Ulrich Haarmann
1942-1999

The Mamluk System of Rule in the Eyes of Western Travelers*

The Lens of Occidental Travel Reports

The reports of late medieval European travelers to Egypt and Palestine have been discovered recently by experts in the history of mentalities as a first-rate source for the reconstruction of contemporary European modes of thought, perception, and experience during the critical transition from the medieval to the modern. Among this body of works, pilgrims´ reports have been especially fruitful, and in particular, those sections dealing with Egypt. Despite the significance that this land had in the Old and New Testaments, in Egypt—unlike the Holy Land—it was not yet the case that every stone and every ford was imbued with sacral historical significance. Vast horizons were open to the imagination and curiosity of the traveler in Egypt, horizons which had long since been blocked in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, or Nazareth. The holy sites of Palestine so preoccupied the attention of authors and readers that they paid very little attention to the landscape and everyday life around them.[1]

Reports on Egypt are not so unidimensional; they show a thematic multiplicity. The wonders of nature, that is the exotic animal and plant world of the Nile oasis, as well as the disconcerting customs and habits of the natives,[2] are placed on an equal footing with the locales and monuments associated with Biblical reminiscences. Among the more prominent such sites are the fruitful land of

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[1]See Hannes Kästner, ˝Nilfahrt mit Pyramidenblick: Altvertraute Wunder und fremde Lebenswelt in abendländischen Reiseberichten an der Wende der Neuzeit,˝ in Eijiro Iwasaki, ed., *Begegnung mit dem ´Fremden´: Grenzen-Traditionen-Vergleiche*. Akten des VIII. Internationalen Germanistenkongresses Tokyo 1990, vol. VII, (Tokyo 1991), 307-16; here 308 n. 3 with further references.

[2]Pero Tafur, *Pero Tafur: Travels and Adventures 1435-1439,* ed. and trans. Malcolm Letts, The Broadway Travellers (New York, 1926), 71 on jesters.

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Goshen,[3] the pyramids as the granary of Joseph,[4] and the fig tree in the grove of Maṭarīyah[5] under which the holy family found shelter during their flight from the henchmen of Herod.

The perspectives of western travelers to the Orient were naturally subject to European schemes of interpretation, which they had to justify neither to themselves nor to their audience. Not only the educational horizon and religious engagement, but also the cultural and geographic background of the individual author were limited by the traditional and conventional statements and assessments of the Holy Scripture. In those days there was no space for personal experience outside of this frame of reference.

Despite this, we witness a long-term and highly significant transformation, at least in the case of the later travelers at the end of the fifteenth century and beginning of the sixteenth. Recently rediscovered classical texts, namely those of Herodotus, Pliny, and Strabo, emerged as sources of incontestable reliability on the country, edifices, and history of Egypt, rivalling the authoritative tradition of the Holy Scriptures. The contradictions between the Bible and the historians and geographers of antiquity strengthened the inclination to rely on one´s own observation, that is, living, empirical examination. Hannes Kästner has made this clear with the example of the reporting on the pyramids and the crocodile.[6] We find that Arnold von Harff, for example, a knight from the lower Rhine who traveled throughout Egypt from 1496-98, relies entirely on Holy Scripture in his traveler´s report. On the other hand, the humanistically educated Dominican monk Felix Fabri (d. 1502), who left by far the most informative and also most literarily distinguished pilgrim´s report, struggles to reconcile knowledge newly won from the works of the classical authors with the apodictic statements of the Bible. He must frequently resign himself to apposing contradictory interpretations of the things that he encounters in the Sinai or in Egypt about which the Scripture and the old masters give differing accounts.[7]

Travelers to Egypt were spared the necessity of this balancing act when they encountered not the ″familiar strangers″ (the pyramids or the Nile, for example) of

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[3]Ludolf von Sachsen, *Ludolph von Suchem´s Description of the Holy Land, and of the Way Thither, Written in the Year A.D. 1350,* trans. Aubrey Stewart, Library of the Palestine Pilgrims´ Text Society, vol. 12 no. 3 (London, 1895; repr. New York, 1971), 67.

[4]Tafur, *Travels,* 78.

[5]Ibid., 77; Felix Fabri, *Voyage en Égypte de Félix Fabri 1483,* trans. Jacques Masson, Collection des voyageurs occidentaux en Égypte 14 (Cairo, 1975), 897; Emmanuel Piloti, *L´Égypte au commencement du quinzième siècle d´après le traité d´Emmanuel Piloti de Crète (incipit 1420),* ed. P.-H. Dopp (Cairo, 1950), 28-31.

[6]Kästner, ″Nilfahrt,″ 312.

[7]See his reports on the pyramids, Fabri, *Voyage,* 448 ff.

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the authoritative texts, to use Kästner´s phrase, but rather ″true strangers.″ These include the banana plant,[8] rivers upon one of whose banks poisonous snakes thrive while on the other bank they expire,[9] incubators for chicks,[10] giraffes, the Nilometer,[11] the carrier pigeon post,[12] or even a ruling elite that recruited itself in the slave market. This had to be conveyed to the European reader in all of its immediate wonder and strangeness. This subjective striving for realism may not always have been successful. Naive observations were often tied again to general statements from the Bible or classical authors, which led inevitably to the ″harmony of deceptions″ described by Ludwig Fleck.[13] Thus in Pero we read of mules, heavily laden with grain, crossing tirelessly over visible ramps and entering into the pyramids, that is, into Joseph´s granary.[14] The classical, Christian, and even Muslim wonders of the land are depicted together by Fabri, himself inspired by a visit to the pyramids,[15] but are blended, according to the level of knowledge the author brings to each, into a kaleidoscope of commentary, theological report, and direct description.[16]

Also subject to the rules of the time were the illustrations, through which *mirabilia* unknown in Europe were to be brought nearer, quickly reaching the reader thanks to printing. The prelate of Mainz, Bernhard von Breydenbach, who visited Egypt in 1483 at the same time as Fabri, had his artistically-talented Dutch traveling companion depict the then-unknown giraffe, the crocodile (frequently described by classical authors), and the mythical unicorn,[17] all peacefully occupying a single woodcut. Arnold von Harff, on the other hand, showed himself to be more sober. He contented himself with the giraffe and the crocodile, which he incidentally drew separately. In the encounter with the unknown and unbelievable, there was plenty of room for both its fantastic and its relatively objective representation.

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[8]Cf. Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 24.

[9]See Ludolf, *Description,* 63.

[10]Again Ludolf, ibid., 67; Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 38-40.

[11]Ludolf, *Description,* 78; Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 20.

[12]Ludolf, *Description,* 80; Tafur, *Travels,* 68 f.

