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The American University in Cairo

**UNDERSTANDING THE POEM OF THE  
*BURDAH* IN SUFI COMMENTARIES**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Masters of Arts

by  
Rose Aslan

(under the supervision of Dr. Abdel Rahman Salem)

June 2008

The American University in Cairo

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To the Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations  
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The degree of Masters of Arts  
Has been approved by

Dr. Abdel Rahman Salem  
Thesis Committee Chair / Advisor \_\_\_\_\_  
Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Bradley Clough  
Thesis Committee Reader / examiner  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Huda Lutfi  
Thesis Committee Reader / examiner  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Department Chair / Program Director      Date      \_\_\_\_\_  
Dean      \_\_\_\_\_      Date

## DEDICATION

To Muhammad...

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I must thank Muhammad Habib; I could not have gotten through this intense period of my life without his constant help and support. I must also thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Abdel Rahman Salem for his patience and faith in me as we discussed my thesis and for his useful feedback. I am also grateful to the readers on my thesis committee, Dr. Bradley Clough and Dr. Huda Lutfi, for their careful reading of my thesis and constructive criticism, their comments have helped me immensely and will be implemented in future projects based on my thesis. Other professors in the Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations have been instrumental in my career at AUC, including Dr. Matt Malczyk, Dr. Mohamed Serag, Dr. Mahmoud El Rabie, Dr. Samia Mehrez, and Dr. Hisham Hellyer. My gratitude also goes to the administrative staff, Maggie Daoud, Marwa Sabry Osman, and Noha Shawky for their readiness to answer questions and guide me through the bureaucratic maze that is AUC. I am also indebted to Dr. Muhammad Rekabi of Al-Azhar University for his willingness to answer any questions I have had, provide me with a constant stream of pertinent books, and to discuss vital aspects of my thesis. Finally, my friends and family have always encouraged me to pursue my dreams and have believed in me, for this they will always have a special place in my heart.

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## ABSTRACT

American University in Cairo

### UNDERSTANDING THE POEM OF THE *BURDAH* IN SUFI COMMENTARIES

Rose Aslan

(Under the supervision of Dr. Abdel Rahman Salem)

This thesis explores interpretations of the poem of the *Burdah* composed by Imam al-Būṣīrī, a mystical panegyric poem that is associated with miracles and is believed by some to have healing and talismanic properties. By examining various writings by Sufi scholars on the *Burdah*, I have shed light on their interpretations of the poem and its mystical qualities in order to come to a deeper understanding of the poem itself, its context, and the impact it has had on Islamic literature and Sufi practices. Most importantly, I explore the theme of seeking intercession from the Prophet Muḥammad and the role that the *Burdah* plays in this process.

A number of commentators I discuss in this study identify their petition to the Prophet as a primary motive for producing their commentaries. I will argue that there are three levels that play out in this process, namely 1. themes in the poem of the *Burdah* itself that deal with the topic, 2. the story of al-Būṣīrī's composition of the *Burdah* as a means of seeking intercession from the Prophet and forgiveness from God, and 3. the composition of commentaries by Sufis who by clarifying and interpreting the *Burdah*, hoped for their sins to be forgiven and for the Prophet to intercede for them as he did for al-Būṣīrī. While there are those who treat the poem merely as another literary text, those who believe in its spiritual efficacy use al-Būṣīrī's biography as a model that they aspire to in order to purify themselves in the spiritual path.

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

The poem of the *Burdah* is one of the most important poems written in Arabic and it has inspired Sufis throughout the Muslim world to explore its inner meanings and special healing and protective powers. It retains its popularity even today, for example, upon entering the terms “*Burdah*” and “poem,” into the Google Internet search engine, one will find more than 76,400 entries that lead to websites that discuss the poem, Wahhābī polemics against it, as well as recordings and videos of renditions of its recitation. Search the catalog of any library in the Muslim world, and one will find at least a handful, and most of the times many more, of studies, poetic expansions and imitations, and commentaries on the poem. This thesis explores interpretations of *Qasīdat al-Burdah*, a mystical panegyric poem that is associated with miracles and is believed by some to have healing and talismanic properties. The poem was composed by Imam Sharaf al-Dīn al-Būṣīrī, a thirteenth-century Egyptian Sufi of North African origin who lived during the vibrant and often violent Mamlūk period. He wrote the poem as a form of catharsis, using it as a way to purify himself from his past sins and wrongdoings and to overcome a physical sickness.

Throughout the Muslim world, from al-Būṣīrī's time to the present day, Muslims have recited the poem individually and together to invoke blessings on the Prophet Muhammad and to ask for his intercession on the Day of Judgment. In the Arab and Islamic world, hundreds of commentaries have been written on the *Burdah* and it has been translated into many languages, including Urdu, Pashto, Khorezmian Turkic, Persian, Malay, Turkish, Berber, Chinese, Uzbek, and even numerous versions in English and other Western languages.<sup>1</sup> According to Ignaz Goldziher, "it has been commented on more frequently and copiously than any other Arabic poem,"<sup>2</sup> surely a reflection of the important status it has held in Muslim societies. The poem was so popular during the Ottoman period that even the tomb of the Prophet in Madīnah was decorated with its verses, only to be torn down with the advent of the Puritan Wahhābi movement in Saudi Arabia. Many private houses of the rich in the Arab world and perhaps beyond were also covered with the verses of the *Burdah*.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a special room for receiving dignitaries

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<sup>1</sup> See Stefan and Christopher Shackle Sperl, ed., *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa*, ed. J.E. Montgomery and R.M.A. Allen, vol. I, Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), Suzanne Stetkyvch, "From Text to Talisman: Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-Burdah (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 37, no. 2 (2006), Suzanne Stetkyvch, "From Sirah to Qasidah: Poetics and Polemics in Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-Burdah (Mantle Ode)," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 38, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *A Short History of Classical Arabic Literature*, trans. Joseph Desomogyi (Berlin: Hildesheim, 1966), 57.

<sup>3</sup> See unpublished MA thesis for photos and discussion of the text of the *Burdah* that has been discovered on the walls and mosques in Cairo, Noha Mohamed Khaled Abou-Khatwa,

in the Ottoman Topkapi Palace in Istanbul was covered with tiles that not only included verses from the Qur'an, but also a number of verses from the *Burdah* that deal with the Prophet's miracles, or *mu'jizāt*.<sup>4</sup>

A complete rendition of the poem also adorns the walls of the mosque and tomb complex of al-Būṣīrī in Alexandria.<sup>5</sup> At the same mosque, the *Burdah* is still dutifully recited every Friday by members of the Qādirīyyah-Qāsimīyyah Sufi order and on Sundays by members of the Shādhiliyyah-Hamīdiyyah Sufi order in the mosques of Sayyidah Zaynab and Sayyidah Nafīṣah in Cairo. Members of the Sufi orders and Muslim pilgrims visit al-Būṣīrī's tomb from around the world to seek the *barakah*, or blessings, of the *Burdah*. Stories of recitations of the *Burdah* are often mentioned in commentaries on the poem, as are reports of lessons that were given by prominent Azhar sheikhs.<sup>6</sup> Manuscripts of the *Burdah* and its commentaries abound in libraries and private collections in the Muslim world and Western libraries and copies of the poem, popular

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"Inscription Programs in Cairene Domestic Architecture (14th-18th Century)" (American University in Cairo, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Gulru Necipoglu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 150.

<sup>5</sup> Observed by author on numerous visits to Masjid al-Būṣīrī in Alexandria.

<sup>6</sup> Zakī Mubārak, *Al-Madā'ih al-nabawīyyah fī al-adab al-<sup>c</sup>Arabī* (Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-Arabi, 1935), 199-200

commentaries,<sup>7</sup> and poetical expansions (*tashṭīr*) can be found at most bookstores in the Arab world.

I decided to work on this topic as I was struck by the beauty and depth of the *Burdah* and wanted to delve deeper into it and thus began to read the commentaries. After undertaking preliminary research on the topic, I was surprised to learn that, as far as I know, very few studies have been carried out on the *Burdah* and its commentaries in the English language. Numerous scholars have investigated the literary aspects of the *Burdah* in both Arabic and English and have repeatedly dealt with the narrative of the composition of the *Burdah* and al-Būṣīrī's life.<sup>8</sup> Only one translation of a single minor commentary is available in English,<sup>9</sup> and since it is only available in an unpublished PhD dissertation from 1985, it is relatively unknown and inaccessible. Thus I felt it would be appropriate to narrow the gap of knowledge about this important poem by shedding light not only upon the literary aspects of the poem, but more

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<sup>7</sup> Particularly that of an abridged version of al-Bājūrī's *Hāshīyat al-Burdah*, as well as simple glosses in inexpensive booklets provided by modern and religious scholars and who provide a glossary of difficult words and provide short and simple interpretations of the poem.

<sup>8</sup> See Maḥmūd Sālim Muḥammad, *Al-Madā'ih al-nabawīyyah ḥattā nihāyat al-ʿasr al-Mamlūkī* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Mu'asir, 1996); ʿAbd al-ʿAlīm Qabbānī, *Al-Būṣīrī: ḥayātuhu wa shʿīruhu* (Alexandria: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1968); Zaynab ʿAzab, ʿAbd al-Ṣamad ʿAshshāb, *Al-Būṣīrī shāʿir al-madīh al-nabawī: dirāsah tahlīliyyah muʿazzazah bi-qaṣīdatay al-Burdah wa-al-Hamzīyyah* (Rabat, Morocco: Al-Jam'iyyah al-Maghribiyyah lil-Tadamun al-Islami, 1999); ʿAlī Najīb ʿAṭawī, *Al-Būṣīrī: shāʿir al-madā'ih al-nabawīyyah wa-ʿalamuhu* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Devin A. DeWeese, "The Kashf Al-Huda of Kamal Ad-Din Husayn Khorezmi: A Fifteenth-Century Sufi Commentary of the Qasīdat *al-Burdah* in Khorezmian Turkic" (University of Indiana, PhD dissertation, 1985).

importantly, upon the religious and spiritual aspects of the poem as understood by its commentators.

### **Exploring the *Burdah***

By examining various writings by Sufi scholars on the *Burdah*, I hope to shed light on their interpretations of the poem and its mystical qualities in order to come to a deeper understanding of the poem itself, its context, and the impact it has had on Islamic literature and practices. Most importantly, I want explore at the theme of seeking intercession from the Prophet Muḥammad and the role that the *Burdah* plays in this process. A number of commentators I will discuss in this study identify their petition to the Prophet as a primary motive for writing their commentaries. I will argue that there are three levels that play out in this process, namely 1. themes in the poem of the *Burdah* itself that deal with the topic, 2. the story of al-Būṣīrī's composition of the *Burdah* as a means of seeking intercession from the Prophet and forgiveness from God, and 3. the composition of commentaries by Sufis who by clarifying and interpreting the *Burdah*, hoped for their sins to be forgiven and for the Prophet to intercede for them as he did for al-Būṣīrī. While there are those who treat the poem merely as another literary text,

those who believe in its spiritual efficacy use al-Būṣīrī's biography as a model that they aspire to in order to purify themselves in the spiritual path.

Although certain Orientalists who have studied the *Burdah*, such as René Basset, a French scholar who died in 1924 in Algeria, claimed that "there is no trace of Sufism in it [the *Burdah*],"<sup>10</sup> others recognized its mystic influences that led scholars to write Sufi interpretations of the poem. A modern scholar who worked on a Central Asian commentary of the *Burdah*, Devin DeWeese posits that "in view of al-Būṣīrī's Sufi connections, it is doubtful that the mystical interpretation of the work is entirely the invention of later commentators."<sup>11</sup> Although the *Burdah* is itself not a Sufi poem as one would refer to the deeply mystical and ecstatic poetry of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, Ibn al-ʿArabī, al-Hallāj, and others, the poem is indeed saturated with Sufi metaphors and rhetoric. Muḥammad Khafājī, an Egyptian scholar confirms the poetry of al-Būṣīrī as being Sufi-inspired, stating,

The poetry of al-Būṣīrī was full of intense Sufi spirit and in it can be found the light of Sufis and their modes of expression. After Ibn al-Fāriḍ, al-Būṣīrī was truly the greatest poet from Egypt and no other poet that came before or after him could reach his level of poetical beauty and expression.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> René Basset, "Burda," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2008).

<sup>11</sup> DeWeese, 269.

<sup>12</sup> Khafājī, 258.

There are many verses whose symbolism and imagery correspond to Sufi teachings and concepts, for example advice to restrain the *nafs*, or self, using popular metaphors in Sufi discourse,

*Who can restrain my bolting soul from its selfish desires,  
Like bridles that bring restive steeds under control? (16)*

*Do not attempt to break its appetite through wanton indulgence-  
Notice how food only strengthens a glutton's craving (17).*

*The self is like an infant-if you leave it, it will grow up loving to suckle,  
But if you wean it, soon it will lose its desire for the breast (18).*

*Divert the self's desires and avoid empowering it-  
Whenever desire takes charge, it either destroys or defiles (19).*

*Shepherd over it as it grazes freely in the field of actions,  
But should it find the pasturage sweet, restrain its casual roaming (20).*

*How often it has found some deadly pleasure delightful,  
Not knowing that poison lies hidden in cream! (21).*

*Be on guard against the traps of hunger and satiety-  
An empty stomach can be worse than a full one (22).*

*Empty out every last tear from an eye that has gorged  
On forbidden deserts, and cling to a diet of remorse (24).*

*Contradict the infantile self and Satan, and disobey them-  
If either of them offers you sincere advice, be suspicious! (25)*

In addition, in the *Burdah*, al-Būṣīrī refers to *nūr Muḥammad*, which, according to Annemarie Schimmel, "is one of the central themes (if not the central theme) of

mystical prophetology.”<sup>13</sup> The concept was first developed by mystics, such as Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 283/896), who derived it from the Light verse of the Qur’an,

*God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it.*<sup>14</sup>

Essentially *nūr Muḥammad* refers to the idea that before creation, God created the light of Muḥammad that worshipped God from the beginning. From this light emanated the prophets and spiritual universe. While the Prophet Muḥammad was created from the clay of Adam, his spiritual essence had already existed for an eternity and permeated the universe,<sup>15</sup>

*All of the signs brought by the noble prophets before him  
Came to them through his light alone (52).*

*He is the bounteous sun and they her orbiting planets-  
She reveals their lights for humanity in the darkness of night (53).*

Despite the fact that it contains numerous esoteric mystical and Sufi references, the *Burdah* has reached a much wider audience than the work of the aforementioned poets due to its accessible language and devotional style. Al-Būṣīrī was a Sufi and disciple of Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Mursī, a well-known sheikh and founder of the widespread Shādhilī Sufi order inspired by his teacher, Abū al-Hasan al-Shādhilī. Al-Būṣīrī wrote the *Burdah* during a time when Sufism

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<sup>13</sup> Schimmel, *And Muḥammad is His Prophet*, 123.

<sup>14</sup> Qur’an 24:35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

flourished under the generous patronage of the Mamlūk rulers and elite members of society. But it is in the works of Sufis where we can find a rich collection of interpretations of the *Burdah*.

