

Gerrit Jasper Schenk
Editor

Historical Disaster Experiences

Towards a Comparative and Transcultural
History of Disasters Across Asia and Europe

 Springer

Editor

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Acknowledgments

That books also have a destiny prior to their making is well known. This volume is no exception. As the editor, I am happy and relieved that the long process of editing and printing, which really stretched the patience of the authors, has come to an end. Therefore, I wish to express my gratitude first of all to the contributors of this volume for their faith in the project.

Thanks to all those who have supported the work on the long road to printing, in particular Kristine Chalyan-Daffner, Eleonor Marcussen, Martin Bauch, Julia Itin, Benedikt Mette, Susanne Dressler-Mutz, Robert Schwank, and Andrea Hacker—all team members in Heidelberg and Darmstadt, who have contributed to the success of the preceding conferences in Heidelberg, Beirut, and New Delhi and thus to the development of the volume. Without Elaine Griffiths' thorough editing, the adventure of assembling a volume of English texts from all kinds of linguistic and cultural backgrounds into a readable whole would certainly not have been possible. Language nuances and coloring, however, are unavoidable: those who do research in a cross-cultural perspective consider variation an enrichment.

The topic of this volume may be gloomy at first glance, but it is worth the effort: research on the historical dimension of disaster experiences shows not only that cultures are sensitive tissues but also how elastic they are and what surprising patterns, combinations, and opportunities for change they offer. This book invites the reader to discover the diversity and similarities of these experiences and thus to learn about oneself. As the editor, this is what I am grateful for: the additional insight that I have gained from the collected research on the topic of this volume. I hope and wish that the readers will be able to share the same experience.

December 2015

Gerrit Jasper Schenk

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Part IV
Urban Experience: Earthquakes and Fires

“The Great Fire in Cairo in 1321:” Interactions Between Nature and Society

Syrinx von Hees

Abstract This contribution explores the ways in which urban Mamlūk society reacted during the fourteenth century when confronted with a major disaster like a great fire. My starting point is six Mamlūk reports on the same event, the “Great Fire” that struck in 721 AH/1321 CE in Cairo. These reports themselves are one important reaction to the disaster to be considered. With reference to the distinguishing features between natural and man-made disasters, I argue that in the final analysis, all disasters that we know about are man-made in the sense that we know about them only through human narration. First I explore the immediate measures taken during the fires as reported by the different authors. The aim is to understand how well society was prepared for such disasters: Did people take up fire-fighting and preventive measures and, if so, which ones and who actually felt responsible? Against the mainstream argument that pre-modern Muslim societies were mainly seeking help from God when confronted with disasters, I argue that this gives a distorted picture and that such an opinion could only be maintained because researchers rely upon singular reports ignoring their special narrative strategies. Secondly, I discuss the human interpretations of the causes for the “Great Fire” as presented by the different authors. Against the opinion, established in secondary literature, that these fires were acts of arson committed by Christians, I argue that we have to be very cautious in accepting such facts. Reading the different reports makes it clear that the accusation of the Christians was just one convenient interpretation among several others that later authors took for granted.

In the year 721 AH/1321 CE, during the third reign of the Mamlūk sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (684–741 AH/1285–1341 CE), a series of fires broke out in the city of Cairo over a period of a month. These tragic events caught the attention of many Mamlūk historians, who describe the conflagrations in detail and give an elaborate account of the people’s reactions. This enables us to discuss some special features

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of the interactions between nature and society. For this purpose, I will first analyse the presentation of the people's reactions to the "natural disaster."¹ I will distinguish between those actions that took place during the conflagration itself (outbreaks of panic or seeking help from God versus fire-fighting and preventive measures) and interpretations and assumptions regarding the causes in the aftermath of the disaster (God/nature/human error). This will lead us to a discussion of human causes of "natural" disasters, another form of interaction between nature and society.

For this study I have consulted six different Mamlūk reports that are accessible in printed editions. I have chosen four contemporary reports—three from Cairo itself (al-Nuwayrī,² al-Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī al-Faḍā'il,³ Ibn al-Dawādārī⁴) and one from Damascus (Ibn Kathīr)⁵—and two later accounts (al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī).⁶ These six narratives differ in the number and order of the fires that occurred during the summer of 721 AH/1321 CE. They also differ in their description of the human reactions to the fires, and in their interpretations of the events.

This aspect is very important: The different depictions highlight that the intensity and extent of disasters (of any kind, not just fires)—whether "natural" or man-made—are definitely a product of human narrative. Thus we are discussing another level of "interaction between nature and society." Indeed, the narrative aspect of disaster coverage is a significant issue when it comes to the question of interaction between nature and society. Following the concept of the "narrative turn,"⁷ we could argue that "natural" disasters do not really exist, since society constructs all known disasters by reporting on them. Reporting on disasters

¹The theory that disasters are part of nature—disruptive and violent, destroying order—in contrast to the culture and order of human beings, has a long tradition that has been discussed and challenged by several authors; see especially Anthony Oliver-Smith, "Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture," in *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*, ed. Susanna M. Hoffman et al. (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002), 23–47. In the often-cited physical classification of different disasters proposed by Eric Jones in *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 24, fires are listed in the last category of "social disasters," outside of his physical classification system, which differentiates between geophysical, climatic, and biological disasters. Fires, however, can have a purely "natural," physical cause, for example, a thunderbolt. Later in the article I will discuss this aspect further.

²For further details, see footnote 14.

³For further details, see footnote 27.

⁴For further details, see footnote 33.

⁵For further details, see footnote 37.

⁶For further details, see footnote 43.

⁷The term "narrative turn" refers to discussions in contemporary cultural studies that stress the narrative aspect of any kind of text, not only literary. These discussions were sparked by radical thoughts such as Jacques Derrida's notion that nothing exists outside the text. For further reading, see "Die Kulturwissenschaften und das Paradigma der Sprache," in *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften*, vol. 2, *Paradigmen und Disziplinen*, ed. Friedrich Jaeger and Jürgen Straub (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), 341–465; see also Ute Daniel, *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte: Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 430–443.

presupposes a certain degree of concern. With respect to the fires of the year 721 AH/1321 CE, I will argue that the “good houses” were the reason for the exceptional coverage. The actual dimension of the destruction is difficult to reconstruct on the basis of the available reports.

The fires of 721 AH/1321 CE have caught the attention of several researchers who study the situation of Christians under Mamlūk rule.⁸ In this context, the fires are interesting because Christians were alleged to have started them in retaliation for the destruction of several churches a month earlier.⁹ These researchers base their information mainly on the report by al-Maqrīzī, one of the later sources. Indeed, al-Maqrīzī’s report on these events has been translated twice, always in the context of the study of Christians in the Middle East.¹⁰ My comparison of different reports and analysis of their narrative strategies will elucidate these events from a different perspective. The issue of the alleged Christian arsonists will be relevant only in the second part of this paper, when I discuss the human interpretations of the fires.

Immediate Measures Taken During the Fires

Let us begin by addressing the immediate actions taken during the respective fires. We will always keep in mind the diverse renderings of these human (re-)actions. The objective is to find out whether the people concerned merely panicked or took action. If the latter, who tried to extinguish the fires? Were such efforts organized in any way, or did they develop spontaneously? Who felt responsible? Were people prepared for conflagrations? Could they resort to any kind of routine in such situations? Can we discern any changes in their behaviour as a result of the disaster?

