CHAPTER 2 / BÖLÜM 2

THE QURAYSH OF THE CIRCASSIANS: CONSTRUCTING CIRCASSIAN ETHNICITY IN THE COURT OF SULTAN QĀNIṢAWH AL-GHAWRĪ

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Abstract

While research about ethnicity in the Mamluk Sultanate has made significant progress in recent years, our knowledge about how Circassian identities were constructed, ascribed, and perceived in the Mamluk lands is still quite limited. The present paper addresses this situation by examining the construction of Circassian ethnicity within a particularly well-documented elite environment, namely the court of the penultimate Mamluk ruler Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516) who, like many members of the late Mamluk military elite, had been brought to Egypt as a Circassian military slave. The paper argues that in the highly competitive social space of the late Mamluk court, it was not only Circassian identity in itself, but also the status of one's lineage group among the Circassian ethnos that could be used to define and legitimate a person's position in the Mamluk political system. The findings of the paper thus challenge the assumption expressed in earlier publications that Circassian identity alone was important in late Mamluk political culture and call for a more nuanced understanding of what it meant to be called a Circassian in the Mamluk Sultanate. The paper thereby demonstrates that an exclusive focus on ethnic macro groups such as the Circassians is insufficient for grasping the full complexity of Mamluk concepts of ethnicity. Rather, researchers also need to pay attention to how internal divisions within these macro groups were imagined and evaluated.

Keywords: Mamluk Sultanate, Historiography, Ethnicity, Circassia, Legitimation, Identity, Court Culture, Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī

Introduction

Research about ethnicity in the Mamluk Sultanate has made significant progress in recent years. Thanks to the work of Hannah Barker, Josephine van den Bent, Stephan Conermann, Benjamin Lellouch, Julien Loiseau, Koby Yosef, and others, we know today much more about what it meant to be a Turk, a Mongol, or a Persian in the Mamluk Sultanate than we did ten years ago.[1] One of the key points emphasized in earlier research about ethnicity in the Mamluk Sultanate is that ethnic identities are not simply natural properties that people have because of their origins and backgrounds, but rather that such identities are the results of social processes of construction in which human beings get labelled – and/or label themselves – as members of specific ethnic groups. These social processes of labelling typically take place when groups that exhibit differences in terms of culture, language, or other social properties come into close interaction with each other. The imagined origins of a given ethnic group constitute often a particularly important aspect in such processes of identity construction. The outcomes of the social processes in which ethnic identities are constructed differ depending on the people involved in them and the situations in which they take place. Thus, a person can be ascribed different identities referring, for example, to a specific people, a tribe, or a clan. These attributions of identities depend on the time, place, and the social environment in which the process of ethnic labelling takes place. Each of these identities comes with its distinctive set of social, legal, and political effects, which are often strategically employed by those involved in the social process of ethnic labelling. The social power of these distinctive sets of effects is based on the shared recognition of the ethnic identities as true within a given context.[2] As Peter Webb put

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1   Examples of relevant recent publications include, but are not limited to, Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260-1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); Benjamin Lellouch, "Qu'est-ce qu'un Turc? (Égypte, Syrie, XVIe siècle)", *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2013), 1–20; Christian Mauder, "Being Persian in Late Mamluk Egypt: The Construction and Significance of Persian Ethnic Identity in the Salons of Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906–922/1501–1516)", *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā: The Journal of Middle East Medievalists* 28 (2020), 376–408; Josephine van den Bent, "None of the Kings on Earth Is Their Equal in ʿAṣabiyya: The Mongols in Ibn Khaldūn's Works", *Al-Masāq* 28/2 (2016), 171–186; Josephine van den Bent "Mongol Origins in Mamluk Texts: An Origo Gentis in Ibn al-Dawādārī's *Durar al-Tījān* and *Kanz al-Durar*", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 24 (2021), 39-70; Josephine van den Bent, *Mongols in Mamluk Eyes: Representing Ethnic Others in the Medieval Middle East* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, Ph.D. Dissertation, 2020); Koby Yosef, "*Dawlat al-Atrāk* or *Dawlat al-Mamālīk*: Ethnic Origin or Slave Origin as the Defining Characteristic of the Ruling Elite in the Mamlūk Sultanate", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012), 387–410; Koby Yosef, "Cross-Boundary Hatred: (Changing) Attitudes towards Mongol and 'Christian' Mamlūks in the Mamluk Sultanate", *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History*, ed. Reuven Amitai – Stephan Conermann (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2019), 149–214. See also footnote 5 below.

2   Mauder, "Being Persian", 379, which is in turn based on Robert Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity", *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31/1 (2001), 39–56, here 40, 42; Timothy

it so well in his study of Arab ethnicity in the early Islamic period: "Ethnicities must be believed in to become real."[3]

While we thus know today significantly more about ethnic identities in the Mamluk Sultanate than we did ten years ago and also begin to understand how these identities were constructed, ascribed, and perceived by members of Mamluk society, there are some ethnic identities that still remain relatively little-studied. One of these ethnicities that have received comparatively little attention is the Circassian one, prompting a recent study to ask "How Circassian were the Circassian Mamluks?"[4] This lack of research on Circassian ethnicity is surprising considering the significant roles that people identified as Circassians played in the Mamluk Sultanate, especially during the later years of this polity –roles that have prompted many historians to refer to the second half of the history of the Mamluk Sultanate as the "Circassian period."[5]

The present paper addresses this situation by examining the construction of Circassian ethnicity within a particularly well-documented elite environment, namely the court of the penultimate Mamluk ruler Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516) who, like many members of the late Mamluk military and political elite, had been brought to Egypt as a Circassian military

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Reuter, "Whose Race, Whose Ethnicity? Recent Medievalists' Discussions of Identity", *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, ed. J. L. Nelson, 100–108 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 101, 103; John A. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 4–6. See also Patrick J. Geary, "Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages", Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien 113 (1983), 15–26, here 18, 21; Walter Pohl, "Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity", *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. Walter Pohl – Helmut Reimitz, 17–69 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), here 21–22; Frederik Barth, "Introduction", *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. Frederik Barth, 9–38 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), here 9–10, 13–16, 33–34;
Nayzan Adlparvar – Mariz Tadros, "The Evolution of Ethnicity Theory: Intersectionality, Geopolitics and Development", *IDS Bulletin* 47 (2016), 123–136, here 125–126.