In my research, I have identified several significant components that may explain why the *Burdah* gained such importance in Muslim communities and how certain healing and protective properties came to be attributed to it. I posit that the *Burdah*, a compact poem written in highly refined and eloquent Arabic gives expression to those who are themselves unable to construct such exceptional and beautiful language. The poem contains many important aspects, stemming from the story of a man who repents to God for his sin of not dedicating his life and work to a higher goal, a theme which any Muslim can easily identify with as this represents the well-known *jihād al-nafs*, or greater struggle with oneself. In addition, the poem also contains the carefully chosen snippets of the sacred biography of the Prophet Muhammad, with references to events and miracles from his life as well as abundant praise of him. The poem ends with the poet's miraculous recovery from his illness, return to God, reconciliation with his faith, and an epiphany about the reality of the world. For a considerably short poem, it contains many separate components, all of which are very attractive to the reader, who can easily emphasize and even experience what al-Būṣīrī went through on his spiritual journey.

Furthermore, Muslims are raised to love the Prophet Muhammad from the day they are born and many desire to see him in their dreams or even while they are awake. Stories abound of visions of the Prophet and bear witness to the fact that this is a sought-after goal of Muslims, many of whom have written stories of their visions and advice and instructions on the best way to bring about this vision. Most importantly, an important authentic hadith reports: “Abu Huraira reported that the Messenger of Allah said: ‘He who saw me in a dream has certainly seen me, for Satan cannot take my form.’”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, while Muslims who claim to see anyone but the Prophet may be doubted, the only vision that can be guaranteed to be absolutely true according to Muslims is that of the Prophet, where all other visions may or may not be false. Thus, scholars and ordinary Muslims have attributed a special quality to the *Burdah*. They believe that if one reads it with a pure intention and engages in praising the Prophet, one can then have visions of the Prophet Muhammad just as al-Būṣīrī did when he composed the *Burdah*. Thus, the story of al-Būṣīrī’s life and his composition of the *Burdah* are essential to understanding the importance of the *Burdah* in Muslim society. In effect, the poem cannot be separated from its compositional narrative, which further strengthens its popularity and blessings according to the beliefs of those who recite it. Understanding the love of the Prophet Muhammad and his

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<sup>16</sup> Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Saḥīḥ Muslim

role as an intercessor as experienced in every Muslim's life could shed light on the popularity of the *Burdah*.

Scholars who have written commentaries on the *Burdah* have done so in order to expound this captivating poem and to explain its meanings in further detail and to reveal its secrets and elegant language. While the earlier commentators from the Mamlūk and earlier Ottoman era focused on interpreting the linguistic, and metaphor and literal meanings of the poem, we can see a developing trend among later commentators to add further glosses based on their actual experiences of reciting and utilizing the poem for the purpose of healing. These later commentators highlighted certain verses and enumerated upon their talismanic uses based on their own experiences; this knowledge was taught to them by their teachers. These commentators were all Sufis and often prominent scholars of Islam from Al-Azhar and other important centers of learning in the Muslim world. Included in their ranks are theologians, jurists, judges, leaders of al-Azhar and Zaytūnah mosques and universities, and other high-standing members and religious leaders of Muslim society.

In a nutshell, this study will attempt to understand the role that the *Burdah* has played in the lives of Muslims around the world exploring how it has inspired Sufis. It is hoped that it will contribute to the understanding of a number

of issues including: the importance of the Prophet Muhammad in the lives of Muslims, the use of literary talismans among Sufis, and how the *Burdah* has inspired an entire genre of commentaries, as well as special beliefs and practices.

## Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted on the literary aspects of the *Burdah*, in particular Suzanne Stetkvych's two recent articles are of great merit and importance. A scholar of Arabic literature, Stetkvych's first concern in her research is to analyze the literary aspects of the poem and to isolate the rhetorical tools and devices utilized by al-Būṣīrī and to compare the poem with those by his predecessors and contemporaries.<sup>17</sup> In her first article, "From Text to Talisman,"<sup>18</sup> Stetkvych attempts to explain the story of al-Būṣīrī's miraculous cure and the influence of the *Burdah*, which led to large amounts of imitations, expansions, translations, and commentaries being produced, by exploring its literary aspects. Stetkvych traces possible origins of the structure present in the *Burdah* and how the poet transcended traditional classical *madhī* poetry in that it addressed the object of praise on a spiritual level. She provides snippets of translations of

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<sup>17</sup> Based on personal communication with Dr. Suzanne Stetkvych through email, I have learned that she is also preparing a full-length monograph that will cover topics included in the two articles mentioned here as well as the genre of *madhī* poetry in Arabic and the *burdahs* of Ka'b b. Zuhayr, al-Būṣīrī, and Ahmad Shawqī.

<sup>18</sup> Stetkvych, "From Text to Talisman: Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-Burdah (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode."

several commentaries that mention the healing powers of certain verses. But Stetkvych does this only to give evidence of the great popularity and attention the *Burdah* has received, but she refrains from analyzing these literary talismans or their presence in the commentaries. Stetkvych categorizes the *Burdah* as “an Arabic panegyric ode (qaṣīdat al-madh) of the supplicatory variety, addressed to the Prophet Muḥammad as the *mamdūh*, and pleading for his intercession on Judgement Day.”<sup>19</sup> Throughout the bulk of her article, Stetkvych scrutinizes the poem from within its context of the genre of classical Arabic panegyric poems, paying attention to the structure of the poem in relations to others from within the genre and the theme of intercession and petition within the poem. Stetkvych’s approach is literary and she is concerned primarily with methodically analyzing the refined ritual-liturgical structure of the poem, which she believes has led to the “literary and religious success” of the *Burdah*.<sup>20</sup> Essentially Stetkvych sums up the *Burdah* as being “a liturgical text whose recitation constituted a reenactment of al-Būṣīrī’s experience of offering a gift of praise to the Prophet and receiving in return the gift of spiritual transformation/healing.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 181.

In her second article, "From Sīrah to Qaṣīdah,"<sup>22</sup> Stetkvych continues the thesis of her previous article and examines further topics, such as al-Būṣīrī's portrayal of the Prophet Muḥammad in the *Burdah* and asserts that this section of the poem promotes what she terms "an ideology of Islamic Manifest Destiny."<sup>23</sup> Basically, she holds that this section of the poem is supposed to confirm the prophethood and message of Islam and its presence in the world and to establish that the Prophet Muḥammad is indeed able to intercede for Muslims on the Day of Judgment. Most importantly, Stetkvych argues that al-Būṣīrī's portrayal of the Prophet Muḥammad's life was not intended to be historically accurate, rather the "poeticization of these originally prose materials achieved an increased polemicization."<sup>24</sup>

Ahmed Taher Hasanein's study<sup>25</sup> of the *Burdah* is a technical and critical work in which he attempts to prove that a number of verses included towards the end of the commonly accepted version of the *Burdah* were not actually written by al-Būṣīrī. In the second half of his article, Hasanein explores the influence that Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry had upon al-Būṣīrī's and the subsequent wave of imitations and expansions that al-Būṣīrī left in the wake of the *Burdah*. He also points out that

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<sup>22</sup> Stetkvych, "From Sirah to Qasidah: Poetics and Polemics in Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-Burdah (Mantle Ode)."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>25</sup> Aḥmad Ṭāher Ḥasanein, "Iṭlālāh ālā Burdat al-Būṣīrī ta tarāsīlātiha " *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 23, no. Literature and the Sacred (2003).

while al-Būṣīrī may have been influenced by Ibn al-Fāriḍ's poetry, whose audience was mainly elite group of Sufi scholars, the *Burdah* became more widespread throughout the Muslim world due to its simple eloquence.<sup>26</sup>

Hasanein's article is valuable in that it examines the connection between a series of poets who influenced one after the other, but his article is mainly descriptive with little analysis.

Zaki Mubarak's early twentieth-century study<sup>27</sup> on panegyric (*madīḥ*) poems that praise the Prophet Muḥammad is useful in that it covers the entire genre of *madḥ* poetry from its origins up to the Mamluk period. His book includes a brief chapter on the *Burdah*, its composition, a discussion of its various commentaries and its influence on Arabic literature. An active scholar of Sufism and Arabic literature and a literary critic during the first half of the twentieth century, Mubārak's modernist and rationalist tendencies inhibit him from engaging with his subject from a scholarly perspective due to his rejection of practices associated with the *Burdah*. As one modern scholar noted of Mubarak's views on Sufi writings, "twentieth-century Enlightenment rationalism was the standard by which every statement...was to be evaluated. In doing so, he demonstrated a complete inability to register the tonality of the different narrative strategies

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>27</sup> Zakī Mubārak, *Al-Madā'ih al-nabawīyyah fī al-adab al-ʿArabī* (Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-Arabi, 1935).

employed in Muslim literature over the ages."<sup>28</sup> His failure to refer to sources and at times, superficial examination of topics, takes away from the merit of the book. While his book is a good source to begin with, it cannot be relied on for accuracy.

Brief remarks on the *Burdah's* talismanic properties and interpretations<sup>29</sup> have also been mentioned in larger studies on panegyric poems of the Prophet Muhammad and his role in Muslim society. Annemarie Schimmel's *And Muhammad is His Messenger* provides a comprehensive and sensitive study of the veneration of the Prophet in Islamic piety, with special references to his praise in Sufi poetry and writings. While Schimmel's book offers an excellent bird's eye view of the importance of the Prophet in Islam and to contextualize his role in Muslim's lives, her approach is primarily descriptive. Schimmel presents countless ideas and concepts that she briefly passes over, because of this, her work is only of limited benefit and more detailed and analytical studies need to be carried out on this topic.

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<sup>28</sup> Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, ed. Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence, *Islamic Civilizations and Muslim Networks* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>29</sup> See Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985, 181-187.

## The *Burdah* in Translation

Apart from a large number of translations in Islamicate languages, there have also been a number of English translations produced over the last century. Subsequently, I have perused the available translations and compared and contrasted their accuracy in translation as well as literary quality and ease in comprehension. Apart from a large number of unpublished translations by amateur translators that can be found in abundance online, there are four main translations by scholars that I have consulted for my research, these include: R.A. Nicholson's clear but highly classical translation found in *A Reader on Islam*,<sup>30</sup> Thoraya Mahdi Allam's highly poetic yet obscure and awkward Egyptian edition,<sup>31</sup> Susan Stetkvych's literal and accurate translation which can be found within her two articles that comprise a study of the literary aspects of the *Burdah*,<sup>32</sup> and finally Hamza Yusuf's fluid and refined translation.<sup>33</sup>

I ultimately decided to use Yusuf's translation not only due to its highly accurate and insightful translation based on solid scholarship and chains of

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<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Sharaf al-Dīn al-Busiri, *A Reader on Islam*, trans. Arthur Jeffery (Gravenhage: Mouton, 1962).

<sup>31</sup> Sharaf ad-Din Muhammad ibn Sa'id al-Busiri, *Al-Busiri's Burdah*, trans. Thoraya Mahdi Allam (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization 1987).

<sup>32</sup> Stetkvych, "From Text to Talisman: Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-Burdah (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode." and Stetkvych, "From Sirah to Qasidah: Poetics and Polemics in Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-Burdah (Mantle Ode)."

<sup>33</sup> Sharaf ad-Din Muhammad ibn Sa'id al-Busiri, *The Burda: The Poem of the Cloak of Al-Busiri*, trans. Hamza Yusuf (Thaxted, Essex: Sandala Ltd., 2002).

traditions relating back to al-Būṣīrī himself, but also because of its beauty and spirit that it gives to the *Burdah* in English, as the American calligrapher of the *Burdah*, Mohamed Zakariya says, “when there is love and imagination to amplify skill, wonders of literature become apparent.”<sup>34</sup> Hamza Yusuf is a highly respected American convert to Islam who is one of the leading spiritual leaders of American Muslims. He spent over 10 years studying in various Arab countries and in particular, studied the *Burdah* under the well-known Syrian scholar, Shaykh Muḥammad al-Yaʿqūbī. In addition, Yusuf’s translation was given final touches by a well-known American Muslim poet, Daniel Abdul Hayy Moore and edited by another prominent American Muslim scholar, Michael Wolfe. What made Yusuf’s rendition of the highly elaborate poem stand out was the fact that the English seems to emit the same level of devotion and mystical longing for the Prophet Muḥammad as the original Arabic does. It is as if Yusuf has not merely translated the *Burdah* into English, but also managed to transfer its essence along with it – truly a rare feat among translators of poetry in any language.

While the other translations may be incredibly accurate, at times their Shakespearean wording and classical poetic structure distances the average reader from the poem, rendering it dry and ultimately inaccessible. Yusuf’s English rendition of the *Burdah* is as close as one can

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

get to the Arabic without actually resorting to the original and therefore I will be using this version throughout my thesis. All other translations from Arabic-language commentaries as well as primary and secondary Arabic sources (except for the Qur'an and Hadith) are mine unless noted otherwise. As for the numbering of the verses, I have used the same system as that of Suzanne Stetkvych,<sup>35</sup> who determined her numbering, based on a comparison of various versions and then chose the most accurate one. I subsequently matched up lines from Yusuf's translation to that of Stetkvych's and confirmed the numbering with the various commentaries in my possession.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

My primary sources for my research are literary in nature, comprising the text of the *Burdah* itself as well as a number of commentaries on the poem composed in Egypt and Turkey during different dynasties. These are drawn from both published texts and unpublished manuscripts in order to represent different styles of commentaries from different time periods. In addition, for practical reasons, I have had to primarily limit myself to commentaries that are available in edited and published forms

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<sup>35</sup> In her two articles on the *Burdah*, "From Text to Talisman," and "From Sīrah to Qaṣīdah."

versus many that are only available in manuscript form. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate any Mamluk-era commentaries that have been published although I was able to locate two manuscripts of note from this era at Al-Azhar Library. The bulk of published commentaries I have found are from the Ottoman-era.

By seeking to understand how Sufis have interpreted an important praise poem of the Prophet Muhammad, I hope my findings will shed light on important issues that can contribute in a useful way to the ever-growing wealth of knowledge in Arabic Literature and Islamic Studies. I have made use of historical texts, particularly hagiographies and biographies, to map out al-Būṣīrī's life and historical context as well as that of the commentators on the *Burdah*. In addition, I have drawn on studies from Arabic literature as sources for information on al-Būṣīrī and the *Burdah* and different scholars' interpretations and glosses of the poem. Moreover, I have made use of research from English-language works in Islamic Studies, which have helped in part to shape my thesis.

By approaching the *Burdah* as a text that is revered by many Muslims and not merely a static text present only in print form; it is my goal to analyze the different ways Muslims, particularly Sufis, value and understand the text and how this reflects on their worldview and devotion for the Prophet Muḥammad.

In this way, William Graham's astute quote will guide my analysis and methodology for this paper,

The most crucial kind of 'authenticity' of a scripture or anything else of religious significance is, in the final analysis, its absolute authenticity in the understanding and faith of a particular individual or a particular group in a particular age. What a person or community recognizes as true, has faith in as true, is as legitimate an object of scholarly concern as the equally elusive genesis or 'original source' of an idea, an image, a myth, or even a text; and certainly it is more important than the latter in seeking to understand the person or group involved.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, in accordance with the standard of scholarly approach set forth by Graham above, I approach the beliefs and doctrine as presented in this thesis in the context of those who believe in them. In contrast to the methodology of Orientalist scholars, I do not attempt to investigate the validity of the beliefs or recorded experiences, rather, I attempt to understand how they were formed and to place them in their appropriate cultural, historical, religious and intellectual Weltanschauung.

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<sup>36</sup> William A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam: A Reconsideration of the Sources with Special Reference of the Divine Saying or Hadith Qudsi* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), 2.

