
Echoes of the Eurasian Steppe in the Daily Culture of Mamluk Military Society

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Abstract

The Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and Syria (1250–1517 CE) was based on a military-political elite of Eurasian Steppe provenance, brought to the Eastern Mediterranean as youths. In the early decades of the Sultanate, most of these were Qipchaq Turks, but additional groups of Turks, Mongols and others were also well represented. The impact of the Eurasian military tradition has been long noted by scholars. However, some other aspects of the Inner Asian legacy have not been fully explored. In this paper I will look at a few characteristics of this cultural heritage: names, daily language, drinking habits, sports, hunting, religious rituals, and cultural awareness. The question of identity of the ruling strata of the Dawlat al-Turk/al-Atrak (“The Dynasty/State of the Turks), as the Mamluk Sultanate was then known in Arabic, will be broached at the end of the paper.

As is well known, the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and Syria (1250–1517 CE) was led by a military-political elite of Eurasian Steppe provenance, brought as youths to the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean.¹ In many ways, the Sultanate represents the culmination of a development that had its beginnings in the early ninth century in the ‘Abbasid Caliphate: the creation of a guard corps and other units based on Turks who were brought from the Steppe, after being separated from their families, and were thus plucked out of their pastoral nomadic and tribal society. These young Turks entered the Islamic world as slaves and were known mostly in the early centuries as *ghilmān* (singular *ghulām*), ‘youths’, but later as *mamālīk* (singular *mamlūk*), ‘owned ones’.² In some cases, these soldiers were defined legally as slaves throughout their career, but in the Mamluk Sultanate, they were manumitted after several years of training. At the same time, they proudly retained the group name recalling

¹For the Mamluk state in general, see J. Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks, XIIIe-XVIIe siècle: une expérience du pouvoir dans l’Islam médiéval* (Paris, 2014); Linda Northrup, “The Bahārī Mamlūk Sultanate, 1250–1390”, in Carl Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, I: Islamic Egypt, 540–1517* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 242–289; J-C. Garcin, “The regime of the Circassian Mamlūks”, in Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt, I*, pp. 290–317; R. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382* (London, 1986).

²A survey of the institution of military slavery from its beginnings until the nineteenth century is found in R. Amitai, “The Mamluk institution: 1000 years of military slavery in the Islamic world”, in Philip Morgan and Christopher Brown (eds.), *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age* (New Haven, 2006), pp. 40–78. However, as Jürgen Paul has pointed out, we should be wary of anachronistically seeing all of these slave soldiers over the centuries as being cut from one cloth, or reading back too much from the well-documented Mamluk Sultanate to previous generations. See Jürgen Paul, “The state and the military: The Samanid case”, *Papers on Inner Asia*, no. 26 (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 4–5.

their early servile status, although they were often also referred to as *al-Turk* or *al-Atrāk*, the Arabic plural. Most of these were Qipchaq Turks, from the steppes north of the Black Sea and the Caucasus, but additional groups of Turks, Mongols and others were also well represented, including some individuals of non-Steppe origin.³ The impact of the Eurasian military tradition in the Mamluk Sultanate has been long noted by scholars: Mamluk troopers were trained primarily as mounted archers, and the Mamluk army was based on disciplined masses of such soldiers. I should mention that there is some disagreement among scholars about how this Steppe military tradition was affected by the sedentary and urban lifestyle of the Mamluks. To my mind, in spite of the substantial impact of this adopted urban environment, the basic methods and style of Mamluk warfare remained remarkably similar to those practiced in the Eurasian Steppe society from which they hailed.⁴

Other aspects of the Inner Asian legacy in the Mamluk Sultanate can also be explored. In this short article, I will look at a few characteristics of this cultural heritage especially as it impinged on daily life of the military-political elite, dealing briefly with names, language, drinking habits, sports, hunting, a religious ritual of sorts, and cultural awareness. I am very happy to make this modest contribution to the special issue devoted to our teacher, colleague and friend David Morgan, who has done so much in the last generation to bring to the attention of scholarly circles, and those beyond, the importance of the role of Eurasian Steppe people in Middle Eastern and world history.⁵ Here I hope to show the impact of this culture in one particular state, which achieved fame for its consistent, and generally successful, opposition to the Mongols of Iran, the focus of much of Professor Morgan's work.

One of the most striking features of Mamluk life is that the Mamluks themselves almost exclusively carried Turkish or Mongol personal names, even if they had a different provenance. In fact, this was a badge of honour among them and a clear sign of distinction from the vast majority of the population whom they controlled, even their own sons who invariably were given Arabic-Islamic names.⁶ Thus a typical Mamluk *amīr*—‘officer’—might be referred to as Ḥusām al-Dīn Uzdamur ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Mujīrī:⁷ the *laqab* (honorific with

³For the various ethnic groups from which the young Mamluks were taken for service in the Sultanate, see D. Ayalon, “Ḥarb, iii. The Mamlūk Sultanate”, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, III, pp. 184–190.