3   Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 11.

4   Robert. Irwin, "How Circassian Were the Circassian Mamluks?", *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History*, ed. Reuven Amitai – Stephan Conermann (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2019), 109–122. In addition to Irwin's chapter and Hannah Barker's important work on the regional origin of slaves labeled as "Circassians" in Barker, *Merchandise*; the following studies are of fundamental importance: David Ayalon (Neustadt), "The Circassians in the Mamlūk Sultanate", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 69/3 (1949), 135–147; Hannah Barker, "What Caused the 14th-Century Tatar-Circassian Shift?", *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c. 900-1900: Forms of Unfreedom at the Intersection between Christianity and Islam*, ed. Felicia Roşu (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 339–363; Julien Loiseau, "Soldiers Diaspora or Cairene Nobility? The Circassians in the Mamluk Sultanate", *Union in Separation: Diasporic Groups and Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean (1100-1800)*, ed. Goerg Christ et al. (Rome: Viella, 2015), 207–217; Julien Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks XIIIe–XVIe siècle: Une expérience du pouvoir dans l'Islam médiéval* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014), 173–203.

5   For a call for case studies on, inter alia, Circassian ethnicity in the Mamluk Sultanate, see Reuven Amitai, "Mamluks of Mongol Origin and Their Role in Early Mamluk Political Life", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12/1 (2008), 119–137, here 134.

slave.[6] The paper argues that in the highly competitive social space of the late Mamluk court, it was not only Circassian identity in itself, but also the status of one's lineage group among the Circassian ethnos that could be used to define and legitimate a person's position in the Mamluk political system. The findings of the paper thus challenge the assumption expressed in earlier publications that Circassian identity alone was important in late Mamluk political culture[7] and call for a more nuanced understanding of what it meant to be called a Circassian in the Mamluk Sultanate. The paper thereby demonstrates that an exclusive focus on ethnic macro groups such as the Circassians is insufficient for grasping the full complexity of Mamluk concepts of ethnicity. Rather, researchers also need to pay attention to how internal divisions within these macro groups were imagined and evaluated.

After the present introduction, I first provide a brief introduction to the sources that I use in this paper and their historical background. I then describe and analyze three different explanations of the origins of the Circassians from al-Ghawrī's court, before I focus on the question of Circassian tribal and clan identities. Finally, I briefly indicate some implications of my findings for the study of ethnicity in the Mamluk Sultanate.

Historical Background and Sources

Historians of the Middle East are often familiar with Qānisawh al-Ghawrī as the penultimate Circassian Mamluk sultan whose defeat in the battle of Marj Dābiq in 1516 marked the beginning of the Ottoman conquest of Syria and, later, Egypt. The details of the political history of the late Mamluk Sultanate and the underlying causes of its defeat have been studied by Carl Petry and others and do not need to detain us here.[8] It is, however, important to note that the last decades in the history of the Mamluk Sultanate seem to have been perceived by

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6   Loiseau, "Diaspora", likewise seeks to study "how their [i.e., the Circassians'] social identity was constructed," (Loiseau, "Diaspora", 208), but does so using different sources and based on an apparently different understanding of ethnicity, given that he writes: "In other words, are the Circassians a group based on a real common ancestry and migratory experience or is it a constructed allegiance, a constructed ethnic group […]?" (Loiseau, "Diaspora", 208).

7   See, e.g., Ayalon (Neustadt), "Circassians", 142–143; Loiseau, "Diaspora", 216. See on this issue also, e.g., Amalia Levanoni, "al-Maqrīzī's Account of the Transition from Turkish to Circassian Mamluk Sultanate: History in the Service of Faith", *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c. 950–1800)*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 93–105; Jo van Steenbergen, *Order out of Chaos: Patronage, Conflict and Mamluk Socio-political Culture, 1341-1382* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 92–94.

8   The most comprehensive studies of the period are Carl Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) and Carl Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultans al-Ashraf Qāytbāy and Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993). Note also the important recent findings summarized in Albrecht Fuess, "Three's a Crowd: The Downfall of the Mamluks in the Near Eastern Power Struggle, 1500-1517", *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History*. ed. Reuven Amitai – Stephan Conermann (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2019), 431–450.

many of its inhabitants as a time of great challenges. Economic problems, epidemics, adverse climate conditions, military conflicts, and internal political turmoil led not only to a crisis of the Mamluk polity, but also negatively impacted the reputation and legitimacy of the Mamluk rulers, who were at least by some contemporaries seen as responsible for the trials that the Sultanate and its population were facing.[9]