## CHAPTER TWO CONTEXTUALIZING THE *BURDAH*

### Biography of al-Būṣīrī

Before proceeding any further, it is important to examine al-Būṣīrī's background and life in order to understand how he came to write the *Burdah* and under what circumstances. As the story of the poem's composition is as important as the poem itself, his journey from a misanthropic court poet to an enlightened Sufi is a long one and must be understood within this context. In order to attempt to piece together the piece's of historical records of al-Būṣīrī's life and to work out a broad timeline, I have located the most important historical biographical works that offer various snippets of his life. In addition, I also somewhat followed Muḥammad Kīlānī's<sup>37</sup> timeline of al-Būṣīrī's life. Kīlānī offers a loose sketch based on a combination of historical records and analysis of al-Būṣīrī's poetry informed by references to geographical locations, events, and other pieces of information. Despite clues that point to aspects of al-Būṣīrī's life, this timeline remains speculative and calls for a separate study to establish an authoritative biography of al-Būṣīrī.

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<sup>37</sup> In *Diwān al-Būṣīrī*.

Al-Būṣīrī's full name<sup>38</sup> is Muḥammad b. Saʿīd b. Ḥammād b. Muḥsin b. Abū Surūr b. Ḥibbān b. ʿAbdullah b. Mallak al-Sanhajī.<sup>39</sup> Different biographers present slightly different versions of his life although certain facts are agreed upon by all. Of North African descent, he was born on a Tuesday on the first of the Islamic month Shawwāl; and although different historians have proposed that he was born in 607, 608, and 610, the majority agree on 608/1211.<sup>40</sup> Born in the village of Dalās, his mother's hometown, he was raised in his father's village of Būsir Qūrīds, which is located on the West bank of the Nile in the present-day governate of Beni Suif near Fayoum. Būsir Qūrīds was known to be the home of a number of North African Berber immigrants and al-Būṣīrī's family was no exception, it traced its origin to the Sanhajī tribe of Morocco. The famous

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<sup>38</sup> Biographical information based on the following sources: Abū Falāḥ ʿAbd al-Ḥayy b. al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī, *Shadharāt al-dhahab fī akhbār man dhahab*, 8 vols., vol. 5 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsiyyah, 1931), Muhammad b. Shākir b. Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kutubī, *Fawāʾit al-wafayāt*, ed. Sheikh Ali Muhammad Muʿwad, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2000), Khayr al-Dīn Ziriklī, *Al-Aʿlām: qāmūs tarājīm li-ashhar al-rijāl wa-al-nisāʾ nin al-ʿArab wa-al-mustʿaribīn wa-al-mustashriqīn* (Beirut: Dar al-Ilm lil-Malayin, 1990). and Imām Sharaf ad-Dīn al-Būṣīrī, *Diwān Al-Būṣīrī*, ed. Muhammad Sayyid Kilānī (Cairo: Maktabat Mustafa al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1973).

<sup>39</sup> This is one version of his full name, other versions include Muhammad b. Saʿīd b. Ḥamād b. Muḥsin b. ʿAbdullah b. Hīyyanī al-Habnūnī al-Sanhajī Abū ʿAbdulah Sharif al-Dīn al-Dalās, al-Kutubi calls him Muhammad b. Saʿīd b. Ḥamād b. Muḥsin b. ʿAbdullah b. Sanhaj b. Malāl al-Sanhajī and Ibn al-ʿImād calls him Muhammad b. Saʿīd b. Ḥamād al-Dallāṣ. Another name also used is Dalāṣīrī, a combination of his mother's and father's family names. According to Muḥammad Sayyid Kilānī in his introduction to al-Būṣīrī's *Diwan*, some of his biographies mentioned only shortened versions of his names while others added additions titles and attributes. The one thing that all historians agree on is that al-Būṣīrī's first name was Muhammad and that he was from the Banu Habnūn clan, which was a branch of the major North African Berber Sanhajī tribe.

<sup>40</sup> Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-muqaffā al-kabīr*, ed. Muhammad al-Yaʿlāwī, vol. 5 (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1991), 663

historian al-Maqrīzī, claimed that al-Būṣīrī 's family was from the Hammād Citadel in Morocco and was a part of the Banū Ḥabnūn tribe.<sup>41</sup>

Little is known about his childhood although scholars surmise that he received the usual education for children of his time; he would have attended a Qur'an school and memorized the entire Qur'an. Kīlānī asserts that al-Būṣīrī 's family must have been poor as he was forced to search for work from a young age. Sometime during his youth, he made his way to Cairo, where he pursued his studies. There he was exposed to the important Islamic sciences, Arabic language and linguistics, literature, history, and the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad. Even as a young man, al-Būṣīrī began to compose poetry, although not of a religious nature. For example, in the year 637/1240, at the age of 30, he composed a poem to petition the King Najm al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī when he failed to allot a generous endowment to al-Būṣīrī 's mosque.<sup>42</sup> An accomplished poet, he would often recite his poetry and give lessons at mosques in Cairo. A number of young poets studied under him, such as Athir al-Din Muḥammad Ibn Yusuf Abū Hayyān al-Andalusī (d. 725/1325), Abū al-Faṭḥ b. Sayyid al-Nās al-Ya'amarī (d. 734/1334), and 'Izz al-Dīn b. Jamā'ah (d. 735/1335).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī, *Dīwān al-Būṣīrī* (Cairo: Maktabat Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1973), 6-7

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 7.

## Al-Būṣīrī: The Misanthropic Poet

While he is best known for the deeply religious *Burdah* and the *Hamziyyah* poems, al-Būṣīrī's complete *diwan* is still extant and includes poetry that reveals the transition from a rough and terse youth to a mature man with a deeply spiritual disposition. Based on his poetry, one can map out his spiritual development as he records his experiences in life, interactions with people, complaints, and insights. Al-Būṣīrī's short and slender stature led to his being ridiculed by people and the source of their jokes. Early on in his career, he wrote a number satire poems that revealed his feelings about being ridiculed. He also had a hard time accepting criticism from other poets and even wrote a rebuttal of a poet, one Zayn al-Dīn b. al-Ra'ād who had insulted his work.<sup>44</sup> He was known to have a harsh tongue and took pleasure in composing *hija'*, or satire, poetry to insult his enemies. The historian al-Shehāb Mahmūd, a contemporary of al-Būṣīrī, wrote that he was a misanthrope who would attack others with his words and had a bad reputation in the courts of princes and viziers.<sup>45</sup>

Al-Būṣīrī lived in various locations in Cairo and in the Delta region, working primarily as a scribe and poet for the local rulers. At one time, a ruler offered him the position of a *muḥtasib*, or market inspector, in Cairo, but he rejected it. From

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 8; al-Maqrīzī., 664.

this job offer, we can ascertain that al-Būṣīrī must have had a decent knowledge of Islamic law as the job of market inspector requires a thorough knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and law. He lived for a long time in the Lower Egypt town of Bilbīs (from around 659-663 / 1261-1265) and worked there as a scribe and manuscript copyist. He seems to have also been skilled in accounting, although al-Maqrīzī claimed that he made a lot of mistakes and was not competent in this skill.<sup>46</sup> Al-Būṣīrī was interested in religious polemics and read the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and religious history of Judaism and Christianity primarily in order to defend Islam and the position of the Prophet Muḥammad. Some of his colleagues at work were Jewish and Christian and he was known to engage in fiery debates with them. He was interested in proving to them that the Gospels did not indicate that Jesus was a god and that it contained signs of the coming of the Prophet Muḥammad. He was also concerned with correcting what he held to be mistakes in the Hebrew Bible that told stories of the prophets and of their sins.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to being a poet, al-Būṣīrī was also a fine calligrapher and composer of prose, although nothing of his writing or calligraphy is extant. Coming from a humble background, it was said at one point, he made a living

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<sup>46</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, 663, 669.

<sup>47</sup> *Diwān al-Būṣīrī*, 8.

designing the engravings for tombstones.<sup>48</sup> In an attempt to make money, he also opened a Qur'an school for children in Cairo, but this venture failed and he was forced to close it.<sup>49</sup> As for his domestic life, his poems paint a hellish impression of living with his constantly pregnant wife and gaggle of children. He talks of his wife conspiring with his sister-in-law to get him to divorce her by hitting him and pulling out the hairs from his beard. He also complains in detail about old age, his inability to provide his children with enough food and the problem he faced when he could not provide his daughter with furnishings for her home for her marriage.<sup>50</sup>

He spent some time in the central Delta town of al-Maḥallah, where he was the poet and scribe for the mayor and received a monthly wage for composing panegyric poems of the ruler.<sup>51</sup> In al-Maḥallah, al-Būṣīrī clashed with the local Christian scribes, copyists, and poets and wrote verses complaining of his treatment at their hands.<sup>52</sup> Sometime during his stay in al-Maḥallah, it seems he broke his leg on a visit to the public baths and complained bitterly about his leg in a number of poems.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 16.

His relation with others was so bad that it reached the point where they wished he would die. Once, when he became very sick, a rumor quickly spread that he had died. Upon recovering from his sickness, he wrote a satirical poem to mock his enemies who had spread rumors of his death:

*I am not the one who would die before them*

*I will survive them and weep over their graves,*

*It's true that I had almost lost my life*

*but the generosity of this vizier gave me a new life.<sup>54</sup>*

Al-Būṣīrī didn't only have enemies among Jews and Christians, but also among his coreligionists, and even those closest to him, including his wife. He wrote satirical poems attacking anyone who criticized or insulted him, recording each event and rebuttal in a poem. According to al-Maqrīzī, al-Būṣīrī would befriend important members of the court, such as the vizier Zayn al-Dīn Ya'qūb b. al-Zubayr, and would support them no matter if they were just or oppressive rulers.<sup>55</sup> He supported the Mamlūk rulers and wrote zealous panegyric poems praising the Turkish Mamlūks that also affronted the local Arab population.<sup>56</sup> The only positive characteristic of al-Būṣīrī recorded by al-Maqrīzī was that he was generous.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, 662

<sup>56</sup> Kīlānī, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Al-Maqrīzī, 663.

## Al-Būṣīrī : The Enlightened Sufi

Although al-Būṣīrī 's modern biographer, Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī, doesn't seem to present a clear timeline of his spiritual development and mixes in discussions of al-Būṣīrī's satirical poetry and poor relations with people alongside his practice of Sufism, it seems that a distinction needs to be made.

Kīlānī posits that al-Būṣīrī

...as a man could not benefit from the teaching of al-Shādhilī, because in his morals and domestic life, we find things that don't correspond to Sufi ethics. In addition, he had a large family and was driven to compose poems in praise of the princes and viziers. In these poems [al-Būṣīrī] sometimes praised oppressive rulers who deserved to be rebuked and this has nothing to do with Sufism...As for al-Būṣīrī as a poet, he was greatly influenced by Sufism.<sup>58</sup>

It is not known when exactly al-Būṣīrī became a disciple of Abū al-°Abbās al-Mursī, but it can be posited that this happened later on in his life, at least some years before the death of al-Mursī in 686/1287. At least in the beginning of his practice of Sufism, al-Būṣīrī seemed to have struggled to follow Sufi principles and desired to live in isolation from people although he was prevented as he had a large family and was often unable to feed them due to his poverty:

*If I were on my own, I would have been a disciple  
in a Sufi hostel or a worshipper in a cave<sup>59</sup>*

His later poetry consists mainly of panegyric poems praising the Prophet Muḥammad and bears little similarity to that of his earlier satirical poems.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 14.

Perhaps after becoming a Sufi disciple, he underwent a spiritual awakening, which may be seen in the form the *Burdah* and the accompanying story of its composition, and refrained from his previous harsh and misanthropic nature. There seems to be conflicting information about al-Būṣīrī's life as seen in the biographies of non-Sufi historians and that of hagiographies written by Sufi scholars. Especially since Sufi hagiographies always describe him as an older man with a head of white hair, it can be presumed that while he might have been a misanthrope and generally unpleasant person during his youth, he must have changed his ways perhaps later on in his life as an older man.

The timeline of al-Būṣīrī's life is not clear, although it is known that as a grown man, he was drawn towards Sufism and joined the Shādhilī order under the guidance of his Shaykh Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Mursī in Alexandria, which at the time was a center for North African Sufis. At this time, the Shādhilī Sufi order was still in its infancy, having been founded by al-Mursī, who was the disciple of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī. Al-Būṣīrī was fond of al-Mursī and studied Sufi thought and practice under him; this background would have a strong influence on his later poetry.<sup>60</sup> He was faithful to his order and wrote poems full of praise of al-Shādhilī and al-Mursī and their spiritual attributes and ranking.<sup>61</sup> Al-Būṣīrī was the contemporary of Ibn al-Fāriḍ, the great Sufi poet and mystic. It was also

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<sup>60</sup> Kīlānī, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 19.

said that he was a friend of Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allah al-Sakandarī, the Sufi scholar and jurists who wrote the famous *Ḥikam*, or collection of Sufi aphorisms as well as a spiritual biography of al-Shādhilī and al-Mursī.

In Sufi hagiographies, al-Būṣīrī is painted as a saint-like figure who had reached the high spiritual station (*maqam*) of *al-ghawthiyyah al-kubrā*.<sup>62</sup> They claim that when he would walk down the street, the young and old would come out to greet him and kiss his hand. His body was said to have emitted a sweet scent and he wore fine clothes, had a head of snow-white hair, a humble smile, was aesthetic in his lifestyle, and had a respectable and virtuous character. Kīlānī disregards these attributes of al-Būṣīrī based on his readings of his poetry.<sup>63</sup> Kīlānī fails to see that it is quite possible that al-Būṣīrī was indeed an unpleasant person for much of his life until he discovered Sufism, mended his ways, and reached a high spiritual station that was respected and acknowledged by his fellow Sufis.

Despite this, Kīlānī divides al-Būṣīrī's praise poetry of the Prophet Muḥammad into two periods, the first from before al-Būṣīrī's Hajj and the second after his return from the Hajj. Kīlānī posits that al-Būṣīrī did not perform his

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<sup>62</sup> This title was also given to the great North African mystic, Abu Madyan and indicates a very high spiritual station of the holder.

<sup>63</sup> Kīlānī, 11.

pilgrimage until at least after 653/1255. Before going on Hajj, he composed a number of praise poems, especially ones that referred to his longing to visit the tomb of the Prophet.<sup>64</sup> Upon his arrival to Madīnah and Makkah, he composed poems revealing his joy of being at the tomb of his beloved and other places the Prophet had visited.<sup>65</sup>

Although buried in Alexandria, it is not known if al-Būṣīrī spent his last years in Cairo or Alexandria. While his official tomb is located in Alexandria, there previously has been some dispute about where al-Būṣīrī was buried. Al-Maqrīzī recorded that he died in the al-Manṣurī Hospital in Cairo.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, al-ʿAyyashī, a North African traveler who visited Cairo in 1073/1663, mentioned that he visited al-Būṣīrī's tomb in the area of the jurist Imam al-Shāfiʿī's tomb located in the southern cemetery of Cairo. One scholar has ascertained that the initial confusion about al-Būṣīrī's burial location is due to the fact that there was another scholar, Abū al-Qāssim Hibat Allah b. ʿAlī b. Masʿūd al-Ansārī al-Khazrājī al-Munastīrī, also known as al-Būṣīrī, who died a century before our al-Būṣīrī's death in 598/1202. The older al-Būṣīrī was indeed buried at the foot of al-

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>66</sup> al-Maqrīzī, 663.

