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Descriptions of the Body in Biographies and Their Social Meanings. Al-Şafadī's Use of "Handsome Figure" in Describing his Contemporaries

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Descriptions of the Body in Biographies and Their Social Meanings

Al-Şafadī's Use of "Handsome Figure" in Describing his Contemporaries

♦ **ABSTRACT**

Pre-modern authors of biographies use descriptions of bodily features in order to portray a person. These descriptions have not been analysed in a systematic way. As an exemplary start to such an enquiry, I concentrate on the biographies of contemporaries by the Mamluk author al-Şafadī. Focusing on his use of the qualification "handsome figure" for males, I try to understand its meaning in the context of the individual biography. I argue against the interpretation that bodily features were meant by al-Şafadī to reflect the person's moral character. I show that the handsome figure was perceived as a positive value in its own right. Highlighting the body in this way indicates the importance of the body in pre-modern Arabic culture for the appreciation of individuals.

Keywords: body – biographical literature – al-Şafadī – beauty – aesthetic value

♦ **RÉSUMÉ**

Les biographes prémodernes utilisent la description de traits corporels pour faire le portrait d'une personne. Ces descriptions n'ont jusqu'ici pas été analysées de manière systématique. L'auteur propose, à titre d'exemple, de concentrer l'analyse sur les biographies que l'historiographe d'époque mamelouke al-Şafadī a consacrées à ses contemporains, et plus particulièrement sur son usage de l'expression « au beau visage » pour les hommes. L'auteur essaie

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de comprendre le sens de l'expression dans le contexte de la biographie d'un individu, et discute l'interprétation qui fait des traits corporels le reflet du caractère moral. Elle montre qu'un beau visage était perçu comme doté en soi d'une valeur positive. Cette manière de mettre en valeur le corps indique son importance, dans la culture arabe prémoderne, pour l'évaluation des individus.

Mots-clés : corps – littérature biographique – al-Şafadī – beauté – valeur esthétique

* * *

PRE-MODERN Arabic literature provides us with a huge corpus of biographical lexicons. Authors of biographical entries use descriptions of bodily features in order to portray their subjects. Highlighting the body in this way indicates the importance of physique in pre-modern Arabic culture for judging and appraising individuals. It would be interesting to understand the social meanings behind the different body features that are described. However, such descriptions of the body have never been analyzed in a systematic way in order to better understand the cultural meanings and how they may have changed over time and space.¹ One obstacle lies in the prevalent prejudice claiming that descriptions of the body in Arabic literature are not substantial at all, especially in contrast to a pictorial portrait tradition in Europe.

In this contribution I present a very first step as a model for future study focusing on a single work: the biographical lexicon by the Mamluk author al-Şafadī (696-764/1297-1363) with the title *A'yān al'asr wa-a'wān al-naşr*. Al-Şafadī presents in this book some two thousand biographies of individuals who lived during his own lifetime. In these biographies al-Şafadī summarizes his contemporaries' education and career. He informs about the individual's intellectual and/or financial achievements. Al-Şafadī takes pains to acknowledge a subject's literary skills quoting poems and letters as examples, and provides his literary criticism. He reports—where relevant—on habits or tastes or incidents that illuminate the person's character. In many cases he mentions in what way he himself was associated with his contemporary. Most importantly for this survey, al-Şafadī provides in most of his biographies a sort of résumé, which consists of a general evaluation of the individual. Most of his body descriptions appear in the context of his general assessment of his contemporaries.

Based on my own rough estimate, about 10% of al-Şafadī's biographical sketches contain a description of his subjects' appearance. As said, in most cases this description is integrated in the passage in which al-Şafadī gives his general assessment of the individual. When mentioning the body, al-Şafadī often emphasizes the favorable or pleasing appearance of a person. In order to express this he uses the terms *şakl* (figure), *şūra* (image), *hay'a* (form), *qāma* (stature), *qawām* (straightness), *bizza* (attire), *halq* (build), *kawn* (being), *ruwā'* (look), and others. Usually these

1. For a discussion of the state of the art regarding studies on the body in Middle Eastern history, please refer to von Hees, "Mamlukology as Historical Anthropology," where I discuss the body and its study as an example.

terms are accompanied by an adjective conveying a positive significance. The frequently used term *šakl* (figure) for example, is connected with such adjectives as *ḥasan* (handsome), *malīḥ* (nice), *tāmm* (perfect), *ḡamīl* (comely), *anīq* (charming), *laṭīf* (delicate), *zarīf* (elegant), *ṭawīl* (long), or *daḥm* (corpulent).

A person's image may be *munawwara* (illuminated) or his stature may be *madīd* (tall). Or else, a person may simply be characterized as *samīn* (fat), *badīn* (stout), *ḡasīm* (corpulent) or as *daqīq* (slender). Often also the general comeliness (*ḡamīl*, *ḡamāl*) of a person is emphasized. Furthermore the movements and gestures of a person may be described in more detail using an adjective.

Besides characterizing the general appearance of a person, al-Ṣafadī often describes the face, the eyes, the skin and the hair in more detail, usually mentioning complexion or color. These more detailed descriptions need a study on their own.² Also the general age indicators such as *šābb* (young man), *kahl* (mature man) and *šayḥ* (old man) serve to define the physical constitution.

The fact that al-Ṣafadī goes to the trouble of portraying the physical appearance in about one in ten of his biographical sketches raises the question, what significance this had for him and for his contemporaries. Up to now the question of cultural significance of physical characteristics in pre-modern Arabic biographical texts has not been systematically addressed.

One example is the essay by Michael Cooperson who investigates the question of how people were portrayed in classical Arabic biographies in the framework of a thematic volume on *Seeing Things: Textuality and Visuality in the Islamic World*.³ First of all he stresses that authors of biographies saw it as their task to portray the life of deceased individuals. He remarks that they aim to convey to their readers/listeners the feeling of having known the person themselves, the feeling of having seen him or her with their own eyes. For this matter he refers also to al-Ṣafadī quoting the introduction to al-Ṣafadī's voluminous biographical lexicon *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt* on persons who died since the time of the prophet Muḥammad. There al-Ṣafadī states that the reader of his work

“feels that he has known such men in their own time. He seems to join them on their pillowed thrones and lean companionably with them on their cushioned couches. He gazes at their faces—some framed in hoods, others lambent under helmets—seeing in the evil ones the demonic spark, and in the good ones that virtue which places them in company of angels.”⁴

Cooperson interprets this statement on the one hand as saying that al-Ṣafadī in his biographical texts indeed intends to create an image of the person, but that on the other hand, the purpose of this visualization is to enable the reader through this gaze to comprehend that person's character. Consequently, al-Ṣafadī would aim to describe an individual in the way

2. See for example the article in this volume on blue and green eyes in the Islamic Middle Ages by Kristina Richardson.

3. Cooperson, “Images Without Illustrations.”

4. Translation by Cooperson, “Images Without Illustrations,” p. 9, from al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*.

the reader will find him or her in the hereafter. Thus, the physical aspect is intended to reflect the good or evil character of the person concerned, without necessarily being related to the actual appearance on earth. Cooper then claims that, regardless of his intention, al-Şafadī does not go into more detail than any other pre-modern Arabic author when describing bodily features and consequently in his following discussion he does not provide a single example from a biographical text authored by al-Şafadī. Once again the prejudice that such bodily descriptions are not really worth to be studied because of their meagerness compared to European images is at work.