These questions will be approached from the perspective of Islamic history. It is to be noted that such questions have hitherto rarely been posed and, if they were, the suggestion was that pre-modern Muslims reacted to disaster mainly by seeking

⁸Moshe Perlmann, “Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire,” *Bulletin of the School for Oriental and African Studies* 10, no. 4 (1942): 843–861, especially 852–854; Donald P. Little, “Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahārī Mamlūks, 692–755/1293–1354,” *Bulletin of the School for Oriental and African Studies* 39, no 3 (1976): 552–569, especially 562–565; Donald P. Little, “Religion under the Mamlūks,” *The Muslim World* 73, nos. 3–4 (1983): 165–181, especially 179–180; Donald P. Little, “Coptic Converts to Islam during the Bahārī Mamluk Period,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 274.

⁹On the destruction of the churches, see also footnote 67.

¹⁰Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, *Macrizi’s Geschichte der Copten*, (1845; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1979), 121–136; Arthur S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects: A Critical Study of the Convent of Umar* (London: Cass, 1970), 61–77.

refuge in God.¹¹ William Tucker, who was one of the first to gather material on natural disasters during the Mamlūk period, argues that there is a cause-and-effect relation between the experience of natural disasters and religious behaviour. I do not want to question this relationship, but because of his focus, Tucker is only interested in religious reactions to disasters. He refers to the “great fire in Cairo in 1321” as an example of people reacting to catastrophic events with eschatological expectations.¹² Here again, the comparison of the different reports and the analyses of their narrative strategies will lead us to a different conclusion.

Let us now turn to the first narrative: al-Nuwayrī (677–733 AH/1279–1333 CE), the high-ranking civil servant, historian, and man of letters, reports on events that took place when he was around 44 years old. At that time he was most probably living in the Madrasa al-Nāṣiriya,¹³ where he wrote his encyclopaedic work, including his annals.¹⁴ He could have been an eyewitness to the events. It seems that he did not go to the places where the fires broke out, but at one point in his report he says that he asked someone affected by the fire what they had done about it.¹⁵ Al-Nuwayrī can be regarded as a well-informed contemporary source, providing the most detailed rendering of events.¹⁶

According to al-Nuwayrī, the fire (*al-ḥarīq*) broke out on Saturday, 4 June (15 Jumādā I), in a street (*khatt*) in the urban quarter called al-Daylam (Map 1, fire no. 2). The fire in question destroyed the house (*dār*) of the chief of the descendants of Muhammad (*naqīb al-ashraf*), namely Sharīf Badr al-Dīn, along with other houses in the vicinity belonging to other notables (*ashraf*) and Muslims

¹¹William F. Tucker, “Natural Disasters and the Peasantry in Mamlūk Egypt,” *Journal of Economic and Social History* 24, no. 2 (1981): 215–224; William F. Tucker, “Environmental Hazards, Natural Disasters, Economic Loss, and Mortality in Mamluk Syria,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 109–128; Anna Akasoy, “Islamic Attitudes to Disasters in the Middle Ages: A Comparison of Earthquakes and Plagues,” *The Medieval History Journal* 10, nos. 1–2 (2007): 387–410; Konrad Hirschler, “Erdbebenberichte und Diskurse der Kontinuität in der postformativen Periode,” *Der Islam* 84 (2008): 103–139.

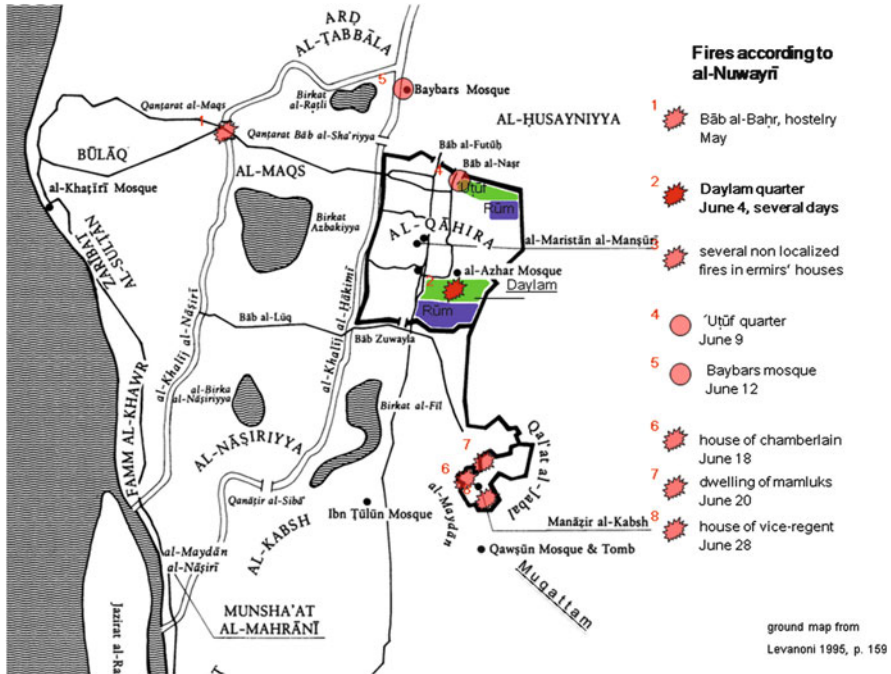
¹²Tucker, “Natural Disasters,” 223. In this regard, his more recent article, extending the material with a regional focus on Syria, is a little more cautious, stating: “Disasters may well have stimulated heightened religious consciousness, but the references are too sparse to warrant any confident statements in this respect.” Tucker, “Environmental Hazards,” 115.

¹³This Madrasa is on the main street connecting the northern city gate Bāb al-Futūḥ with the southern gate Bāb al-Zuwayla. The Madrasa al-Nāṣiriya is next to the Madrasa-Hospital of Sultan Qalāwūn, indicated on the map (Map 1) as “al-Maristān al-Manṣūrī.”

¹⁴Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi, “an-Nuwayrī,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. 8, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 156–160.

¹⁵Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab fī funūn al-adab*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ḥijāzī and Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda (Cairo: Dār al-kutub al-miṣriya, 1997), 33: 17.

¹⁶It consists of 14 pages with approximately 25 lines each; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 33: 14–27. Another historian living in Cairo at the time was Baybars al-Manṣūrī, who died in 725 AH/1325 CE, at the age of approximately 80. His chronicle, *Zubdat al-fikra fī tārikh al-hijra*, ends with the year 724 AH/1324 CE, but from this work only the years 650–709 AH/1252–1309 CE are edited, and I have not used his work for this study.



Map 1 Fires according to al-Nuwayrī. On this map the outline of the city walls of Cairo (highlighted in black) appear as they were during this period. To the south they are connected to the walled citadel of Cairo, the residence of the Mamlūk sultan and his Mamlūk soldiers. To the south of the famous al-Azhar Mosque-University in the middle of the walled city was the urban quarter al-Daylam. Al-Nuwayrī mentions two other urban quarters further north, namely al-'Uṭūf and al-Rūm, in his further discussion of the events. I thank Björn Zimprich for his help with the map design (For al-Daylam quarter, see al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā'iz wa al-i'tibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa al-athār*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (London: al-Furqān Islamic Heritage Foundation, 2003), vol. 3, 23–27; André Raymond and Gaston Wiet, *Les Marchés du Caire: Traduction annotée du texte de Maqrīzī* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 1979), plan II and plan III)

(*muslimūn*).¹⁷ Al-Nuwayrī gives a precise account of the destruction caused by this first fire, claiming that around 30 houses, with approximately 100 households (*maskan*), were affected. The fire continued to spread for several days.¹⁸

Up to this point, al-Nuwayrī only describes the damage caused by the fire, without mentioning the reactions of the people concerned. However, the damage is depicted in detail, and al-Nuwayrī is the only author who makes special mention of the *naqīb al-ashraf*'s house and other *ashraf* houses. We may suppose a certain sympathy on his part for this part of the local elite.

