then one has to endure it, because the one who leaves this path only for a hand’s span (*shabran*) for revolt, will die as an unbeliever (p.344, ch. 40). Ṭ. does not give any justification for insurgencies against the Sultan, but he exaggerates in defending him to the extent of justifying his tyranny: “I keep hearing people say that your acts are reflected in the behavior of your regents, as you are, so will be those in rule over you”. One can obtain this meaning, as the author shows, also from the Quran (6:129): ‘Thus do We cause sinners (*ẓālimīna*) to befriend one another, to requite them for what they earned’ (p.348. ch. 41).
4- The intimates and the ruler

One may distinguish two kinds of Sultanic offices according to al-Ṭurtūshī. Offices and ranks close to the center of the state including “ministers” and “companions” (ch. 24, 25), and local ranks including governors and deputies (ch. 49, 52, 53, 54).

In his treatment of the vizier, Ṭ. does not go beyond affirming the necessity of this function in the state’s organization, since “even the most glorious, powerful and competent kings were in need of the minister.” He also refers to the importance of selecting the right minister, “as this choice manifests the ruler’s nobility, his ability of making judgments and the excellence of his intellect” (p.222, ch. 24). According to Ṭ. rather short-spoken statements, the companion may exercise both the functions of giving counsel and offering entertainment.

Compared to his scanty explanation of the “central” positions in state administration, he emphasizes the importance of governors (wulāḥ) and deputy state agents (ʿummāḥ), when he sets forth the qualities required (ch. 52), stressing that their importance to the ruler is comparable “to that of weapons to the warrior” (p.409). He also speaks about “the terms and covenants that define the deputies’ obligations (ch. 53). He recommends this as a measure to fend off the oppressive and selfish comportment of those “who just pursue their desire” (al-ṭālib al-rāghib), and admonishes the ruler for selecting his deputies carefully, if he does not want “to appoint wolves as shepherds of his flock”.

If we cannot find anything new about these various ranks and offices in The Kings’ Shiner, we have to consider that we are talking about the Sultan’s servants, and this entails an obvious paradox that characterizes Ṭ.’s discourse. While he emphasizes the necessity to offer advice and accepting it on the ruler’s side, he dedicates two chapters (ch. 44 and 45) to warnings against associating with the ruler. He is even prohibiting it, because “how many among the sultan’s associates, virtuous, reasonable and learned people, have we seen or heard of being corrupted while trying to rectify the ruler” (p.358). One must always
be on guard, control ones comportment and display utmost politeness towards a person who is (as erratic) as the fortune, the sea and the fire, as al-Māwardī puts it, a person always unpredictable with respect to how he would receive advice.

We have tried to point out the most important aspects that *The Kings’ Shiner* brings up, without claiming an exhaustive treatment of all of its topics and leaving unconsidered especially the ruler’s ethics, which people believe to be essential for the king’s power and of its collapse.


Besides the emphasis on the importance of the book, it seems that there are dissimilarities in the interpretation of its content which we may sum up as follows:

1- There are those who saw in *The Kings’ Shiner* an analysis of issues of public law, and a useful explanation of constitutional rules, public liberties and freedom of opinion and disagreement, as the editor of the book suggests. There is no necessity to emphasize that such concepts are modern, and inseparably linked the emergence of modern state and its evolution. It is meaningless to claim their
presence in the work of Ṭ. for whom the state is just an instrument and a medium of moral and religious values.

2- Ḩsan ʿAbbās is of the opinion that the work is rooted in a religious-ethical vision adorned by exempla, images, stories and some personal experiences, which is the outpour of a pious man (p. sīn, mīm). Whereas for Sāmī al-Nashshār, the author represents the idealistic ethical tendencies in Muslim political thought (p. mīm, sīn). Yāsīn al-Sayyid recognized in Ṭ.’s work the islamization of the mirror-for-princes genre (p. 36). Without discussing this position in more detail, one may assert that the work indeed contains, at least from its appearance, ample evidence of its religious, ethical and piety-oriented character.

3- Another reading attempts to understand the work in the larger context of political transformation, interpreting the work as a form of condescendence, which religious scholars would not desist from offering in view of Sultanic state’s sluggish movement forwards. In this vein, Ridwān al-Sayyid understood it as a “realistic acknowledgement of the structure of power” (p. 17). Similarly, ʿAlī Īmīlīl considered it to express Ṭ.’s attempt to expand his political horizon (p. 137) and to adapt to the new political conditions which had occurred. In his view, Ṭ. and his colleagues began doubt whether sharia had to play a political role (p. 137).

4- ʿAbdallāh al-ʿArwī did not dedicate an independent study to political advice literature, but his ideas about this topic are extant in several of his writings. When speaking about the concept of reason (māfhum al-ʿaqīl) he classifies the Shiner as a product of traditional thought exposed to the criticism of Ibn Khaldūn. It would therefore be incommensurable with the “germ cells of reason”, as only concern that overshadows it, consist in “strengthening the state” and his finances (p. 172). The best way perhaps to conclude this essay is asserting the criticism put forward by Ibn Khaldūn against the author of the Shiner: “Judge Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī also had the same ideas [as Ibn Khaldūn] in his work. He divided it into chapters that come close to the chapters and problems of our work. However, he did not achieve
his aim or realize his intention. He did not exhaust the problems and did not bring clear proofs. He sets aside a special chapter for a particular problem, but then he tells a great number of stories and traditions and he reports scattered remarks be Persian sages such as Buzurjmihr and the Môbedhân, and by Indian sages, as well as material transmitted on the authority of Daniel, Hermes and other great men. He does not verify his statements or clarify them with the help of natural arguments. The work is merely a compilation of transmitted material similar to sermons. In a way, he aimed at the right idea, but did not hit it. He did not realize his intention or exhaust the problems” (Ibn Khaldûn p.83).

ʿIzz al-Dīn al-ʿAllām, translated by Stefan Leder

Sources and references