In this contribution, on the contrary, I want to suggest that it is worthwhile to investigate in detail those physical descriptions that are provided by al-Şafadī in order to better understand their function and meanings for someone like al-Şafadī and his contemporaries. We could catalogue the bodily features mentioned and study them in their respective context trying to interpret when and how al-Şafadī points out to them. In order to give an example how we could investigate these body descriptions in a systematic fashion I chose to start with those biographies in which the widely used term *şakl* (figure) is employed. There are 70 odd biographies where al-Şafadī uses this term and out of these I chose a random subset consisting of 45 entries I examined in detail. This term is used exclusively in connection to men.

If we study the physical descriptions given by al-Şafadī in the context of their respective biography we will be able to understand their importance to him as a special, mainly positive feature of a person through which an individual man distinguished himself from others. It will also become evident that this kind of depiction was not intended to imply a judgment on the moral character of the individual. Indeed, I will argue that beauty of the male body in the biographical presentation of an individual stood for itself as an aesthetic value on its own. This corresponds to the findings by Doris Behrens-Abouseif in her book on beauty in Arabic culture where she argues that beauty in poetry and the visual arts had an aesthetic value not connected to moral or religious criteria.⁵ In order to check and understand this it is important to contextualize the given body feature.

Among those individuals who according to al-Şafadī had a handsome figure, there are some that can also be characterized as pious. I have already mentioned that the descriptions of physical characteristics in al-Şafadī's biographies are usually found in a passage where he gives a general evaluation of the person concerned. One such passage about Şams al-Dīn Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ḥilāfī al-Dimaşqī, who held the preacher's office at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus for one year before he died at the age of 62 in the year 706/1307, reads as follows:

“He was religious, good and dignified (*kāna dayyin ḥayyir waqūr*), of handsome figure and had a pleasant voice beyond measure (*ḥasan al-şakl, ṭayyib al-şawt ilā al-ğāya*), with excellent knowledge of the different koranic readings and law (*ğayyid al-muşāraka fī al-qirā'ā wa-l-fiqh*), and he had a nice handwriting (*malih al-kitāba*).”⁶

5. Behrens-Abouseif, *Schönheit in der arabischen Kultur*, p. 16.

6. Al-Şafadī, *A'yan al-ʿaşr*, no. 1444, vol. 4, p. 234.

In this passage the characterization of the person as being pious is followed immediately by the description of his physical appearance. This supports the notion of Cooperson and suggests a direct connection between the comely figure of an individual and his or her religious character. However, the preacher al-Ḥilāṭī was not only pious and handsome, but he had—in addition to his knowledge of the different koranic readings and law—above all an especially beautiful voice and nice handwriting. If we accept the theses put forward by Cooperson, this portrayal can be interpreted as merely a reflection of this person’s good character. Apart from the fact that the majority of persons that are characterized by al-Ṣafadī as religious and pious, are not all at the same time depicted as of handsome figure, it seems to me very plausible that the preacher al-Ḥilāṭī must have been good-looking during his life and that in Damascus he was able to captivate people on account of his handsome figure and his wonderful voice.

In the following we will be able to show that the feature “of handsome figure” can be understood as an additional, particular, positive qualification that is mentioned of an individual who first of all distinguishes himself through the pleasant impression he made on his contemporaries. In only a few cases al-Ṣafadī mentions the handsome figure of a person without providing further details about his character.⁷ Apart from this, we may differentiate between the following groups: persons of “handsome figure” can be presented moreover as especially pious, or else as not so pious; they can be particularly knowledgeable or especially gallant, particularly young, or especially rich while enjoying life, and finally also fat.

Handsome Figure and Especially Pious

To be sure, in many cases the reference to a handsome figure comes—as in the first example given—in conjunction with the characterization of the individual as being especially pious. The judge Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Taḡlabī al-Zura‘ī who died in 728/1328 was according to the evaluation given by al-Ṣafadī

“a good man, generous (*kāna raḡulan ḡayyidan, karīm al-nafs*), of handsome build and perfect figure (*ḥasan al-ḥalq, tāmm al-šakl*), of praiseworthy conduct, free of passion and chaste (*maškūr al-sīra, nazih ‘afif*).”⁸

In this case al-Ṣafadī clearly highlights the especially pious way of life of this good-looking judge. About the imam Šaraf al-Dīn al-Arzūnī, who died as an old man in the year of al-Ṣafadī’s birth, 696/1296, al-Ṣafadī does not tell us anything else apart from his general evaluation of this person:

“He was an old man, known for his righteousness (*kāna šayḥan mašhūran bi-l-šalāḥ*), of perfect figure, tanned complexion (*tāmm al-šakl, asmar*), imposing and glorious (*mahīban ḡalīlan*), with sparse

7. For example al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 9, vol. 1, p. 54; no. 29, vol. 1, p. 82; no. 1897, vol. 5, p. 485.

8. Al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1907, vol. 5, p. 495.

white hair, with great ardor and a (nice) way to wind the turban and (nice) white hair and (nice) attire (*qalīl al-šayb malīḥ al-himma wa-l-šimma wa-l-šayba wa-l-bizza*), he knew how to act, had right guidance and dignity (*šāḥib samt wa-hudā wa-waqār*).⁹

This imam is not only pious and of perfect figure, he is also old and has white hair—sparse but handsome—his tanned complexion seems to be remarkable for al-Šafadī. To understand the latter attribute it would be necessary to analyze all those biographies where this feature is mentioned. However, it does not seem to be a characteristic of especially pious people.

