

YĀQŪT AND HIS FOLLOWERS

Abū ‘l-Majd Jamāl al-dīn Yāqūt b. ‘Abdallāh al-Musta‘šimī, commonly known as Yāqūt, is the most famous calligrapher of later Islamic times. Lauded as the cynosure of calligraphers (*qiblat al-kuttāb*), he is credited with canonizing the Six Pens, known in Arabic as *al-aqlām al-sitta* and in Persian as *šīs qalam*. Yāqūt’s six styles of round script, which were typically arranged in pairs of majuscule / miniscule hands (*thuluth* / *nash*, *muḥaqqaq* / *rayḥān*, and *tawqī’* / *riqā’*), are said, in turn, to have passed to six followers. These scripts remained the major styles used for transcribing the Qur’ān and other Arabic texts until the present day.

Much of what we know about Yāqūt and his successors comes from later sources, and the purpose of this paper is to try to extricate fact from fiction, or, more precisely, concrete events from later retelling. By closely examining both written and visual sources, it is possible to see that during Yāqūt’s lifetime his reputation was much more modest and that he was lionized only at the very end of the fourteenth century and beginning of the fifteenth, particularly in Herāt under the Timurid ruler Šāh Rūḥ (r. 1405–47) and his son, the noted bibliophile Bāysunḡur (d. 8 Jumādā I 837 / 21 December 1433). The tradition of six followers of Yāqūt seems to have developed at the same time, and the number six is most likely apocryphal and meant to coordinate with the six styles of script. This rewriting of history occurred as chroniclers were struggling to develop an art history of calligraphy. Later writers looked back to the time of Yāqūt and his followers as a major watershed in the history of calligraphy, and indeed it was, but for a different reason than that recorded in written texts. This was, in my view, the time when calligraphers routinely worked in other media, designing inscriptions for architectural monuments and objects. This development was possible because of the increased size of paper readily available for preparatory drawings.

First to Yāqūt himself. Few details about Yāqūt’s life are certain, and much is the stuff of legend [1]. The dates given for his birth and death vary in different sources. Some are clearly implausible, as they imply that he lived for 180 years. He was probably born in the first or second decade of the thirteenth century, either at Amasya in Anatolia (given in various sources and more probable) or in Abyssinia (perhaps a misreading for Amaysa or an attempt to connect Yāqūt with Bilāl, the Abyssinian slave who was the first *mu’adhdhin*). Both of these foreign places would

fit with the etymology of his name Yāqūt, literally meaning “ruby” and a common name for a slave.

As a young boy, Yāqūt was brought to Baḡdād where he served the last Abbasid caliph there, al-Musta‘šim billāh (r. 1242–58) and earned the epithet al-Musta‘šimī. Yāqūt spent virtually all of his life in Baḡdād. He studied calligraphy there with one of the masters of the day, Šafī al-dīn ‘Abd al-Mu‘mīn al-Urmawī (d. 1294). Well-versed in Arabic language, literature, and history as well as penmanship, al-Urmawī made a name for himself as a calligrapher and was appointed copyist at the Caliph’s new library. Al-Urmawī later became head of the chancery (*dīwān al-inšā’*) and is best remembered as a musician and writer on the theory of music.

Yāqūt remained in Baḡdād when the Mongols under Hūlāgū besieged the city in 1258. The details of this event have become apocryphal, and the Safavid chronicler Qāḍī Aḥmad incorporated an amusing vignette about it in his early seventeenth-century treatise on calligraphers and painters [2]. Yāqūt reportedly sought refuge from the Mongols in a minaret. He took along ink and a reed pen, but no paper on which to practice calligraphy, so he used the only thing available — a linen towel. Illustrations to copies of Qāḍī Aḥmad’s treatise depict this incident, with the beturbaned calligrapher scribbling away in the upper right corner of the painting [3]. Qāḍī Aḥmad was particularly interested in this event, because, he says, Yāqūt’s towel was preserved in the library of the chronicler’s patron, the Safavid prince Bahrām Mīrzā.

Yāqūt’s career flourished in Baḡdād under Mongol patronage. He became friendly with ‘Aṭā-Malik al-Juwaynī, Persian historian, governor of the city for the Mongols, and author of the biography of Genghiz Khan entitled *Tārīḥ-i Jahāngūšā*, or *The History of the World Conqueror*. Yāqūt taught calligraphy to Juwaynī’s sons and brother Šams al-dīn, the *šāhib dīwān*. Ettinghausen suggested that the double-frontispiece to the sole contemporary copy of Juwaynī’s history (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France suppl. pers. 205) dated 689/1290 depicts the author seated and taking dictation from the patron, either the Mongol ruler Hūlāgū or the viceroy Amīr Argūn [4].

Yāqūt continued the calligraphic traditions established by many of his illustrious predecessors who had worked for the Abbasids. Like Ibn Muqla (885–940), the famous calligrapher active at the beginning of the tenth century who is often credited with the development of the proportioned script (*al-ḥaṭṭ al-mansūb*), Yāqūt served as an official sec-