In this situation, the Mamluk political elite with Sultan al-Ghawrī at its head experimented with multiple strategies to demonstrate that they were not only in control of the situation, but indeed the rightful leaders of the greatest polity of the Islamic world. They showcased their command over considerable material resources by staging military parades and commissioning ambitious building projects. Moreover, they also engaged in forms of patronage that aimed to prove that the Mamluk Sultanate was still a force to be reckoned with in the realms of culture and learning. Thus, they commissioned the first versified translation of the Persian *Shāhname* into Ottoman Turkish, authored multilingual poetry, and reinvigorated the art of book illumination in Egypt.[10]

In this context, Sultan al-Ghawrī's decision to hold regular learned gatherings (*majālis*) at the Cairo Citadel on several nights each week deserves particular attention. During these events, the sultan did his best to present himself as a cultured, wise, pious, just, and, perhaps most importantly, legitimate ruler who easily conversed with scholars, litterateurs, and foreign dignitaries about questions of religious and non-religious learning, thereby demonstrating his acumen and erudition.[11]

No less than three literary texts provide insights into the proceedings of these events: *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya fī ḥaqāʾiq asrār al-Qurʾāniyya* by a certain Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī and two anonymous works with the titles *al-Kawkab al-durrī fī masāʾil al-Ghawrī* and *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya fī al-nawādir al-Ghawriyya*. *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* and *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* are of special importance in the present context, as they both pay ample attention to Sultan al-Ghawrī's Circassian background.

Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya is preserved in a single manuscript today located in Istanbul, in the Topkapı Palace Library, Ahmed III 2680. The observations that this manuscript is lavishly decorated, of superb artistic quality, and hardly used point to a courtly context of

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9   On the late Mamluk crisis and its impact on the legitimacy of Mamluk rule, see Christian Mauder, *In the Sultan's Salon: Learning, Religion and Rulership at the Mamluk Court of Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501-1516)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 785–795.

10   On strategies of legitimation in al-Ghawrī's period, see Mauder, *Salon*, 931–999.

11   On these events and their political functions, see Mauder, *Salon*, esp. 320–560; 926–931.

origin, as does a note on its titlepage that states that it was produced for the library of Sultan al-Ghawrī. The manuscript does not contain explicit information on its date of production, but internal evidence points out that it must have been produced between December 1505 and the end of Sultan al-Ghawri's reign.[12]

The manuscript of *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* features a text written mostly in Arabic, but that contains also Turkish and Persian elements. It consists of three parts: an introductory section, a main part of ten chapters in chronological order, and a concluding section. Each of the ten chapters in the main part is dedicated to the accounts of *majālis* convened by Sultan al-Ghawrī during the ten months between late Ramaḍān 910 and early Shaʿbān 911, corresponding to March to December 1505. For each *majlis*, the text provides precise information on its date, location, and duration. Moreover, it indicates questions and topics that were discussed during the sessions and offers insights into the respective lists of participants.[13]

We know very little about the author of the work beyond his name Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī and his claim to have been a participant in al-Ghawrī's *majālis*. From information gleaned from his text, we can deduce that al-Ḥusaynī did not grow up in the Mamluk Sultanate, but hailed from the East of the Islamic world. Moreover, he traced his origins back to the Prophet Muḥammad's grandson Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, was learned in Ḥanafī jurisprudence, and spoke Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Most important, however, is the information that al-Ḥusaynī depended financially on Sultan al-Ghawrī, a fact that allows us to think that he wrote *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* in an attempt to maintain his patronage relationship with the sultan. To the modern historian, this means that any analysis of *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* must begin with the observation that its author was in need of the favor of the ruler whose court he depicted in his work.[14]

Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya was partially edited by ʿAbd al-Wahhāb ʿAzzām in 1941. However, since this edition left out significant parts of the text and modified it in many ways, the present paper builds on the manuscript version of the text, in addition to the edition.

The second source relevant to the present study, *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya,* is available in a unique, two-volume manuscript preserved in Istanbul in the Süleymaniye Manuscript Library as Ayasofya 3312 and 3313. The manuscript was brought to scholarly attention in 2016[15] and remains unedited. According to their colophons, the first volume was finished in March or

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12 On the manuscript, see in detail Mauder, *Salon*, 129–136.

13 On the structure and content of the work, see in detail Mauder, *Salon*, 136–150.

14 On the author and the background of the work, see Mauder, *Salon*, 150–166.

15 Christian Mauder – Christopher Markiewicz, "A New Source on the Social Gatherings (*majālis*) of the Mamluk Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī", *Al-ʿUsur al-Wusta: The Journal of Middle East Medievalists* 24 (2016), 145–148.

April 1515 and the second one in April or May 1515. The manuscript was thus produced late in the reign of Sultan al-Ghawrī. It is less lavishly executed than the manuscript of *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya*.[16]

Al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya is almost completely written in Arabic, but contains a few passages in Ottoman Turkish. The first volume begins with an introductory section and short a passage in question-and-answer format. The main part of the text narrates the history of humankind from Adam to the reign of the ʿAbbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–833). This is followed by a short concluding section and the colophon. The second volume begins like the first one with an introductory section and a question-and-answer passage before giving a historical account up to the early days of the reign of Sultan al-Ghawrī, thereby paying special attention to al-Ghawrī's biography. A short final section and colophon mark the end of the text. The work is apparently incomplete, as several topics that the author promises to discuss in his introduction are not touched upon.[17]

Al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya lacks an author's name. While there is reason to assume that *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* and the previously mentioned text *al-Kawkab al-durrī* were authored by the same person, both texts have to be considered anonymous for the time being. However, we know that the author had been a client of Sultan al-Ghawrī for a long time when he began to write his work and that he had participated in the sultan's *majālis*, which he presents as the context of origin of much of the material included in his work. *Al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* shares thus with *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* the characteristic of being written by an author who was dependent on Sultan al-Ghawrī's patronage.[18] While the two texts do not seem to be directly textually related to each other, their contents overlap on numerous occasions. This observation makes it likely that both texts were indeed at least partially based on what was said and done in Sultan al-Ghawrī's *majālis*, just as their authors claimed. For the modern historian, this implies that the texts offer unique material to examine the topics of debate in late Mamluk courtly gatherings.[19]

Constructing the Origins of the Circassians

As texts written at the court of a Circassian sultan and reflecting discussions that were held at his court, it is not surprising that *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* and *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* pay attention to topics related to Circassian ethnicity. One of the topics that receives particular

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16   On the manuscript, see in detail Mauder, *Salon*, 187–193.