Ibn al-Našw was a merchant and scholar of hadith. He died in 720/1320 at the age of 79. According to al-Šafadī he was

“of handsome figure (*kāna ḥasan al-šakl*), and was trustworthy and knowledgeable (*fīhi amāna wa-maʿrifa*). He travelled as a merchant to Bagdad and Egypt and had property.”¹⁰

The teacher Sayf al-Dīn Abū al-Rūḥ al-Baḡdādī died 705/1305 and had reached the age of 90 years according to his own claim, which al-Šafadī doubts. He says:

“He was very humble, frugal and tolerant (*wa-kāna kaṭīr al-tawāḍuʿ muqtašidan samḥan*), of delicate figure and pleasant company (*laṭīf al-šakl ḥasan al-muḡālasa*). Sheikh Šams al-Dīn b. al-Akfānī told me strange and odd stories (*ḥikāyāt ʿaḡība muḍḥika*) about him that indicate that he was elegant, ([but] abandoned?) (*zarīf muṭṭaraḥ*), peaceful in the inside (*salīm al-bāṭin*).”¹¹

The figure of this pious teacher was *laṭīf* (delicate). However, the doctor and pharmacist al-Akfānī narrates to his friend al-Šafadī stories that make them laugh about the appearance of this fine gentleman. This kind of formulation makes it evident that here the description of the body cannot be a matter of portraying the deceased in the hereafter by emphasizing his pious character. On the contrary, al-Šafadī apparently deems it necessary to amend the image of a delicate, but somehow ludicrous figure, by stressing the moral integrity of al-Baḡdādī.

The examples given so far all deal with religious scholars who reached a relatively old age. However, in al-Šafadī’s biographies the combination of a handsome figure and pious character is not specific to aged scholars of religion. For example, about the Mongol sovereign Mūsā, who succeeded Abū Saʿīd in 736/1335 and was only in power for one year before he met a violent end, al-Šafadī tells us that he was

“of handsome figure and excellent mind (*wa-kāna Mūsā ḥasan al-šakl ḡayyid al-ʿaql*), a true Muslim (*šāḥib al-islām*).”¹²

9. Al-Šafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿašr*, no. 1640, vol. 4, p. 550.

10. Al-Šafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿašr*, no. 1618, vol. 4, p. 511.

11. Al-Šafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿašr*, no. 1309, vol. 3, p. 715.

12. Al-Šafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿašr*, no. 1896, vol. 5, p. 484.

The emir Muḥtār, known as al-Bilbaysī, who was a treasurer and who died in 716/1316 in the Damascus citadel,

“was of handsome figure and good character (*kāna ḥasan al-šakl, ḥasan al-aḥlāq*), had dignity and calmness (*fīhi waqār wa-sukūn*), and he knew the Koran by heart and recited it with a pleasant voice (*wa-ḥafiẓa al-qur’ān, wa-kāna yatlūhu bi-ṣawt ḥasan*).”¹³

These two military men might not have had a very profound religious knowledge, but still they are portrayed by al-Ṣafadī as combining a good look with pious behavior.

The merchant Šams al-Dīn al-Sallāmī is not only described as having

“a nice figure (*malīḥ al-šakl*), being imposing, with comely clothing and good disposition (*mahīb ḡamīl al-libās ḥasan al-biṣr*),” “experienced with merchandise (*ḥabīr bi-l-amti’a*).”

but acted also in a pious manner:

“He was continuously offering and spending charity (*dā’im al-baḍl wa-l-ṣadaqa*),” and “he had a manuscript of koranic passages for private devotion and spend the night in prayer (*dā ḥaṭṭ min awrād wa-tahaḡḡud*), had gallantry (*wa-muruwwa*), and was knowledgeable in the art of recitation of God’s book (*muḡawwid li-kitāb Allāh*). The merchants submitted to him and gave him full right of disposal, trusting in his knowledge and his fear of God (*wa-kāna al-tuḡḡār yaḥḍa’ūna lahu wa-yaḥtakimūna ilayhi wuṭūqan bi-ilmihī wa-wara’ihī*).”¹⁴

Of Handsome Figure, but not Especially Pious

Even though al-Ṣafadī describes quite a few of his contemporaries as combining comeliness and piety, he also portrays some of them as having handsome figures but at the same time not leading a particularly religious life. He writes, for example, about the hanbalite judge and talented calligrapher Burhān al-Dīn al-Zar’ī, who was an outstanding legal scholar holding the position of substitute of the hanbalite chief judge in Damascus until he died at the age of 53 in 741/1341:

“He was of handsome figure and (had a nice) way of winding the turban (*kāna ḥasan al-šakl wa-l-ḥimma*), with a great mind and immense ardor (*wāfir al-’aql ’ālī al-himma*).”¹⁵

13. Al-Ṣafadī, *A’yān al-’aṣr*, no. 1851, vol. 5, p. 413.

14. Al-Ṣafadī, *A’yān al-’aṣr*, no. 1567, vol. 4, p. 437.

15. Al-Ṣafadī, *A’yān al-’aṣr*, no. 2, vol. 1, p. 45.

Next to detailed information about his career, al-Şafadī reports, how he himself saw Burhān al-Dīn one Friday going to the market of slave girls, while on another Friday frequenting the book market. He is portrayed as having been inclined towards Turks as concubines and that he associated with them closely, even learning Turkish from his slave girls. Al-Şafadī knew this judge Burhān al-Dīn personally. He presents him as a good-looking man, a scholar well-versed in law, without claiming that he led an especially pious life.

Nağm al-Dīn was treasurer at Damascus and was renowned for his knowledge of the biographies of his contemporaries—an interesting aspect to al-Şafadī. He died in 742/1342. Al-Şafadī depicts this man as follows:

“He had a handsome figure and a perfect build (*ḥasan al-şakl, tāmm al-ḥalq*), he knew how to charm, to win other people and to flatter (*lahu tawaddud wa-mulqā wa-maliq*).”¹⁶

This good-looking and sweet-talking man was according to al-Şafadī in hard times before he married the daughter of a judge. Through this relationship he was able to get a good position. There is no mention about him being especially pious.

The judge Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī grew up as a poor orphan, studied law and finally received a position as judge in Tripoli. He died in 740/1340 at the age of 74. Al-Şafadī disagrees with the claim of al-Dahabī that this judge was not reputable, stating that he was capable of writing documents and giving verdicts. He describes him as follows: “with nice attire and a nice figure (*malīḥ al-bizza, malīḥ al-şakl*).” His “white hair was especially pure (*naqī bayāḍ al-şayb*)”. He was also blessed with dignity (*waqār*) and honor (*‘izza*). However, al-Şafadī emphasizes the avarice of the man: “He was stingy with what he had in his hand and pocket (*mumsik li-mā fi yadihi wa-l-ğayb*).”

Al-Şafadī claims that

“he collected possessions and he tried to have the world at his feet.”¹⁷

With this formulation al-Şafadī seems to suggest that this judge, even though he knew his field fairly well and was handsome and rich, forfeited the hereafter because of his avarice.