[13]See reference in Kästner, ″Nilfahrt, ″ 309 n. 6 and 313 n. 16.

[14]Tafur, *Travels,* 78.

[15]Fabri, *Voyage,* 448 ff.

[16]See esp. ibid., 475 ff.

[17]Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Die Reise ins Heilige Land: Ein Reisebericht aus dem Jahre 1483 mit 15 Holzschnitten, 2 Faltkarten und 6 Textseiten in Faksimile,* ed. Elisabeth Geck (Wiesbaden, 1961), 35.

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This forms the basis of the particular value of travelers´ reports for the Islamic historian. The geographic and cultural distance from which the western visitors to the Nile, the Sinai, or to Palestine came again and again permitted a conscious awareness of, and reflection on, structural differences in the everyday world that they found there. The inhabitants of this world, on the other hand, were not capable of this, at least not without conscious effort. For the Egyptians themselves, the milieu in which, and according to whose rules, they lived was close, intimate, and taken for granted. The self-evident does not require examination, which is valid here as well. It cannot be approached from outside, for the inner distance necessary for objective analysis is lacking. The European visitors were able to grasp the differences and otherness of the Near Eastern world more clearly than were its own natives.

In this way, insights into the social structure and ruling system were also achieved, insights for which we search in vain in the Arabic sources, including political and administrative tracts. The occidental pilgrims deal extensively not only with the Mamluk system of ruling and recruiting[18] but also with the relationship between Mamluks and their sons, the focus of this paper, and sometimes even their relations with the native Egyptian (and Syrian) population. They also speculate about the reasons for this peculiar regime. Whenever possible, a link is of course also sought between observations and commentary on the Mamluk ruling system and Biblical or Biblical-classical traditions whose truth is unquestioned.

The Slave Status of the Mamluks

The primary reaction of the contemporary western commentary on Mamluk rule was astonishment over the fact that slaves could become rulers of the land. The Castillian Pero Tafur, who visited Egypt in the time of Sultan Barsbāy (1422-38), relates how the Mamluks were sold for cash in the Black Sea region by Christian merchants, brought to Egypt, Islamized there (″made into Moors″), and instructed in Islamic law and the arts of mounted warfare. At this point they were equipped and received a salary. Only from their ranks could one become sultan or admiral. Only one of their number could occupy the offices of the empire.[19] Emmanuel ″Mannoli″[20] Piloti (b. 1371), an enterprising Venetian of Cretan origin[21] and many-year resident of Egypt in the early fifteenth century, emphasizes this absurdity when he says that the Mamluks, bought as slaves, pretend that God had invested

[18]Tafur, *Travels*.
[19]Ibid., 74.
[20]Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 99.
[21]Ibid., 102.

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them with the sword and the power to rule and govern this land.[22] According to the Bedouin with whom Piloti had contact,[23] it was preposterous that the Mamluks, the ″nation vitupé reuse″ who had been bought with the money of the Egyptian peasants, should be the rulers of the land and not the Bedouin. It was these who had been called to this position since time immemorial and from whose numbers, after all, the Prophet Muḥammad came.[24] In another passage, however, Piloti adds his voice to the chorus of those who say that, without these purchased slaves, Cairo would be in a hopeless situation.

Hans Schiltberger also comments on this unusual phenomenon. A native of Munich, Schiltberger visited Egypt and several other regions of the Islamic Near East at the same time as Piloti, that is, during the reign of Sultan Faraj (1405-12) and his successors in the first third of the fifteenth century. He closes his chaotically structured chapter 38, entitled ″The Neighboring Lands of the Great Tartardom, a Description of Cairo,″[25] with the strikingly nuanced observation ″that hardly anyone becomes the Egyptian sultan who has not come out of the Mamluk bodyguard, of which many had been sold there as slaves.″ His formulation is doubly qualified: there would certainly also be sultans who are not themselves Mamluks; and not every Mamluk enters this elite as a purchased slave. There is no talk here of exclusivity.

The absurdity of slave rule was easily harmonized by our European travelers with the image associated with Egypt since Herodotus[26] that everything on the Nile stands on its head. In his fictional dialogue with a nun, the Franciscan abbot Francesco Suriano, zealous for learning, lists all of the ways in which Egypt is the opposite of the Western, read natural, order. He counts thirty-six contrasts. Among them are some objective and accurate observations. These include, for example, the fact that in Egypt, one writes from right to left,[27] and begins a letter with the address whereas ″we″ close with it. Other observations are of interest concerning legal praxis. For example, ″we″ repudiate women, but there it is the women who repudiate the men (!)[28] and there, poultry is sold by size and fruit and vegetables

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[22]Ibid., 11; see also 14.

[23]Ibid., 19.

[24]Ibid., 11 and 19.

[25]Johannes Schiltberger, *Hans Schiltbergers Reise in die Heidenschaft: Was ein bayerliches Edelmann von 1394 bis 1427 als Gefangener der Türken und Mongolen in Kleinasien, Ägypten, Turkestan, der Krim und dem Kaukasus erlebte*, adapted by Rose Grässel (Hamburg, 1947), 87.

[26]Herodotus, *Histories,* second book, chapter 35.

[27]Francesco Suriano, *Treatise on the Holy Land,* trans. Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade (Jerusalem, 1949), 204.

[28]Ibid.

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by weight whereas in Europe it is the opposite.[29] The pair of opposites that concerns us here is number 27 regarding Mamluk rule: for us, slaves are servants, but there they are lords.[30]

"All Mamluks are Christian Apostates"

It is not easy to clarify the claim made by most of the European travelers that the Mamluks are *all* Christian renegades. It is known from the Arabic sources that the majority of the Mamluks were *awlād al-kafarah,* "sons of true unbelievers."[31] This was indeed held against them at the court of the Ottoman sultan Bayezid. Initially they were predominantly Kipchak Turks. From the end of the fourteenth century they were of Circassian-Abkhazian origin. Certainly there were some Christians who became Mamluks, as per the prevailing misconception, after being captured (no doubt willingly, on occasion) or through the slave market. After the Ottomans defeated the western alliance led by Emperor Sigismund at Nicopolis in 1396, two hundred Christian prisoners of war, French and Italian, were sold en masse as Mamluks to the Cairene sultan by the victorious Turks, and "All were made to be pagans,"[32] that is, they had to accept Islam. This is reported by Piloti, the Cretan merchant and Venetian subject,[33] who spoke with them in Cairo. As prominent as this Mamluk contingent may have remained in the consciousness of West Europeans, converted Christians were in fact still only a comparatively small minority.