17   On the structure and content of the work, see in detail Mauder, *Salon*, 193–206.

18   On the author and the background of the work, see Mauder, *Salon*, 206–214.

19   On the overlapping parts of the works and their value as sources, see in detail Mauder, *Salon*, 232–252.

attention in the texts is the origin of the Circassians, which is explained in multiple ways. Since I have dealt with these explanations also in a recent monograph, a rather brief discussion may suffice here.[20]

We find three different attempts to construct the origin of the Circassians and explain the name of their ethnos in the sources from al-Ghawrī's court. While these attempts might seem to present conflicting origin narratives, they form part of the same strategy to integrate the Circassians into a broader, and decidedly Islamic, ethnic landscape.[21] This integrative function is hardly surprising, given that narratives of ethnic origin are known to reflect the needs and concerns of the social groups among whom they circulated. As Walter Pohl and David Mahoney put it: "[Origin stories] tell us less about actual origins than previous generations of scholars had assumed. However, they are valuable indicators of how these origins were perceived at specific points in time and space and what they may have meant for the respective communities."[22] From the persevered narratives, it appears that members of al-Ghawrī's court saw a need to explain how the Circassians fit into a vision of history defined by the Quran and the Arabic historiographical and genealogical traditions.

The first origin narrative from the sources on al-Ghawrī's *majālis* ties the Circassians to the figures of Joseph's brothers known from the Quran. It seems that the story of Joseph's brothers was perceived as a meaningful Quranic reference point in this context because it also made it possible to explain the connection between the Circassians and the land of Egypt. In *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya*, this origin narrative reads as follows:

> The origin of the word Jarkas (Circassians) is *jār kas*, meaning "four persons" in the Persian language. I saw in the history of the non-Arabs that four of Joseph's brothers, namely Ruben, Simeon, Levi, and Dan, were embarrassed by [what they had done to] Joseph and fled from him because he had suffered these things from them. Therefore, they were ashamed to meet him, fled, settled in the lands of the North because of [their] embarrassment and agitation. They begot offspring [in those lands]. Therefore, [their] heirs [now] rule over the districts of Egypt.[23]

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20   See especially Mauder, *Salon*, 497–498; 823–831.

21   On explaining the name of an ethnic group as a typical element of narratives of ethnic origin, see Walter Pohl – Daniel Mahoney, "Narratives of Ethnic Origins: Eurasian Perspectives", *The Medieval History Journal* 21/2 (2018), 187–191, here 188–189.

22   Pohl – Mahoney, "Narratives", 187.

23   *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya fī al-nawādir al-Ghawriyya* (Istanbul: Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Ayasofya, 3312), 34b. Translation quoted from Mauder, *Salon*, 497, with minor changes.

The text continues:

> [The Circassians'] inheritance of the rule over Egypt indicates that they belong to the offspring of Jacob, upon whom be peace, because Joseph, upon whom be peace, was the ruler of the districts of Egypt.[24]

In presenting this narrative, the first-person narrator of *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* managed to do three things at once. First, he explained the origins of the Circassians by identifying their progenitors and elucidating why and how they had settled in the area that later became the Circassian homeland. Second, he embedded the Circassians in a Quranic view of history by tracing their origins back to figures who were known from the scripture of Islam and were related to the line of prophets sent to the people of Israel. Thereby, he saved the Circassians from historical obscurity and portrayed them as the offspring of figures who had played a significant role in the interaction between God and humankind. Third and perhaps most importantly, he provided a genealogical legitimation for why Circassians such as Sultan al-Ghawrī ruled over Egypt. The narrator indicated that just as the Quranic Joseph was in control of the affairs of Egypt in his time, his relatives, the Circassians, now governed the country as their rightful inheritance. Hence, the narrative about the Circassians' origins from Joseph's brothers represents a quite typical case of a narrative of ethnic origin as "a medium for negotiations for legitimacy, power, and status within and between communities."[25]

It is tempting to assume that the narrative about the origin of the Circassian ethnos from the family of the Quranic Joseph is connected to a feature that appears in numerous accounts of European travelers to the Mamluk Sultanate. As Ulrich Haarmann has shown, many of these European visitors sought to explain the – in their view – highly unusual political system of the Sultanate through references to the Biblical story of Joseph.[26] When confronted with a society in which former slaves ruled, the travelers "found an answer to this apparently absurd principle of permanent renewal and rejuvenation of a political and military elite from the outside in the precedent of the Biblical Joseph. He, too, came to Egypt in bondage; and he, too, rose to become the chief minister of the country."[27] Julien Loiseau has suggested that

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24 *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* (Ayasofya, 3312), 35a. Translation quoted from Mauder, *Salon*, 497, with minor changes.