These examples make it clear that a nice figure and good looks are not by themselves a reflection of a pious character. Evidently, when al-Şafadī tells us “someone had a handsome figure” he simply means that that person’s appearance was pleasing to others. He does not imply a correlation with pious behavior.

16. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 1699, vol. 4, p. 685.

17. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 277, vol. 1, p. 531.

Handsome Figure and Knowledgeable

In many cases al-Şafadī praises both the handsome figure of one of his personages and his extraordinary knowledge. He writes for example as his general evaluation of ʿĪyāʾ al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl al-Turkmānī, who was a judge at Şawbak where he died in the year of al-Şafadī's birth 696/1297 at the age of 79:

“He was a distinguished old man (*kāna šayḥan mutamayyizan*), occupied a dignified place (*sakana min al-waqār ḥayyizan*); his figure was perfect (*şakluhu tamm*), and he was renowned for his universal knowledge (*wa-faḍluhu fī al-ʿilm ʿāmm*).”¹⁸

The preacher Muḥyī al-Dīn, who worked at Baalbek and died at the age of 85 in 743/1343, is described by al-Şafadī: “with a nice figure and intelligent (*wa-kāna malīḥ al-şakl ʿāqilan*).”¹⁹ We do not learn much more about him.

Ġamāl al-Dīn Ibn al-Ḥusām al-Buḥārī lived in a village near Şafad where al-Şafadī met him when he himself was 26 years old. He portrays this man saying that

“he had a handsome figure (*wa-kāna şakluhu ḥasanan*), was clever and eloquent (*wa-dā mantiq lasin*).”²⁰

Ibn Ḥaşşāş was an eminent preacher and he was over 80 years old when he died in 711/1312. Besides telling us about the stages in his career and the books he wrote on various subjects, al-Şafadī narrates an anecdote illustrating his diligence. Al-Şafadī says: “He was good-looking, had a nice figure, and a charming expression (*wa-kāna ḥasan al-şūra malīḥ al-şakl, ḥulw al-ʿibāra*)” and he praises his immense knowledge of law, grammar, logic, literature, geometry and other mathematical sciences. Al-Şafadī also notes his gallantry and nobility of character (*wa-kāna fīhi muruwwa wa-karam aḥlāq*).”²¹ In this case an outstanding scholar is introduced, who had in addition to his knowledge a handsome figure. If we try to understand why al-Şafadī tells us about this fact, we get the impression that the gift of being handsome is seen by him at least in this case as an extra plus, an additional quality that may enhance the status of the individual in question.

Aside from these scholars that combine comeliness and knowledge, al-Şafadī evaluates also one of the noble emirs from the important Bedouin clan Āl Faḍl, Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā b. Muḥannā in this manner: “He had a handsome figure and possessed knowledge and courage (*wa-kāna ḥasan al-şakl, lahu maʿrifa wa-durba*).”²²

18. Al-Şafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaşr*, no. 641, vol. 2, p. 341.

19. Al-Şafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaşr*, no. 1616, vol. 4, p. 510.

20. Al-Şafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaşr*, no. 41, vol. 1, p. 108.

21. Al-Şafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaşr*, no. 1825, vol. 5, p. 319.

22. Al-Şafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaşr*, no. 1709, vol. 5, p. 41.

Handsome Figure and Gallant

Not only the Bedouin emir Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā b. Muḥannā is described as good-looking, knowledgeable and courageous, but also the previously mentioned preacher Ibn Ḥaššāš was handsome, extremely knowledgeable and moreover gallant. This quality is mentioned by al-Ṣafadī in connection with several other individuals he describes as having a handsome figure. Ibn Mankalī Ṣarafā was appointed judge at Ṣawbak and died in the year 731/1331. Al-Ṣafadī describes him as follows:

“He had a handsome figure and a nice form (*wa-kāna ḥasan al-šakl, malīḥ al-hayʿa*), and possessed generosity and gallantry (*fīhi karam wa-muruwwa*).”²³

ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Tanūḥī, the wealthy supervisor of the Umayyad mosque and the market inspector of Damascus died in the year 746/1345 at the age of 58. Al-Ṣafadī depicts him thus:

“He had a handsome figure, a (nice) way to wind his turban (*kāna ḥasan al-šakl wa-l-ʿimma*), and a nice face like a full moon (*malīḥ al-waḡḥ yaḥkī al-badr wa-tammahū*).”²⁴

Next to his extraordinarily handsome appearance,

“he possessed noble qualities, good deeds and merits such as one finds only seldom altogether in a human being (*fīhi makārim wa-iḥsān wa-maḥāsīn qallamā taḡtamīʿu fī insān*).”

Among these, al-Ṣafadī mentions explicitly that he had “great gallantry and chivalry (*ḡazīr al-muruwwa, kaṭīr al-futuwwa*).” Furthermore, this wealthy man was known for his clear and lively mind. He financed the renewal of marble paneling and gold plating at the Umayyad mosque.

Among those cited by al-Ṣafadī as combining a handsome figure with gallantry is the emir Mankalī Buḡā. He became the chief of the sultan’s guard and attained reputation and riches at Cairo. He died in 753/1352. Al-Ṣafadī depicts him as follows:

“He had a handsome figure, always a smile on his face (*wa-kāna ḥasan al-šakl bassāman*), was benevolent, gallant and kind to those who served him (*fīhi ḥayr wa-muruwwa wa-taʿaṣṣub li-man yaḥdumuhu*).”²⁵

23. Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr*, no. 1979, vol. 5, p. 623.

24. Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr*, no. 1466, vol. 4, p. 261.

25. Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr*, no. 1877, vol. 5, p. 454.

Handsome Figure and Young

Not surprisingly many of the personages described by al-Şafadī as good-looking are young men. The foremost characteristic of these youths is their handsome figure. Some of them may have owed their career to their appearance.

The emir ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Qaṭliġā was in service at Damascus. He died in his forties in the year 720/1320. Al-Şafadī depicts in detail his outstanding comeliness:

“He had a fair, light-skinned complexion, a handsome figure, a perfect disposition (*kāna abyad azhar al-lawn, ḥasan al-şakl tāmm al-kawn*), elegant movements and sweet tranquility (*zarīf al-ḥarakāt, laṭīf al-sakanāt*). On his face he had a touch of beauty (*‘alā waġhibi maşhat ġamāl*). He possessed the beauty of the full moon (*wa-fīhi min al-badr ḥusnuhu laylat al-kamāl*), and never did one see a blue iris more beautiful than in his eye, and there was nothing more devastating than his eyelashes in all his attacks (*wa-lā aftak min ġufūnihi fī kull ḥamlīhi*).”²⁶

He caught the attention of several of his superiors. Al-Şafadī reports that the high-ranking officer al-Afram was quite enthralled with him, being aware of his perfect comeliness; and the emir Sayf al-Dīn Qaṭlūbak al-Kabīr was also inclined towards him. When Qaṭlūbak became governor at Şafad he brought the handsome ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Qaṭliġā with him. Aside from his comeliness, Qaṭliġā stood out as an excellent polo player and horse trader. Aş-Şafadī, who was 24 years old when Qaṭliġā died, noticed how he took care of himself and was impressed:

“I saw him—may God have mercy with him—how he vomited frequently and then gargled with vinegar and rose-water. He did this all the time. He used to drink much almond-oil, little glass bottle after little glass bottle.”