In 1498, Arnold von Harff mentions as the regions of origin Slavonia, Greece, Albania, Circassia, Hungary, Italy, and, in rare cases, also Germany,[34] in short, the Caucasus and the Balkans with its adjoining regions. A few years earlier, in 1483, Bernhard von Breydenbach lists "Slavonia, Albania, Hungary, and the Romance countries."[35] Greeks and Christian Caucasians, especially Georgians, would have represented the largest "Christian" contingent of the Mamluks. After all, historians of the fifteenth century provide lists not only of the Circassians, but also of the Greeks (*arwām*) who attained the sultan's throne. In comparison with the Mamluks

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[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, *Kitāb Nafā'is Majālis al-Sulṭānīyah fī Ḥaqā'iq Asrār al-Qur'ānīyah,* in *Majālis al-Sulṭān al-Ghawrī, Ṣafaḥāt min Tārīkh Miṣr fī al-Qarn al-'Āshir al-Hijrī,* ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Azzām (Cairo, 1360/1941), 133.

[32]"Tous furent fais tornez estre poyens."

[33]Piloti, *L'Égypte,* 104, 110.

[34]Arnold von Harff, *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff, Knight, from Cologne through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France, and Spain, Which he Accomplished in the Years 1496 to 1499,* trans. Malcolm Letts, Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society, 2nd. ser. no. 94 (London, 1946), 120.

[35]Breydenbach, *Reise,* 37.

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of pagan-shamanistic origin who came to Islam without a detour through Christianity (and in some cases, those already born as Muslims),[36] converted Christians, and in particular the central and southern European ″Foreign Legion″ among them, did not constitute an important presence on the Nile.

But for our pilgrims from the West, it was precisely these few Mamluks from the Christian realms who were important. Moreover, the catastrophe of Nicopolis was everywhere present: imperceptibly, the few became many, a noteworthy and typical but proportionally insignificant, marginal group became the whole. And one carried this exaggerated claim to the next without anyone seeing the necessity of determining its accuracy while in the region. For by having supposedly all quit the path of salvation, the Mamluks became more enigmatic and interesting to the audience of these travel reports back home. Piloti speaks with admiration of the fact that the Mamluks who were captured at Nicopolis were ″young, handsome, and stood at the beginning of illustrious careers.″[37] The decision of these Europeans to reject Christianity demonstrated in fascinating and menacing ways the attraction of Islam and also of the Mamluk institution in which a slave, bought like a cow or a horse,[38] could rise to become the ruler of a powerful kingdom. In Burgundy in the fifteenth century, the term *mammelu,* ″Mamluk,″ became a regular synonym for ″apostate.″[39]

A few of the European renegades are actually quite well known to us from the western travelers′ reports. Piloti′s encounter with ″two hundred″ Latins who had become Mamluks has already been mentioned. Konrad the Mamluk from Basel was met by Arnold von Harff, a knight from Cologne, in 1496, and also by Felix Fabri of Ulm[40] thirteen years before that in Cairo, the Rome of the pagans.[41] Fabri takes him to be ″at that time, the only German at the court of the sultan.″[42] In another passage, he speaks at length of some Catalan and Sicilian Mamluks, ″that is, Christian renegades,″ whom he encountered in Gaza directly before the exciting and arduous trip across the Sinai. Thenaud mentions a Mamluk from Languedoc.[43] Arnold von Harff sat together over forbidden wine not only with Konrad, but also

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[36]Piloti, *L′Égypte,* 15, 64.

[37]Ibid., 110: ″tous estoyent josnes, beaux et tous eslus.″

[38]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 120.

[39]See Johan Huizinga, *Im Bann der Geschichte: Betrachtungen und Gestaltungen,* trans. Werner Kaegi (Basel, 1943), 245.

[40]Fabri, *Voyage,* 913-14.

[41]″Rome des payens,″ Piloti, *L′Égypte,* 11.

[42]Fabri, *Voyage,* 913-14.

[43]Jean Thenaud, *Le voyage d′Outremer (Égypte, Mont Sinay, Palestine),* ed. Charles Schefer, Recueil de voyages et de documents pour servir à l′histoire de la géographie 5 (Paris, 1884; repr. Geneva, 1971), 64.

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with a German subject of the Danish king. His countrymen clearly enjoyed the exchange and the opportunity to speak German again. They showed him the city, even arranged a visit to the Citadel and, above all, instructed him in the strange Mamluk universe. They had attached themselves to this universe of their own free will but remained conscious of its peculiarities, all the more so in the company of an interlocutor from the world of their own past. If Felix Fabri is to be believed (though in fact, in this case it may well have been a matter of wishful thinking), the Islam of these opportunistic converts, as he portrays them, was not especially firm. For one thing, they give themselves to forbidden pleasures such as wine drinking. Already in the middle of the fourteenth century, this passion is reported by Ludolf von Sachsen, who spent the years 1336-41, the last years of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn´s sultanate, in Egypt and Palestine. He writes, ″these mercenaries (i.e., Mamluks) have an especial delight in Germans whom they straightaway recognize by their appearance and walk, and drink wine deeply with them, albeit it is forbidden by their law.″[44] Beyond this, ″all Mamluks are bad pagans [i.e., Muslims] and all have the intention to return to Christianity. The Mamluk from Basel also promised us that he wanted to return, and the dragoman Tamgwardin often tells us that he does not want to stay long.″[45]

European converts to Islam played a key role as courtiers and officials in exactly that sphere in which western visitors encountered the indigenous people. Pero Tafur, Piloti,[46] Felix Fabri, and Thenaud, thirty years later, all report southern European dragomen who smoothed the way for European visitors and who, though not without sentimental memories of their own Christian youth, had no desire to turn their backs on Islam. One of them, the Spanish born Taghrībirdī, was sent by Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī as an ambassador to Venice at the rank of *amīr tablkhānah*.[47] In these reports, the spontaneous familiarity with these intermediaries is counterbalanced by the total incomprehension of how easily these countrymen had become accustomed to the mores and vices of the Islamic milieu. The claim, coming from Christian mouths, that they were all waiting for an opportunity to return to the Christian fold can be rejected as an exaggeration and a case of wishful thinking, even if there were occasionally such confessions made by disillusioned, aging Mamluks to their countrymen. Ludolf von Sachsen tells of three impoverished ″renegades″ from the diocese of Minden, whom he met in

[44]See Ludolf, *Description,* 61.

[45]Felix Fabri, *Die Pilgerfahrt des Bruders Felix Faber ins Heilige Land Anno 1483* (Berlin, n.d.), 122; idem, *Voyage,* 915.

[46]Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 87.

[47]Schefer, Introduction to Thenaud, *Voyage,* xlv, li-lii.