¹⁷With these terms al-Nuwayrī refers to the local elite, in contrast to the ruling elite of Mamlūk emirs.

¹⁸Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 33: 16.

Al-Nuwayrī's first reference to any reaction to the conflagration is when he states that "someone" feared that the fire might reach the house of Qādī Karīm al-Dīn. This Karīm al-Dīn was actually not a jurist, but was at that time the most powerful figure in government administration, as supervisor of the sultan's personal finances (*nāzir al-khāṣṣ al-sultānīya*).¹⁹ The sultan's goods, namely textiles and other treasures (*amwāl al-sultān wa al-aqmisha wa ghayru dhālika min al-tuḥaf*), were stored in Karīm al-Dīn's house, as al-Nuwayrī relates.²⁰ This makes it clear that the "one" concerned here is not just any rich and influential person, but the sultan himself. According to al-Nuwayrī, people feared the fire most at the moment when it began to threaten the sultan's goods, and the sultan's personal concern also seems to be the main reason why al-Nuwayrī tells this story.

Al-Nuwayrī portrays the sultan himself as the instigator of the ensuing measures, since Karīm al-Dīn, the owner of the endangered house, was in Alexandria. The sultan reportedly took action by sending emirs and their attendants (*ghulmān*) to extinguish the flames with the assistance of water carriers (*saqqāyīn*) and bleachers (*qaṣṣārīn*). Even the vice-regent (*nā'ib al-salṭana*), the sultan's guard (*ḥujjāb*), Emir Jāndār, and other high-ranking emirs helped. With this concerted effort, supported by the elite, the conflagration was actually extinguished. However, some of the houses around Karīm al-Dīn's house had to be torn down.²¹

This report points to the great loss that the destruction of the sultan's textiles would have implied. It seems that since there was so much at stake, the ruling elite came together—under the command of the sultan himself—and fought the fire collectively. However, it is also evident that this concerted effort by the ruling class was not primarily aimed at protecting the quarter as such, or at containing the fire as far as possible, but mainly at rescuing the sultan's valuable goods. Other houses were even purposely destroyed in order to save the one and only important house. The report also shows that the elites were able to enlist ordinary people's help for the purpose of extinguishing flames, especially water carriers and bleachers. Al-Nuwayrī does not describe how this was organised, but it is to be assumed that the water carriers on the streets would simply be forced to come and join in. Did some emir go to the bleachers' workplace and pick them up?

Since thereafter several fires occurred, hitting several emirs' dwellings (*'idda duwar masākin al-'umarā'*), and since these fires always seemed to have started next

¹⁹Originally, Karīm al-Dīn was a Copt and started his career in the Mamlūk bureaucracy under the auspices of his uncle during the reign of Qalāwūn. Under pressure from Sultan Baybars Jāshankīr, he converted to Islam. In 710 AH/1310 CE, sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad appointed him to the high position of supervisor of his personal finances. Karīm al-Dīn fell into disgrace in 723 AH/1323 CE. His property was confiscated and he was strangled. See W. M. Brinner, "Ibn al-Sadīd, Karīm ad-Dīn," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3: 923; Little, "Coptic Converts," 275–276; see also: Donald P. Little, "Notes on the early nazar al-khāṣṣ," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235–253.

²⁰Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 33: 16.

²¹Ibid., 16.

to the air-shafts on the roofs (*bādhanj*)²² (several fires in unspecified emirs’ houses, Map 1, no. 3), people began to take preventive measures. Al-Nuwayrī reports:

The people (*al-nās*) took precautions. They equipped themselves and this resulted in a high demand for storage vessels and large jugs (*al-dinān wa al-khawābī*) that were filled with water and set up in the streets (*turuqāt*), at shop-doors (*abwāb al-ḥawānīt*), in the markets (*aswāq*), in big stores (*qayāsīr*), stables (*iṣṭiblāt*), alleys (*durūb*) and houses (*dūr*).²³

He explains that the people took turns at staying awake all night, especially at emirs’ dwellings. Their Mamlūks and attendants (*ghulmān*) stayed on the roofs, beating their drums and calling out to one another.²⁴

At this point in the narrative, al-Nuwayrī integrates his personal “eyewitness” report. He tells us that, while praying at the al-Ḥākim-Mosque (in the north of the walled city next to the city gate called Bāb al-Futūḥ), he asked one of the emirs, who usually attended prayer with a large entourage, where he had left all of his people. This emir explained to al-Nuwayrī that he had left them behind in order to protect his house, out of fear that a fire might break out; this way they could immediately extinguish the flames before they grew too strong.²⁵

Here, al-Nuwayrī reports on rich people who took their own measures in view of repeated house fires. It seems that after the initial fire in the al-Daylam quarter, the houses of emirs were especially targeted. These wealthy homeowners learned from the recurring disasters, and took precautionary measures, mainly for themselves. These measures seem to have been a private matter; the much-needed vessels were contested and each emir tried to protect his own house. On the other hand, streets and alleys, markets and the large shops were also equipped with buckets. Who was responsible for these precautionary measures in the public sphere? Can we interpret this as an act of caring for the community? It seems that the emirs did not just protect their own houses without regard for others, since they did organize a sort of temporary fire brigade for the nights, which consisted of men keeping guard and warning each other with the help of drums. These measures can be seen as corporate measures that were not imposed from above, but guided by common interests.

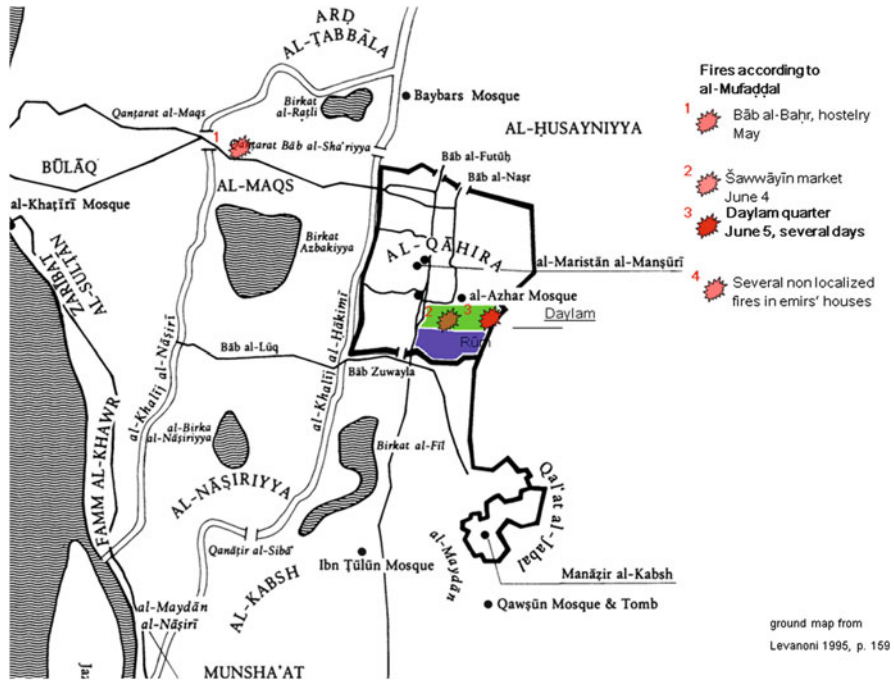
It is to be noted that the human reactions to the outbreaks of fire described by al-Nuwayrī have nothing to do with faith or any kind of religious feelings. First, he describes the damage that one conflagration caused to the houses of the local elite, the *ashraf*. In a second step, he depicts the sultan himself as the driving force behind an organized effort to extinguish a major fire that threatened his own goods (on which many others depended), by recruiting his emirs as well as ordinary people whose work involved water. Finally, he reports on a group of rich people—in this case from among the military elite—who both individually and collectively took precautionary measures without guidance from above to protect themselves from recurring outbreaks of fire.