⁴T. May, “Mamluks”, in G. Martel (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of War* (Oxford, 2012), III, pp. 1299–1303; J. M. Smith, Jr. “‘Ayn Jālūt: Mamlūk success or Mongol failure”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 44 (1984), pp. 307–345; R. Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War 1260–1281* (Cambridge, 1995), Chapter 10.

⁵I first encountered David Morgan's work in the form of the paper “The Mongols in Syria, 1260–1300”, in P. Edbury (ed.), *Crusade and Settlement. Papers Read at the First Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East and Presented to R. C. Smail* (Cardiff, 1985), pp. 231–235, leading me right away to read more of his then published studies on the Mongols in Iran and beyond. The impact of his work on my own studies was compounded when I showed up at SOAS in the fall of 1985 as a visiting research student. There I was fortunate that year to take a class with then Dr Morgan, and I am happy that he has remained a formidable presence in my academic life (and beyond) since then. The present paper had its origins as a somewhat different short communication given at the 55th annual meeting of the Permanent International Altaic Conference (PIAC), held at Indiana University (Bloomington) in July 2011.

⁶J. Sauvaget, “Noms et surnoms de Mamelouks”, *Journal Asiatique* 238 (1950), pp. 31–58; D. Ayalon, “Names, titles, and ‘nisbas’ of the Mamluks”, *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975), pp. 189–232, and reprinted in D. Ayalon, *The Mamlūk Military Society* (London, 1979).

⁷This is the name of the Mamluk officer who served as an envoy to Ilkhan Ghazan around 1302. For the reported conversation between the two, see Ibn al-Dawādārī (Abū Bakr b. ‘Abd Allāh), *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmi‘ al-ghurar*, IX: *Al-Durar al-fākhīr fī sīrat al-malik al-nāṣir*, (ed.) H. R. Roemer (Cairo, 1379/1960), pp. 71–76; and the anonymous chronicle edited by K.V. Zetterstéén, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mamlükensultane in den Jahren 690–741 der Hīġra nach arabischen Handschriften* (Leiden, 1919), pp. 101–104. The passage in question was translated in R.

al-dīn, ‘the religion’, as a second element) Ḥusām al-Dīn showing his Muslim notable status and Uzdampur (the Arabic transcription of Özdemür, ‘Real Iron’) being his personal name (*ism*). Ibn ‘Abdallāh (‘the son of the servant of God’) demonstrated that he was a convert—his pagan father being consigned to oblivion: this generic *nasab* (genealogy), by the way, almost invariably and clearly shows our Turk to be a Mamluk. Finally, the *nisba* (the adjective with a *-ī* ending indicating geographic, ethnic or other origin) al-Mujīrī shows might have been an early patron, in this case a merchant Mujīr al-Dīn who had brought young Uzdampur to the Sultanate. To these names could added nicknames, the terms for various jobs filled early on one’s career and other monikers to distinguish one Mamluk from the other. Yet, at the centre was the Turkish private name, carried generally only by Mamluks. The extensive biographical collections of the Mamluk period are full of hundreds of entries of more-or-less prominent officers with such nice Turkish names, a pleasure for any with a taste for such matters.⁸

While this use of Turkish names was both symbolically important and served as a clear distinction between the Mamluks and the rest of the population, also significant was the invariable use of the Turkish language by the Mamluks themselves. This is well attested by the Arabic sources themselves, who often note *en passant* that the Mamluks would be speaking Turkish. One nice example is from early on in the history of the Sultanate. Around 1253, a group of Bahārī Mamluks—comrades of the future sultan Baybars—were taken prisoner by a rival group in some of the infighting that was to become so characteristic of the Sultanate’s history. Being led along in chains to prison in the Cairo Citadel, they spied above the wife of the Sultan, Shajar al-Durr, also of Qipchaq Turkish provenance (and one of their gang, so to speak), looking down at them. The Arabic source clearly notes: they yelled up to her in Turkish asking for help. She shouted down that she was sorry but could not help.⁹ This is a touching story, with some interesting cultural information on the side.

Most Mamluks must have had some knowledge of spoken Arabic and the rudiments at least of the written variety. A good part of their training was devoted to ‘civilian’ topics, which concentrated on the basic elements of Islam, and thus must have included at least some formal exposure to literary Arabic.¹⁰ The daily contact with the Arabic speaking

Amitai, *Holy War and Rapprochement: Studies in the Relations between the Mamluk Sultanate and the Mongol Ilkhanate (1260–1335)* (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 109–155.

⁸See the summary translation by Gaston Wiet of Ibn Taghūr Birdī’s *Manhal al-Ṣāfi* (*Les biographies du Manhal Safī* [Cairo, 1932]), for many examples of the Turkish names of the Mamluks.