The emir ‘Izz al-Dīn Maḥdī was especially handsome:

“He had a handsome figure, a nice chin beard and (nice) eyebrows, black hair, a sweet expression, he was popular (*wa-kāna ḥasan al-şakl maliḥ al-daqaṇ wa-l-ḥawāġib, aswad aş-şā’r, ḥulw al-‘ibāra, ‘alayhi qubūl*).”²⁷

Al-Şafadī gives no dates for his life. This handsome man first worked as a craftsman making flax fibers and selling them to the cotton spinners, before he rose to become governor and supervisor of the fiscal administration in Aleppo. Even though al-Şafadī does not say so explicitly, we can assume that this remarkable career was possible at least to a certain degree due to his striking appearance.

26. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 1384, vol. 4, p. 128f.

27. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 1882, vol. 5, p. 459.

According to al-Şafadī the emir Bahādir al-Nāşirī had “an elegant figure (*kāna šakluhu ẓarīfan*).”²⁸ Al-Şafadī reports that “the sultan saw him and liked him (*fa-ra’āhu al-sultān fa-aḥabbahu*).” He took him in, made him a member of the inner circle and promoted him. Even though the influential emir Sayf al-Dīn Baktumur al-Sāqī criticized the sultan for his infatuation, Bahādir was finally raised to the highest emir’s rank, espoused one of the sultan’s daughters, and was one of four men who lodged each night with the sultan.

Al-Şafadī portrays the mighty king Mansa Mūsā of Mali—he refers to him as Mūsā, king of al-Takrūr—who passed through Cairo in 724/1324 on his legendary pilgrimage to Mekka. He was young and handsome and impressed people with his large entourage and abundant gold presents:

“At the time of his pilgrimage he was a young man with a nice figure and handsome face (*wa-kāna šābban malīḥ al-şakl ḥasan al-waḡḥ*).”²⁹

In this case it is clear that the young sovereign had not gained his position because of his comeliness, but al-Şafadī praises his handsome figure most probably because he considers it to be an additional advantage that contributed to the great impression made on the people of Cairo.

Not only emirs and kings are portrayed as combining youth and comeliness. Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Hilāl for example, who died at the young age of 25 from a fever and heavy blood loss in the year 748/1347, was according to al-Şafadī

“a young man, tall, with a handsome appearance and a nice figure, whose movements were always elegant and delicate (*wa-kāna šābban ṭawīlan ḥasan al-şūra, malīḥ al-şakl, ḥarakātuḥu ‘alā al-ẓurf wa-l-luṭf maqşūra*). His cheek had been already marked by the basil’s pen and it smiled from his front teeth as if they were grapes on vines.”³⁰

This young man, whose father and grandfather had been judges, tried once and again to get a lucrative post in the administration. One time he got support for his endeavor from the sultan’s wives. Even though it turned out to be unsuccessful, we can assume that this kind of support had something to do with his good looks. However, he was granted an important position in the fiscal administration after he “spent a large sum”. When he was made supervisor of the treasury in Syria, the people complained saying: “This one is too young for this position (*hādā şaḡīr ‘alā hādihī al-waẓīfa*),” as al-Şafadī reports. Good looks and riches were no qualification enough in this case. Taqī al-Dīn was dismissed and al-Şafadī tells us how he reacted emphasizing once again his moon-like handsomeness:

28. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 480, vol. 2, p. 62.

29. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 1890, vol. 5, p. 477.

30. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 107, vol. 1, p. 218.

“After this he did not leave his house anymore and stayed at home like the moon in his house (*fa-lāzama dārahu wa-aqāma makānahu ka-l-qamar fi dārihi*).”

The category of outstandingly fine-looking young men dispels all doubt that the physical descriptions by al-Ṣafadī may aim at a portrayal of the deceased person in the hereafter and reflect character. These handsome young men had such a captivating effect on their contemporaries that they could draw capital out of it for their career even though they may have lacked other qualities. In any case they were not especially pious.

Handsome Figure and Rich, Pleasure in Clothing and Eating

Another large and interesting category consists of the biographies of those contemporaries that are both handsome and rich and known for their taste for fine clothes and good food.

Ibrāhīm b. Ḥabāsa, a Christian, was supervisor of finances at Damascus and Aleppo, before he converted to Islam and got a similar position at Ṣafad. He died in 728/1327 when al-Ṣafadī who knew him personally was 32 years old. Al-Ṣafadī recounts that he had a nice figure (*kāna malīḥ al-šakāla*), was skilled in writing (*sadīd al-maqāla*) and was experienced in office work (*šanāʿat al-dīwān*).³¹ In the following biographical portrait, al-Ṣafadī writes mainly about how this man was able to make a profit during his career. At Aleppo he found “udders to milk”, and at Damascus he continued accumulate riches. Al-Ṣafadī says “his endless streak of luck does not need to be recounted in all detail”. Al-Ṣafadī tells us what he heard from Ibrāhīm b. Ḥabāsa himself who bragged about how much money he made while constructing a new khan. This man may have been good-looking and good at his job, but most importantly for al-Ṣafadī, he was rich.

Ibn al-Waḥīd al-Zurʿī was renowned for his exceptionally beautiful handwriting and he made a lot of money selling it. He died in 711/1311 at the age of 64. Al-Ṣafadī depicts him as follows:

“He had a perfect figure and enjoyed clothes and food (*kāna tāmm al-šakl, mutaʿanniḡan fi al-labs wa-l-akl*), he had a handsome attire and graceful movements (*ḡasan al-bizza lādīn al-muḡazza*). He was known for his courage, sound expression and skillfulness (*maḡṣūf bi-šūḡāʿihi, wa-bi-l-ʿibāra al-sādda wa-l-barāʿa*).”³²

This clearly is a portrait of a man who was not only comely, but also paid attention to his wardrobe and enjoyed eating. Ibn al-Waḥīd had enough money to afford this.

Likewise, al-Ṣafadī says about ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Našwān, a high-ranking secretary who died in 717/1317 at the age of 41:

31. Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr*, no. 18, vol. 1, p. 68.

32. Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr*, no. 1591, vol. 4, p. 466.

“The judge ‘Alā’ al-Dīn had a handsome figure, an elegant way of winding his turban, he dressed tidily and was of exceptional comeliness and pleasant scent (*wa-kāna al-qāḍī ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ḥasan al-šakl zarīf al-‘imāma nazīf al-malbūs zāhir al-wasāma ṭayyib al-rā’iḥa*).”³³

This good-looking man evidently cared for his outward appearance. Beside this portrait al-Šafadī reports that ‘Alā’ al-Dīn was very generous and cared for those around him.

Another contemporary of al-Šafadī who “enjoyed food and clothes (*yata’annaqu fi al-mā’kūl wa-l-malābis*)” was ‘Alam al-Dīn b. Quṭb al-Dīn. During his career he held several important positions in administration, among them the post of superintendant of Damascus, where he amassed riches. Al-Šafadī tells us: “In his life he received extraordinary blessings.” Al-Šafadī had a correspondence with this secretary who died in 760/1359 after a long illness. He describes his appearance and behavior:

“He had a comely appearance, a charming figure (*wa-kāna ḡamīl al-šūra, anīq al-šakl*), was of lofty stature and handsome form (*madīd al-qāma, ḥasan al-bizza*). He dressed tidily and used aromatic perfumes (*nazīf al-libās, ‘āṭir al-rā’iḥa*), he adorned himself with clothes and delighted in good food (*yataḡammalu fi al-malābis wa-yata’annaqu fi al-mā’kul*), he was generous with himself in foods and drinks (*yatawassa’u fi al-maṭā’im wa-l-mašārib*), and in the course of the day enjoyed having diverse dishes. He spent a lot of money for his companions (*wa-yunfiqu ‘alā muḥālīṭihi al-māl maḡḡānan*).”³⁴

Here, al-Šafadī stresses in the first place the overall handsome appearance of this individual, then goes on to dwell in detail on his somewhat extravagant love for food and clothing. The mention of love of food immediately follows the comments on appearance in the text. However, it is not warranted to try to establish a direct connection between a handsome figure and the enjoyment of life, just as it is not justified to establish such a connection between comeliness and leading a pious life.

The astronomer Ibn Abī Ṭarṭūr was one of al-Šafadī’s good friends. This scientist was also an outstanding man of letters. He died in 761/1360 at the age of 76 (al-Šafadī was 65 years old). Al-Šafadī reports that after his death, a lot of riches were found in his house. He sketches the following portrait of his friend:

“I met him frequently at Cairo, Damascus, Šafad and Ḥamā. He was humorous, a good entertainer (*wa-kāna ḥafīfan ‘alā al-qulūb, ḥasan al-‘iṣra*), full of jokes and sweet lamentations (*kaṭīr al-nādira, ḥulw al-tandīb*), the days in the company of people and in intelligent social gatherings had sharpened him (*qad barrathu al-ayyām fi ṣuḥbat al-nās wa-muḥālaṭat al-akyās*). He was of handsome figure and elegant dress, enjoying his food and drink (*wa-kāna ḥasan al-šakl zarīf al-malbas yata’annaqu fi ma’kalibi wa-mašāribibi*). However, he used to sit in his house surrounded by a lot of useless plates

33. Al-Šafadī, *A’yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1211, vol. 3, p. 488.

34. Al-Šafadī, *A’yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1486, vol. 4, p. 305.

and vessels. He had his meals cooked in front of him and for that reason there was so much stuff around (*wa-lākinnahu mā kāna yağlisu fi baytihi illā wa-ḥawlahu ‘ufāš kaṭīr min al-zabādī wa-l-awānī, wa-kāna yuṭbaḥu quddāmahū, fa-li-hādā kāna kaṭīr al-‘ufāš*).³⁵

Clearly Ibn Abī Ṭarṭūr appreciated both clothes and food. He himself was good-looking and witty.

From the examples given above it is evident that handsome appearance is not a characteristic of pious persons. Thus, a comely body is a quality worthy of mention in its own right.

Handsome Figure and Fat

How should we imagine a person who is described by al-Ṣafadī as of “handsome figure”? Up till now I have used the word “handsome” as a translation for *ḥasan*, the adjective employed by al-Ṣafadī in most cases in order to describe a comely body. Besides *ḥasan* he often uses other adjectives that imply a similar positive qualification, e.g. charming, elegant, fine etc. Apart from these terms he describes the handsome figure of someone in singular cases as lofty and tall. The group of individuals that are characterized as being especially tall need to be studied separately in order to better understand the meaning of “tall”. However, it seems plausible that a tall figure was perceived in al-Ṣafadī’s time as being charming.

In the following I will discuss the category of people that are described as having a handsome figure and at the same time as being corpulent. This group of biographies suggests that our own esthetic feeling may differ in important ways from that of al-Ṣafadī and his contemporaries.³⁶

The chief judge of Damascus, Imām al-Dīn Abū al-Ma‘ānī al-Qazwīnī who died aged 46 in 699/1300, was according to al-Ṣafadī

“of perfect figure, stout, with a comely face, clearly graceful (*kāna al-maḍkūr tāmm al-šakl samīnan, ḡamīl al-waḡḥ wasīman mubayyanan*). His character was delicate and his movements were elegant (*aḥlāquhū laṭīfa wa-ḥarakātuhū zarīfa*). He behaved with humility towards everyone he met and was conciliatory (*yatawāda‘u li-man yalqāhu wa-yatanāzalu*), even though he was of the highest rank (*wa-huwa fi a‘lā marqāt*). His mind was excellent beyond measure (*‘aqluhū ḡayyid ilā al-ḡāya*).³⁷

Here then, a man is depicted whose corpulence is presented as part and parcel of his perfect comeliness. Moreover, he was virtuous and knowledgeable. All in all, the description conveys a positive image.

The same can be said about the hanbalite chief judge ‘Izz al-Dīn Abū Ḥafṣ al-Maqdisī, who died at the age of 65 in the year 696/1296. Al-Ṣafadī portrays him as:

35. Al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1687, vol. 4, p. 667.

36. Compare the following discussion of fat men as presented in al-Ṣafadī’s biographies with the study by Marion Holmes Katz in this volume on the practice of women to fatten up.

37. Al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1272, vol. 3, p. 633.

“stout, of perfect figure and perfect mind (*samīn, tāmm al-šakl, kāmil al-‘aql*).”³⁸

This handsome fat man is moreover portrayed as deliberate in issuing his sentences and exceptionally knowledgeable. In both of these examples, the overall evaluation is positive.