²²See Franz Rosenthal, “Poetry and Architecture: The Bādhanj,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 8 (1977): 1–19.

²³Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 33: 16–17.

²⁴Ibid., 17.

²⁵Ibid., 17.



Map 2 Fires according to al-Mufaḍḍal

Let us now turn to the second report on these events. The Coptic historian al-Mufaḍḍal Ibn Abī al-Faḍā'il (before 759 AH/1358 CE) wrote a chronicle covering the period from 658 AH/1260 CE until 741 AH/1340 CE.²⁶ We do not know much about his life, but it seems that he lived in Cairo during the time of the fires.²⁷ Like al-Nuwayrī, he can be considered a potential eyewitness. His account is much shorter than that of al-Nuwayrī.²⁸ Al-Mufaḍḍal starts with a detail that is missing in al-Nuwayrī's account, namely that on Saturday, 4 June (15 Jumādā I), the fire (*al-ḥarīq*) broke out at the meat-grillers' market, al-Shawwāyīn, next to the al-Daylam quarter (Map 2, fire no. 2).²⁹

²⁶J. den Heijer, "al-Mufaḍḍal b. Abi 'l-Faḍā'il," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 7: 305.

²⁷Samira Kortantamer, *Ägypten und Syrien zwischen 1317 und 1341 in der Chronik des Mufaḍḍal b. Abī l-Faḍā'il*, (Freiburg: Klaus Schwarz, 1973), 5.

²⁸It consists of 38 lines: al-Mufaḍḍal, "an-Nahḡ as-sadīd," in Kortantamer, *Chronik des Mufaḍḍal*, 13–15.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 14. The market of the meat-grillers was situated on the main street leading to the southern city gate called Bāb al-Zuwayla; see Raymond and Wiet, *Les Marchés du Caire*, 177 and plan III.

After mentioning this first fire, al-Mufaḍḍal moves on to the conflagration on Sunday “in an alley (*zuqāq*) of the al-Daylam quarter near the house of the Qāḍī Karīm al-Dīn al-Kabīr” that destroyed all the houses in this alley (Map 2, fire no. 3).³⁰ Unlike al-Nuwayrī, al-Mufaḍḍal does not refer to the houses of the *ashraf*. Like al-Nuwayrī, al-Mufaḍḍal only begins to mention reactions to the fire when Karīm al-Dīn’s house is in danger. He also describes the efforts undertaken by the vice-regent (*nā’ib al-saltana bi-naḥsihī*) and other emirs to extinguish the fire while Karīm al-Dīn was absent in Alexandria. However, al-Mufaḍḍal does not write about the sultan’s own involvement in this matter. According to his account, it is a corporate measure organised by the emirs of their own accord. When the recurring fires begin to affect emirs’ dwellings (*duwar al-‘umarā’*) in particular, (non-localized fires, Map 2, no. 4), al-Mufaḍḍal states that “the people took action and deposited water in leathern reservoirs (*al-aḥwāq al-jild*) on the roofs (*saḥḥa*) and at the doors (*abwāb*).”³¹

Al-Mufaḍḍal, like al-Nuwayrī, describes the precautionary measures taken by the emirs when confronted with recurring fire outbreaks. However, according to him, these measures were only taken for private dwellings, contrary to the picture drawn by al-Nuwayrī, who reports that public spaces, such as streets and alleys, markets and large shops, were also equipped with water buckets.

The third report that I will analyze was written by Ibn al-Dawādārī. Unfortunately, we do not know much about his life, but he most probably composed his chronicle in Cairo between 709 AH/1309 CE and 736 AH/1335 CE.³² This implies that he might have been an eyewitness of the fires that broke out in Cairo during the summer of 721 AH/1321 CE, just like al-Nuwayrī and al-Mufaḍḍal. His report is rather brief.³³ He begins his coverage of these events by stating: “In this year (721 AH) the grand fire (*al-ḥarīq al-‘azīm*) started in Old Cairo and Cairo.”³⁴ The formulation “the grand fire,” using a definite article together with an adjective of this kind, suggests a certain familiarity with these events on the part of the readers—as if the events in question had already been given a specific name by the time the author was reporting on them. Al-Nuwayrī and al-Mufaḍḍal refer to “the fire” (*al-ḥarīq*). This kind of labelling, be it “the grand fire” or “the fire,” shows that the narrative itself turns an event into a disaster. It can be regarded as an example of the human construction of “natural” disasters.

Regarding the extent of the destruction caused, Ibn al-Dawādārī merely concludes his report by saying: “Several good and representative houses (*dūr ḥasana*

³⁰Al-Mufaḍḍal, “an-Nahḡ as-sadīd,” 14.

³¹Ibid., 14.

³²Bernard Lewis, “Ibn al-Dawādārī,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 3: 744; Ulrich Haarmann, introduction to *Die Chronik des Ibn ad-Dawādārī: Achter Teil; Der Bericht über die frühen Mamluken*, ed. Ulrich Haarmann (Freiburg: Schwarz, 1971), 11–22.

³³It consists of 18 lines: Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa jāmi‘ al-ghurar: al-Durr al-fākhir fi sirat al-Malik al-Nāṣir*, ed. Hans Robert Roemer (Kairo: Sami al-Khandji, 1960), 9: 306.

³⁴Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar*, 306.

la-hā šūra) burned down.” He does not indicate any specific location, nor do we learn to whom these houses belonged. Knowing the other reports we might ask: Were these the houses of the local elite, or the military elite? Ibn al-Dawādārī’s version suggests that his readers would already know. He is mainly concerned with the interpretation of the fires, which will be discussed in the second part of this article.

As to the severity of this “grand fire,” Ibn al-Dawādārī makes a value judgement, declaring “these were hideous days (*ayyām shanī’a*).” On the human reactions, he reports: “everyone feared for himself, for his property and his money.”³⁵ Ibn al-Dawādārī paints a rather general picture of gloomy days, neither referring specifically to Karīm al-Dīn’s house or the emirs’ dwellings, nor mentioning any concrete efforts to fight the fire. He only indicates the people’s concern for themselves. The impression that he conveys is that they were unable to work together to fight the fire. Instead, it seems that they succumbed to panic without taking action. They behaved selfishly, concerned only with their personal well-being; however, just like al-Nuwayrī and al-Mufaḍḍal, Ibn al-Dawādārī does not mention any kind of religiously motivated behaviour. He does not mention anyone seeking God’s help and protection in this situation.