⁹Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kitāb durar al-tijān wa-ghurar tawārikh al-zamān*, partial edition and translation in G. Graf, *Die Epitome der Universalchronik Ibn ad-Dawādārīs im Verhältnis zur Langfassung. Eine quellenkritische Studie zu Geschichte der ägyptischen Mamluken* (Berlin, 1990), p. 69 (Arabic text), p. 211 (translation). For more on the use of Turkish, see A. Mazor, *The Manṣūrīyya in the First Mamluk Sultanate, 678/1279–741/1341*. ‘Mamluk Studies’, vol. 12 (Göttingen, 2015), p. 42.

¹⁰D. Ayalon, *L’esclavage du Mamelouk*, *Oriental Notes and Studies* no. 1 (Jerusalem, 1951), pp. 13–14 (reprinted in Ayalon, *The Mamlūk Military Society*). See now also J. Frenkel, “Some notes concerning the trade and education of slave-soldiers during the Mamlūk era”, and Amir Mazor, “The Early Experience of the Mamlūk in the First Period of the Mamlūk Sultanate (1250–1382 CE)”, both to appear in Christoph Cluse and Reuven Amitai (eds.), *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1000–1500CE)* (forthcoming). Both Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), *Kitāb al-‘ibar* (Bulaq, 1284/1867–68), V, pp. 371–373, and al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442), *Kitāb al-Khīṭaṭ* (Bulaq, 1270/1853–54), II, pp. 213–214 (who may well have taken this information from the former), note that only with the completion of the religious education was the formal military training begun. However, this seems unlikely, not the least since the inculcation of military skills, based on the steppe upbringing of the young Mamluks, necessitated long-term, **continual**, practice. See Mazor for this point.

natives of Egypt and Syria surely gave most of them a working knowledge of the colloquial language. Some we know were quite learned in Arabic and Islamic sciences, and there were even writers of fine Arabic prose among them.¹¹ An outstanding example of this is Baybars al-Manṣūrī al-Dawādār (d. 1325), who was both a senior officer and a prolific author of well-written histories, most importantly, *Zubdat al-fikra fī ta'rīkh ahl al-hijra*.¹² Others, such as the sultan Qalāwūn (1279–90), appear to have been not only illiterate in Arabic, but to have had little knowledge of the spoken language.¹³ Yet, with all this exposure and use of Arabic, without a doubt the daily language of discourse among the Mamluks themselves was surely Turkish, and those Mamluks who were not of Turkish provenance probably quickly learned this language in order to function within this military society. An example of how this worked is seen from 1266: Baybars having conquered the Frankish town of Qārā in north Syria, had decided to turn a group of captive Frankish youths into Mamluks, the first step of which was having them taught Turkish.¹⁴

There was also some literature—and I use this term broadly—in Turkish composed in the Mamluk Sultanate or brought there.¹⁵ Many of these volumes were devotional works, but they also included a *furūsiyya* (generally, ‘horsemanship’) training manual and Turkish–Arabic dictionaries. They mostly date from later Mamluk times (1382–1517), which is still often mistakenly called the Burjī period. Contemporaries, however, referred to it generally as the Circassian period, after the then leading ethnic group in the Sultanate.¹⁶ It is interesting that it is actually in this later era that there is this mini-flowering of written Turkish culture, indicating the continuing domination of Turkish as the daily tongue, and even as a literary language of sorts, in the military society of Egypt and Syria.

The Mamluks were converted to Islam at an early age and clearly identified with this religion. Whether they always obeyed all of its religious laws is another matter.¹⁷ Here and

¹¹ See J. P. Berkey, “Mamluks and the world of higher Islamic education in medieval Cairo, 1250–1517”, in H. Elboudrari (ed.), *Modes de transmission de la culture religieuse en Islam*, (ed.) Hassan Elboudrari (Cairo, 1993), pp. 93–116; J. P. Berkey, “‘Silver Threads among the Coal’: A well-educated Mamluk of the ninth/fifteenth century”, *Studia Islamica* 73 (1991), pp. 109–125; U. Haarmann, “Arabic in speech, Turkish in lineage: Mamluks and their sons in the intellectual life of fourteenth-century Egypt and Syria”, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33, 1 (1988), pp. 81–114. See comments in Amir Mazor, *The Rise and Fall of a Muslim Regiment*, pp. 41–42.

¹² (Ed.) D. S. Richards (Beirut and Berlin, 1998). See the introduction for biographical details. There is some evidence that Baybars may have received some assistance in the composition of this work by a native Arabic speaking Christian official (*ibid.*, pp. xxi–xxii).

¹³ L. Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan: The Career of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn and the Consolidation of Mamluk Rule in Egypt and Syria (678–689 AH/1279–1290 AD)* (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 67.

¹⁴ P. Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century*, translated P. M. Holt (London and New York, 1992), p. 175.