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Hebron, longing to return home.[48] They had hoped for fame and fortune, surely in the service of an amir, through their Mamlukdom and conversion to Islam, but now toiled, despite their status as Mamluks, as a water carrier, a manual laborer, and a porter.[49] Ludolf also speaks of a German Mamluk who had guarded the balsam garden of the sultan before the gates of Cairo, prominently mentioned by nearly every European traveler to Egypt, who did in fact return to Christianity. Piloti personally obtained the release, in 1402 from Sultan Faraj ibn Barqūq, of Christians (Mamluks?) who were forced against their will to convert to Islam.[50] This came after his diplomatic success in purchasing the freedom of 150 Saracen captives from the grasp of the Duke of Naxos.[51]

The testimonies of the exclusively Christian origin of the Mamluks by travelers to Egypt of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries vary according to the emphasis given to this theme. They also vary, in cases in which the text is longer and allows for such conclusions, according to the socially and regionally determined perspective of the reporter as well as his level of education. One finds both brief qualifications attached to the term ″Mamluk″ as well as lengthy interpretations that reach into other areas.

In the fourteenth century, Niccolò da Poggibonsi summarily mentions the ″number of Christian renegades,″ that is, of Mamluks, in the heading of chapter 176 of his pilgrim´s report.[52] His contemporary, Ludolf von Sachsen, even holds all Turks, ″the most zealous Saracens [i.e., Muslims], but not of the Saracen race [i.e., Arabs],″ (!) to be apostates from Christianity.[53] A few generations later, we have the report of Bertrando de Mignanelli, the intimate observer of the rise, fall, and rise of Sultan Barqūq, in his *Ascensus Barcoch*. He tells us that Nu‘ayr, the Bedouin ally of Mintāsh and adversary of Barqūq, held it against Barqūq that he had been a Christian and was then sold into slavery.[54]

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[48]Ludolf, *Description,* 70.

[49]See also Michael Hamilton Burgoyne and D. S. Richards, *Mamluk Jerusalem: An Architectural Study* (Jerusalem, 1987), 55.

[50]Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 103.

[51]Ibid., 95-103.

[52]Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *A Voyage beyond the Seas (1346-50),* Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 2 pt. 2, trans. Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade (Jerusalem, 1945), 89.

[53]Ludolf, *Description,* 30.

[54]Bertrando de Mignanelli, trans. Walter J. Fischel in *″Ascensus Barcoch:* a Latin Biography of the Mamlūk Sultan Barqūq of Egypt (d. 1399) Written by B. de Mignanelli,″ *Arabica* 6 (1959): 153.

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Both of the Florentine travelers Leonardo di Frescobaldi[55] and Simone Sigoli[56] directly address the Christian origin of Sultan Barqūq, who ruled Egypt during their stay. On the other hand, Bertrandon de la Brocquière, who visited the Near East in 1432-33, is not entirely certain about the Christian past of this ″ancestor″ of the Circassian sultans ruling during the fifteenth century.[57] With regard to Barqūq, Frescobaldi adheres to an entirely personalized treatment of his subject.[58] He reports that Barqūq had his father brought to Egypt from the pagan Circassian lands, then forced him to renounce Christianity and be circumcised. This operation led to the death of the old man in a short time. This depiction is known to be accurate and greatly preoccupied the Arab historians.[59]

The travel report of the Castillian globetrotter Pero Tafur stems from the first half of the fifteenth century. He speaks of the Mamluks as ″apostate barbarians.″[60] ″No one other than these renegades can become sultan or admiral, nor hold office or prebend. Neither can any Moor [i.e., native Muslim Egyptian] under pain of death ride a horse. These Mamluks possess all the knightly privileges.″[61] Tafur, and this I mention only in passing, exaggerates when he claims that every non-Mamluk who mounts a horse is immediately killed. However, we do learn from numerous oriental sources that horses were fundamentally reserved for the Mamluks, who were addicted to *furūsīyah*.

Perhaps the most important witness is again Piloti, who spent many years in Egypt during the final phase of Sultan Barqūq´s reign, under Faraj, and then again under Barsbāy.[62] He emphasizes not only the Mamluks´ monopoly of power, as does Tafur, but also their Christian origin. In his schema of the three ″pagan″ (i.e.,

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[55]Leonardo di Frescobaldi, ″Pilgrimage of Lionardo di Niccolò Frescobaldi to the Holy Land″ in Theophilus Bellorini, Eugene Hoade, and Bellarmino Bagatti, trans., *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384,* Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 6 (Jerusalem, 1948), 45 ff..

[56]Simone Sigoli, ″Pilgrimage of Simone Sigoli to the Holy Land″ in Theophilus Bellorini, Eugene Hoade, and Bellarmino Bagatti, trans., *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384,* Publications of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 6 (Jerusalem, 1948), 171.

[57]Bertrandon de la Brocquière, *The Voyage d´Outremer by Bertrandon de la Brocquière: Translated, Edited, and Annotated with an Introduction and Maps*, trans. Galen R. Kline, American University Studies, Series II: Romance Languages and Literature, vol. 83. (New York, Bern, Paris, Frankfurt am Main, 1988), 22.

[58]Frescobaldi, *Pilgrimage,* 46.

[59]This report is to be found not only in al-Maqrīzī but also in the short chronicles such as Abū Ḥāmid´s *Duwal al-Islām.*

[60]Tafur, *Travels,* 74.

[61]See also Burgoyne and Richards, *Mamluk Jerusalem,* 55.

[62]Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 11.

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Muslim) Egyptian nations or ″generations″ (Egyptians; Arabs [i.e., Bedouins]; Mamluks), he equates Mamluks with purchased slaves of *Christian* origin:

> The third nation, they are bought slaves, from all Christian nations, of whom are made Mamluks and admirals, and from these the sultan is made. And in this nation they made themselves lords and governors and they command the state and the lordship over the people of the country and over the generation of the Arabs and over the inhabitants of the country. . . .[63]

Piloti had great difficulty in reconciling the cliché that all Mamluks were of Christian origin with the much more complex evidence that was available to him. As an expert in long-distance trade, he was better informed than any of the other European reporters of the late middle ages. He provides a more realistic picture in his chapter on the procurement of Mamluks[64] and the Genoese entrepôt of Caffa in the Crimea.[65] He writes that the Tatar (and other) slaves purchased by the sultan´s ″facteurs et serviteurs″ in the ″pagan″ *(payen/poyen)* (i.e., truly pagan or Muslim, certainly not Christian) lands of the Tartars, Circassians, Russians (!), etc., passed through Caffa.[66] There, they are said to have been asked by the Genoese authorities (whom the author, as a Venetian, deeply mistrusts) whether they would rather be Christians or pagans (in this case, Muslims).[67] If they choose to be Christians, the Genoese keep them. Only if they choose to be Muslims do they travel with the Muslim slave traders in Muslim[68] or disreputable Christian ships[69] through Gallipoli[70] to Alexandria, Damascus, and Cairo (if they are not first seized by Christian corsairs).[71] There, they are delivered in triumph to Islam.[72] Whenever the slave traders have again brought a couple of hundred future Mamluks of the sultan to

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[63]Ibid., 14.