The religious scholar and historian Ibn Kathīr (700–774 AH/1300–1373 CE),³⁶ who lived in Damascus and was still young—around 20—at the time of the conflagrations, gives a rather short account,³⁷ quoting as his source ‘Alam al-Dīn al-Birzālī (665–739 AH/1267–1339 CE), a chronicler who was older than Ibn Kathīr and also lived in Damascus.³⁸ Ibn Kathīr (or Birzālī) explains that “a grand fire (*ḥarīq ‘azīm*)” struck Cairo, “the good houses, the nice and solid places and some mosques (*fī al-duwar al-ḥasana wa al-amākin al-maliḥa al-murtafiqa wa ba’ḍ al-masājid*).”³⁹ This report—like that of Ibn al-Dawādārī—does not provide many details and does not describe any fire-fighting measures. Of the human (re-) actions, Ibn Kathīr says: “The people were overwhelmed by a great calamity (*mashaqqa ‘azīma*) and sought refuge in prayers to God (*qanatū fī al-ṣalawāt*).”⁴⁰

The Damascene historians, that is to say Ibn Kathīr and al-Birzālī, are the only authors who call these fires a “disaster” (*mashaqqa*), and they are the only contemporaries who state that the human response to this disaster was to call on God. With respect to the reactions of the people concerned, their account conveys a completely different picture from those of al-Nuwayrī and al-Mufaḍḍal. This might be because al-Birzālī and Ibn Kathīr, as religious scholars claiming that those fires were an act

³⁵Ibid.

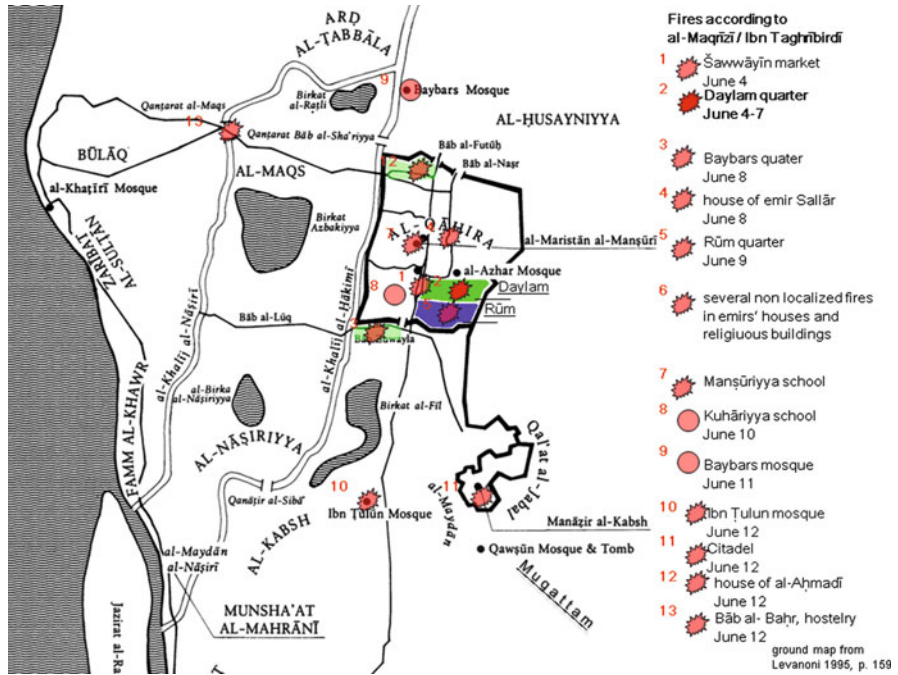
³⁶Henri Laoust, “Ibn Kathīr,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 3: 817.

³⁷It consists of 17 lines: Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya fī al-tārīkh* (Cairo, n.d.), 13: 98–99.

³⁸The chronicle written by Birzālī (665–739 AH/1267–1339 CE) ends with the year 735 AH/1335 CE. This work has not yet been edited.

³⁹Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya*, 13: 99.

⁴⁰Ibid.



Map 3 Fires according to al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī

of retaliation by Christians,⁴¹ wanted to contrast the devout Muslims with the Christian perpetrators.

Two later authors, who were born after the events, namely the historian al-Maqrīzī (766–845 AH/1365–1442 CE) and Ibn Taghrībirdī (812–874 AH/1409–1470 CE), give especially detailed accounts of the fires of 721 AH/1321 CE in their chronicles.⁴² According to them, the first fire broke out on Saturday, 4 June (15 Jumādā I) in the street (*khaff*) of the meat-grillers’ market, al-Shawwāyīn (Map 3, fire no. 1)—a detail we know from al-Mufaḍḍal—and, according to al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, this fire was fought by the emirs

⁴¹On these accusations see the discussion in the section *Human Interpretations of the Fires* and footnotes 8–10.

⁴²It consists of 13 pages with approximately 20 lines each; in Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk lī ma’rifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda, vol. 2, part 1 (Cairo: Lajnat al-Ta’līf wa al-Tarjamah wa al-Nashr, 1934), 216–228. Al-Maqrīzī also reports these events in his *al-Khiṭaṭ*, when describing the church al-Zuhrī, al-Maqrīzī, *al-Khiṭaṭ*, vol. 4, part 2, 1066–1076. Because orientlists have a special interest in the history of oriental Christians, this section has been translated several times, for example, into German by Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, *Macrizi’s Geschichte der Copten*, 121–136; and into English by Arthur S. Tritton, *The Caliphs and Their Non-Muslim Subjects*, 61–77. The version rendered by Ibn Taghrībirdī follows al-Maqrīzī’s version verbatim, with only some minor omissions and very few changes, see Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa al-Qāhira* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, n.d.), 9: 63–73.

(*al-umarāʾ*), i.e. the military elite.⁴³ On the same day, another fire broke out in al-ʿUraysa alley (*zuqāq*) in the al-Daylam quarter, close to Karīm al-Dīn’s house.⁴⁴ After a long struggle, this conflagration was finally extinguished on Tuesday (Map 3, fire no. 2).⁴⁵

Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī present the events unfolding from Saturday to Tuesday in the most detailed and most dramatic way. A good example is the formulation “The night came and the gusts of wind blew stronger and sparked the fire in several places.”⁴⁶

In this version, the first to take action is Karīm al-Dīn, who sends his son to inform the sultan, whereupon the sultan sends many emirs and Mamlūks to extinguish the flames out of concern for his warehouses (*ḥawāṣīl al-sultāniya*). However, “the affair went awry and Aq Sunqur, the supervisor of buildings and builders (*shādd al-ʿamāʾir*), had to gather more water-carriers and emirs, and the sultan’s guard (*ḥujjāb*) came down, but the fire raged the whole Sunday.”⁴⁷

What is interesting here is the fact that a new person is introduced, namely Aq Sunqur, who seems to have been responsible ex officio as *shādd al-ʿamāʾir* in the event of a catastrophe of this kind. Usually, the *shādd al-ʿamāʾir* was an engineer responsible for major building projects and in this capacity presided over everyone involved in such projects, such as engineers, stone-masons, and carpenters.⁴⁸ I could not find any further evidence of a *shādd al-ʿamāʾir* involved in rescue work following disasters of the kind in question. However, there is at least one further indication, in Ibn al-Ḥimṣī’s (1438–1527 CE) account of the fire of 884 AH/1479 CE at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, that the sultan’s master builder (in that specific case called *muʿallim al-sultān*) was the first person to whom the outbreak was reported, and who was later blamed for not having taken successful fire-fighting measures.⁴⁹ Therefore, it seems likely that in our case Aq Sunqur, as *shādd al-ʿamāʾir*, presented himself as the responsible person, but was incapable of dealing with the situation, partly because he could not call on any kind of fire brigade.