¹⁵ J. Eckmann, “The Mamluk–Kipchak literature”, *Central Asiatic Journal* 8 (1963), pp. 304–319; B. Flemming, “Literary activities in Mamluk halls and barracks,” in M. Rosen–Ayalon (ed.), *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 249–260; A. Bodrogligeti, “A Grammar of Mameluke–Kipchak”, in L. Ligeti (ed.), *Studia Turcica* (Budapest, 1971), pp. 89–102; O. Kurtulus (ed. and tr.), *Munyatu'l-Ghuzat: A 14th Century Mamluk–Kipchak Military Treatise* (Cambridge, MA, 1989); M. T. Houtsma, *Ein türkisch-arabisches Glossar, nach der leidener Handschrift* (Leiden, 1894).

¹⁶ Robert Irwin discussed this ethnic group in an important paper, “How Circassian were the Circassian Mamluks?” presented in the 2006 conference held in Haifa and Jerusalem, which will hopefully soon see the light of day. For the question of how the later period should be called, see D. Ayalon, “Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks—inadequate names for the two reigns of the Mamluk Sultanate”, *Tārīḥ* 1 (1990), pp. 3–53, and reprinted in D. Ayalon, *Islam and the Abode of War* (Aldershot, 1994).

¹⁷ J. P. Berkey, “The Mamluks as Muslims: The military elite and the construction of Islam in medieval Egypt”, in T. Phillip and U. Haarmann (eds.), *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 163–173;

there, they kept up some non-Muslim aspects of the culture into which they were born. One of these was the drinking of *qumiz*, or fermented mare's milk. We have some examples in the Mamluk sources of drinking parties of the elite in which *qumiz* was featured. In fact, Sultan Baybars, in spite of his militant Muslim public persona which included the frequent closure of wine houses and brothels, is recorded as having indulged in this practice with his comrades. It was at one such event that the Sultan met his demise; in unclear circumstances, he drank poisoned *qumiz* that soon led to his death.¹⁸ Baybars himself evidently did not see any dissonance between his deeply held personal and public Islamic faith and indulging in the odd cup of this traditional Steppe beverage.

There is a little evidence of ongoing rituals among the Mamluks from the traditional religion of Eurasian Steppe societies, what is often referred to as Shamanism.¹⁹ One outstanding example is a story told about Sultan Qalāwūn: at times in engaged in the practice of scapulamancy, i.e. divination of the future by the reading of cracks on burnt scapulae (shoulder blades) of sheep.²⁰ Was this just the tip of the shamanistic iceberg, and did other members of the Mamluk military society—officers and common soldiers—indulge in this and other rituals originating in the Steppe? If this were the case, perhaps Muslim writers of Arabic in the Sultanate played down what they would have considered despicable acts? I think this unlikely however: not all the historians of the Mamluk era were beholden to the ruling elite, and it is difficult to see how widespread practices from the pagan Steppe *milieu* could have been kept under wraps for long. It seems to me much more plausible that rituals like the one in which Qalāwūn engaged were rare. In the realm of religion and related matters, the intensive Muslim education that the young Mamluks received over the years, along with the all-pervading Islamic ambience in which they continually found themselves, had a great, even decisive impact. Overall, I might suggest that the religious slate of their Steppe childhood had more-or-less been wiped clean. In this connection, it is worth remembering a story in connection to the Oirat Mongol *wāfīdiyya* (refugees) who arrived in large numbers to the Mamluk Sultanate in the mid-1290s. The Mamluk officers were scandalised by their pagan method of slaughtering horses for meat, by pounding the animals on the head, instead of the normative *shar'ī* technique.²¹

D. P. Little, "Religion under the Mamluks", *The Muslim World* 73 (1983), pp. 165–168, and reprinted in D. P. Little, *History and Historiography of the Mamlūks* (London, 1986). I address this subject further in *Holy War and Rapprochement*, Chapter 4.

¹⁸Irwin, *Middle East*, pp. 57–58; Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, pp. 240–243, 268. On *qumiz/qumis* in general, see T. T. Allsen, "Ever Closer Encounters: The appropriation of culture and the apportionment of peoples in the Mongol Empire", *Journal of Early Modern History* 1, 1 (1997), pp. 13–15; G. Doerfer, *Türkische und mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen* (Wiesbaden, 1963–75), III, pp. 512–517 (no. 1529).

¹⁹On the assemblage of rituals and beliefs that constitute what (for lack of a better term) I have termed 'traditional Steppe religion', see J.-P. Roux, "Turkic Religions", in M. Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), xv, pp. 87–94; W. Heissig, "Mongol religion", in Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion*, x, pp. 54–57; W. Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia*, translated by G. Samuel (London, 1980), esp. Chapter 2; J.A. Boyle, "Turkish and Mongol shamanism in the Middle Ages", *Folklore* 83 (1972), pp. 177–193, and reprinted in J.A. Boyle, *The Mongol World Empire 1206–1370* (London, 1977).

²⁰Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan*, p. 67, citing Ibn al-Furāt, *Ta'riḫ al-duwal wa'l-mulūk*, VIII, ed. C.K. Zurayk and N. Izzedin (Beirut, 1939), pp. 94–95 (a translation of this passage is found in n. 15).