[64]Ibid., 15f.

[65]Ibid., 64.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid., 16, 64: ″se il/ils vuellent estre crestiens ou payens/poyens″; note that he writes *″estre,″* ″be″ and not ″become″ or ″remain.″

[68]Ibid., 15.

[69]Ibid., ″sur nés de malvis crestiens et mal disposés″; 64, ″sur naves de très faulx et très mauvais crestiens.″

[70]Ibid., 15, 62.

[71]As depicted by Piloti, ibid., 60.

[72]Ibid., 16.

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Cairo, and have been led to the Citadel with highest honor and the blare of trumpets, the heralds of the sultan, of the ″chief de la foy payene,″[73] loudly cry:

> These honorable traders have brought and rendered three hundred or more, whatever the number may have been, souls of the Christian nation and Christian faith to the sultan. These will now live and die in the faith of Muḥammad so that the faith of Muḥammad may multiply and grow and that of the Christians may dwindle.[74]

Also, the fact that Piloti takes pains to present two of the Mamluk conspirators against Sultan Faraj as Christian renegades[75] (one came from Salonica, the other from the southern Slavic lands) implies that there must also have been Mamluks who did *not* arrive in the country as Christians. Piloti´s own evidence cannot, therefore, easily be harmonized with his claim that all Mamluks had fallen away from Christianity.

The travel reports from the last quarter of the fifteenth century are numerous and often closely interwoven.[76] Travelers such as Tucher, among others, will not be considered here. One of the most original authors in this respect is again Francesco Suriano, abbot of the Franciscan monastery on Mount Zion in Jerusalem and favorite of Sultan Qāytbāy and the famous/infamous chief *dawādār* Yashbak al-Ẓāhirī. He had spoiled both of them during their exile in Jerusalem with monasterial hospitality and, above all, fine cuisine. In one passage, Suriano qualifies the term ″Mamluk″ as ″that is, Christian renegade soldiers.″[77] In another passage, he formulates the rule equally concisely: ″all of these soldiers must be Christian renegades.″ But he goes another step and substantiates this rule in a ″historical″ way:[78]

> Their first sultan was bought and sold five times and for this reason, to the present day, only he who has been bought and sold five times can ascend to this position. And if one of them does not meet this prerequisite and nonetheless wishes to ascend to this position,

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[73]Ibid.

[74]See ibid., 15.

[75]Ibid., 12.

[76]Arnold Esch, ″Gemeinsames Erlebnis - individueller Bericht: Vier Parallelberichte aus einer Reisegruppe von Jerusalempilgern 1480,″ *Zeitschrift für historische Forschung* 11 (1986): 385-416.

[77]Suriano, *Treatise*, 4, 191.

[78]Ibid., 207.

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> then he is bought and sold as many times as is necessary. Only a Christian renegade can rule this land.[79]

In 1496-98, in his etiology of the unique foundational law of the Mamluk system, Arnold von Harff goes back, impeded neither by humanistic knowledge nor doubt, to the Old Testament. For him, it was Joseph who set the precedent to which contemporary Egyptians still conformed:[80]

> For it was never questioned since the time of Joseph, who was sold by his brothers into Egypt, that a Sultan should be a heathen born, and always an elected renegade Christian . . .[81]

Later he carries this idea further:

> . . . as Joseph was sold by his brothers and came to Egypt to Cairo to King Pharaoh (as the Bible tells us plainly in the thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis), and this Joseph was such a wise man that after Pharaoh´s death he was chosen King or Sultan and ruled the land with great wisdom and in peace, so they keep him in everlasting remembrance. They will have no Sultan who has not first been sold, and they observe this until today, choosing Sultans from the bartered Christians known as Mamelukes. . . .[82]

When Harff and his two German companions encounter over one thousand young, dark-skinned Mamluks after his visit to the Citadel, and he asks his two friends and drinking-partners about these people, he discovers that the sultan presently

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[79]Quoted in Pietro Casola, *Canon Pietro Casola´s Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Year 1494,* trans. M(ary) Margaret Newett, Publications of the University of Manchester 26 (Manchester, 1907), 392 n. 88.

[80]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 103; ibid., trans. Paul Bleser, ″Le pelerinage du chevalier Arnold von Harff,″ in *Zum Bild Ägyptens im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance/Comment se représente-t-on l´Égypte au moyen âge et à la renaissance?,* ed. Erik Hornung, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 95 (Göttingen, 1990), 81.

[81]Note that pagan here means Muslim. Pagan can therefore also metonymically mean ″Arabic,″ the language of the pagans. See Jan Hasištejnský z Lobkovic (1450-1517) in his pilgrim´s report *Putování k Svatému Hrobu,* quoted by Svatopluk Souček, ″A Czech Nobleman´s Pilgrimage to the Holy Land: 1493,″ *Journal of Turkish Studies* 8 (1984) (special issue entitled *Turks, Hungarians and Kipchaks: A Festschrift in Honor of Tibor Halasi-kun*), 233-40; here, 235, ″pohansky.″

[82]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 120; idem, *Pelerinage,* 98.

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possessed 15,000 Mamluks ″who are renegade Christians,″[83] from which that year alone one thousand had been killed. There is no talk of Joseph in this passage, nor is there any in Harff′s vivid report of how these Christian warriors become Muslim Mamluks:

> When these Mamelukes are first captured in Christian lands they are sold to the heathen. They are then forced to say: ″Holla, hylla lalla Mahemmet reschur holla:″ that is in German: ″God is God and shall be so forever, Mahomet is the true prophet sent from God.″ Then they circumcise him and give him a heathen [Muslim] name.[84]

The learned Felix Fabri, who had stayed in Cairo in 1480 and 1483, reports in a manner that is similarly colorful and direct. He discriminatingly registers and comments on what occurs around him in a different way. He speaks of the renegade status of the Mamluks in several passages both in the long and in the short version of his *Evagatorium*, for example, on the occasion of the visit of some Mamluks to the house of the Christian pilgrims in Cairo on October 11, 1483,[85] or in a report about the three ″mighty ones″ of the empire:[86] ″Cathube [Qāytbāy], a Catalan renegade, the father of the sultan and governor of all the kingdom, and the admiral, head of the armies. These three men do everything. . .″ This quote corresponds in the German summary to the following striking text: ″And all three are Mamluks, apostate Christians, and all office holders in all the lands of the king sultan are Mamluks and greatly oppress the Saracens and allow them no power, nor do they let them become rich.″[87]

Fabri sees the causes for these unusual political conditions in demography and in the social structure. He explains them in a manner that approximates the conclusions of modern research: by utilizing an inexhaustible reservoir of soldiers from the outside (Christians, Fabri believes), one is no longer dependent on native Muslims. Rather, these are discriminated against in favor of the Mamluks:

> All Mamluks are Christian renegades. . . . They neither let the Saracens serve as soldiers nor permit them to bear weapons. Things have gone so far that, thanks to the growth of the band of Christian renegades and apostates, only such are considered as sultan or king

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[83]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 108; idem, *Pelerinage,* 86.