⁴³ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 220; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 63–64.

⁴⁴ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 220; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 64. It is identical to al-Maqrīzī’s description, omitting only the name of the alley.

⁴⁵ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 220–222; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 64–66.

⁴⁶ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 220; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 64.

⁴⁷ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 221. Ibn Taghrībirdī’s account differs slightly from al-Maqrīzī’s, accusing Aq Sunqur of being incapable of dealing with the situation, Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 64.

⁴⁸ For a detailed description of this office, see Ayman Fuʿād Sayyid, in al-Maqrīzī, *al-Khiṭaṭ*, vol. 4, part 1, 70–72; see also Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “Muhandis, Shād, Muʿallim—Note on the Building Craft in the Mamluk Period,” *Der Islam* 72 (1995): 293–309.

⁴⁹ See Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “The Fire of 884/1479 at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and an Account of Its Restoration,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 279–297, esp. 281, 286, 287, 288f., and 290.

At this point, al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī start to describe the ordinary people’s reactions to the conflagration, thereby dramatizing the events. It is said that, after the fire raged the whole Sunday, “The women came out unveiled and the people passed a sleepless night.” The aim of this formulation is clearly to convey the state of emergency and break with normality that the disaster caused, and its disturbing effects on public order. The dramatic vein continues: “On Monday morning people woke up and the fire had destroyed everything in reach.”⁵⁰ And further:

In the night from Monday to Tuesday, the conflagration went out of human control. A heavy gale erupted that pulled the palm trees to the ground and caused the boats to sink.⁵¹

Al-Maqrīzī foregrounds the power of nature, since we are told that the fire spread due to strong winds that turned into a storm. In order to illustrate the strength of the storm, he mentions palm trees and boats, which of course have nothing to do with the events in the al-Daylam quarter, but are used in order to make the description more powerful. He goes on to say, “People no longer doubted that the Day of Judgement had come.” This phrase can be regarded as part of al-Maqrīzī’s narrative strategy—the Day of Judgement is a powerful image. It seems apt to emphasize this point, because, as already mentioned above, William Tucker quotes exactly this phrase from al-Maqrīzī in support of his thesis that people in Mamlūk society were increasingly convinced that the end was near, because they were confronted with so many disasters. Al-Maqrīzī continues: “The sparks of fire were terrifying and began to reach remote places. [Now] people came out of their houses, clinging to minarets and gathering in mosques and places of holy men (*zāwiyas*), making a huge noise with their prayers and pleas to God.” On Tuesday morning, they “woke up in the worst of all situations.”⁵²

Through his narration, al-Maqrīzī emphasises the power of nature as well as the desperation of the people. He illustrates the worsening situation, the intensification and diffusion of the conflagration by strong winds, and he presents a desperate population confronted with a catastrophe. This dramatic picture is followed by a detailed description of the final and effective measures taken by the ruling elite. Therefore, the dramatizing narration can be interpreted as a preamble of and a contrast to the following account.

According to al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, it was Vice-Regent Arghūn who now took the initiative.⁵³ They report that on the fourth day of the conflagration, the vice-regent not only summoned the remaining emirs and a group of those staying in

⁵⁰ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 221; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 64.

⁵¹ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 221; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 64–65.

⁵² Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 221; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 65.

⁵³ Arghūn al-Dawādār al-Nāṣirī was entrusted with the important office of vice-regent in Jumādā I 712 AH/September 1312 CE, which he held until 727 AH/1326 CE, when he was sent into exile as governor of Aleppo. He was a confident counselor of the sultan and was able to amass a great fortune. He died in 731 AH/1330–1331 CE. See Peter Holt, “al-Nāṣir,” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 7: 991–992.

the citadel, but also the inhabitants of Cairo (*ahl al-Qāhira*). He had the idea to use the emirs' camels to transport the necessary water. Emir Baktamur al-Sāqī followed his example,⁵⁴ using the sultan's camels. The city gates were closed, so that no water-carrier could leave. The water was taken from schools, baths, and wells. They gathered builders and carpenters in order to tear down houses. The twenty-four emirs of a thousand worked with their people, as well as the emirs of forty and the emirs of ten.⁵⁵ The emirs coordinated their work with the water-carriers, so that "a river was created from Bāb Zuwayla to the quarter of al-Rūm." The two leading emirs, Arghūn and Baktamur, reportedly took care of the sultan's goods, moving them from Karīm al-Dīn's house to the house of his son, located in Darb al-Raṣāṣī.⁵⁶ To make this possible, seventeen houses were torn down.

This version presents us with an active military elite that took responsibility in the crisis. First, the sultan gave orders to extinguish the fires. However, when the situation became worse, it was one of the important and powerful emirs who took charge. The military elite not only organized the fire-fighting measures, but they were also actively involved in the work itself. However, it is very clear that their main concern was not the well-being of the community, but the rescue of the sultan's goods. It seems that no provisions had been made for such cases. At first this account suggests that the supervisor of buildings and builders, the *shādd al-'amā'ir*, was regarded as responsible due to his office. However, it is also evident that he did not have the necessary manpower at his disposal to fight the fire. It seems that the emirs acted on the sultan's order, but not effectively. It was only when the situation escalated that one of the emirs had a good idea and was able to give orders and organize a massive and effective cooperative action. The emirs acted out of common interest. At the same time, they were able to force ordinary people like water-carriers and carpenters to participate in the action.

This version reports on another fire in an urban quarter and its trading-house (Map 3, fire no. 3). Again, wind worsened the matter, but the sultan's guards (*al-hujjāb*), along with the governor (*wālī*), were able to extinguish the conflagration. Again, many houses had to be torn down.⁵⁷

Judging from this account, preventive measures were taken only after Emir Sallār's house had caught fire, starting in the air-shaft, where naphtha and wick were found (Map 3, fire no. 4). Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī tell us: "It was proclaimed that in Cairo and in Old Cairo people were to deposit a large bucket (*zīr*)

⁵⁴Baktamur al-Sāqī held the high domestic office of cupbearer (*sāqī*), and died with his son under suspicious circumstances; see Holt, "al-Nāṣir," 992.

⁵⁵These references denote special ranks among the military elite. If we take these numbers at face value and assume that the emirs of a thousand really had at least 100 horsemen under their command, while the emirs of forty could command 40 horsemen and emirs of ten 10 to 20 horsemen, this would imply that there was a workforce of at least 700 people, most probably more, involved in extinguishing the conflagration.

⁵⁶This was a part of the al-Daylam quarter, to the north of the Fakahānī-Mosque; see al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, vol. 3, 123–124.

⁵⁷Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 222; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 66.

and a storage vessel (*dann*) filled with water next to every shop (*ḥānūt*),” suggesting that these precautionary measures were ordered by a central authority, contrary to al-Nuwayrī’s account of preventive measures taken by individuals of their own accord.