25 Pohl – Mahoney, "Narratives", 190.

26 Ulrich Haarmann, "The Mamluk System of Rule in the Eyes of Western Travelers", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 5 (2001), 1–24, here 13-15; Ulrich Haarmann, "Jospeh's Law: The Careers and Activities of Mamluk Descendants before the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt", *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp – Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 55–84, here 58 –59.

27 Haarmann, "Joseph's Law", 58–59.

"[o]ne might assume that this political myth originated in Islam."[28] The first narrative about the origin of the Circassians in the sources from al-Ghawrī's *majālis* can be read as a corroboration of this assumption.

The second origin narrative from the accounts of al-Ghawrī's *majālis* is more complicated and constructs Circassian ethnicity through recourse to ancient Arab and early Islamic history. It argues that the Circassians originate from the Arab noble dynasty of the Banū Ghassān, who were the rulers of a Christian buffer principality in northern Syria allied to the Byzantine Empire at the time of the coming of Islam. The narrative that connects the Circassians to the Banū Ghassān is included in two different versions in the accounts of al-Ghawrī's *majālis*. The longer version features in *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* and explains the origins of the Circassians as follows:

> It is said that one of the leaders *(amīr min umarāʾ)* of the Banū Ghassān called Kas came and converted to Islam in the time of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb['s caliphate], may God be pleased with him. When [Kas] entered Medina, ʿUmar said to him: "Do you want to enter the inviolable house of God and see these great sights?" Then, when [Kas] had begun to perform the circumambulation [around the Kaʿba] and was walking, suddenly a man from the Fazāra tribe trod on the hem of his pilgrim dress. [Kas] hit the Fazārī's face and gouged his eye out. The Fazārī went away and complained to ʿUmar about him. ʿUmar said: "Get me Kas!" He was brought to him and ʿUmar said: "What is this, Kas?" [Kas] said: "If it were not for the shame it would have brought you, I would have killed him!" Then ʿUmar said: "Provide retaliation to your opponent, as it has been transmitted 'an eye for an eye.'" [Kas] said: "I am a ruler *(malik)* and he belongs to the rabble." ʿUmar said to him: "Islam has made you two equals, there is no difference between a slave and noble people." Then [Kas] said: "Grant me a respite of one night so that I may provide retaliation to him tomorrow." That night he met with a group, fled toward Syria, and converted back to Christianity. Then, he became afraid of an attack by ʿUmar and fled to the Byzantines. Heraclius allocated him land for settlement in the north. The Circassians (Jarkas) belong to his offspring because ʿUmar was told "Kas has left" *(sāra Kas)*. They thus belong originally to the Banū Ghassān.[29]

In *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya*, we find a second, shorter version of the same story. There, it is explicitly credited to Sultan al-Ghawrī:

> Our lord the Sultan said: "The origin of the Circassians is 'Kas got away' *(ṣāra Kas)*." The Banū Ghassān came during the caliphate for ʿUmar b. al-Fārūq [sic], may God be pleased with him, converted to Islam, and performed the pilgrimage. While their sultan was performing the circu-

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28   Loiseau, "Diaspora", 213. See also Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks*, 177.

29   *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* (Ayasofya, 3312), 34b–35a. Translation quoted from Mauder, *Salon*, 824, with minor changes.

mambulation, a poor man stepped on his foot. [The sultan] pushed him away so that he fell and died. The poor man's group came and demanded the blood of the murderer. ʿUmar sentenced the murderer to death to satisfy them, as his death was the only thing that [could] satisfy them. The sultan said: 'Grant me a respite of three days.' In that night, he fled, went to Emperor Heraclius, and converted to Christianity. Heraclius sent them to the lands of al-Dasht, and the Circassians belong to his offspring."[30]

That the sources from al-Ghawrī's *majālis* contain two versions of what is clearly the same narrative strongly suggests that members of the Circassian ruling elite perceived it as meaningful. This is further corroborated by the fact that similar versions of the origin narrative circulated already under earlier Mamluk Circassian rulers[31] and that a later, revised version in which the Prophet Muḥammad's tribe of Quraysh appeared as the ancestors of the Circassians was produced for a Circassian political leader in Ottoman Egypt.[32]

The reasons why this narrative was so attractive to power holders of Circassian origin are not difficult to discern. It integrated the Circassians not only into the history of the Arabo-Islamic world, but also ascribed to them a distinguished pedigree as the scions of a noble Arab house. Moreover, it meant that the progenitors of the Circassians had embraced Islam early on and could thus potentially claim precedence over people who had converted at later points of history.

However, the issue of the Circassians' conversion to Islam brings us also to the main disadvantage of the narrative from the perspective of Circassian power holders in Mamluk Egypt. The story implied that they were not only the offspring of Arab nobility, but also that of traitors and apostates from Islam. Hence, it is not surprising that a source from al-Ghawrī's court outrightly rejected this origin narrative. *Al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* states:

> This statement [about Kas being the Circassians' progenitor] is to be rejected for two reasons. First, the change from a *sīn* to a *jīm* [i.e., from *sāra Kas* to *Jarkas*] does not occur in Arabic. Second, [the Circassians] do not have an Arab appearance, neither in their figure, nor in their clothing or their complexion. Moreover, they continuously sell one another [as slaves], in contrast to the Arabs. Furthermore, [the Circassians'] inheritance of the rule over Egypt indicates

30 Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya fī ḥaqāʾiq asrār al-Qurʾāniyya* (Istanbul: Topkapı Palace Library, Ahmed III, 2680), 200; Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, "Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya fī ḥaqāʾiq asrār al-Qurʾāniyya", *Majālis al-Sulṭān al-Ghawrī: Ṣafaḥāt min tārīkh Miṣr min al-qarn al-ʿāshir al-hijrī*, ed. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb ʿAzzām (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Lajnat al-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1941), 85.