Muqattam hills, where historians presumably thought the younger poet Al-Būṣīrī was buried.<sup>67</sup>

### The Legend of the *Burdah*

All of al-Būṣīrī's biographers discuss the legend of how the *Burdah* was composed, the first being recorded by the historian Muḥammad b. Shākir b. Ahmad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Kutubī (d. 764/1363) in *Fawāt al-wafayāt*. Al-Kutubī narrates the story from al-Būṣīrī as follows:

I had composed a number of praise poems for the Prophet, including one that was suggested to me by my friend Zayn al-Dīn Yʿaqūb b. al-Zubayr. Some time after that, I was stricken by *fālij*,<sup>68</sup> an illness that paralyzed half of my body. I thought that I would compose this poem, and so I made supplications to the Prophet Muḥammad to intercede for me and cure me. I repeatedly sang the poem, wept, prayed, and asked for intercession. Then I slept and in my dream, I saw the Prophet. He wiped my face with his blessed hands and covered me in his cloak (*burdah*). Then I woke up and found I was able to walk; so I got up and left my house. I had told no one about what had happened.

I encountered a Sufi (*faqīr*) on my way and he said to me: "I want you to give me the poem in which you praise the Prophet."

I said: "Which one?"

So he said: "The one that you composed during your sickness."

Then he recited the first verse and said: "I swear by God that I heard it in a dream last night being sung in the presence of the

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<sup>67</sup> Khurshid Rizvi, "The Tomb of Al-Busiri," *Hamdard Islamicus* 4, no. 1 (1981), 73

<sup>68</sup> A form of paralysis, translated by S. Stetkvych as hemiplegia, see "From Text to Talisman," 151.

Prophet Muḥammad. I saw the Prophet was pleased with it and covered the person who sang it with his cloak.”

So I recited the poem to him and he memorized it and related his vision to others.<sup>69</sup>

While his earlier biographers all professed their belief in the story of the composition of the *Burdah*, his later biographers, such as Kīlānī along with other more puritan Muslim scholars, strongly refute the story. It is not my place here as a scholar to judge the authenticity of al-Būṣīrī’s story, although I would posit that one must be sensitive in approaching hagiographies and not to take them at their face value. While anyone is free to label the legend a “fabrication of the imagination” as does Kīlānī, I would hesitate to hasten judgment on the narrative.<sup>70</sup> Without venturing into the validity of the story, one can learn a lot from the narrative in terms of the importance that many Muslims place on it, their love for the Prophet Muhammad and the strong belief in its healing and talismanic powers.

Soon after its composition, news of healing qualities of the poem quickly spread. The follow narrative tells how miraculous powers of the *Burdah* quickly spread,

The story reached Bahā<sup>3</sup> al-Dīn b. Ḥannā, who sent for me and took the poem and swore that out of reverence for the poem, he would

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<sup>69</sup> Muhammad b. Shakir b. Ahmad b. Abd al-Rahman al-Kutubi, *Fawāt al-wafayāt*, Vol. 2., ed. Sheikh Ali Muhammad Mu'waḍ, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2000, 346-7.

<sup>70</sup> *Diwan al-Busiri*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī, 28.

only listen to it while standing bareheaded. He and his family loved to listen to it.

Then after that, he heard that Sa<sup>c</sup>d al-Dīn al-Fāriqī was afflicted with an eye disease that left him nearly fully blind.

He saw someone in a dream tell him: “Go to your friend and take the *Burdah* and put it on your eyes and with the permission of God, you will be cured. So he went to his friend and related his dream to him.

His friend said: “I don’t know anything about relics of the Prophet’s *Burdah*.”

Then he sat in contemplation for one hour and then said: “Perhaps the *Burdah* refers to al-Būṣīrī’s poem *al-Burdah*. Yāqūt,<sup>71</sup> go open the trunk that contains the relics and take out al-Būṣīrī’s poem.”

So he brought it and Sa<sup>c</sup>d al-Dīn took it, put it on his eyes and was cured. After that it was called the *Burdah* – and God knows.<sup>72</sup>

While originally named “*Al-kawākib al-durrīyyah fī madḥ khayr al-barīyyah*,” or “The Celestial Stars in Praise of the Best of Creation,” news of its healing qualities quickly spread and it acquired several names, the most popular including the *Burdah*, or the cloak of the Prophet, and the *Barā’ah*, the healer.

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<sup>71</sup> Presumably the name of the servant of Sa<sup>c</sup>d al-Dīn al-Fāriqī.

<sup>72</sup> Ibn Shākir al-Kutubi, *Fawat al-wafayāt*, Vol. 2, ed. Sheikh Ali Muhammad Mu'wad, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 2000, 346-7.

## Historical and Literary Background

Al-Būṣīrī lived during the height of the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt in the thirteenth century (seventh century AH), a time of heightened religious fervor that witnessed the ever-growing popularity and influence of Sufism.<sup>73</sup> The Mamluk-era in Egypt and Syria lasted from the middle of the seventh century A.H. / thirteenth century until 922 / 1551. The Mamluk military elite were all foreign-born slaves whose primary language was Turkish. Although they remained somewhat aloof from society, the Mamluks, married local women and participated in religious and cultural activities and many were also educated in the Islamic sciences as well as Sufism.<sup>74</sup> During this time, the Mamlūk rulers were strong supporters of the Sufis and would flock to them to receive blessings.<sup>75</sup> During this period, under the generous patronage of the Mamluks, many institutions centered around Sufi orders were established and often served parallel purposes to services offered in madrasahs.<sup>76</sup>

The Mamlūks were involved in fighting the Crusaders led by Louis IX who were invading Muslim territories and al-Būṣīrī witnessed the victory of the

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<sup>73</sup> Fawzī Muḥammad Amīn, *Al-Muġtamʿa al-Misrī fi adab al-ʿasr al-Mamlūki al-awal* (Cairo: Dar al-Maʿārif, 1982), 163.

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Berkey, "Silver Threads among the Coal': A Well-Educated Mamluk of the Ninth/Fifteen Century," *Studia Islamica* (1991), 109-10.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>76</sup> Th. Emil Homerin, "Sufis and Their Detractors in Mamluk Egypt: A Survey of Protagonists and Institutional Settings," in *Islamic Mysticism Contested*, ed. Frederick De Jon and Bernd Radtke, *Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), 226.

Muslim army in the famous battle of al-Manṣūrah. In addition to being faced with invading Mongol and French armies, famine and infestation were continual problems,<sup>77</sup> perhaps it was the instability that led to such fervent piety. A sense of urgency was often present and differing factions fought to gain control and claim legitimacy. Sufism was generally accepted into mainstream Islam although certain groups were sometimes singled out by scholars and polemical works written on their controversial beliefs and practices.<sup>78</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, many religious and secular leaders in power lent their support to Sufis seeking mystical experiences, which would bring them closer to God.<sup>79</sup>

While some skeptical scholars, such as Kīlānī, criticize this era for being a time of superstition and ignorance, others would characterize it as a time of spiritual awareness and widespread piety. Kīlānī mentions that many Sufis at this time would report having seen the Prophet in their dreams and would have conversations with him.<sup>80</sup> Well known Sufi leaders spread their teachings in Egypt during the Mamlūk period include Abū al-Hasan al-Shādhilī, Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Mursī, Sayyid Ibrahīm al-Disūqī (d. 676/1277), and Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawī (d. 675/1276). In the Levant, mystics such as Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 637/1240),

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> *Diwan Al-Busiri*, 27.

ʿAfīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690-1291), and Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī created a new Sufi paradigm based on the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or the unity of being, and dedicated their lives and teachings to purification of their hearts and achieving union with God.<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, al-Būṣīrī’s era was a time of a flourishing culture, poets competed with each other to compose more complex and linguistically stunning poems and the genre of *madḥ*, or panegyric poems, because they were very popular. Some of the more well-known poets include al-Khaymī and Ibn Wafā.<sup>82</sup> Al-Būṣīrī was the contemporary of the great Sufi poet, Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 732), whose poetry he used at times as a model for his own. Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s poetry received renown during his lifetime and his mystical poetry had great influence on later Arabic poetry and also propagated doctrines set forth by Ibn al-ʿArabī.<sup>83</sup>

### **Literary Aspects of the *Burdah***

The *Burdah* has had considerable influence in the realm of Arabic literature, as one scholar put it, “its [**The *Burdah*’s**] fame spread over the East and West and poets wrote expansions based on it and scholars wrote many commentaries on

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<sup>81</sup> Homerin, 228.

<sup>82</sup> Amīn, 165.

<sup>83</sup> Homerin, 228.

it.”<sup>84</sup> Essentially, the *Burdah* does more than just express the poet’s love for the Prophet Muḥammad; in fact Sufis, such as the renowned Yemeni Hadramawt scholar Ḥabīb ʿAlī al-Jifrī, claims that it can “touch peoples’ hearts and spirits...and every time I hear it, I find my heart is moved and many other people also experience this.”<sup>85</sup> The poem is unique because according to al-Jifri, it represents the height of Arabic poetry, wherein one can also find insightful meanings and refined language that can be repeated without ever growing tiresome.<sup>86</sup>

The structure of the *Burdah* is traditional in nature, following the pattern established by classical Arab poets. It can fit in a number of poetic genres, primarily *madīh*, or panegyric poetry, as well as Sufi poetry. The first verses (1-7) begin with themes of *nasīb*, in which al-Būṣīrī criticizes himself for his intense passion towards the object of his love and then (8-16) he points out his mistakes that have pushed him to blatantly ignore advice given to him,

*What’s wrong with your eyes?  
You say, “Stop!” But that only increases their painful downpour;*

*Or your heart? You say, “Wake up!”*

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<sup>84</sup> Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Munʿim Khafājī, *Al-Adab fī al-turāth al-Ṣufī* (Cairo: Maktabat Gharīb, 1980), 255.

<sup>85</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *Al-ʿUmdah fī sharḥ al-Burdah*, ed. Bassam Muhammad Barud (Dubai, UAE: Dar al-Faqih, 2003), 13.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

*But it wanders even further astray in distraction! (3)*

He then (17-25) goes on to lay out ways in which one can engage in a struggle with one's lower self but reverts (26-28) to self-blame in humble recognition that he cannot heed his own advice,

*Divert the self's desires and avoid empowering it-  
Whenever desire takes charge, it either destroys or defiles (19)*

*I counsel you to good, but all the while ignore it myself.  
I haven't been upright, so how dare I tell you, "Be upright (27)."*

He then (29-33) compares his sinful self with that of the ideal figure of the Prophet Muḥammad until he delves into an all out *madīḥ* of the Prophet (36-58) and his attributes and qualities, and then goes on to narrate the biography of the Prophet's life, starting with his miraculous birth (60-74),<sup>87</sup>

*I have neglected the path of the one who brought black nights  
To life by praying, until even his feet swelled with distress (29).*

*His form and character surpassed even the previous prophets,  
And none have approached him in knowledge or nobility (38).*

*Exquisite as a lily, illustrious as a full moon,  
Magnanimous as the ocean, persistent as time (55).*

*His birth revealed the purity of his elemental nature-  
O pure form first to last! (59)*

*Jinn cried out from afar, and the flare of his birth lit up the darkened land.  
The Truth became plain as day in word and meaning (65).*

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<sup>87</sup> Sperl, *Qasida Poetry*, 471.

What follows is then a poetic description (73-87) of the Prophet's *mu<sup>c</sup>ajizāt*, or miracles, that establish his prophethood and authority. Then al-Būṣīrī narrates incidents of the Prophet protecting others in time of need and how he hopes to be watched over by him (75-81),

*God's protection was all he needed: no excess armor,  
Strategic lookout towers, or powerful fortresses! (79)*

*If ever the people of my time intended to mistreat me,  
I simply took refuge in his harbor, and no harm came (80).*

Up until now, we see al-Būṣīrī engaged in the themes of hardship and redemption through the Prophet with proofs of the Prophet's miraculous powers and ability to protect and heal his followers. Thereafter al-Būṣīrī expresses his faith in the Qur'an (88-104), first by iterating the benefits of reading it and the healing powers of the scripture,

*They are full of clear wisdom without double meanings  
For anyone torn by dissension, and this proof needs no judge (94).*

*The reciter's eyes were soothed by it, so I said to him,  
"You have grasped the rope of God - now hold on tight" (99)*

*If you recite it when the Fire's flames overwhelm you,  
Its cool springs of flowing water will put them out (100).*

Verses 105-117 describe the blessings spread to Muslims by means of their love of the Prophet and then go on to recount the story of his *mi<sup>c</sup>rāj*, or ascension to the Heavens, and stories of the battles (117-139) fought by the

Prophet and his victories and the rewards bestowed upon those who participate in defending Islam,<sup>88</sup>

*O you who are the greatest sign for the discerning,  
The most blessed gift of those desiring gain! (106)*

*You spent the night ascending until you reached the station of "two bows' length  
or nearer,"  
A point of intimacy never before realized nor even dreamed of (108).*

*He continued to encounter them in every field of battle,  
Until, due to piercing spears, they resembled flesh on skewers (119).*

*Each answering God's call expecting divine requital,  
Bravely engaged in battle with weapons uprooting rejection of Reality (124).*

*You will never see a true ally of his unless he be victorious,  
Nor a true enemy of his other than dejected and defeated (136).*

*He placed his community in the refuge of his Way,  
Just as a great lion retreats with its cubs to the safety of its lair (137).*

At the end of the poem (140-44), al-Būṣīrī once again confesses his sins of writing poetry in the service of rulers and wasted in life in this occupation,

*I have served him in this poetic praise hoping to redeem  
The errors of a life misspent in courtly verse and patronage (140).*

*Since both have fettered me with a yoke that portends a bad end,  
As if I were a sacrificial lamb, singled out for slaughter (141).*

The poem ends in a culmination of the poet requesting intercession and protection from the Prophet (144-158) and closes with prayers upon the Prophet,

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 472.

*Since I have focused all my thoughts on praising him alone,  
He has proved the best of those committed to my ultimate salvation (149).*

*And let a cloud of Your incessant prayers  
Rain down gently on the Prophet and pour forth forever (159).*

Composed in the ornamental *badī* school of poetry that depends on “a remarkable amalgam of lexical and conceptual leitmotifs,”<sup>89</sup> the *Burdah* follows the classic *qasida* pattern. In this form, the poet begins by emphasizing his personal failings and lack of meaning in his life, then goes on to praise the Prophet and his perfect attributes and defeat of his enemies, finally ending with the redemption of the poet. Several scholars have pointed out that the *Burdah* bears a resemblance to both Sufi and classical poetry, for example that of al-Mutannabī, one of whose poems also shares the same poetical meter of *basīṭ* and the rhyming letter of *mīm*.<sup>90</sup> In addition, Suzanne Stetkvych and Zakī Mubārak have both noted the similarity between the beginning of the *Burdah* and a Sufi *ghazal* by the ‘Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235). They suggest that the beginning of the *Burdah* is a *mu‘āraḍah*<sup>91</sup> of Ibn al-Fāriḍ’s poem although there is little other parallel and they fall under two different poetic genres.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Sperl, *Qasida Poetry*, 473.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 474.

<sup>91</sup> A contrafaction, imitating the rhyme and meter

<sup>92</sup> Suzanne Stetkvych, “From Text to Talisman,” 9-10; Zakī Mubārak, *al-Madāʿih al-nabawīyah*, 183-184.