[84]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 122; idem, *Pelerinage,* 101.

[85]Fabri, *Pilgerfahrt,* 121; idem, *Voyage,* 913.

[86]Fabri, *Voyage,* 576f.

[87]Fabri, *Pilgerfahrt,* 128-29; idem, *Voyage,* 928.

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> of Egypt. This custom is not very old and does not have the force of law among them. But the immense flood of renegades has brought about this situation, which is the greatest of all humiliations for the Saracens and for the Christians a powerful and repulsive scandal and simultaneously the ruin of our faith. They have decreed that no one can become sultan who has not before been a Christian and who has not been sold twice since his fall from faith [Suriano spoke of five times].[88]

A reference to Joseph and Genesis 37 and 39 follows. Then Fabri repeats the last point once again: ″They thus say that no one may be sultan who has not renounced his Christian brothers and been sold twice.″[89] This is surely a reflection of the fact that Mamluks, especially in the later period, might have a number of masters *(*sing. *ustādh)* in short succession:

> Furthermore, these apostates have decreed that all important offices in the kingdom can only be entrusted to Mamluks. The governors, legal officials (!), princes, army commanders, and emissaries within the realm of the sultan are all Mamluks. The [prospect of] emancipation and freedom and these hopes of attaining the highest offices attract numerous Christians. There are also the payments and daily stipends, the security, but also the weakness of the flesh and the prospect of possessing several women. All of this leads a great number of them to abandon their [Christian] faith. As soon as one has disowned his faith, he immediately receives an office, a salary, and is placed above others.

From the perspective of contemporary research, what is interesting in this quote is Fabri′s view that the imported military slaves′ monopoly of power is not a *law,* but rather a custom resulting from the *embarras des richesse* of Mamluk importers, which does not stem from a previous age. This impressively commensurate analysis admittedly does not prevent our Dominican, in his search for biblical *loci probantes,* from also calling upon the biblical Joseph as the godfather of this unusual custom. Harff, who traveled thirteen years later, could have been inspired by Fabri′s Joseph argument in his own portrayal.

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[88]Fabri, *Voyage*, 551-53. See also Jean Claude Garcin, ″Aux sources d′une idéologie: la force empruntée de l′Islam (trafic d′hommes et mentalités en Méditerranée)″ in *Le mirior égyptien: Rencontres méditerranéennes,* ed. Robert Ilbert and Philippe Joutard (Marseilles, 1984), 167, reprinted in Garcin, *Espaces, pouvoirs et idéologies de l′Egypte médiévale* (London, 1987).

[89]Fabri, *Voyage,* 552-53.

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In another passage in Fabri´s travel report, we encounter the tensions between the Mamluk elite and the native Egyptians,[90] which culminated in the ban on weapons for the latter, linked with the supposed exclusively Christian past of the Mamluks. In the passage depicting the pilgrims´ stay in Gaza, two Saracen (that is, native Arab-Muslim) guides of a Christian pilgrim caravan with the names Sabat(h?)ihanco and Elphahallo accuse the Europeans entrusted to their care of cultivating displeasingly friendly relations with Mamluks. And this despite the fact that the Mamluks (whose offensive hubris vis-a-vis the Muslims of the land has already been mentioned) should be especially repugnant to Christians.[91] Sabat(h?)ihanco says, ″You are true Christians! How can you dare to eat and drink with these people who have sworn off the faith of the Christians with abominable oaths?″ His companion Elphahallo raises the pressure for self-justification for the pilgrims still more: ″You are among those Christians who will doubtless be saved through their faith. It is just as certain that these Mamluks will be damned for having rejected your faith. How can there be relations between you?″ The pilgrims responded, according to Fabri ″as best they could,″[92] astounded at the belief that one could achieve salvation only in the faith in which he was born and in no other.[93]

Sultans and Popes: The Descendents of the Mamluks

If it is indeed the case that the Mamluk ruling elite replenishes itself entirely from the outside (for demographic or whatever other reasons), irrespective of whether they are Christians or pagans, then all natives must be *ipso facto* barred from participation in these highest privileges, no matter how much this runs contrary to human psychology, which yearns to pass riches and instruments of power on to its own progeny in as undiminished a form as possible.

The extent to which the limitation of membership in the elite to first-generation Mamluks can be demonstrated to be a historical reality over the course of decades is a major concern of this study. What do the European travel reports have to say on this matter? As we have said, Schiltberger speaks, as far as the circumstances that he experienced in the early fifteenth century are concerned, very reservedly of the fact that there is hardly a sultan who is not a Mamluk.[94] This commentary implies that there are exceptions to be expected. After all, the time which he

[90]Found in this quote as well as in Pero Tafur; see above.

[91]Fabri, *Voyage,* 32.

[92]Ibid., 33.

[93]See also the brief reprimand in ibid., 798: ″We saw many Mamluks there, powerful and magnificent, all of them Christian renegades.″

[94]Schiltberger, *Reise,* 87.

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describes and partially experienced first hand saw the enthronements of several sons of sultans (Faraj ibn Barqūq; but also the sons of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh and Ṭaṭar).

Pero Tafur, who also visited Egypt at this time, namely during the sultanate of al-Ashraf Barsbāy, speaks not about the princes specifically but rather about the sons of the Mamluks generally, which makes this testimony especially valuable. He has the impression that the Mamluk privileges diminish continually from the first to the second and third generation: ″Their [i.e., the Mamluks′] sons have a somewhat reduced status [from that of the father] and the grandchildren less still. After this, they are considered as native born Moors.″[95] Piloti′s commentary, stemming from the same period, is much less precise. In his chapter on the training of the Mamluks in the barracks under the supervision of the *ṭawāshīyah,* indispensable as a supplement to Maqrīzī′s *Khiṭaṭ* and Abū Ḥāmid al-Maqdisī′s *Duwal al-Islām*,[96] he adds, following the description of the emancipation ceremony of the Mamluks before the sultan and the transfer of the corresponding privileges, that this favor is to continue to be held after the death of the beneficiary by his children or other relatives.[97] He may have been thinking here of payments to survivors *(rizqah mabrūrah)* or perhaps only of non-material support for the relatives of the deceased Mamluks. We cannot infer anything more precise from this succinct quote.[98]

The next voices are half a century younger. At this point, the chances of the descendents of Mamluks having a share in the power and wealth of the state are judged much more cautiously.