31 Irwin, "How Circassian", 115; Ayalon (Neustadt), "Circassians", 137; Mauder, *Salon*, 825; Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks*, 194–195.

32 Mauder, *Salon*, 827–831.

that they belong to the offspring of Jacob, upon whom be peace, because Joseph, upon whom be peace, was the ruler of the districts of Egypt. No master of the districts of Egypt was of Ghassanid origin.[33]

This valuable passage allows us insights into how members of al-Ghawrī's court engaged with the competing narratives about the origins of the Circassians. They used arguments based on language as well as physical and cultural differences to assert that the Circassians could not be the offspring of the Banū Ghassān. The underlying reason for this stance is indicated in the final two sentences of the quoted passage: While the origin narrative that traced the Circassians' lineage back to Joseph's brothers provided a legitimation of Circassian rule over Egypt, no similar argument with regard to Egypt could be made if the Circassians were related to the Banū Ghassān.

The sources about al-Ghawrī's *majālis* include one more explanation of the origins of the Circassians. This third explanation, however, is not developed into a similarly full narrative as the previous two. It rather forms part of a highly innovative discussion about whether Sultan al-Ghawrī could be legally considered the caliph of the Muslim community. Since I analyze and contextualize this discussion elsewhere,[34] it might suffice to note here that one of the qualifications that al-Ghawrī is said to fulfill is that of genealogical origin. The first-person narrator of *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* states in his text that ideally, the caliph should come from the Prophet Muḥammad's clan of Quraysh. If no qualified Qurashī is available, a suitable candidate from Prophet's tribal group of the Kināna can be chosen. If no qualified Kinānī could be found, the next best solution is a caliph from the descendants of Abraham's son Ishmael and then one from the offspring of Ishmael's brother Isaac. The text then continues:

> Praise and glory be to God! The Circassians originate from the sons of Isaac, and all of these requirements [for the caliphate listed previously in the text] are present in the greatest sultan, the grand caliph, the support of the sultans of the provinces [of the world] who is deservedly the example of [all] rulers, the one who reveals the secrets of [the Quranic verse] "*We made you successors (*khalāʾif*) on Earth,*"[35] the sultan of the seven climes in their entirety, the Commander of the Faithful, the Caliph of the Muslims, al-Malik al-Ashraf, the overlord of Egypt, Abū al-Naṣr Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī.[36]

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33   *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* (Ayasofya, 3312), 35a–35b. Translation quoted from Mauder, *Salon*, 827, with minor changes.

34   Mauder, *Salon*, 862–923.

35   Yūnus 10/14.

36   al-Ḥusaynī, *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* (Ahmet III, 2680), 228; al-Ḥusaynī, "Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya", 108. Translation quoted from Mauder, *Salon*, 896 with minor changes.

The claim that the Circassians are descendants of Isaac is not developed any further in this passage, which is clearly more focused on the issue of qualifications for the caliphate than on explaining the origin of the Circassian ethnos. Nevertheless, this passage is relevant in so far as it indicates that the narrative that connected the Circassians to the Banū Ghassān was widely rejected at al-Ghawrī's court, given that the Banū Ghassān were generally accepted as descendants of Ishmael. In contrast, the narrative about the Circassians' descent from Joseph's brothers is consistent with the statement that the Circassians belonged to the offspring of Isaac, given that Jospeh's brothers are commonly considered Isaac's grandsons.

Taken together, the sources from al-Ghawrī's court demonstrate a strong interest in constructing Circassian ethnic identity by means of origin narratives that explain the name of the Circassian ethnos and its place among the peoples of the world. The clearly most favored of these narratives identified the Circassians as descendants of the brothers of the Quranic Joseph, thereby also providing a legitimation for Circassian rule over Egypt. It thus seems no longer tenable to assume that the "Circassian Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī was […] a believer in the Ghassanid contribution to the Circassian bloodstock,"[37] as was claimed in a recent publication on the topic.

Circassian Tribal and Clan Identities

Circassian ethnicity could evidently play an important role in courtly discourses during the late Mamluk period. However, Circassian ethnic identity was not understood and constructed as uniform. Rather, sources from al-Ghawrī's court demonstrate a keen interest in Circassian tribal and clan identities and construct hierarchies between them. In a passage describing the birth of Sultan al-Ghawrī and his family background, *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* tells us the following about how the sultan's soul descended from heaven to the family in which he was born:

> The bird of his soul reached the land of the Circassians, and descended among the Circassians on the tribe of the Qabardā, because they are the Quraysh among the Circassians by unanimous agreement, and the holders of power and dominion by right. Then, the bird of his soul reached the clan of the Bāyazīriyya, who are the pillars of the rule of the Circassian kings and the notables of their kingdom. [The bird of his soul] did not descend on the royal house, because the kings of the Circassians do not rule over the Egyptian districts and the Hijazi regions. Neither did it descend on the common people because of the base nature of the common people among them. It made the best and most balanced choice.

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37   Irwin, "How Circassian", 115.