### CHAPTER THREE SUFİ COMMENTARIES OF THE *BURDAH*

While literally hundreds of translations and commentaries have appeared throughout the Muslim world, I have only been able to examine a number of Arabic-language versions composed by both Arabs and non-Arabs, of which very little has been written about in English. While I have been able to locate 12 printed copies of Arabic commentaries in Egypt as well as several in manuscript form, many more exist in both printed and manuscript form in libraries around the world. Apart from questionable commentaries available on the Internet in English and Arabic, reference to several commentaries in the previously-mentioned articles of Suzanne Stetkvych,<sup>93</sup> and quotations from commentaries in the late nineteenth-century French translation of the *Burdah* by Rene Basset,<sup>94</sup> to my knowledge, no studies dedicated to this important genre of Sufi literature has been published. From the commentaries available to me, I have chosen to explore in detail the ones that appear to have been the most popular in their time by prominent scholars or those that present substantial commentary and analysis in their work. I have found that some

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<sup>93</sup> Stetkvych, "From Text to Talisman: Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-*Burdah* (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode.", Stetkvych, "From Sirah to Qasidah: Poetics and Polemics in Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-*Burdah* (Mantle Ode).

<sup>94</sup> Sharaf ad-Din Muhammad ibn Sa'id al-Busiri, *La Borda Du Cheikh El Bousiri: Poeme En L'honneur De Mohammed*, trans. Rene Basset (Paris: E. Leroux, 1894).

commentaries are merely glorified glossaries and these works had little to add to my research, although they would be of interest to someone conducting research in Arabic language and linguistics.

An overview of the genre of Sufi commentaries on the *Burdah* is necessary; and I shall briefly discuss some of the most prominent commentaries and their main methods used in approaching the *Burdah*. In commentaries of the *Burdah*, Sufi scholars expound upon the poem's literary qualities, analyze its grammatical structure, highlight its talismanic properties, identify its origins in the Qur'an and Hadith and interpret its mystical connotations. It can be posited that the *Burdah* is a poetical expression of Islamic doctrine, or *ʿaqīdah*. Ensclosed within the elegant verses are a dense presentation of the tenants and beliefs of Islam and didactic Sufi metaphors. Thus, when not engaged with grammatical analysis, the commentators spend their time unraveling the metaphorical passages to expound upon the religious and spiritual themes set forth in the poem in a scholarly prose form. As little is known about these commentaries in Western scholarship, I have chosen to present background information and a brief overview of the approach of each commentary. I have chosen highlighted eight commentaries, either those written by more well-known scholars or commentaries by lesser-known authors that offer substantial analysis .

The earliest commentary I could locate was a manuscript written in Maghrebi script and composed by Muḥammad b. ʿAbdullah al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392). Al-Zarkashī was a Mamluk-era Shafiʿī scholar of fiqh, tafsīr, and other Islamic sciences from Cairo and studied with the likes of Imād al-Dīn Ibn Kathīr in Syria and other leading scholars of his time.<sup>95</sup> He lived only two generations after al-Būṣīrī and traces his *silsilah*, or chain of tradition, for the *Burdah* back to his teacher, ʿIzz al-Shaykh Nūr al-Dīn al-Hāshimī, who took the *Burdah* from Shaykh ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Mughultay. Al-Zarkashī’s *Sharḥ al-Burdah* primarily comprises a linguistic analysis of each word and etymology and sometimes uses examples from poetry for evidence. He was obviously quite enamored by the poem, as illustrated in the introduction,

Reciting [the *Burdah*] can prevent disasters, if people only knew about value of the poem, then they would write it on their pupils of their eyes with gold ink.<sup>96</sup>

In his commentary, Al-Zarkashī explains only the difficult, or *gharīb*, words and leaves out words that he viewed as obvious. Then he discusses the general meaning and at the end, he always asks a number of philosophical questions related to the verses and proposes a number of answers.<sup>97</sup> By writing his commentary, al-Zarkashī seems to have intended on replicating al-Būṣīrī’s

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<sup>95</sup> Andrew Rippin, "Al-Zarkashī," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2008).

<sup>96</sup> Muhammad b. Behader b. ʿAbdullah al-Zarkashī, *Sharḥ al-Burdah*, vol. Maghāribah, MS. 2079 (Cairo: Al-Azhar Library), 3.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

spiritual experience by producing a work that simplified the *Burdah* and made it more accessible to readers,

When I saw the eloquence of the *Burdah*, I wanted to explain it with a commentary that would open people's eyes. This commentary includes [references] to many [Islamic] sciences; and through this commentary, as a sinful servant of God, I seek intercession from the Prophet, *al-mamdūh* [the praised one], the most noble of creation...to wipe away my sins.<sup>98</sup>

Kamāl al-Dīn Husayn Khorezmi<sup>99</sup> (d. 839/1435-36) was a noted Central Asian mystic of the Kubrawiyyah Sufi order,<sup>100</sup> Muslim scholar, and poet who was killed by the Uzbek authorities due to some of his controversial beliefs set forth in his poetry.<sup>101</sup> Husayn Khorezmi wrote two commentaries on the *Burdah*, the first an Arabic version entitled *Raḥat al-Arwāḥ* that is no longer extant and a second one entitled *Kashf al-Hudā* written for the Uzbek Turkic conquerors of Khorezm in the local dialect. This is the only complete commentary that has thus far been translated into English. Unlike the other commentaries I have examined, Husayn Khorezmi avoids linguistic and grammatical analysis and aims to distill the Sufi symbolism in the *Burdah*. The commentary is dedicated to the Uzbek rulers and starts out with the Arabic original of each verse with a Turkic

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> In Arabic transliteration, his name is spelled Khuwārizmī.

<sup>100</sup> Founded by Najm al-Dīn Kubrā in the early seventh / thirteenth century primarily in Central Asia.

<sup>101</sup> In his PhD dissertation, Devin A. DeWeese included a complete translation of the commentary into English, "The Kashf Al-Huda of Kamal Ad-Din Husayn Khorezmi: A Fifteenth-Century Sufi Commentary of the Qasidat Al-Burdah in Khorezmian Turkic" (University of Indiana, PhD dissertation, 1985)

translation and subsequently a narrative that expounds upon the meaning of the verse or ruminations upon the mystical connotations hidden within the lines. In *Kashf al-Hudā*, he also mentions his other commentary, *Raḥat al-Arwāḥ* and explains that it includes "wondrous verifications and marvelous analyses, embellished allusions and precious proofs."<sup>102</sup> Interestingly enough, Husayn Khorezmi considers the *Burdah* to have the ability to aid both one's spiritual and physical being. In the introduction to his commentary, he appeals to the ruler for whom he produced the commentary, "My hope is that this 'trifling merchandise of the deal soul of Egypt' will be marked by the sign of acceptance in the august presence of the ruler."<sup>103</sup> In addition to hoping for his own redemption, he uses his commentary to instruct the ruler on how he can also redeem himself through recitation of the poem,

I also instruct this monarch of sublime honor, this king of kings and royal protector, so that if in times of weighty concerns he would read this ode, which blesses creation, with sincerity and faithfulness, then God shall produce his desires, bestow salvation from the calamities of the world, and reserve for him a great station in the next world.<sup>104</sup>

Zakariyya al-Anṣārī (d. 926/1520) was a scholar from the province of Sharḡiyyah in Lower Egypt who spent most of his life in Cairo. He studied the Islamic sciences, particularly Islamic jurisprudence, under Ibn Ḥajar al-<sup>c</sup>Asqalānī,

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>103</sup> DeWeese.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 288.

a leading jurist of his time who also wrote a commentary on the *Burdah*. Al-Anṣārī was involved with several Sufi orders, wrote several works on Sufi thought, and was believed to have reached a high spiritual station. Not only was al-Anṣārī an outstanding teacher and author, but he was also the chief Shafiʿī judge (*Qādī Quḍāt al-Shāfiʿiyyah*) under the Mamluk prince Qaytbay and was also honored with the titles of *shaykh al-Islam* and the *mujaddid*, or reformer, of the ninth/ fifteenth century.<sup>105</sup> His commentary entitled *Al-Zubdah al-rāʾiqah fi sharḥ al-Burdah al-fāʾiqah* is quite simple in its presentation. Through his commentary, he offers interpretations for all of the difficult words and analyzes al-Būṣīrī's rhetorical style. Apart from briefly narrating the story of how al-Būṣīrī came to compose the *Burdah*, he doesn't mention any of the poem's spiritual benefits or delve into the general significance of each verse.<sup>106</sup>

Another prominent commentary, *Rāḥat al-arwāḥ*,<sup>107</sup> was composed by the Ottoman Turkish Hanafi judge and jurist Muḥammad b. Muṣṭafā Muḥyī al-Dīn b. Muṣṭalīḥ al-Dīn al-Qawjawī al-Ḥanafī al-Rūmi, who is better known as Shaykh

<sup>105</sup> E. Geoffroy, "Zakariyyā ʿAl-Anṣārī, Abū Yaḥyā B. Muḥammad B. Zakariyyā, Zayn Al-Dīn Al-Sunaykī," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2008).

<sup>106</sup> Zakariyya al-Anṣārī, *Al-Zubdah al-rāʾiqah fi sharḥ al-Burdah al-fāʾiqah*, Ms. Mejamīʿa 237 (Cairo: Al-Azhar Library).

<sup>107</sup> Shaykh Zadeh's commentary has the same title as that of Husayn Khorezmi's lost Arabic commentary. Without having access to Husayn Khorezmi's commentary, it is impossible to know the content, but it can be conjectured that as they were both ethnic Turks, that perhaps Shaykh Zadeh was inspired by that of Husayn Khorezmi.

Zadeh (d. 951/1544).<sup>108</sup> Shaykh Zadeh was a prominent Hanafi scholar of his time who taught in the madrasah of Khawaja Khayr al-Dīn in Istanbul. He then chose to go into spiritual retreat (*‘uzlah*) and left his teaching post. Legend goes that he only received a meager pension of 15 Dirhams and he considered it to be too much for himself. He would say, “I only need 10 Dirhams for myself and my household and I will dedicate myself to gaining knowledge and engaging in worship.”<sup>109</sup> He was very humble and loved to be in the company of righteous people. He would even buy his own household supplies in the market despite the fact that he had servants. He would give lessons on *tafsir* in his mosque and many locals would gather to hear him speak and seek blessings and benefits from him. In symbolic language similar to that of Ibn Arabi (683/1240), Shaykh Zadeh used to say,

If I ever had trouble understanding the meaning of a Qur’anic verse, I would turn to God and my chest would expand and light will fill it from an unknown source. The light would appear in front of me and it would guide me to the tablet of destiny (al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz). I would then be able to extract the meaning of the certain Qur’anic verse from the tablet.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Complete bibliographical information taken from following sources: al-Ḥanbalī, Abī al-Ḥasanāt Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kanūnī al-Hindi, *Kitāb al-fawā’id al-bahīyyah fī tarājīm al-Ḥanifiyyah* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘ādah, 1906), 201; Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī al-Shawkānī, *Al-Badr al-ṭalī‘ bi-maḥāsīn man ba‘da al-qarn al-sābi‘*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘ādah, 1929); Muḥammad Amīn ibn Faḍl Allah Muḥibbī, *Khulaṣat al-athar*, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar Ṣadr, unknown), 9-11; Najm al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazī, *Al-Kawākib al-sā‘ira bi-a‘yān al-mā‘at al-‘āshirah*, ed. Khalīl al-Manṣūr, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1997).

<sup>109</sup> Al-Hindi, 201.

<sup>110</sup> Muḥibbī, 11.

In addition, Shaykh Zadeh was honored with the position of Mufti. It was narrated that when he became a prominent judge, he would have visions of the Prophet Muḥammad once a week. Out of his desire to have more frequent visions of the Prophet, he left his judgeship. But after having dedicated all of his time to spiritual retreat, he stopped having visions of the Prophet. So he returned to his former position and once again his visions of the Prophet resumed. So the next time he saw the Prophet in a vision, he said to the Prophet, “O Prophet of God, I left my judgeship in order to get closer to you, but it didn’t happen like I had had hoped.” The Prophet said to him, “ Between you and me, it is more suitable for you to be a judge than to leave your position. As a judge, you occupy your time with improving yourself as well as my *Ummah*, but if you leave your job, you will only be able to occupy yourself with improving yourself. Whenever you work towards improving more than just yourself, then you will be able to draw nearer to me.”<sup>111</sup> Considering his preoccupation with searching for new ways to increase his visions of the Prophet, it is not surprising that Shaykh Zadeh wrote a commentary of the *Burdah*, which is believed by many to have the ability to produce visions of the Prophet for those who recite it,

The pen cannot even record its wonders, and its benefits make the tongue aware of its affairs...with this commentary, one can only attempt to uncover its issues and to clarify its enigmas...with an interpretation, one can uncover its secretes and raise the veils off it...I saw that there were pure souls who wanted to understand its [the *Burdah*] benefits, so I found some wonderful opinions that

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<sup>111</sup> Muḥibbī.

helped explain its usage. And I saw the most amazing thing that one could desire, and I ascended to it...so I commenced to compose a commentary that would simplify [the *Burdah*], solve its enigmas, and analyze its meanings.<sup>112</sup>

Shaykh Zadeh wrote a number of important works, including a gloss on Bayḍawī's *Tafsir*, commentaries on *al-Wiqāyah fī al-fiqh*, *al-Farā'id al-serājiyyah*, and *Sharḥ miftāḥ al-<sup>c</sup>ulūm* (written by al-Sakkākī). While most of his main works deal with Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence, he also wrote on topics on mysticism, including his commentary on the *Burdah*.<sup>113</sup>

Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/3 or 1567) was left an orphan at a young age and was raised by two notable Sufis, Shams al-Dīn b. Abi al-Ḥamā'il (d. 932/1526), a noted mystic, and Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Shanāwī. At Ṭanṭa and Al-Azhar mosques, al-Haytamī studied under the aforementioned Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī and his *isnad* goes back to other prominent scholars and commentators of the *Burdah*, such as Ibn Ḥajar al-<sup>c</sup>Asqalānī and of al-Suyūfī.<sup>114</sup> Al-Haytamī was a jurist and teacher and most of his writings reflect his main occupation although his Sufi influences come to light in his two commentaries of the al-Būṣīrī's poetry,

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<sup>112</sup> Zadeh, *Rāḥat al-arwāḥ*, 383.

<sup>113</sup> Muḥibbī, 11.

<sup>114</sup> C. van Arendonk, "Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, Abu 'l-<sup>c</sup>Abbās Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. <sup>c</sup>Alī b. Ḥadjar, Shihāb al-Dīn, Al-Haytamī (Not Al-Haythamī) Al-Sa<sup>c</sup>dī," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2008).

one entitled *al-ʿUmdah fī sharḥ fl-Burdah*,<sup>115</sup> and the other, *Sharḥ al-Hamziyyah*. *Al-ʿUmdah* is a simple commentary wherein al-Haytamī primarily focuses on the meaning of each word in a verse without tying them in together to explain the entire verse as a whole. At times, al-Haytamī does delve into Sufi terminology and concepts that aid the reader contextualize the mystical connotations of the *Burdah*. Seeing as he was the student of al-Anṣārī, there is a striking resemblance between the methodologies of both scholars, although al-Haytamī seems to derive his evidence from different sources than those of al-Anṣārī, perhaps in an effort to avoid blindly imitating his predecessor.