²¹On this, see D. Ayalon, "The Great Yāsa of Chingiz Khān. A re-examination. Part A", *Studia Islamica* 33 (1971), pp. 118–120, who notes that this method attributed to the Oirats was different from another method of slaughter ascribed elsewhere to the Mongols: slitting the chest of the animal and pulling out its heart.

There is some mention in the Arabic sources about the use and application of the Mongol Yasa (law) in the Sultanate.²² Some forty years ago, David Ayalon in a series of important and wide-ranging articles convincingly showed that these occasional references cannot be taken at face value, and there was little if any application of the Yasa by the Mamluk authorities.²³ However, the fact that the Yasa does have some prominence in the Mamluk sources, both in descriptions of the ‘enemy’ as well as at home, shows a great fascination with the subject, reflecting perhaps both the danger and the prestige of the Mongols in Mamluk eyes, or at least the great interest that they generated.²⁴

Perhaps as to be expected, the Mamluks not only fought on horseback, but also played on it. Somewhere between military manoeuvres and plain fun was polo, known in Arabic as *laʿb al-kura*, literally, the ‘game of the ball’. Polo’s exact beginnings are shrouded in mystery, although they were probably in Central Asia or Iran. Whatever its provenance, it had become an integral part of Eurasian Steppe culture, and it is probably from there that the Mamluks brought it to Egypt; a more direct Iranian influence, however cannot be discounted.²⁵ In any case, the early sultans—foremost among them Baybars—and the Mamluk elite were avid players, playing it regularly in one of the Cairo hippodromes.²⁶ One indication of the game’s importance was the position of *jūkandār*, from the Persian *chawkandār*, or ‘holder

²² Al-Ṣafādī (Khalīl b. Ayyub), *Aʿyān al-ʿaṣr wa-aʿwān al-naṣr*, (ed.) ʿA. Abū Zayd et al. (Beirut-Damascus, 1418/1998), I, p. 634; al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, II, pp. 219–222; Ibn Taghūrī Birdī (Jamāl al-Dīn Abū al-Maḥāsīn Yūsuf), *al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk miṣr waʿl-qāhira* (Cairo, 1348–92/1929–72), VI, p. 268; VII, p. 182. All of these are cited and discussed at length by Ayalon in the series of articles cited in the next note, especially in Part C2, pp. 127–140.

²³ D. Ayalon, “The Great Yāsa of Chingiz Khān. A reexamination. Part A”, *Studia Islamica* 33 (1971), pp. 97–140; “. . . Part B”, *Studia Islamica* 34 (1971), pp. 151–180; “. . . Part C1”, *Studia Islamica* 36 (1972), pp. 113–158; “. . . Part C2”, *Studia Islamica* 38 (1973), pp. 107–156; all reprinted in Ayalon, *Outsiders in the Lands of Islam: Mamluks, Mongols, and Eunuchs* (London, 1988). This important study helped to propel a vigorous discussion by scholars about the origins and nature of the Yasa in a more general, mostly Mongol context, in which David Morgan has played a key part. See D. O. Morgan, “The ‘Great Yāsa of Chingiz Khān’ and Mongol law in the Ilkhānate”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 49 (1986), pp. 163–176; D. O. Morgan., “The ‘Great Yasa of Chinggis Khan’ revisited”, in R. Amitai and M. Biran (eds.), *Mongols, Turks, and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden, 2005), pp. 291–308. For a comprehensive and up-to-date review of the whole subject, see P. Jackson, “Yāsā”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition. Available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yasa-law-code> (accessed 3 March 2015).

²⁴ See R. Amitai, “The Mongols as seen by the Arabic sources: The view from across Asia”, in *Chinggis Khan and Globalization* (Ulaan Baatar, 2014), pp. 125–126; R. Amitai and M. Biran, “Arabic Sources for the History of the Mongol Empire”, in M. Biran and Hodong Kim (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Mongol Empire* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

²⁵ On polo in general in the Islamic world, with a few comments regarding its origins and early appearance, see H. Massé, “Čawgān”, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, II, pp. 16–17. See also B. Shoshan, “Sports,” in J. W. Meri (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London, 2006) ii, pp. 768–770. For Polo in China, see: J. T. C. Liu, “Polo and Cultural Change: From T’ang to Sung China”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45 (1986), pp. 203–224 (esp. pp. 203–205); V. L. Bower, “Polo in Tang China: Sport and Art”, *Asian Art* 4/1 (Winter 1991), pp. 23–45. See also the comment in T. T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia, 2006), p. 266, who refers to polo as “the first international sport, played by both elites and commoners from Korea to the Mediterranean”. It is not impossible that polo passed to the Mamluks directly from China or Iran, but the Inner Asian provenance seems the most likely, or at least reinforced its initial borrowing from another source.