The quite controversial mystic al-Muršidī entertained his own religious center in a village in the Egyptian province. He impressed his visitors with opulent meals. He died in 737/1337 when he was nearly 60 years old. Al-Šafadī describes him thus:

“The Sheikh—may God have mercy on him—was of tanned complexion, corpulent, of medium height, a handsome figure, illuminated image, of comely form and good character (*wa-kāna al-šayḥ... asmar mubaddan rab‘a min al-riḡāl, ḥasan al-šakl, munawwar al-šūra, ḡamil al-bay‘a, ḥasan al-aḥlāq*).”³⁹

In this case as well, the corpulent and compact body is seen as handsome and comely.

Not only in the case of scholars of religion is corpulence considered attractive. Al-Šafadī writes about the emir Bahā’ al-Dīn al-Manṣūrī, who died in 698/1299:

“He had a nice figure, was of perfect build, stout and courageous (*kāna malīḥ al-šūra, tāmm al-ḥalq, samīnan, šuḡā‘an*).”⁴⁰

Al-Šafadī does not give us much information on this military man. Another emir, Sayf al-Dīn b. Ašbuḡā, was one of the middle ranking emirs at Damascus. He died in 749/1348 in Beirut and is described as being “of perfect figure, corpulent (*šakl tāmm ḍaḥm*)”. Concerning his character al-Šafadī states that “he was peaceful by nature (*salīm al-bāṭin wa-l-ṭibā‘*)”⁴¹.

Fat Figure

Supplementing these examples I wish to mention three more cases in which al-Šafadī does not describe a comely person as being fat, but mentions only the overweight figure of a person presenting this person in an overall positive light. The treasurer and market supervisor ‘Izz al-Dīn al-‘Aqīlī died 736/1335 at the age of 63. Al-Šafadī emphasizes that “he possessed religiosity, abstinence and was safeguarding (*kānat laḥu diyāna wa-fīhi muska wa-šiyāna*)”. His appearance and behavior is depicted by al-Šafadī as follows:

“He had a corpulent figure (*kāna šakluḥu ḍaḥman*), honor and dignity (*‘alayhi mahāba wa-waqār*), and talked while bowing his head and lowering his eyes (out of humility) (*yataḥaddatu wa-huwa mutriq*).

38. Al-Šafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1270, vol. 3, p. 632.

39. Al-Šafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1630, vol. 4, p. 536.

40. Al-Šafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1366, vol. 4, p. 87.

41. Al-Šafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 665, vol. 2, p. 375.

When he punished one of the market vendors it was never more than ten light blows. Consequently they held him in great honor.”⁴²

Another person is Faḥr al-Dīn b. al-Ḥarīrī who held a high office in the fiscal administration and whom al-Ṣafadī knew personally having met him several times at Damascus and Cairo. He died in 751/1350 in Tripoli and was according to al-Ṣafadī

“of fair complexion, with carrot hair, and stout (*wa-kāna abyad, ašqar, samīnan*), he possessed cheerfulness, refinement and elegance (*fīhi bašāša wa-kays wa-lutf*), a mild character and cleverness (*damāṭat aḥlāq wa-dahā*). For a while he walked with a simple headgear and a simple honey-colored garment (not wearing a turban).”⁴³

This fat administrator is depicted as being at the same time refined and elegant and of good character even sometimes dressing in an extreme modest way.

Also the emir Sayf al-Dīn Ṭurnā, who died in 734/1333, was according to al-Ṣafadī

“fat, of pale complexion, fleshy, and his face was like a glowing ember (*wa-kāna ḍaḥman abyad ḡasīman ka’anna waḡḥahu ḡamr awmaḍa*).”⁴⁴

This fat emir used to lead the music band during their processions around the tent hitting his stick in the ground so heavily “that sand and pebbles were stirred up” in order to beat time. Al-Ṣafadī comments:

“His corpulence when he turned (playing with the musicians) was pleasant (*wa-li-dahāmatihī idā dāra ḥalāwa*).”

In this case then, al-Ṣafadī explicitly notes that the corpulent figure was good-looking.

All these examples make it very clear that corpulence was not considered to be the opposite of comeliness. On the contrary, we can assume that a stout body was perceived as contributing to the attractiveness of a person, enhancing his good appearance. However, the following examples of fat individuals show that we should be wary of generalizations.

Fat but Generous

Indeed, some descriptions by al-Ṣafadī point to the fact that corpulence by itself was not simply equated by him and his contemporaries with comeliness. He portrays, for example, the high-ranking emir Sayf al-Dīn Ḥimmaṣ Aḥḍar in the following way:

42. Al-Ṣafadī, *A’yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1464, vol. 4, p. 256.

43. Al-Ṣafadī, *A’yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 1802, vol. 5, p. 292.

44. Al-Ṣafadī, *A’yān al-‘aṣr*, no. 456, vol. 2, p. 45.

“He had a corpulent figure (*kāna šakluhu ḍaḥman*) and his face was fleshy (*wa-waḡḡuhu mumtali’ laḥm*).”⁴⁵

Al-Şafadī states at a later point in the biography that

“when he first came to power he had a nice and handsome figure (*wa-kāna fī awwal amrihi maliḥan ḥasan al-şūra*).”⁴⁶

It seems then that a corpulent figure was not always considered as attractive by al-Şafadī. This chubby emir, who was killed in 743/1342, had hoarded a lot of money, but was also charitable to the poor as al-Şafadī emphasizes.

Ibrāhīm b. Şābir was chief of state and highly respected by the sultan. He died in 744/1343 and al-Şafadī notes that “he was corpulent and tall (*wa-kāna ḍaḥman ṭawīlan*)”⁴⁷. Al-Şafadī recounts in his biography that he resorted to violence to steal from people by way of confiscation and in so doing succeeded in amassing riches for himself. He was granted special privileges by the sultan, being allowed to have his own entourage. In connection with his death, al-Şafadī then declares that

“in spite of his corpulence and tallness (*illā annahu ma’a ḍaḥāmatihī wa-ṭūlibihī*), he was not rude and harsh (*lam yakun faẓẓan ḡalīẓ al-qalb*), but he was merciful and kind to the weak.”

Through this formulation al-Şafadī indirectly equates corpulence with rudeness, and suggests that it is not linked to kindness. He sees Ibrāhīm b. Şābir as an exception to this rule.

Whatever idea might be behind this perception, these examples indicate that corpulence was not always seen in a positive light.