Probably the single most famous and accessible commentary on the *Burdah* is *Ḥāshīyat al-Burdah* by the late Ottoman/Khedivian-era Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad al-Bājūrī (d. 1276/1860).<sup>116</sup> Al-Bājūrī was born the village of Bājūr, which is northwest of Cairo in the Lower Delta of Egypt. A very respectable Shāfiʿī scholar of his time, his father helped him to memorize the Qurʾan from a young age and sent him to study at Al-Azhar in 1212/1797. He stayed in Cairo until the invasion of the French the next year, when he took refuge in Giza and stayed there for some time. He

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<sup>115</sup> Al-Haytamī. *Al-ʿumdaḥ fī sharḥ al-Burdah*, ed. Bassam Muhammad Barud, Dubai, UAE: Dar al-Faqih, 2003.

<sup>116</sup> Th. W. Juynboll, "Bādj urī (or Baydj urī), Ibrāhīm b. Muḥammad " in *Encyclopedia of Islam*(2008).

occupied himself with his studies and once he mastered the Islamic sciences, he then dedicated himself to teaching and writing. It was said that the Qur'an was always on his tongue. Al-Bājūrī became the Shaykh of Al-Ahzar in 1263/1846, and after his appointment, he continued to play an important role as a religious leader. He was primarily a theologian although his writings also include a number of commentaries on Sufi poetry, such as the *Burdah*. As was the norm of the scholarly elite of his time, al-Bājūrī was a Sufi, "*Tasawwuf* was accepted as an essential part of the Islamic religion by the 'ulama of this Ummah. The proof of this is all the famous scholars of Shari'a sciences who had the higher education of *Tasawwuf*, among them... Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī."<sup>117</sup>

Al-Bājūrī's work is one of the most important extant commentaries, and in the past, scholars at Al-Azhar would hold lessons on Thursday and Friday during which they would expounded on his book. Students from all backgrounds would attend the special classes held on the *Hāshīyah* outside of their regular class schedule. It was so popular, in fact, that Zaki Mubārak complained that the only source for teaching Islamic history in al-Azhar during his lifetime was the *Burdah* and its commentaries.<sup>118</sup> It can

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<sup>117</sup> Shaykh Nuh Keller, *The Place of Tasawwuf in Traditional Islam*, (accessed Mar. 17, 2008, ); available from [http://www.suhba.org/tariqa/intro\\_more\\_v2.html#more](http://www.suhba.org/tariqa/intro_more_v2.html#more).

<sup>118</sup> Mubārak, 101.

be claimed that the *Ḥāshīyah* is perhaps the most popular of all commentaries written on the *Burdah*, it has found its way to places as far a field as Indonesia and Morocco. In fact, one scholar describes the popularity of the commentary in Indonesia. He mentions that the *Ḥāshīyah* is widely available in Indonesia in a cheap booklet form and that it is the main source for understanding the *Burdah* and its miraculous properties among Indonesian scholars and lay people.<sup>119</sup>

While al-Bājūrī's commentary does contain many similarities to that of earlier commentaries in terms of his methodological approach and analysis of each individual verse, he adds a new component that is found among a number of 19<sup>th</sup> century Sufi scholars. In addition to interpreting the mystical and metaphorical meanings in the poem and extracting its grammatical structure, he also highlights the talismanic merits of certain verses. This trend seems to be common in other commentaries of the *Burdah* written by his contemporaries, such as Ahmad al-Kharṣūṭī.<sup>120</sup>

Although there are records of older commentaries that cover these properties, I have been unable to obtain any in Egypt.<sup>121</sup> In effect, al-Bājūrī

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<sup>119</sup> Julian Millie, "Addendum to Drews: The Burda of Al-Busiri and the Miracles of Abdulqadir Al-Jaelani in West Java," *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land- en Volkenkunde* 161, no. 1 (2005), 110.

<sup>120</sup> 'Amr b. Aḥmad al-Kharṣūṭī, *Asīdat al-shuhda: sharḥ Qasīdat al-Burdah* (Cairo: Dar al-Jawami' al-Kalem, 2006).

<sup>121</sup> In "From Text to Talisman," p. 47, Suzanne Stetkvych mentions a 12th/18th-century

renders the *Burdah* into what I propose to call a literary talisman. For modern-day religious scholars, many of the talismanic properties that are suggested by al-Bājūrī would be considered to be based on superstition. But to judge by the practice of the shaykh of Al-Azhar and an extremely prominent and reputable scholar of his time, the use of literary and other types of talismans must have been widespread.

Another well-known nineteenth century commentary is entitled *Shifāʾ al-qalb al-jarīh bi-sharḥ Burdat al-madih*<sup>122</sup> and was composed by Muḥammad al-Ṭāher b. ʿAshūr al-Tūnsī (d. 1284/1868). Ibn ʿAshūr was from a wealthy family in Tunisia and was a highly respected teacher of Maliki fiqh, Hadith, grammar, rhetoric (balāghah) and other Islamic sciences at Zaytunah Mosque in Tunis. In *Shifāʾ al-qalb al-jarīh bi-sharḥ Burdat al-madih*, Ibn ʿAshūr was heavily influenced by the Sufi scholar Shams al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Marzūq al-Tilimsānī, known as Ibn Marzūq (781/1379), who wrote *Iḍḥḥār ṣidq al-mawaddah fī sharḥ al-Burdah*. As mentioned before, most commentators would engage in

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manuscript in Berlin that records the special properties of *Burdah* verses, reportedly composed by Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām (d. 660/1262?): “Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām, Qāla al-Shaykh Ibn ʿAbd al-Salām fī Khawāṣ al-Kawākib al-Durriyyah fī Madḥ Khayr al-Bariyyah lil-Shaykh al-Buṣīrī. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Petermann II 105, folios 243-254a. Ahlwardt identifies the author as ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ibn ʿAbd al-Salām d. 660/1262 and dates the ms. to ca. 1150/1737.”

<sup>122</sup> Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ṭāher b. ʿAshūr al-Tūnsī, *Shifāʾ al-qalb al-jarīh bi-sharḥ Burdat al-madih*, ed. Muhammad ʿAwād ʿAwād (Damascus: Dar al-Taḳwa, 2006).

*naql*, or lifting texts from older texts<sup>123</sup> and including it in their own work according to practices of the time. Ibn ʿĀshūr’s text can almost be considered to be a summary of Ibn Marzūq’s commentary<sup>124</sup> although at times he does add his own interpretation of verses. The *Shifāʾ* chiefly consists of a detailed explanation of the vocabulary employed in the *Burdah* and an analysis of the grammatical structure. Ibn ʿĀshūr often refers to early Arabic poetry and other sources to back up his explanation, but on a whole, his commentary is primarily linguistic in nature. He also analyzes the rhetorical, syntactical, and doctrinal aspects of the verses and methodically verifies the doctrinal soundness of verses by quoting the Qur’an, Hadith, and other scholars. Ibn ʿĀshūr goes further than most other commentators in examining the theological implications put forth by al-Būṣīrī in the *Burdah*. The primary methodology used by Ibn ʿĀshūr is to start by explaining the meaning of each individual word, then the entire meaning of the verse drawing upon vast evidence from traditional Islamic sources.<sup>125</sup>

Ibn ʿĀshūr appears to be strongly effected by the poem, and in his introduction that flows in rhyming prose that plays on the vocabulary of the *Burdah*, he writes that he himself was stricken with a terrible illness that bears resemblance to the illness described by al-Būṣīrī in his poem. Ibn ʿĀshūr writes

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<sup>123</sup> See next paragraph for further explanation of term *naql*.

<sup>124</sup> Which is only available in manuscript form.

<sup>125</sup> al-Tūnsī.

about how he was healed by using the *Burdah* as “an antidote” for his illness and after seeing impressive results, decided to continue using it and made a vow to write a commentary on it. He continues, emphasizing that the *Burdah* is sanctified due to the fact that it is connected to the *mamdūh*, the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>126</sup>

Furthermore, he quotes another commentator, al-Anṭākī, who explains,

I saw amazing things from its blessings, but all of this is miniscule compared to the object of its praise (*mamdūh-ha*) [the Prophet]. Of course this is so because he is the greatest intercessor, the protector...he can implore for him [the Prophet] to intercede for him to God to help him acquire his heart’s desire.

The most recent commentary I have been able to locate was written by Muḥammad ʿEid ʿAbdullah Yaʿqūb al-Ḥusaynī in 2004, a contemporary Syrian scholar<sup>127</sup> whose book bears evidence of many of the commentaries that came before him. In *Al-Sharḥ al-farīd fī Burdat al-nabi al-ḥabīb*,<sup>128</sup> al-Ḥusaynī acknowledges his use of these commentaries in writing his own commentary, and mentions the following commentaries by: al-Qaṣṭalānī, Abū al-Suʿūd, Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī, Khālīd al-Azharī, Ḥasan al-ʿAdawī al-Ḥamzawī.<sup>129</sup> Al-Ḥusaynī is probably one of the first commentators who actually mentions that he “sought inspiration” from previous commentaries and mentions them by name, although

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>127</sup> Whose website can be visited at: <http://67.15.211.9/~sheikhmo/>

<sup>128</sup> Muhammad ʿEid ʿAbdullah Yaʿqūb al-Ḥusaynī, *Al-Sharḥ al-farīd fī Burdat al-Nabi al-Ḥabīb* (Damascus: Maktabat al-Farabi, 2004).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 421.

fails to refer to the specific texts or page numbers within his commentary. His commentary reflects the tradition of *naql* or lifting material from other texts, a term that could possibly be translated in modern-day language as plagiarism, but which cannot be considered to be the same as plagiarism in consideration of the cultural and intellectual context, perhaps intertextuality would be a better term. While studying the many commentaries that I have used in my research to contextualize my study, I have noticed that some commentators, such as al-Ḥusaynī, take lines from other commentaries word-for-word to the point that it is nearly impossible to discern who the original author is. At the same time, I have been able to discern several distinct chains of transmission wherein the commentators hail from nearby regions and either use *naql* from other commentators or at least the same approach. As one scholar aptly described the context of this tradition,

Each text can be seen, then, as an intertext intersecting a broad swathe of material coming before it. The intertextual view emphasizes the energy and tension in a text that engages itself, questions itself, the part bringing out strands of the whole because the text is a part of a whole enterprise of life as well as the premier expression of a religious commitment to engage events within codes of value and meaning. The microcosmic view of the commentaries, on the other hand, emphasizes their authors' participation in a communal, civilizational pursuit of knowledge, illumination and moral clarity stemming from common sources and articulated, generation after generation, by further scholars and sages.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Yunus Wesley Schwein, "Illuminated Arrival in the Ḥikam al-ʿAṭʿiyyah and Three Major Commentaries" (MA thesis, University of Georgia, 2007), 30.

It would be fascinating and useful to the field of Islamic Studies and Arabic Literature to pursue the tradition of *naql* in Islamic scholarship and to explore the various chains of transmission among the commentaries of the *Burdah*. As this topic is tangential to the study at hand, I will not be delving any more into it, although it offers an intriguing topic that calls for further research.

Many other renown scholars produced their own reflections on the *Burdah*, including: Muhammad Ali b. ʿAllān al-Siddīqī (d. 1057 / 1647), a Makkan scholar who wrote *Al-dhukhrū wa-l-ʿuddah fī sharḥ al-Burdah*,<sup>131</sup> Ḥasan al-ʿAdawī al-Ḥamzāwī (d. 1303 / 1886), an Egyptian Sufi who composed *Al-Nafaḥāt al-shadhiliyyah fī sharḥ al-Burdah al-būṣīriyyah*,<sup>132</sup> and ʿAmr b. Aḥmad al-Kharḫūṭī (d. 1299 / 1882), who was an Anatolian Hanafi scholar and author. He composed a number of works in the Islamic sciences including a commentary of the *Burdah*, ʿAṣīdat al-shuhdah fī sharḥ al-Burdah.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Muḥammad ʿAli b. ʿAllān al-Siddīqī al-Makkī, *Al-Dhukhrū wa-l-ʿuddah fī sharḥ al-Burdah*, ed. Ahmet Turan Arslan (Istanbul: Faculty of Theology, University of Marmara, 1999).

<sup>132</sup> Shaykh Ḥasan al-ʿAdawī al-Ḥamzāwī, *Al-Nafaḥāt al-Shadhiliyyah fī sharḥ al-Burdah al-Būṣīriyyah* (Cairo?: publisher unknown, 1880).

<sup>133</sup> ʿAmr b. Aḥmad al-Kharḫūṭī, *ʿAṣīdat Al-Shuhda: Sharḥ Qasīdat Al-Burdah* (Cairo: Dar al-Jawama', 2006), *ʿAṣīdat al-shuhdah: sharḥ qasīdat al-Burdah*, (Cairo: Dar al-Jawamʿ al-Kalem, 2006).

## Intercession in the Commentaries

*Some of the shaykhs used to advise their students to recite the Burdah. It was said that it was the greatest way to connect with God, that it helps people succeed in their lives, its recitation calms someone who is frightened, gets rid of anxiety, and brings joy to people's hearts. The place in which the poem is recited becomes full of mercy and blessings.<sup>134</sup>*

The concepts of requesting *shafā'ah*, or intercession, and *tabarrak*, or seeking the blessings from the Prophet Muḥammad are important concepts in Sufism and are also play an important role in the Burdah. In the Qur'an, we can see that the Prophet was given a high spiritual station, *maqām maḥmūd*, or a praised station,

*And pray in the small watches of the morning: (it would be) an additional prayer (or spiritual profit) for thee: soon will thy Lord raise thee to a Station of Praise and Glory!<sup>135</sup>*

This station gave the Prophet the power to intercession for his *Ummah*. The power of intercession is only for the reserved few, the Prophet being one of them, as the Qur'an explains, "Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His leave?"<sup>136</sup> Another verse emphasizes the select few who will be chosen as capable of intercession, "On that Day, intercession will be useless except for those to whom the Lord of Mercy has granted permission and whose words He approves."<sup>137</sup> In addition,

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<sup>134</sup> Ibn Āshūr, *Shifā' al-qalb al-jarīh*, 68.

<sup>135</sup> Qur'an 17:79.

<sup>136</sup> Qur'an 2: 255.

<sup>137</sup> Qur'an 28: 108.

there are a number of hadiths that support this view and specifically mention the Prophet's ability to intercede for people,

Narrated Abu Huraira, I said: "O Allah's Apostle! Who will be the luckiest person, who will gain your intercession on the Day of Resurrection?" Allah's Apostle said: O Abu Huraira! "I have thought that none will ask me about it before you as I know your longing for the (learning of) Hadiths. The luckiest person who will have my intercession on the Day of Resurrection will be the one who said sincerely from the bottom of his heart "None has the right to be worshipped but Allah."<sup>138</sup>

The Prophet said: I have been conferred upon five (things) which were not granted to anyone before me...and I have been granted intercession.<sup>139</sup>

Recognition of the Prophet's unique status as an intercessor, capable of saving Muslims who seek him help is part of Islamic doctrine as supported by Qur'anic verses and hadiths and most Muslim scholars support this view.<sup>140</sup> While the Prophet is not the sole intercessor in Islam, he is certainly the most powerful one, although regular Muslims, angels, prophets, and martyrs could also intercede for others.<sup>141</sup>

The original Arabic meaning of *shafā'ah* refers to a person who joins him or herself to another person, who can aid or petition for him or her, and "in most instances the former person is one of higher station than the latter...It is also

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<sup>138</sup> Saḥīḥ Bukhārī, Volume 1, Book 3, Number 98.

