

Al-Bayḍāwī's Date of Death: A Mystery Resolved

Mohamed A. Moṣṭafa
UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Introduction

There is a wide range of opinions regarding the date of death of the Ilkhānid polymath al-Qāḍī Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī in both the primary sources and secondary literature.¹ Modern scholarship in the West usually argues for a much later date. For example, Josef van Ess favours 716/1316 or 1317 as al-Bayḍāwī's most probable date of death.² Likewise, in his entry on al-Bayḍāwī in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam THREE*, Walid Saleh dates al-Bayḍāwī's death to Jumādā I 719 / June 1319, drawing on an account by Shihāb al-Dīn al-Khafājī. Recently, Farid Suleiman has discussed seven different proposed dates, ranging from the earliest (641/1243) to the latest (719/1319), on the basis of which he argues for an early date. In agreement with Bahā' al-Dīn al-Janādī's (d. 732/1332) account, Suleiman concludes that al-Bayḍāwī 'died shortly after the year 690 (probably 691) at the age of 49'.³

The unpublished evidence that I present in this article for the first time, as well as the published evidence that I re-examine, demonstrate that the date that Suleiman found most probable is the actual date of al-Bayḍāwī's death.⁴ I argue that al-Bayḍāwī died in 691, as suggested by Taj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Isnawī (d. 772/1370), whose input falls within the range of al-Janādī's dating. More precisely, al-Bayḍāwī died in Shawwāl, 691 / September–October 1292, as is proven by an unpublished manuscript.

Dündar Alikılıç, from Atatürk Üniversitesi, has recently discovered an early manuscript (MSS Erzurum 19) of al-Bayḍāwī's Qur'an commentary, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, which contains the precise date of al-Bayḍāwī's death in its colophon. I became aware of this discovery through a news report and subsequently corresponded with Professor Alikılıç, who generously shared the folio bearing al-Bayḍāwī's date of death with me (for this evidence, see section 2 of this article).⁵ Inspired by this discovery, I undertook a re-examination of the diverse dates mentioned in classical sources, employing a four-step approach.

In the following, I study the historical reports chronologically to account for their divergence, which has left modern scholars uncertain about the correct date of al-Bayḍāwī's death. Examining the sources chronologically helps us understand the reasons behind the divergence among historians on a topic that has sparked much debate. This approach underscores the historical significance of historians' direct encounters with sources or reliance on eyewitness accounts when reporting biographical details with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

To support the outcome of my analysis of the primary sources, I incorporate early manuscript evidence from a student of al-Bayḍāwī named 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Fārūqī al-Fārābī (d. after 707/1307) who, in 692, copied al-Bayḍāwī's *Anwār al-tanzīl*, and explicitly documented the date of al-Bayḍāwī's death on the colophon of the manuscript. Following that, I utilise an area of al-Bayḍāwī's scholarship that remains to be explored: his contributions to the field of Islamic legal theory. Al-Bayḍāwī's work *Mihāj al-wuṣūl ilā 'ilm al-uṣūl* was transcribed and studied during his lifetime and shortly after his demise, and I draw inferences from early commentaries on *Mihāj al-wuṣūl* that support my argument about al-Bayḍāwī's early date of death. In this connection, I also re-examine a piece of evidence that is used in Western scholarship to argue for a later date, namely a letter by Rashīd al-Dīn al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh Ḥamadānī (d. 718/1318).

The structure of this article follows a logical sequence in the arrangement of the four steps that I have undertaken. While the unpublished evidence from an early manuscript of *Anwār al-tanzīl* is compelling on its own, it needs to be contextualised and justified in the context of the various historical debates regarding al-Bayḍāwī's date of death. My motivation for this stems from the fact that al-Zanjānī's account (reported by al-Janādī), which Suleiman used as his primary support for the early-date argument in his paper, represents the earliest of early published reports. Therefore, my approach starts with a chronological analysis of the primary sources to understand the role of al-Zanjānī's account in the evolution of classical debates on the subject. I also aimed to establish a relatively definitive stance regarding which of the various proposed dates is more accurate. While the first and second steps of this approach suffice to bolster my argument, the inclusion of the third and fourth steps adds supplementary evidence that I consider important for the discussion.

Analysis of the Historical Sources

According to the testimony of al-Bayḍāwī's student Sharaf al-Dīn al-Zanjānī (d. Delhi, 722/1322), whom al-Janādī met in Yemen, al-Bayḍāwī 'died in Tabriz, a city within the district of Azerbaijan, in 690 *wa-nayyif* after 49 years of age'.⁶ The phrase '690 *wa-nayyif*' used to describe al-Bayḍāwī's death indicates that he passed away between 691/1292 and 693/1294. This is because *wa-nayyif* refers to the passing of one to three years after a decade.⁷ Given that he died 'after 49 years of age', al-Bayḍāwī would have