²⁶ For this game in the Sultanate, see D. Ayalon, “Notes on the Furūsiyya exercises and games in the Mamluk Sultanate”, in U. Heyd (ed.), *Studies in Islamic History and Civilization* (Jerusalem, 1961 = *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 9), pp. 31–62, esp. pp. 53–55, and reprinted in Ayalon, *Mamlūk Military Society*. For an example of Baybars playing polo (from 659/1261 in Damascus), see Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir (Muḥyī al-Dīn), *al-Rawḍ al-zāhir fī sirat al-malik al-zāhir*, (ed.) ʿA-ʿA. al-Khuwayṭir (Riyad, 1396/1976), pp. 119–120: the author notes that the Sultan played with a large group of kings and princes, including many Ayyubid scions, comparing him favourably to Saladin, who had played with a less impressive—so it is implied—group of Seljuq and Zengid princes. See now Sh. al-Sarraf, “The Mamluk *Furūsiyya* Literature and Its Antecedents”, *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, 1 (2004), pp. 190–192, and the comment in Li Guo, “Sports as Performance: The Qabaq-game and Celebratory Rites in Mamluk Cairo”, *Ulrich Haarmann Memorial Lecture*, vol. 5 (Berlin, 2013), p. 20. Mention should also be made of the remarkable collection of evidence,

of the polo mallets'; this court functionary was usually a young royal Mamluk whose job was to take care of the Sultan's polo equipment.²⁷ Not a few Mamluk officers carried this title their entire life, long after they had moved on and upwards in the court and army, showing their pride in this particular job.²⁸ While primarily a form of enjoying leisure time, polo had the secondary benefit of honing riding skills. This game both reflected the high level of the Mamluks' horsemanship, and at the same time made them even better horsemen.

Related to the matter of equestrian sport among the Mamluks was a penchant for hunting, which was also a staple of Steppe life. Most of our evidence relates to relatively small-scale affairs of the Sultan, his court and the senior officers in the countryside around Cairo.²⁹ Occasionally, we read of larger scale activity of this type, at least in Syria. Thus in early 1265, before the campaign against the Crusader city of Arsūf (today, just north of Tel Aviv), Sultan Baybars initiated a large hunt for lions in the nearby forest.³⁰ Implicitly, this movement surely had the secondary benefit of getting the troops into full form just before a campaign, although our source, explicitly tells us that the real goal of the Sultan, besides the pleasure that he surely derived from this activity, was to spy upon the Frankish fortifications and readiness. Of course, these goals do not need contradict each other. We should remember the famous phenomenon of the role of the large scale hunt among the Mongols, which had as one of its purposes the training of coordination among large numbers of soldiers and units.³¹ The Inner Asian influence fitted very well the indigenous Near Eastern tradition of the hunt.³²

Can we talk about any real sense of cultural or ethnic awareness among the Mamluks of Egypt or Syria, particularly regarding their Inner Asian origins and the society from which they were taken? Indeed, there seems to have been some feeling of a special provenance, different from the vast majority of subjects, in spite of the common religion. The Arabic sources refer to the Mamluk Sultanate as *Dawlat al-Turk*, *Dawlat al-Atrāk*, or *al-Dawla al-Turkiyya*, i.e., the Dynasty (more correct here than the modern meaning of

going well beyond the Mamluk Sultanate, by E. Quatremère in a note in his partial translations of Maqrīzī's *Kitāb al-Sulūk: L'Histoire des sultans mamelouks de l'Égypte* (Paris, 1837–45), vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 121–132.

²⁷For this title, as well as how it was represented on Mamluk "heraldic" symbols, see L. A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry* (Oxford, 1933), index, s.v. "jūkandār". Mayer, however, translates this as 'polo-master', but I prefer 'the holder of the polo mallets', following R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* (Leiden, 1881), i, p. 235.

²⁸One example from the beginning of Mamluk rule in Syria is Ḥusām al-Dīn Lājīn al-Jūkandār al-'Azīzī (d. 662/1263–4), actually a Mamluk of an Ayyubid prince in Syria, who briefly controlled Aleppo in the aftermath of 'Ayn Jalūt; Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*, pp. 94–95; al-Maqrīzī (Taḳī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. 'Alī), *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma'rīfat al-duwal wa'l-mulūk*, (ed.) Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda et al. (Cairo, 1934–73), i, p. 522.

²⁹E.g., Baybars was hunting outside Cairo at the end of 1264 when news arrived of a Mongol attack on al-Bīra on the Euphrates: Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, pp. 221–222. For an example of Qalāwūn's sons out on the hunt, see Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan*, p. 247. Al-Ashraf Khalīl (r. 1290–3) was murdered while out on a hunting expedition; Irwin, *Middle East*, p. 82.

³⁰Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Rawḍ*, p. 229; R. Amitai, "The conquest of Arsūf by Baybars: Political and military aspects", *Mamluk Studies Review* 9 (2005), pp. 61–63.