<sup>139</sup> Saḥīḥ Muslim, Hadith 810.

<sup>140</sup> A.J. Wensinck and Annemarie Schimmel, *Shafā'ah*, Encyclopaedia of Islam, Brill Online Edition (2008).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

[signifies] the passing over without punishment, or the forgiving, or rather the asking or requesting the passing over of sins, crimes, or misdeeds."<sup>142</sup> Thus, by asking for intercession from the Prophet, the receiver "joins" oneself to the Prophet, or dedicates himself to him. As the Prophet is seen as the foremost human intercessor and protector of the Muslim community, it is logical that he would be the object of refuge for so many Muslims and ensures the bond of the Prophet to his *Ummah*. In the past, court poets would present poems to rulers as gifts in return for their patronage and protection. In contrast, in the case of the *Burdah*, al-Būṣīrī seeks a symbolic patronage from the Prophet and in return, offers him a splendid array of praises in the form of a poem.<sup>143</sup> Interestingly enough, some of the Sufi commentators mimicked al-Būṣīrī's request of the Prophet and took it even further. Kamal Husayn Khorezmi, a Central Asian mystic who wrote his commentary for the Uzbek rulers, used the end of his commentary to petition the ruler to allow him to leave the country and go on a pilgrimage to Makkah,

I, the petitioner...do ask that with permission and favor of this ruler of Islam, I might go to those perfumed precinct and those ennobled sites, and there where petitions are accepted, undertake to perform abundant prayers and innumerable praises...for you.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984).

<sup>143</sup> Suzanne Stetkvych, "From Sirah to Qasīdah," 46.

<sup>144</sup> DeWeese, *Kashf al-Huda*, 411.

The theme of *shafā'ah* is prevalent among Sufi poetry, and there are a plethora of examples of similar requests for intercession as seen in the *Burdah*, for example, Ali al-Makki wrote,

*My God I make my petition to Thee, approaching Thee though thy  
Prophet our Lord Muḥammad, the Prophet of Mercy.  
Our Lord Muḥammad, I have approached my Lord through thee in this  
My need that is to be met...  
Then, O Ahmad, be to me an Intercessor for my distress; since between me and the  
Lord stands the fear of one who has sinned.*<sup>145</sup>

Other poets have also requested for intercession in poetic form, such as Afifi al-Tilimsanī, who wrote,

*I have sins, abundant-but perhaps  
Your intercession may save me from Hellfire..  
I have called you, hoping for an act of grace from you-  
God forbid, God forbid, that you would be called and would not answer!*<sup>146</sup>

By seeking intercession from the Prophet, a human who reached the pinnacle of perfection and the highest station possible, Muslims hope to have their sins forgiven and redeemed through their love and praise of him. While not all commentators mentioned their intentions in composing their works on the *Burdah*, the ones who did clearly were driven by the goal of seeking intercession and blessings from the Prophet. As we will also see in the next chapter, the commentators not only wished to interpret the *Burdah* to simplify its meaning to

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<sup>145</sup> Contance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London: SPCK, 1961).

<sup>146</sup> Schimmel, *And Muḥammad*, 88.

their students and followers, but also in the hope that they could receive the same blessings that al-Būṣīrī received. Their commentators were their offerings to the *mamdūh*, the Prophet, they gifted their works in hope that the Prophet would answer the supplications and grant his intercession, in other words, a guarantee that they would be able to enter Paradise in the Afterlife.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE *BURDAH* AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

A famous verse from the poem of the *Burdah* expresses Muslims' love and adherence to the Prophet Muhammad in a powerful manner,

*He is the beloved whose intercession is hoped for*

*As arms against a host of relentless calamities (36).*

While many panegyric poems praising the Prophet Muḥammad can be found in books, few have retained the popularity of the *Burdah*. I assert that the *Burdah* has transcended its status as merely a written text to become a living text that goes beyond its printed form. To some, the poem may be merely another beautiful poem written in highly refined Arabic, but to others, especially Sufis, it is also a means with which to praise the Prophet, to heal oneself spiritually and physically, and to produce visions of the Prophet. These visions help the dreamer to directly communicate with the Prophet Muḥammad wherein they can ask him questions, seek advice, and request intercession. In this chapter, I aim to discuss three interrelated issues, namely: the importance of dreaming and visions of the Prophet in Islam with specific reference to Sufism; the significance of the story of the composition of the *Burdah* and al-Būṣīrī's miraculous cure through his vision of the Prophet and importance of the mantle of the Prophet; and finally, how and why Sufi commentators have focused on interpreting the *Burdah* and how they have highlighted its ability to produce visions of the Prophet.

## Dreaming in Islam

It would be best to start by giving a brief background on dreaming in Islam and how it relates to the *Burdah*. Dreaming and dream interpretation are an important part of the Islamic tradition, both popular and scholarly. A well-known authentic hadith states that the Prophet Muḥammad said that although prophethood would come to an end with his death, Muslims would still be able to receive good tidings in the form of dream-visions (ruʿyā),<sup>147</sup> as a hadith narrates, “The vision of a believer is one of the forty-six parts of Prophethood.”<sup>148</sup> Thus dreams became a way for Muslims to receive divine guidance and inspiration. Visions of the Prophet are especially significant in that they cannot be falsified, whereas visions of other people, even other prophets and saints, could possibly be manifestations of Satan in disguise. A hadith backs up this claim, stating, “Whoever see me, sees me truly, for Satan cannot take my form.”<sup>149</sup> This hadith validates stories of visions of the Prophet’s authority that other visions cannot claim. Despite the Prophet’s physical death, his appearance in dreams soon became a source of guidance and inspiration among Muslims. There are countless narrations of both scholars and regular believers seeing the Prophet in

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<sup>147</sup> Volume: 9 Book :87 (Interpretation of Dreams), Number :119.

<sup>148</sup> Sahih Muslim, Kitab al- Ruʿyā, Book 29, Number 5624-9 and al-Bukhari, Vol. 9, book 87:112, 114, 116-8.

<sup>149</sup> Sahih Muslim, Kitab al- Ruʿyā, 29:5635-9 and al-Bukhari, Vol. 9, book 87:122.

their dreams and sometimes even when they were awake.<sup>150</sup> Yunus Emre (d. 720/1320-1), a mystic poet from Anatolia describes his vision of the Prophet and his consequent relief from suffering as follows:

*In an inspired dream tonight  
I saw Muḥammad  
In the clean mirror of the heart  
I saw Muḥammad...  
Muḥammad gave a bowl to me,  
Intoxicated was I then-  
The Lord bestowed such grace on me:  
I saw Muḥammad.  
I, like a drop sunk in the seas,  
Found healing for my suffering;  
Today I was so greatly blessed-  
Today I saw Muḥammad.<sup>151</sup>*

Visions of the Prophet are particularly important among Sufis and could reveal new forms of supplications, give advice to the dreamer and his community, perform an act of healing, and much more. The interpretations of dreams also played an important component in the life of Muslims and comprised a major genre of early Islamic writings.<sup>152</sup> Dreams were essentially viewed as “text,” that could only be understood and interpreted by an expert. In addition, sharing stories of one’s vision of the Prophet was extremely important and helped

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<sup>150</sup> See Jonathan Katz, *Dreams, Sufism and Sainthood: The Visionary Career of Muhammad Al-Zawawi*, ed. H. G. Kippenberg, Studies in the History of Religions (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).; Leah Kinberg, "Literal Dreams and Prophetic Hadiths in Classical Islam: A Comparison of Two Ways of Legitimation," *Der Islam* LXX (1993).

<sup>151</sup> Schimmel, 213-4.

<sup>152</sup> For an extensive study on the rich genre of dream interpretation, see John C. Lamoreaux, *The Early Muslim Tradition of Dream Interpretation*, ed. Sayyed Hossein Nasr, Suny Series in Islam (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

strengthen the sense of community and faith. To illustrate further, Shaykh Zawawi, a 15<sup>th</sup> century Algerian Sufi visionary who produced an entire manuscript wherein he recorded his visions of the Prophet, said that it “is one of the greatest things that God may bestow upon us. Its concealment is not permitted to us, and it is nothing but a sin not to show it and [not] to write about it.”<sup>153</sup>

### **A Story of Healing: Composing the *Burdah***

Coming back to the *Burdah*, one could briefly describe it as a touching poem that narrates the spiritual journey of a man who finds security and belief through his love and praise of the spiritual figure of the Prophet. While he spends much of the poem praising the Prophet, he also recognizes his own downfalls in poetical terms, exclaiming:

*I have served him in this poetic praise hoping to redeem  
The errors of a life misspent in courtly verse and patronage (140).*

As I mentioned earlier when discussing the story of the composition of the *Burdah*, al-Būṣīrī began to compose what would later be called the *Burdah* after a friend suggested he compose some praise poems of the Prophet. But during the process of composing the poem, he was stricken

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<sup>153</sup> Katz, 32.

by a form of paralysis, which was perhaps caused by a stroke. To be relieved of his illness, he spent his time in prayers, asking the Prophet for intercession. Then one night, in a dream, the Prophet came to him, wiped his hands over al-Būṣīrī's face and covered him in his cloak, or *Burdah*. He also recited the entire poem in the Prophet's presence who reacted to it with great pleasure. When he awoke in the morning, he was completely healed. He left his house and on his way, he met a mysterious Sufi figure, whom some name as Abu al-Raja' al-Ṣiddīq, who asked him to give him the poem that he had composed during his sickness. Al-Būṣīrī was taken aback, as he hadn't told a single soul about his experience the night before, but the man insisted that he had seen him in a dream the night before and described exactly what al-Būṣīrī had experienced in his own vision. So al-Būṣīrī transmitted the poem to the Sufi, who then narrated his vision to others.<sup>154</sup>

Here, I would like to put forth a possible conjecture that might in part explain the popularity of the poem. I propose that the story of its composition is intricately connected to the poem. This can be illustrated by the fact that every single commentary and translation of the poem starts with varying versions of the narrative that I just mentioned. What this

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<sup>154</sup> Al-Kharṣūṭī, 10.

means is that according to Suzanne Stetkvych,<sup>155</sup> legends of the mantle of the prophet have generated actual physical relics of the cloak that have been in the possession of various Muslim rulers. Some have posited that the *Burdah*, or cloak, given to al-Būṣīrī was the very same one that was gifted to Kaʿb b. Zuhayr for having composed the panegyric poem of the Prophet Muḥammad, *Bānat Suʿād*.<sup>156</sup> Yet in the case of the *Burdah*, both the written text and recitation of the poem have essentially assumed, or perhaps embodied the spiritual qualities of the Prophet’s cloak. In essence, while only the very elite could claim to have possession of actual relics, any Muslim who could either own or merely memorize the *Burdah* possessed the key to a spiritual power that was transmitted to al-Būṣīrī and hence passed on to later generations. As Stefan Sperl theorizes,

Through depicting and eulogizing the great example of the Prophet, he regains a sense of confidence, and, at the end of the poem, sees ground for hope that his sins will be forgiven. This therapeutic element, inherent in the very structure of the work, may go some way towards explaining its immense popularity.<sup>157</sup>

Thus we can see that the miraculous properties of the *Burdah* were propagated by the story of al-Būṣīrī’s vision of the Prophet and

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<sup>155</sup> Stetkvych, "From Text to Talisman: Al-Busiri's Qasidat Al-Burdah (Mantle Ode) and the Supplicatory Ode." 161-2.

<sup>156</sup> Sperl, *Qasida Poetry*, 470.

<sup>157</sup> Sperl, 471.

subsequent miraculous cure, and thus those who recite it can hope to have a similar experience.

### **Poetry as a Mean to Visions**

The *Burdah* became sanctified and various commentators even added their own conditions for those who both recited the poem as well as those who healed others with it. Stringent rules were set, such as those laid down by the nineteenth-century Turkish mufti, judge and Sufi, Shaykh ʿAmr al-Kharṣūṭī, who wrote *ʿAṣīdat al-shuhdah fī sharḥ al-Burdah*, which can be awkwardly translated as “The Sweet Paste of the Honeycomb: A Commentary of the *Burdah*.” Al-Kharṣūṭī listed strict conditions that surprisingly nearly match those for the recitation of the Qur’an. These conditions must be adhered to by those hoping to gain full benefits from the *Burdah*, they include: requiring people to be in a state of ritual purity, facing the Qiblah throughout recitation, correct pronunciation, an awareness of the meaning of the words, having the poem memorized, having an *ijāza*, or permission,<sup>158</sup> from a teacher, and most importantly, repeating the prayer refrain, “My Lord, prayers and peace for an eternity on your beloved, the best of creation.” This refrain must be repeated after

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<sup>158</sup> That is, permission from one’s teacher or shaykh to employ the healing and protective powers of the poem.

every verse, or at least after every one of the ten sections.<sup>159</sup> The importance of repeating the refrain can be seen in the following narrative as recorded by al-Kharpūti:

A certain Imam al-Ghaznawī used to read the *Burdah* every night in order to see the Prophet in his sleep but did not receive any visions. So he complained about this to his mentor, Shaykh Kāmel and asked him what the secret was. The shaykh said, “Perhaps you have not been adhering to the conditions of reading it. Al-Ghaznawī replied, “But I follow all of the conditions.” So Shaykh Kāmel watched him the next time he recited the *Burdah*. He informed al-Ghaznawī that the problem was because he had failed to recite the above-mentioned refrain, which al-Būṣīrī originally used to constantly send prayers upon the Prophet.

Failing to read the refrain would not ensure that the blessings would be received and the recitation of the *Burdah* could be rendered invalid or ineffective, much like the requirement before one reads the Qur’an.<sup>160</sup>

Commentators such as al-Kharpūti, highlighted certain verses that were known to produce visions of the Prophet and also explained the importance of having these visions and their veracity. For example, one verse in the *Burdah* warns,

*Beware of rejecting the Prophet’s nocturnal revelations-  
Though his eyes may sleep his heart never slumbers! (82)*

Al-Kharpūti goes on to explain the benefits and origins of visions and mentions the hadith stating, “Surely dream-visions of the believer are God’s way of

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<sup>159</sup> Al-Kharpūti, 10.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 11.

speaking to him.” Thus, a vision of the Prophet could be considered to be the best form of vision, and indeed one that signifies a high spiritual station for the dreamer. Through a vision of the Prophet, the dreamer can receive inspiration and revelations and is a powerful tool for heightening one’s spiritual awareness and practice by receiving teachings directly from the Prophet.

In his commentary, al-Kharpūṭī also highlights a number of verses that are specifically potent in inducing visions of the Prophet, such as,

*How can you dent such a love, when true tears  
And real heartbreak testify so strongly against you?(6)  
His form and character surpassed even the previous prophets,  
And none have approached him in knowledge or nobility (38).*

*They all seek from the Messenger of God  
Cupfuls from his ocean or sips from his unceasing rain (39).<sup>161</sup>*

*What excellence lies in the birth of a prophet adorned with such character!  
Beauty itself shines forth from his smiling face! (54)*

Yet another commentator, Shaykh Ibrahim al-Bājūrī, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian scholar and Shaykh of al-Azhar, describes how one can produce a vision of the Prophet. Commenting on verse 8, which reads,

*How true! In the night, a vision of the one I long for came and deprived me of sleep.  
But love is famous for impeding pleasures with pain!*

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 135.