> He whose victory may be glorious [i.e., Sultan al-Ghawrī] chose the Circassians so that he would become the servant of the Noble Sanctuaries and the sultan of the two lands and the two seas and so that he, through this means, be the most splendid of the people of his age, and the greatest of the sultans of his time.[38]

This passage describes it as a voluntary decision of Sultan al-Ghawrī's soul to be born a Circassian of a specific tribe and a specific clan. This clan can be described as belonging to Circassian nobility, but not the royal house itself. The decision of the soul can be inferred to have been informed by two factors: As a member of the royal house of his tribe, the future sultan would most likely not have been brought to Egypt as a slave, while as the son of a commoner, he would have been of too lowly a background to reach his goal of becoming the ruler of Egypt and the Hijaz.

The sultan's earlier life as a slave is thus presented in the text as a necessary –and self-chosen– strategy to gain the rule over Egypt and the Islamic Sanctuaries. To make sure that this strategy was successful, al-Ghawrī had to be born in the right lineage group within the right tribe of the Circassian ethnos, namely one noble enough to bring forth rulers –note here the reference to the Arab clan of Quraysh– but not so noble that it would preclude enslavement. One can assume that the emphasis of the first-person narrator of *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* on this point had to do with the fact that other members of the Mamluk ruling elite did come from royal Circassian backgrounds[39] –a fact that potentially spoke against al-Ghawrī's claim for supreme status among them. By indicating that al-Ghawrī had consciously chosen to be born into a non-royal clan, what might have appeared as a weakness in the legitimacy of his sultanate was turned into a conscious and strategic choice.

Our historical knowledge about the internal divisions of the Circassians in the premodern period is limited. It is clear, however, that the Karbadian tribe that *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* refers to as "holders of power and dominion" were indeed among the most influential inner-Circassian groups. Amjad Jaimoukha notes in his *The Circassians: A Handbook*: "The Karbardians, who occupied the strategic central region of the North Caucasus, were the most numerous and mightiest in Circassia and their land was the richest."[40] Moreover, while it has so far not been possible to locate in the available secondary literature the name of the Circassian clan to which Sultan al-Ghawrī apparently belonged, the Karbadian tribe is known to have had a highly stratified and rigid social system based on birthright in which lineage

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38 *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya fī al-nawādir al-Ghawriyya* (Istanbul: Süleymaniye Manuscript Library, Ayasofya, 3313), 52b–53a.

39 *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* (Ayasofya, 3313), 49a–49b. See also Irwin, "How Circassian", 115.

40 Jaimoukha, Amjad, *The Circassians: A Handbook* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 19.

groups such as those that *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* describes clearly existed, i.e., groups that were noble, but not royal.[41] We have thus every reason to assume that the differences within the Circassian ethnos that *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* refers to actually mattered to people identified as Circassians during the Mamluk period.

Differences in status among the various Circassian genealogical groups are also taken up elsewhere in *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya*. The work includes the following anecdote about the childhood of the future Mamluk sultan, which provides deep insights into how inner-Circassian status differences between various genealogical groups were understood and performed:

> The king of the Circassians Mībūlād entered the house of His Highness [i.e., Sultan al-Ghawrī] as a guest. It was winter season and it was customary among the Circassians that when the king took lodgings at the house of a person, the owner of the house and his children had to bare their heads and be of service.[42] The king had a boy with him who was his nephew, his name was Tuqtamish. Food was brought for them. The king gave his nephew a leg of a broiled chicken. He bit off some of it, then he brought it to His Highness [i.e., Sultan al-Ghawrī]. He was at that time a boy of ten years. Then [the king] gave [the boy] a piece of another limb [of the chicken] and he handed it to His Highness. The prince was not able to sit for a while without standing up, taking a bit of food, and giving it to His Highness. So, his uncle asked: "When you leave, whom do you give the food to?" He said: "To the son of the owner of the house." He [i.e., al-Ghawrī] was at that time bareheaded. The uncle summoned him and said: "Bring him to me." His Highness felt embarrassed to enter, so the prince grabbed him, dragged him along by force, and brought him to his uncle. When he entered, he performed the salute that was customary among them. Then the commanders said to the prince: "You must wrestle with your comrade." At first, he refused, but they did their utmost with him. So, he went to His Highness and grabbed him. He whose victory may be glorious [i.e., Sultan al-Ghawrī] had the advantage over him in terms of mind and body (*bi-l-qalb wa-l-qālab*). He intended to throw him to the ground, but all of a sudden, an insight from his wit struck him and his mind awoke from the slumber of foolishness. Then the sultan of the mind won over the Satan of the animal soul (*shayṭān al-nafs*). He said to himself: "How could I offend the prince and all the people in attendance?" He whose victory may be glorious let go of his strength. The prince grabbed him and threw him to the ground. All the people rejoiced together and His Highness' father came and kissed his face. He said with vigor: "My son, you have honored me. If the affair had gone differently, you would have humiliated us." The sultan of the Circassians joyfully gave orders to see to all of His Highness' needs. When Tuqtamish's

41   Jaimoukha, *Circassians*, 157–159.

42   On this practice in Circassian society, see Inga A. Druzhinina – Milana Yu. Ilyushina – Inal B. Kabardov, "'The Life and Country of the Zikhs, called Circassians. A Remarkable Account' by Giorgio Interiano: Commentaries to the Text", *History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus* 19/4 (2023), 921–933, here 930.

mother heard [what had happened], she sent all of her son's clothes and gave them to His Highness.[43] He became afterwards one of the prince's best friends and they were inseparable. The signs of felicity were shining on His Highness since his youth.[44]

This story demonstrates that internal status differences that, as we have seen, were constructed based on genealogical criteria, mattered greatly in Circassians society as remembered and presented in the Mamluk court. As a member of a noble, but not royal clan, the future sultan al-Ghawrī had to show deference to the members of the royal clan to the point where he voluntarily lost a wrestling match against a scion of the ruling house. Honoring the social obligation to submit to those from a lineage group with higher standing was expected and rewarded in Circassian society, according to the source. *Al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* thus creates the image of a Circassian social system in which the maintenance of established status differences based on clan and tribe identities was in the interest of all parties involved. The fact that the text narrates this story at such length points to the significance of this depiction of Circassian social relations and status differences to members of al-Ghawrī's court. Moreover, the story conveys the image of Sultan al-Ghawrī being particularly apt at navigating these status differences, thus showcasing his political skills and underlining his qualities as a ruler.