³¹For the Mongol hunt, see D. Morgan, *The Mongols* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 84–85; S. Jagchid and P. Hyer, *Mongolia's Culture and Society* (Boulder and Folkstone, 1979), pp. 27–37; and T. May, *The Mongol Art of War: Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Military System* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, 2007), pp. 46–47.

³²For the larger question of the royal hunt in the Old World, see the magisterial study by Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*. However, without delving into the matter too deeply, it appears to me that under the Mamluks the hunt never developed quite the importance that it seems to have had in ancient Iran, the Mongol empire, or Mogul India, which is so clearly portrayed in Allsen's book. This is a subject to which I hope to return in the future.

‘State’) of the Turks, or the Turkish Dynasty, and never *al-Dawla al-Mamlūkiyya* or *Dawlat al-Mamālīk*, which are modern constructions.³³ This may represent the independent views of these Arabic, mostly Muslims writers, but I think it more likely that it also shows their understanding of how the Mamluks—elite and common troopers—saw themselves. We can remember that there is a not an insignificant group of Arabic writers in the Sultanate who were the sons and grandsons of Mamluks, and even historians writing in Arabic who were themselves members of the Mamluk elite. The most famous of these is the celebrated Baybars al-Manṣūrī, already mentioned but there was also the lesser-known Qirṭāy (or Qaraṭāy) al-Khaznadār (fl. early 14th century).³⁴ Among the descendants of Mamluks who wrote history and related literature, we can note Ibn al-Dawādārī (fl. 1330s), al-Ṣafadī (d. 1363); Ibn Taghrī Birdī (d. 1470), and Ibn Iyās (d. 1524).³⁵ All of these would have been conduits of information about Turkish (and other) ethnicity and identity among the Mamluks to the mainstream of historical writing from the period. In addition, there are frequent notices in the Arabic sources to the Qipchaqi ethnicity of the Mamluks and how this influenced the search for new Mamluks.³⁶ The above mentioned Turkish-Arabic dictionaries also reflects an awareness of a special culture, let alone a distinct language, giving expression to intellectual curiosity among learned Arabic speakers, let alone the need by Arab speaking officials to facilitate communication with the Mamluks.³⁷

In the connection of cultural awareness, even nostalgia, I can mention a particularly interesting instance recorded by Ibn al-Dawādārī, the grandson of Mamluk officers on both sides. He tells of his participation of a study group of Mamluks and civilians that met to learn about Turkish and Mongol culture and stories. In fact, this author brings us the text in Arabic of a short work that describes in some detail the origin myths of both groups. This remarkable text has been analysed in some depth by the late Ulrich Haarmann, and is familiar to scholars of both the Mongols and Mamluks.³⁸ Whether these meetings and

³³Thus, for example, Baybars al-Manṣūrī calls one of his chronicles *al-Tuhfa al-mulūkiyya fī al-dawla al-turkiyya* (“The Royal Gem Concerning the Turkish Dynasty”), (ed.) ‘A-R.S. Ḥamdān (Cairo, 1987), and Ibn al-Dawādārī entitled volume VIII of his chronicle *al-Durra al-zakiyya fī akhbār al-dawla al-turkiyya* (“The Pure Pearl Regarding the Turkish Dynasty”), (ed.) U. Haarmann (Cairo, 1391/1971).

³⁴Qaraṭāy [sic] al-‘Izzī al-Khaznadārī, *Ta’riḫ majmū‘ al-nawādir*, (ed.) H. Hein and M. Ḥujayrī (Beirut and Berlin, 2005).

³⁵The compositions of the first three have been mentioned above. For the last named, admittedly not directly relevant to the time-span of the present article, see the comments in D.P. Little, “Historiography of the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk epochs”, in Petry (ed.), *Cambridge History of Egypt*, pp. 440–441.

³⁶These have been collected and analysed by Ayalon, “Great Yāsa . . . Part C1”, pp. 117–126. Of particular interest is the passage from al-‘Umarī (Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā ibn Faḍlallāh), *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār*, partial edition and translation in Klaus Lech, *Das Mongolische Weltreich: al-‘Umarī Darstellung der mongolischen Reiche in seinem Werk Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār* (Wiesbaden, 1968), p. 70 (Arabic text): “Since the time that al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb had made up his mind to buy Qipchaqi Mamluks, the sultans and commanders of this country have been of these Turks. Then, when the rule [of Egypt] passed into their hands, their kings inclined toward the people of their own race, and they decided to increase their numbers, until Egypt had become populated and protected by means of them.” [Translation by Ayalon, with minor changes.]

³⁷See now the recent publication by Dr Koby Yosef, who emphasises the particular importance of this ethnic identity: “*Dawlat al-atrāk* or *dawlat al-mamālīk*? Ethnic origin or slave origin as the defining characteristic of the ruling élite in the Mamlūk Sultanate”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012), pp. 387–410. Dr Amir Mazor has also dealt with some of these matters in his recent book *The Rise and Fall of a Muslim Regiment*, pp. 33–35, 164–168, 191–192.