Let us begin with a fifth ″renegade″ quote from Arnold von Harff, which has heretofore escaped consideration. It concerns the constitutional consequences of the decree that the ruler must come from outside, and thus by implication also the lot of the sons of Mamluks born in the land: ″no heathen [Muslim] born in the Sultan′s country can be a ruler; only the captured renegade Christians, there called Mamluks, rule the Sultan′s country.″[99]

Harff was present in Egypt at just the right time to watch how effective this rule he posited actually was, or at least to see how power politics were carried out with reference to it. Qāytbāy, close to death, had abdicated in favor of his fourteen-

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[95]Tafur, *Travels,* 74.

[96]″. . . and there, there are the great masters, who are tavassi, which is to say castrated, who are the leaders and governors of this band of slaves. . .″Piloti, *L′Égypte,* 16.

[97]Ibid.

[98]See also Burgoyne and Richards, *Mamluk Jerusalem,* 55a/b.

[99]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 121; idem, *Pelerinage,* 99. The French translation is incorrect in exactly this spot. Instead of ″Dans le pays du Soultan aucun païen de naissance n′a le droit de régner″ it should read ″aucun païen qi est né dans le pays du Sultan, n′a le droit de régner.″

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year-old son al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. In my opinion, this bold youth has been badly handled in the historiography to date. Not only did he show farsightedness as an energetic proponent of the increased outfitting of the army with firearms, he also learned to write Turkish and Arabic poetry in the cultivated ambiance that his father had created in the Citadel. It is true that Sultan Jaqmaq had already done this before him, in January 1453.[100] However, for contemporaries, this abdication and transfer of rule to a son born in the country (one, furthermore, with an Arabic surname) was a provocation and transgression of valid law. With this argument, that the sultan had acted illegally, the powerful General Qānṣūh Khamsmi'ah promptly claimed the sultanate for himself, ″since he was of the opinion that no one heathen born [i.e., Muslim] should be Sultan.″[101] Power befitted only ″genuine″ Mamluks.

We can also infer from western sources, if only indirectly, how widespread was the conviction that Qāytbāy´s abdication in favor of his son was in fact a coup d´état. Under the date May 26, 1496, shortly before Qāytbāy´s death and Muḥammad´s succession, otherwise unknown Alexandrian sources informed the Venetian diplomat Sanuto that the generals and the Mamluks opposed the appointment of Qāytbāy´s son as the new sultan because the youth was a ″son of the people.″[102] Their laws, on the contrary, stipulated that power could be conferred only to a purchased slave. A good eight weeks later, on the 22nd of July of that year, Sanuto´s diary states that the son had in fact been made sultan, but that his reign would not last long because he was a ″son of the people.″[103] ″Son of the People,″ *fiol di la zent,"* is naturally nothing other than the Italian translation for the well-known *ibn al-nās* (pl. *awlād al-nās*). This term, used only sparingly in the Arabic sources as a categorical label, was therefore clearly in circulation, otherwise it would not, as in this case, have been taken up by foreigners.[104]

It can be inferred from a further observation of Arnold von Harff that the purely Mamluk, that is, oligarchic, election principle had prevailed, even after two hundred years, over the competing dynastic principle in this final phase of the Mamluk sultanate, not only at the pinnacle of the state but also in all of the

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[100]See Abū al-Maḥāsin Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah,* vol. 15, ed. Ibrāhīm ʻAlī Tarkhān and Muḥammad Muṣṭafá Ziyādah (Cairo, 1972), 452-53, and Abū Ḥāmid al-Maqdisī, *Kitāb Duwal al-Islām al-Sharīfah al-Bahīyah wa-Dhikr mā Ẓahar lī min Ḥikam Allāh al-Khafīyah fī Jalb Ṭā'ifat al-Atrāk ilá al-Diyār al-Miṣrīyah*, ed. Ṣubḥī Labīb and Ulrich Haarmann, Bibliotheca Islamica 57 (Beirut, 1997), 95.

[101]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 104; idem, *Pelerinage,* 82.

[102]*"Fiol di la zente,"* Marino Sanuto, *I diarii di Marino Sanuto,* ed. Federico Stefani (Venice: 1879-1903), 262.

[103]Ibid.

[104]See Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 103-4 n. 4; see also Casola, *Pilgrimage,* 392 n. 88.

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subordinate benefices reserved for Mamluks: ″when a Mameluke dies, the Sultan takes his goods and all that he has left behind, and if he has ten children they inherit nothing, for they are heathen born [i.e., Muslims]. But, if the Sultan is pleased, out of his grace, to give them something, that they may keep.″[105] Machiavelli′s commentary in 1513 on the Mamluk system of succession is also relevant here. He compares it to the election of a pope, inasmuch as both forms of rule can be described neither as inherited nor as acquired, ″for it is not the sons of the old rulers who are heirs and who remain lords. Rather, the sultan is raised to this rank by those who have the power to do so. Because this is an ancient, traditional structure, one cannot speak of an acquired position, for many of the difficulties that one has with new leadership are not present in it. Even if the ruler is new, the organization of the state is nonetheless old and arranged as if the new lord had inherited the throne.″[106] The College of Cardinals and the council of Mamluk oligarchs are in essence equated.

A valuable confirmation that Arnold von Harff′s verdict on the career opportunities of the sons of Mamluks at the end of the fifteenth century was current in European circles is given by the canon Pietro Casola, who traveled to Jerusalem two years before Harff.[107] His commentary in this respect is connected to his complaint about the rule of the cursed Mamluks, who had repudiated Christianity, over the Holy Land. He places the responsibility for this tragedy with the quarrelsome Christians themselves, who fragment their powers, then speaks to our theme: ″Only a Christian apostate can rule over the Moors. And when one of these apostates takes a wife and has sons, these sons cannot succeed the father in his office. Such sons are called ″sons of the people,″ although they are sons of the sultan.″

The expertise of the theological scholar Felix Fabri is especially enlightening in this matter. Here again, he tries at all costs to systematize that which is incomprehensible to him, and to make it plausible to his readers at home through references to his own culture, no matter how speculative. In both versions of his travel report, the German abridgement,[108] and in the full Latin edition of the *Evagatorium*,[109] he imaginatively addresses the obvious problem of how the sons of Mamluks can share in the privileges of their fathers despite their exclusion:

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[105]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 122; idem, *Pelerinage,* 100.