Fat and Debilitated

Even more evident is the negative perception of corpulence in the following examples, in which al-Şafadī depicts some of his contemporaries who were handicapped on account of their obesity. One example is Ğamāl al-Dīn, son of the famous chief judge Ğalāl al-Dīn al-Qazwīnī, who died in 743/1342 and is described as follows:

“He had a corpulent figure (*wa-kāna šakluhu ḍaḥman*), an enormous belly (*kabīr al-baṭan*), and clumsy movements (*taqīl al-ḥarakāt*). He could walk only with difficulty (*yata’adḍaru ‘alayhī al-mašy illā bi-kulfa*).”⁴⁸

45. Al-Şafadī, *A’yān al-‘aşr*, no. 811, vol. 2, p. 586.

46. Al-Şafadī, *A’yān al-‘aşr*, no. 811, vol. 2, p. 587.

47. Al-Şafadī, *A’yān al-‘aşr*, no. 22, vol. 1, p. 73.

48. Al-Şafadī, *A’yān al-‘aşr*, no. 901, vol. 2, p. 725.

Moreover al-Şafadī reports that this obese man consumed so much meat that the sultan had him transferred from Cairo to Damascus.

A very different personality was the local ruler of Mardin, Ġāzī b. Qarā Arslān al-Malik al-Manşūr, who reigned for approximately twenty years and died an old man in his seventies in the year 712/1312. Al-Şafadī portrays him thus:

“Al-Manşūr was a fat and stout man (*wa-kāna al-Manşūr raġulan samīnan badīnan*). When he was riding, there was always a litter behind him out of fear that something could happen to him out of fatigue. So the litter was always on standby.”⁴⁹

Even though in this case al-Şafadī presents a respected personality, a sovereign in his advanced age, he nonetheless points out that the fear of sudden fatigue might have been not only due to his old age but to his fatness.

The emir Sayf al-Dīn Qalāwuz was accompanying the emir Yalbuġā on his escape when they arrived at Hama, where he broke down. Al-Şafadī describes his illness:

“He stayed there for a week and became swollen and blue since these were very hot days (*wa-aqāma bihā muddat ġum‘a wa-warama wa-zraqqa, li’annahā kānat ayyāman šadīdat al-ḥarr*) and (in addition) he was fat and stout (*wa-kāna huwa fī nafsihi samīnan badīnan*).”⁵⁰

Sayf al-Dīn Qalāwuz died from this weakness in 748/1347. Judging by the wording of this report, it seems as if al-Şafadī wants to point out that the fatness of this emir might have played a role in the fatal outcome of this breakdown.

In the case of the judge Şafī al-Dīn, son of the chief judge Şams al-Dīn al-Ḥarīrī, who died in 757/1356, al-Şafadī portrays an especially villainous man. He was so notorious for his behavior that the people told stories about him that, according to al-Şafadī, are scarcely credible, since they depict him as being extremely brazen and stubborn.

Aş-Şafadī describes his bodily condition thus:

“This judge Şafī al-Dīn had a corpulent figure. He was so excessively fat, that it was beyond comprehension for a reasonable person (*kāna hādā al-qāḍī Şafī al-Dīn šakluhu ḍaḥm mufrit fī al-siman yuḥṭī’u al-‘āqil idā ġā’a fī al-istifhām ‘anhū*).”⁵¹

In this case al-Şafadī clearly condemns the excessive obesity.

49. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 1331, vol. 4, p. 23.

50. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 1385, vol. 4, p. 131.

51. Al-Şafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aşr*, no. 190, vol. 1, p. 376.

Our analysis of those biographies that portray corpulent persons shows that in many cases a corpulent body was perceived by al-Şafadī and his contemporaries as handsome, contributing to the general attractiveness of a person. However, al-Şafadī also points out cases where the obesity was so excessive that he clearly found it disgusting.

Conclusion

Closer examination of one category of the physical descriptions in al-Şafadī's biographical lexicon has clearly shown that the body and personal appearance were important to al-Şafadī and his contemporaries. In the 14th century persons with a handsome figure attracted the attention of those around them and this deserved mention in their biographies.

Al-Şafadī mentions the bodily appearance of people only in approximately one in ten cases. This may quite simply be due to the fact that only a few individuals had an appearance remarkable or unusual enough to attract special attention. Quite a few of the men, whose appearance is not mentioned, were known to al-Şafadī personally. Therefore, first-hand experience was not the reason for including descriptive comments in some biographies and not in others. He describes the bodily appearance of as many persons whom he had never met.

The physical descriptions, especially in the category "of handsome figure" are not very detailed. A few of them are and it would be interesting to analyze them separately. The lack of detail in Arabic biographical literature in general has been pointed out by disappointed Western scholars. However, al-Şafadī did not aim to provide an exact description that could be translated into a picture of the subject of his biography. His aim was rather to highlight a special feature of a person by which this individual distinguished himself from others. From a Western perspective, which is preoccupied with a search for substitutes for missing images, this seems to be very little information. The comparison with a modern academic *Who Is Who* is appropriate in this context. In this genre of reference works information on figure and bodily appearance is neither useful nor desirable. On the contrary, reference to the attractive figure of a researcher, whether male or female, in the context of his or her academic achievements is perceived as completely out of place. In this respect al-Şafadī's biographical lexicon differs from its modern counterpart. Apparently his readers wanted to know about the appearance of outstanding personages. A handsome appearance was acknowledged as a qualification in its own right next to other qualifications, be they academic, military, religious or administrative. This shows clearly the important role that physique played for al-Şafadī and his contemporaries.

The many examples discussed above make it clear that the physical descriptions given by al-Şafadī, even if they consist only of a remark that someone "was of handsome figure", were not based merely on imagination. For al-Şafadī the body was a mundane matter and the basis for a person's attractiveness in this world. I do not want to entirely dismiss Cooper's theses that might be valid in some of those examples he discusses, but as a general interpretation of Arabic biographical literature it is too much concerned with a religious, theological aspect. In the case of al-Şafadī's biographies of his contemporaries it must be revised.

Our examination clearly shows that a handsome figure was esteemed and admired. A fine appearance is mentioned as an independent qualification that distinguishes a person. Comments on comely appearance are included by al-Şafadī in resumes, where he gives a general evaluation of the individual in question. In the frame of this passage, the handsome figure is mentioned along with other qualifications such as religiosity or knowledge, gallantry or richness and *savoir-vivre*. In some cases it is tempting to see a correlation between those other virtues and comeliness. However, there is no real basis for this. The importance of a fine figure is most apparent in the biographies of young men who were known mainly for their comely appearance and, in exceptional cases, owed their career to this single qualification.

Furthermore, we must conclude that a handsome figure in al-Şafadī's time does not necessarily correspond to our perceptions today. Some unusually tall people are described as comely, but this group needs further investigation. The analysis of individuals that are described as corpulent shows that an overweight body could in some cases be perceived as a handsome figure. However, excessive obesity was definitely not considered attractive. Without a doubt, the esthetic effect of the body played an important role and had a high status in al-Şafadī's society.

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