³⁸Ulrich Haarmann, “Alṭun Ḥān und Čingiz Ḥān bei den ägyptischen Mamluken”, *Der Islam* 51 (1974), pp. 1–36; *idem.*, “Turkish legends in the popular historiography of medieval Egypt”, in *Proceedings of the Vth Congress of Arabic and Islamic Studies* (1972) (Stockholm and Leiden, 1975), pp. 97–107.

the composition in question represent a larger trend of cultural and intellectual activity in the Mamluk Sultanate is unclear, but I would wager that it was not a unique occurrence. Certainly, there were some Mamluks of Mongol origin, notably Aytamish (or Ūtāmish) al-Muḥammadī (d. 1336), a Mamluk of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, who was an expert in Mongolian language and culture, and could have provided a focus for learning and discussion of such matters.³⁹

What were the avenues of Steppe influence on the military, social and cultural life of the Mamluks? Certainly, the provenance of the Mamluks themselves played a role, having arrived in the Sultanate mostly from the lands north of the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Caspian at a relatively early age. We can remember that certain Mamluks, such as the just mentioned Aytamish, had great knowledge and a profound understanding of the cultures of Steppes, and these would have intensified such nascent influences. In the early decades of the Mamluk Sultanate, successive groups of Mongols and Turkish soldiers—tribesmen and even Mamluk-like troopers from conquered areas such as Iraq and Anatolia—fled to its territories from across the Euphrates and were integrated into its army and the political life; generally these military refugees, known *inter alia* as *wāfidiyya*, were relegated to secondary political and military status, but this does not mean that their cultural impact was not significant. Baybars, Qalāwūn and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad were married to women of clear Inner Asian origin, including a few Mongols, and overall, the Mamluks preferred wives of such provenance.⁴⁰ The role of women in conveying cultural elements from the Steppe to the Sultanate would be an interesting avenue to pursue in the future studies.

Overall, we should keep in mind the overriding significance of Muslim religion and culture on the Mamluks when looking at the impact of Inner Asian Steppe culture on them. True: the Mamluks spoke Turkish, had Turkish names, at times drank a Turkish alcoholic beverage, etc. But as mentioned above, I think that an extremely formative—perhaps the most seminal—feature of their conscious and unconscious life was the Islam to which they had been exposed even before arriving in the Sultanate (by slave merchants), and driven home by years of orderly education and indirectly by the Muslims who surrounded them and their culture. The Mamluks may have lapsed at times in their strict observance of all the Muslim laws and rituals, but this does not mean that they did not see themselves as loyal Muslims whose job it was to defend the Islam and the Muslim community as a whole. As expressed in coins, inscriptions, documents and countless literary sources, and well as through their hundreds (or thousands) of construction projects spread over Egypt and

³⁹Ayalon, “Great Yāsa . . . Part C2”, pp. 131–140, 143–145; D. P. Little, “Notes on Aitamiš, a Mongol Mamlūk”, in U. Haarmann and P. Backmann (eds.), *Die islamische Welt zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Festschrift für Hans Robert Roemer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Beirut and Wiesbaden, 1979), pp. 387–401, and reproduced in Little, *History and Historiography of the Mamlūks*; R. Amitai, “A Mongol governor of al-Karak in Jordan?: A re-examination of an old document in Mongolian and Arabic”, *Zentralasiatische Studien* 36 (2007), pp. 263–275.

⁴⁰For possible Steppe influences—especially Mongol—and the means by which these were conveyed, see Ayalon, “Great Yāsa . . . Part C1”, pp. 130–136; for the role of the Wafidiyya as agents of these influences, see Nakamachi Nobutaka. “The rank and status of military refugees in the Mamluk army: A reconsideration of the Wāfidiyya”, *Mamluk Studies Review* 10, 1 (2006), pp. 55–81; but cf. R. Amitai, “Mamluks of Mongol origin and their role in early Mamluk political life”, *Mamluk Studies Review* 12, 1 (2008), pp. 119–137; P. M. Holt, “An-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (684–741/1285–1341): His ancestry, kindred and affinity”, in U. Vermeulen and D. de Smet (eds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras* (Leuven, 1995), pp. 313–324.

Syria, the Mamluks were dyed in the wool Muslims in their own way.⁴¹ Of Steppe origin certainly, speaking Turkish among themselves of course and practicing aspects of Steppe culture at times for sure. But their deepest loyalties were to each other (most of the time) and to Islam invariably, and when push came to shove, it was as Muslims that they fought. <reuven.amitai@mail.huji.ac.il>

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⁴¹This is a point that I tried to make in *Holy War and Rapprochement*, chapter 4. See also J. Berkey, "Mamluk Religious Policy", *Mamluk Studies Review* 13, 2 (2009), pp. 7–22.