Al-Maqrīzī’s and Ibn Taghrībirdī’s version conveys the impression that society as a whole was not able to resort to known procedures or a tried and tested repertoire of actions when confronted with a major conflagration in the city. The supervisor of buildings and builders might have been expected to take adequate measures, but was unable to do so. It was only when the situation worsened considerably, and especially when the sultan’s goods were at stake, that the Mamlūks were willing and able to organise effective joint action to extinguish the fire. For this purpose, they drew on the population, especially the water-carriers, builders, and carpenters, and the report in question makes it very clear that this was done by force, since the city gates had to be closed so that none of the water carriers could leave. The military elite was able to recruit a major labour force from among their own ranks and had a stock of animals that could be used for carrying water, especially camels. They could also use the water from the public facilities (baths, schools, and wells) without any impediment. In this version the common people are depicted as desperate and helpless in contrast to the military elite. They panic, run out of their houses, and call on God, making a great deal of bustle. One can very well imagine people panicking and seeking refuge in prayers in such a situation. Yet, as I have tried to show, the description of this behaviour, and especially the reference to the Day of Judgement, is primarily to be regarded as a narrative element and not so much as evidence of newly developing eschatological expectations among Cairo’s population.

The reports on the fires differ considerably, especially in their depiction of human reactions. Al-Nuwayrī, al-Mufaḍḍal, al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī all describe fire-fighting measures taken by the military elite. It seems that the sultan initially gave orders, but that the effective measures were organized by the vice-regent. Judging from al-Nuwayrī’s and al-Mufaḍḍal’s accounts, the preventive measures were taken on the initiative of individuals, whereas al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī describe them as ordained by a central authority. The shorter accounts by Ibn al-Dawādārī and Ibn Kathīr make no mention of the fire-fighting actions. Ibn al-Dawādārī presents everyone’s behaviour as selfish, while Ibn Kathīr only reports on the commoners resorting to prayers. In contrast, al-Nuwayrī, al-Mufaḍḍal and Ibn al-Dawādārī do not provide any information regarding the reactions of ordinary people. al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, in turn, present a desperate population, crying and praying, calling on God for help. These differences highlight the subjectivity of any report. Each author has his own agenda and uses narrative techniques to make his narrative more compelling. To explain the differences between the reports in question would go beyond the scope of this article and, given the limited number of studies on the respective authors and their specific agendas, it would also be quite difficult. Al-Maqrīzī’s report is definitely the best-researched among all of them. For example, the desperate population clearly serves

as a contrast to the vigorous actions on the part of the two important emirs, Vice-Regent Arghūn and Baktamur.

Notwithstanding the differences, the conclusion that Mamlūk society mainly sought refuge in faith when confronted with disasters is clearly too simplistic. It is to be assumed that people knew what needed to be done and that everyone would do his or her best to extinguish the fires. People would also know how to protect themselves, since they took precautionary measures. Yet it is also clear that those in power—who naturally had more resources to fight a major fire (the authority to force others to help, beasts of burden, and access to public utilities)—would only make a special effort if it was in their own interest, as was the case when the fire threatened to destroy the sultan's goods in Karīm al-Dīn's house. Therefore, we can confirm that "governmental responses to disasters appear to have been *ad hoc*."⁵⁸ Indeed, it seems that there was no established procedure for dealing with a major fire in the city, and that no procedure of any kind was developed after "the great fire in Cairo in 1321."

Human Interpretations of the Fires

Apart from people's actions during the fires, the reports also deal with the different interpretations of the fires and speculations regarding their causes. At this point it seems useful to refer to the classification system for different kinds of disasters as developed by E. L. Jones. He classifies settlement fires and war as "social disasters," in contrast to geo-physical disasters (e.g. earthquakes), climatic disasters (e.g. storms), and biological disasters (e.g. epidemics).⁵⁹

In contrast to most of the other types of disaster mentioned above, fires can be man-made—whether unintentionally or intentionally—and this is what the majority of our authors suggest concerning the fire of 721 AH/1321 CE, blaming the Christians.⁶⁰ However, fires can also be caused "naturally," by a lightning strike or an earthquake.⁶¹ In this case it is clear that the conflagration spread due to strong winds that turned into a storm. In this sense, fires can also be viewed as a mixture of social and natural disasters.

⁵⁸The "Mamluk government apparently did not see a need to establish a regular, rationalized organizational structure to address food crises." Tucker, "Environmental Hazards," 113.

⁵⁹Eric Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 24.

⁶⁰See footnotes 8 and 9 above and my discussion of the different narrations of this accusation, footnote 64.

⁶¹Fires that we would regard without hesitation as natural disasters are mentioned by Mamlūk historians. For example, al-Mufaḍḍal reports: "In this year, during the month of Ramaḍān (May/June 1333 CE), heavy rain fell in Mecca and al-Ṭā'if and surroundings that was accompanied by immense lightning. Many people died and countless palm trees burnt down. . . ." al-Mufaḍḍal, "an-Nahḡ as-sadīd," 160.

In most cases, it seems, fires are caused by human negligence. At the beginning of his report on “the fire of Cairo and Egypt,” al-Nuwayrī tells us that during the previous month, May (Rabīʿ II), a fire broke out in a hostelry (*funduq*) near the Bāb al-Baḥr, destroying many goods, especially olive oil and honey (see Map 1, no. 1). He explains that “people thought this had happened unintentionally (*qaṣd*) due to a mistake (*ghalaṭ*), due to a lack of caution and attention (*ʿadam al-taḥaffuṣ wa al-iḥtirāz*).”⁶² Whatever may have been the “real” cause(s) of this fire, al-Nuwayrī, by choosing to mention this fire as the first in a series⁶³ without explaining why, indirectly implies that it might also have been an act of arson on the part of the Christians.⁶⁴

Of course, arson is a possible cause of a fire and it was used on a regular basis in political or other conflicts.⁶⁵ It was used by people in power as well as by people who fought against the powerful as an act of rebellion or sabotage. The fact that a fire can either be a social or a natural disaster, or a combination of both, opens the way for diverse interpretations.

In connection with the conflagration in the al-Daylam quarter, al-Nuwayrī states that different speculations circulated regarding the cause: Some people were of the opinion that the fire had come from the sky; others saw it as a work of (foreign) kings and enemies; others, in turn, thought that it had been caused by idlers of the army (*baṭāl al-jaysh*) or the city’s ruffians (*al-ḥarāfīsh*); according to yet another opinion, the fires were set by Christians in retaliation for the destruction of their churches.⁶⁶

Al-Nuwayrī is the only author who gives such a detailed account of the different rumours that circulated in the aftermath of the disaster. The other authors refer only to the accusations against the Christians, as will be discussed in the following section.

⁶²Al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 33: 15–16.

⁶³Ibid., 15. When al-Nuwayrī talks about the fire in al-Daylam a few lines further on, he also describes it as the first in the series of fires (*awwal al-ḥarīq*).

⁶⁴For al-Nuwayrī’s discussion on whether the following fires were acts of arson on the part of Christians, see below.

⁶⁵As, for example, the report by al-Mufaḍḍal indicates: “In this year (735 AH/1335 CE), armed troops from Aleppo invaded the area of Sīs. They burned and plundered and took many prisoners. Then they returned safely. The cities that they set on fire were the following: Adanā, Ṭarsūs, Ayās and al-Maṣīṣa.” al-Mufaḍḍal, “an-Nahḡ as-sadīd,” 170.