It is tempting to assume that the anecdote might be based on an actual encounter between the future sultan and members of a Circassian royal clan. While it has not been possible to identify Tuqtamish, the scion of the royal family whom al-Ghawrī befriended, beyond doubt with a person known from other sources, the situation is different in the case of the Circassian king whom the source calls Mībūlād. Available information on the history of the Karbadians, i.e., the Circassian tribe to which al-Ghawrī apparently belonged, includes references to a member of the royal clan called Minbolat. It seems very likely that Mībūlād is an Arabicized version of this name. The historical Minbolat was one of the contenders for the succession of his father Inal, known as the Great, whom sources credit with unifying all of Circassia under his rule. Inal reigned from 1427 to 1453.[45] Al-Ghawrī is known to have been born in 1444 or 1445.[46] According to the anecdote in *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya*, al-Ghawrī's fateful encounter with King Mībūlād took place when the former was 10 years old, i.e., in 1454 or 1455. These were precisely the years during which the historical Minbolat sought to assert himself as

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43   On this practice in Circassian society, see Druzhinina – Ilyushina – Kabardov, "The Life and Country", 930.

44   *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* (Ayasofya, 3313), 4a–5b.

45   Šora B. Nogmov – Adolʹf Petrovič Berže, *Die Sagen und Lieder des Tscherkessen-Volks, gesammelt vom Kabardiner Schora-Bekmursin-Nogmow, bearbeitet und mit einer Vorrede versehen von Adolf Bergé, Präsidenten der kaukasischen archäologischen Kommission* (Leipzig: Wigand, 1866), 48.

46   Mauder, *Salon*, 343.

ruler. While it seems impossible to prove that an encounter between a child and a local ruler in 15th-century Circassia actually took place, the fact that the person whom al-Ghawrī met according to *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* was a prominent figure in Circassian history underlines the link between the depiction of Circassian social relations in Mamluk sources and what we know about the history of the Circassian ethnos in its Caucasian home region. This finding challenges the recently voiced claimed that "[i]t seems that a real homeland with which they [i.e., the Circassians] could have identified their own interests did not exist."[47] It rather calls for further research on the relationships between Circassians in the Mamluk Sultanate and their region of origin beyond the relatively well-documented phenomenon of members of the Mamluk Circassian political elite bringing their relatives from their regions of origin to the Mamluk Sultanate.[48]

We thus see that the texts originating in al-Ghawrī's court were not only interested in the origins of the Circassians as an ethnic group, but also in their internal tribal divisions and status differences. By labeling al-Ghawrī as a member of a tribe that was said to be comparable to the Quraysh in status, our sources attributed one of the noblest origins possible to the sultan. At the same time, the authors of our sources seem to have struggled with the fact that the sultan did not come from a royal Circassian clan, thus demonstrating again a keen awareness of the internal divisions of the Circassian ethnos. Their solution to this problem seems to have been twofold: First, they presented the sultan as closely connected to the Circassian royal house and as having good personal relations with its members. Second, and more importantly, they pointed out that members of the Circassian royal house usually did not become rulers of Egypt and the Hijaz, apparently because they were typically not sold as slaves to the Middle East. According to texts originating from his court, it was thus not only his Circassian background, but also his tribal and clan identity within the Circassian ethnos that made al-Ghawrī perfectly suited as Mamluk sultan.

Conclusion

Sources from Sultan al-Ghawrī's court demonstrate that the question "Who are the Circassians?" was of great interest to members of this elite group. The answers that member of the Mamluk court found to this question indicate that constructions of Circassian ethnicity could be of considerable political significance in the Mamluk Sultanate. By arguing that the

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47   Loiseau, "Diaspora", 217.

48   On Circassians joining their relatives in the Mamluk Sultanate, see, e.g., Ayalon (Neustadt), "Circassians", 144; Loiseau, "Diaspora", 212–214; Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks*, 175–180. For an important first attempt to study the relationships between Circassians in the Mamluk Sultanate and their region of origin in depth, see Druzhinina – Ilyushina – Kabardov, "The Life and Country", esp. 924–926.

Circassians were the descendants of the Prophet Jacob through the brothers of the Prophet Joseph, these sources not only embedded the Circassians in a Quranic world-view, but also ascribed to them a birthright to rule over Egypt. This birthright, however, was not to be used by just any Circassian. Internal genealogical divisions within the Circassian ethnos were labelled as relevant, and those coming from the most dignified tribe, but who were not born into the royal clan, were presented as best suited for rule as Mamluk sultans. To members of the court of the Circassian ruler al-Ghawrī, internal genealogical differences among the Circassians were apparently deeply meaningful and significant. According to our sources, it was not only Circassian origin *per se* that mattered when one wanted to become Mamluk ruler, but also one's precise position within the Circassian system of tribes and clans. We thus see that in studying ethnic identities in the Mamluk Sultanate, one should not limit oneself to macro labels such as "Circassian," but also pay attention to how internal divisions within these macro groups were imagined and evaluated.

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