Al-Bājūrī mentioned that whoever repeats this verse after ‘Isha prayers until he is overcome by sleep will see the Prophet in his sleep.<sup>162</sup> On the one hand, in the case of al-Bājūrī, we can see that the ability of the verse to produce visions is directly tied to its meaning, which talks about al-Būṣīrī’s own experience of having visions of the Prophet. On the other hand, the verses highlighted by al-Kharpūṭī do not specifically discuss visions of the Prophet, they focus instead on describing the beauty and high spiritual station of the Prophet. These verses are some of the most beautiful verses in the poem that describe and praise the Prophet, thus, in this case, perhaps it is the most eloquent and powerful verses that can indeed have an effect on the person reciting it. More significantly, perhaps these verses were singled out because they are verses that the Prophet was said to have been especially fond of during al-Būṣīrī’s recitation in his vision. Since the mysterious Sufi who first took the *Burdah* from al-Būṣīrī claimed to have witnessed al-Būṣīrī’s session with the Prophet in a dream, perhaps he later recorded and transmitted the verses that he believed to have witnessed the Prophet react to strongly in his dream, or perhaps al-Būṣīrī himself passed down the story. This was then passed down from teacher to student until it was recorded in written commentaries. Another explanation could be that later mystics received inspirations in dreams about the efficacy of particular verses and then spread the knowledge.

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<sup>162</sup> Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Bājūrī, *Ḥashiyat Burdat al-madih*, ed. Muhammad Effendi Mustafa (Cairo: Al-Matba‘ al-Miṣriyyah, 1887), 8.

Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how the poem of the *Burdah* has exceeded its literary and poetic content and became a medium of prayer, healing, an outlet for petitioning the Prophet, and most importantly, a means of encouraging visions of the Prophet, something all Muslims long for. In addition, both the text and recitation of the poem have essentially embodied the ideal Muslim experience of encountering the Prophet. By transmitting the story of the *Burdah*'s composition and producing commentaries on the poem, Sufis were able to ensure the legacy of the poem and continuing knowledge of its many blessings.

### **The *Burdah* as a Tool for Healing and Protection**

Like a number of other Arabic religious texts written in both prose and poetry in the medieval period, such as *Dalā'il al-khayrāt* by Imam al-Jazūlī and al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's famous *Shifā* or the "Cure," the *Burdah* has been the source of fascination and a tool of protection and healing among Sufis for hundreds of years. As for the *Shifā*, it was highly regarded throughout the Muslim world and some even viewed it as sanctified and used the book itself as a talisman. One writer even commented that "if it [the book] is found in a house, this house will not suffer any harm, and a boat in which it is, will not drown; when a sick person

reads or it is recited for him, God will restore his health.”<sup>163</sup> Just as the *Shifa* concentrates on the Prophet Muhammad and his physical and spiritual attributes, so too does the *Burdah*, which is why it is believed that they both share similar healing and protective powers. Another text that has also been recognized as being sanctified due to its copious praise of the Prophet is *Dalā’il al-Khayrat*. The *Dalā’il* is especially important among Sufis in North Africa and there is even a special Sufi order in Marrakesh in Morocco that is dedicated to reciting the prayer collection during various occasions. Impressive copies of the *Dalā’il* have been produced for private libraries and the book is also used by some people as a talisman with similar properties to that of the *Shifā* and the *Burdah*.

The sanctity of the *Burdah* was established with its composition and subsequent transmission to Abu al-Rajā<sup>c</sup> al-Şiddīq and other contemporaries of al-Būşirī. It was so highly regarded that one commentator even wrote, “Whoever reads the *Burdah* every Friday between the sunset and evening prayers and adheres to the conditions of its recitation, will die as a Muslim and a believer.”<sup>164</sup> As mentioned previously, there are hundreds of commentaries and translations of the *Burdah*, some of which bring to light specific verses in the poem that are known to be efficacious. It was not only written in elegant calligraphy for

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<sup>163</sup> Schimmel, 33.

<sup>164</sup> Al-Kharpūti, 12.

distribution, but also on the walls of private homes and religious institutions. Although it was translated in many Islamicate languages, the Arabic-language original retained its thaumaturgical and theurgical powers as well as blessings, while the translation merely transmitted the poem's meanings.<sup>165</sup>

The *Burdah* has played an important role throughout the lives of Muslims, for example, the nineteenth-century British Orientalist and explorer, Edward Lane, recorded that while washing the corpse of a deceased Muslim, the washers would sing verses from the Qur'an as well as parts of the *Burdah*.<sup>166</sup> In addition, in the funeral processions themselves, families of the deceased would hire a special group of singers to recite the *Burdah*.<sup>167</sup> Other Western scholars have also attested to the efficacious nature of the *Burdah*, such as Goldziher, who wrote that the *Burdah* "has been used ever since by Muslims on edifying occasions to express their devout feelings: it is recited in congregations and at funerals; to its verses, when worn on amulets, a healing power is attributed."<sup>168</sup>

One contemporary Muslim scholar who edited a commentary of the *Burdah* described the sanctity of the *Burdah* in an emotional passage,

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<sup>165</sup> Schimmel, 183.

<sup>166</sup> Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003), 513.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 517.

<sup>168</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Classical Arabic Literature*, 57.

This glorious poem...and its many blessings, is still sought out by people who seek blessings from it in all continents of the Earth. It has been said that it has cured the sick who believed in its high rank...and it was the reason for their cure and for receiving well-being and blessings by reading it. Its recitation has permeated sittings where people chant it and the scent of paradise is spread with this poem. This is what influenced al-Būṣīrī and his love and longing for the Chosen One [Muḥammad].<sup>169</sup>

Stories and legends of the *Burdah's* spiritual influence abound in Islamic, primarily Sufi, literature. One exceptional narration tells of a mystic's experience upon contemplating a verse from the *Burdah*. A biographical entry of Muḥammad b. ʿAli al-Kinānī al-Shāfiʿī (d. 933/1526), a Yemeni Sufi, tells the story of his mystical encounter with the poem. One day, al-Kinānī was sitting and he began to contemplate the following verse from the *Burdah*,

*Lofty mountains, to entice him, draped themselves in gold,  
But he showed them a towering soul, perfectly content, without desire (31).*

Al-Kinānī considered that even these mountains of gold were of little worth compared to the station of the Prophet. At the very moment he had this thought, he looked at the tree he was sitting under and saw that it had transformed into gold. He was frightened by this vision and supplicated to God until the tree returned to its former state. He was so inspired by this experience that he

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<sup>169</sup> See introduction of Al-Haytamī, Ibn Ḥajar. *Al-ʿumdaḥ fī sharḥ al-Burdah*, ed. Bassam Muḥammad Barud. Dubai, UAE: Dar al-Faqīh, 2003, 41.

composed a very popular and simple text on Islamic doctrine that soon gained renown.<sup>170</sup>

As for the commentaries themselves, while the older ones that I have examined do not usually mention the healing and protective powers of the *Burdah*, several of the commentaries composed in the nineteenth century do discuss this issue in depth. To illustrate, what follows is a small selection of verses singled out by commentators, specifically al-Bājūrī and al-Kharpūtī and the *fawā'id* (sing. *fā'idah*), or special properties, that are associated with each one. Some verses can aid a Muslim who experiences self-doubt and questions his faith,

*O you who fault me for this vestal love, accept my excuse-  
Yet if you judged fairly, you would find me blameless (9).*

*May you never have to live like this! I can't even keep it a secret  
From my critics, I'm so feverish and lovesick! (10)*

The special property of these two verses is if you see a denier of the truth or are plagued by doubts, then write these verses on a piece of paper with ink made of saffron, musk, and rose water. You must cut the paper into a circle and then hang it between your eyes from under your turban. This will help you get rid of unbelief, with the permission of God.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Shaykh Abd al-Qādir ibn ʿAydārūs, *Tarīkh al-nūr al-sāfir*, (Baghdad: Al-Maktabah al-ʿArabīyah), 1934, 192-3.

<sup>171</sup> Al-Bājūrī, *Hashiyat al-Burdah*, 9.

Other verses can aid Muslims strengthen their faith through repetition of a single verse,

*He called on God. Whoever clings to him  
Clings to a rope that will never unravel nor break (37).*

This verse protects the faith and security of a Muslim, it must be read after every prayer 10 times, starting with a special prayer on the Prophet.<sup>172</sup>

As noted earlier in this chapter, al-Kharpūti established these verses as efficacious in inducing visions of the Prophet, al-Bājūrī emphasizes their ability to heal physical sicknesses,

*Beware of rejecting the Prophet's nocturnal revelations-  
Though his eyes may sleep his heart never slumbers! (82)*

*They came to him at the outset of his prophetic mission-  
So these dream-visions of his cannot be denied (83).*

These two verses can help get rid of a sickness of someone who writes them on a piece of pottery and then wipes them away with licorice juice and drinks the run-off juice on an empty stomach. If he does this, then the person will get better, with the permission of God.<sup>173</sup>

Some verses have protective powers,

*They were mountains: just ask those who confronted them  
What it is they witnessed on every field of battle (127).*

Whoever writes this verse on the gate of a town, house, or garden, and keep it there, no thief, parasites, or anything else will ever be

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 48.

able to enter it. Someone said that this special protective power was also used to preserve wheat, barley and other grains. He also said that he wrote the verses on the door of his house, and one day a thief came and he heard a voice in the house and left. He said, there was no one there and someone told him that the owner was away. So the thief returned on the second night and heard a voice saying to him, "Do not enter," and God forbade him from entering by the blessings of this verse.<sup>174</sup>

Al-Kharpūti's commentary shares many similarities with that of al-Bājūrī's, although his illumination of the healing and protective powers contains some additional properties. For example, one verse can aid people at their deathbed,

*Incomparable, his beauty has no peer-  
The essence of beauty itself is in his nature (42).*

The special property of this verse is that if it is read over a dying person, he will be conscious and will not experience any pain.<sup>175</sup>

Other verses aid the traveler going on a long and dangerous voyage,

*By seeking the wealth of this world and the next from his hand,  
I received my lot straight from the Generous Donor (80).*

Know that the special property of this verse is if someone wants to go on a journey, he should write the verse on a piece of paper, leaving the first hemistich in his home with his family and take the second hemistich with him on his travels. With the permission of God, he will return home safely to his family.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>175</sup> Al-Kharpūti, °*Asīdat al-shuhdah*, 151.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 230.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the *Burdah* has been received with open arms by Sufis and has gone on to inspire countless translations, commentaries, and other genres of literature in Islamicate languages. In effect, the *Burdah* expounds upon the important tenets of Islamic and Sufi doctrine in poetic form, easily accessible to lay people as well as scholars. It also is believed to contain miraculous powers that were revealed in connection with the legend of al-Būṣīrī's composition of the poem and his ensuing vision of the Prophet.

Overcome by guilt of having led a sinful life and serving the rulers on earth with his poetry instead of obeying the divine commands of God, al-Būṣīrī petitioned the Prophet Muḥammad, in hope that he would intercede for him and save him from his erroneous past. In the process, using his skills as a poet as well as his passion and longing for the Prophet, al-Būṣīrī was able to compose the *Burdah*. The process of spending his time in prayer and supplication coupled with his intense literary expression of love for the Prophet aided him in overcoming his physical and well as spiritual illness. It also culminated in a powerful meeting with the Prophet in a dream-vision, an experience that left him hopeful, cured him of his physical illness, and purified his heart. This narrative gave people a creative and stimulating way to seek out blessings, protection, and

intercession from the Prophet as well as ways to rid themselves of physical and mental ills. It also gave them hope that, like al-Būṣīrī, they could also be forgiven of their sins by petitioning the Prophet. Al-Būṣīrī's vision ultimately gave authority to the efficacy of the *Burdah* and established a chain of tradition of teaching, reciting, and interpreting that continues until this day.

This study is multi-layered and I have attempted to peel back the many layers to understand the place of the *Burdah* in Arabic literature and Sufi literature and beliefs. In chapters one and two, I attempted to place the poem of the *Burdah* and al-Būṣīrī in their historical and religious context. In chapter three, I introduced a number of important Arabic-language commentators and endeavored to distill some of their reasons for composing these works. A number of the commentators expressed their reason for composing their works. While all of them wished to clarify some of the more complex verses and vocabulary so their readers could benefit from insights of al-Būṣīrī; more significantly, a number wanted to reproduce al-Būṣīrī's mystical encounter with the Prophet Muḥammad. By interpreting the *Burdah*, they were able to draw as close as they could to the sacred act of composing the poem and thus sought out a similar experience to that of al-Būṣīrī. We can gather from the *Burdah* and narratives around it that al-Būṣīrī was forgiven for his past sins cured of his illness by God through the intercession and mercy of the Prophet. Several of the commentators paralleled

their own life experience with that of al-Būṣīrī and expressed their hope for a comparable outcome. The *Burdah* essentially became a penultimate devotional prayer, literary talisman and collection of Islamic doctrine that had no equal among Sufis. Instead of imitating it, those who believed in its powers could only aspire to comment upon it and trust that some of its blessings and auspiciousness would rub off on them.

In chapter four, I seek to position the *Burdah* in the tradition of dreaming in Islam and show how it is one of the many ways Muslims have attempted to induce visions of the Prophet. In their visions, Muslims can petition the Prophet to intercede for them, receive advice and words of wisdom, and have spiritual authority bestowed upon them by virtue of their vision. I also touched upon the genre of literary talismans and some believed benefits of reciting certain verses of the *Burdah*. This section could very well be expanded and I would have liked to spend time further analyzing some of the talismanic uses of the *Burdah* and their possible inspirational origins and their use among Sufis. I hope to continue work on my thesis and will further explore the theme of the *Burdah* as a source of healing and protective powers, contextualize the theme of *shafā'ah* in the Mamluk period, and conduct an in-depth study of commentaries that highlight the talismanic aspects of the poem. In particular, I will examine the commentaries of al-Bājūrī and al-Kharpūti and will also attempt to locate earlier commentaries in

manuscript form that also touch upon the miraculous aspects of the *Burdah*. It would also be interesting to conduct further research on the use of literary talismans in Muslim society and to contextualize the *Burdah* in this context.

While I have touched upon some important topics related to the *Burdah*, they are only the tip of the iceberg of what could turn into not only a number of theses and dissertations, but also full-length studies. Due to time restraints, I have been unable to include all of the components I would have liked to in this thesis. Despite this minor shortcoming, I have introduced several new perspectives on studies on the *Burdah*, including an attempt to reveal the Sufi nature of the poem. I have also attempted to piece together al-Būṣīrī's life and explore the meaning of his spiritual experience as seen in the compositional narrative. The significance of the miraculous powers of the *burdah* of the Prophet to the poem of the *Burdah* as well as the use of the *Burdah* as a means to inducing visions of the Prophet presents a new angle on this often discussed narrative and uses of the poem. Further topics that would be of interest include: in-depth studies of individual commentaries; comparative studies of the commentaries; a investigation of the chains of narration in the commentaries and an attempt to identify the original commentaries that found their way to later commentaries through intertextuality and *naql*; a focused survey of the uses of the *Burdah* for its healing and protective powers in Sufi literature as well as an ethnographical study of its uses among

modern-day Sufis; and an ethnographical study of recitations of the *Burdah* throughout the Muslim world.

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