⁶⁶In early May many churches had been destroyed. All our authors report on these events (with differences, of course, depending on their intentions). According to al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 33: 14, on 28 April (29 Rabīʿ I) the sultan gave the order to dig a pond, the Birka Nāṣirīya. However, there was a church in that place and the sultan did not dare to tear it down. This was done on 8 May (9 Rabīʿ II) by a group of simple soldiers (*ghulmān*), ordinary men (*ʿawwām*), and workers, reportedly on their own initiative. Among the inhabitants feelings ran so high that the churches in Cairo and Old Cairo were plundered and destroyed. Before the people (*ʿawwām*) were able to violate the most important Muʿallaqa-Church, the sultan took action against them and the attacks on Christian places of worship stopped. These riots are discussed in the secondary literature, see footnote 8.

As we have learned, the conflagration in the Daylam quarter was followed by recurring fires. According to al-Nuwayrī, at first several fires erupted in emirs' dwellings. Then, so he tells us, on Thursday, 9 June (20 Jumādā I), three Christians were caught red-handed trying to set fire to some houses in the al-ʿUṭūf quarter (Map 1, fire no. 4); and on Sunday, 12 June (23 Jumādā I), three more were caught as they were about to set fire to a Muslim religious building, the Baybars Mosque (Map 1, fire no. 5). He reports in detail that the sultan did not want to accept these allegations, arguing, "How could these peasants be capable of such an act?" According to al-Nuwayrī, the sultan gave in under great pressure from the people, who accused Karīm al-Dīn of protecting the Christians. It is to be noted that Karīm al-Dīn—the sultan's treasurer and the most important person in the administration at the time—was a converted Copt. He stood for the greedy rich and for governmental oppression and coercion. In al-Nuwayrī's version, in order to appease the public and to protect his treasurer, the sultan arrested and tortured a few Christians who confessed their offenses, and he promulgated stricter laws concerning the Christians. Al-Nuwayrī mentions three more fires that broke out in the citadel itself towards the end of the month (Map 1, fires no. 6-8).⁶⁷

We will never know how the fire in the Daylam quarter started, or who or what caused the other fires during the following month. There are several possibilities.⁶⁸ All other authors discuss only the allegations against the Christians, without considering other possibilities, and this view was adopted by modern secondary literature without ever questioning it.⁶⁹ A brief review of their statements reveals different ways of presenting these allegations.

The Coptic historian al-Mufaḍḍal also limits himself to the allegations against the Christians, but he is, as one might expect, the most sceptical in this respect. According to him, the Muslims imagined (*tawahamū*) that the Christians were taking revenge for the destruction of several churches. He reports that a few Christians were arrested, but notes that the allegations could not be substantiated.

⁶⁷ According to al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-arab*, 33: 26, these included the following: On Saturday, 18 June (29. Jumādā I), the house (*dār*) of Emir Sayf al-Dīn Ulmās, who held the office of *ḥājib* (chamberlain and chief judge for the Mamlūks themselves) (Map 1, fire no. 6); On Sunday night, 20 June (1. Jumādā II), the Qaysariya in the proximity of the Bāb al-Qarāfa, the dwelling of the sultan's Mamlūks (Map 1, fire no. 7); and finally, on Monday, 28 June (9. Jumādā II), the house of the vice-regent (*nāʾib al-saltāna*) himself, Emir Arghūn al-Nāṣirī (Map 1, fire no. 8).

⁶⁸ The grill-market is one of the places where human negligence might easily have caused a fire. One could also ask why the Christians would be interested in setting fire to the house of Karīm al-Dīn, one of their most important defenders. Who might have had a reason to attack especially the rich emirs' houses? Maybe another group hoped to profit from the destruction of Muslim religious buildings. Who could have wanted to set fire to the buildings in the citadel? There seem to be many possible reasons other than Christian revenge, such as economic reasons (poor against rich), political reasons (power struggles among the Mamlūk elite), and maybe others.

⁶⁹ Moshe Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," 843–861, especially 852–854; Donald P. Little, "Coptic Conversion to Islam," 552–569, especially 562–565; Little, "Religion under the Mamluks," *The Muslim World* 73, nos. 3–4 (1983): 165–181, especially 179–180; Little, "Coptic Converts," 274.

However, according to him, hearsay (*shulash*) and rumours increased. Al-Mufaḍḍal also tells us that some Christians were publicly executed “without any incriminating evidence.”⁷⁰

In contrast, the contemporary Ibn al-Dawādārī unequivocally states: “The grand fire was the Christians’ doing, because their churches had been torn down.” He even tells us that he was informed that those behind the arson called themselves *al-mujāhidūn* (the fighters).⁷¹ Ibn al-Dawādārī is the only one to make such a claim. In addition to blaming the Christians, he actually implies that the acts of arson were carefully premeditated actions on their part.

Ibn Kathīr takes up a more neutral stance in this respect, saying that “the people... finally uncovered the affair and that it had been on the part of the Christians because of the torching and destruction of their churches.”⁷²

For the later authors, al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī, there is no doubt that the fires were caused by the Christians. They present a very long list of further fires, mentioning other quarters, single houses, and Muslim religious buildings (see Map 3). They even include the fire that broke out in the hostelry outside the city—already mentioned by al-Nuwayrī as having been “the first in the series” (Map 1, fire no. 1)—as the last in the series of fires (Map 3, fire no. 14), giving a much more dramatic account than al-Nuwayrī did.⁷³

The different assumptions regarding the causes of the fires of 721 AH/1321 CE are quite telling. Above all, this example illustrates the extent to which we depend on human speculations on the causes of disasters, and that we might never know what really happened. This makes it all the more important to examine the narrative strategies of the different reports, and this is what I have tried to do with my comparative analysis. For an even better understanding, the specific context of each author would need to be examined in more detail. That, however, would have gone beyond the scope of this article. At least this comparative analysis of the different reports calls into question the widely accepted view that people in pre-Modern Muslim society generally ascribed disasters to God and therefore sought refuge in prayer instead of taking action. In view of the lack of evidence, also the claim that the fires were started by Christians in revenge for the destruction of their churches definitely needs to be treated with caution. The only thing that we can be certain about is that the Christians were accused of arson. To ascribe the cause of a catastrophe to an unpopular minority seems to be a common reaction, regardless of the time and the cultural context. Finally, it has become clear that in the given cases, the discussion of the causes is especially complicated by the fact

⁷⁰ Al-Mufaḍḍal, “al-Nahj al-saḍīd,” 15.

⁷¹ Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar*, 306.

⁷² Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya*, 13: 99.

⁷³ Al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī claim that on Sunday, 12 June (23 Jumādā I), a fire broke out in a *funduq* (hostelry) outside Bāb al-Baḥr that was used by olive oil merchants, and that everything stored there was destroyed; even the sixteen marble columns turned into lime, and one merchant alone lost 90,000 dirhams’ worth of merchandise. See al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 1, 226; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, 9: 70.

that fires can have either “social” or “natural” causes, or a combination of both. Most importantly, it became clear through comparing the different narrations that the social aspect of a fire is not only emphasised by its human causes, but also by the way it is narrated. This narrative aspect can be transferred to any kind of disaster reportage. Seen from this angle, all kinds of disasters must be considered human constructions.