[106]Machiavelli, *The Prince,* chapter 19.

[107]Casola, *Pilgrimage,* 279.

[108]Fabri, *Pilgerfahrt,* 122.

[109]Felix Fabri, *Evagatorium in terrae sanctae, arabiae et egypti peregrinationem,* ed. Cunradus Dietericus Hassler, Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins in Stuttgart 2-4 (Stuttgart, 1843, 1849), 3:93.

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> It is estimated that there are more than 30,000 Mamluks in Cairo in the service of the sultan. The sultan is the heir of all of them, for it is not permissible that the son of a Mamluk inherits his father´s fortune. He is not even seen as a Mamluk, because he has never been a Christian and has not fallen away [from Christianity]. Therefore, the Mamluks intentionally allow their children to be baptized as Christians. As long as they are growing up, they have them instructed in the faith of Christ. However, when they have reached the age in which they can judge for themselves, somebody leads them to renounce their faith in full public view. Now the son can follow in his father´s footsteps and become a Mamluk. The young people know this and yearn for the day of their apostasy to come as soon as possible, because they may then ride a horse and carry weapons. And for this reason, the number of Mamluks grows from day to day.[110]

In the German edition of Fabri´s 1483 pilgrim´s report, abridged from the complete Latin version, it is stated briefly that:

> The Mamluks also allow all their children and women to be baptized. But not all do so for the sake of God; rather they seek to deceive through this. At the court of the king sultan, no one can be or become powerful but Christian apostates. For no heathen [i.e., Muslim] can become a Mamluk and therefore the Mamluks have their sons baptized and instructed in the Christian faith until they reach the age, then they too apostatize, become Mamluks, and inherit their father´s fortune. All this could not be had they not been Christians before. And this is a lamentably great deception in which there is no good, for in this manner the name of Christ remains among the heathens.[111]

The following paragraph is incomplete in the available German abridgement of Fabri´s pilgrim´s report. Therefore I have inserted the missing passages (in italics) from an available French translation of the complete German text:

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[110]Fabri, *Voyage,* 553.

[111]Fabri, *Pilgerfahrt,* 122; idem, *Voyage,* 915.

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> There are innumerably many Mamluks at the court. The sultan, *the amir, and the dyodar* [i.e., *dawādār*] have nearly 30,000 Mamluks, all of whom are given a salary. *Their inheritance goes to the sultan. Their children retain only that which it pleases him to leave them.* We saw young boys as Mamluks at the court, many with costly ornament. The entire land, as far at the sultan rules, is ruled through Mamluks and the Saracens have no power there.

Fabri´s peculiar idea, irreconcilable with the reality known to us, that descendents of Mamluks could, by means of a limited term conversion, attain the privileges of their fathers so to speak through the back door surely has an ideological background on the Christian side. Garcin, for example, sees this as an effort by the author to make the impressive power of the Mamluks and their many victories over the Christians bearable to himself.[112] By declaring them to be former or crypto-Christians, one could claim them for one´s own cause, sharing in their success in a deeper sense. This must surely be the most complex but also the most unequivocal expression of the West´s respect for this powerful monarchy and its rulers. The alleged eagerness of the Mamluks in general to return to Christianity, their native religion, has been discussed above. This claim too strengthened the feeling that, on the deepest level, one was dealing not with opponents but with allies. To be defeated by them was less humiliating than if one had been dealing with true foreigners. We should also not forget that the Mamluks were the masters of the holy places of Palestine, the land which the Crusades had sought in vain to win back for Christendom. Arnold von Harff has one of his German Mamluks argue simply but fully in the context of this deep-set Christian disquiet over the Mamluks´ power: Jerusalem is a holy place for all three great religions, for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Whoever rules this city must then be the most powerful king on earth.[113]

Ibn Zunbul, who wrote his history of the conquest of Egypt by Sultan Selim at the beginning of Ottoman rule, renders historical processes (as well as the inheritance of privileges), as he is fond of doing, in a (fictional) dialogue. In the following case he deals with the competing principles of succession. If, according to Selim, a sultan must be descended from a sultan,[114] something that disqualified a Mamluk from becoming ruler, these were quick to reply: ″Who was Abraham´s or

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[112]Garcin, ″Aux sources d´une idéologie,″ 168.

[113]Harff, *Pilgrimage,* 128-29.

[114]Aḥmad ibn ʻAlī Ibn Zunbul, *Wāqiʻat al-Sulṭān al-Ghawrī maʻa Salīm al-ʻUthmānī,* ed. ʻAbd al-Munʻim ʻĀmir (Cairo, 1962, repr. 1997), 84, 166.

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Muḥammad´s father?"[115] Even in a time when the Mamluk sultanate had long since become history, this basic law of the late Mamluk period was still deeply anchored in the consciousness of the Egyptian people. The French Franciscan André Thevet visited the country in 1550 and encountered again and again sentimental memories of the courageous sultans, especially the last of them, Ṭūmān Bāy, whom the Ottoman conqueror Selim had executed in a most bestial manner. He puts it this way: "The sons of the Mamluks could not become soldiers and therefore the sultan was not able to bring about the succession of his sons."[116]

The Historical Value of the European Travel Reports

In the course of the history of the Mamluk sultanate from 1250 to 1517, the most important institutions of the empire were gradually, and sometimes also abruptly, "Mamlukized." Reverses in this process, such as the well-known intermezzo during Sultan Ḥasan´s reign, were without lasting consequence. Occidental pilgrims and emissaries inform us about these social and political developments, initially sporadically and later with greater and greater frequency. Through their distance they saw, as emphasized above, the essential institutional changes at the pinnacle of the state more clearly and impartially than many of the officials of the chancery or court historians of the time.

The most important stages in this long process of the erosion of the non-Mamluk elites´ power to the benefit of the sultan and the royal Mamluks who underpinned the system can be briefly summarized. Under Qalāwūn began the displacement of the "turban wearers" from offices traditionally accorded to civilians, such as the vizierate, by true Mamluks *(mukalwatūn)*. The next decisive event was the reform, finally successful after many failed attempts, of the army and fiefs by al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in the year 1315. As a result of this, the rulers and sultan´s Mamluks were able to secure a greater share of the rural wealth of Egypt at the expense of non-Mamluk groups (such as the *ajnād al-ḥalqah*). Nevertheless, the assumption of power by the oligarchy of generals after the death of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad still did not mean the end of dynastic continuity at the pinnacle of the

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[115] Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Egypt´s Adjustment to Ottoman Rule: Institutions, Waqf and Architecture in Cairo, 16th and 17th Centuries,* Islamic History and Civilization Studies and Texts 7 (Leiden, 1994), 197; al-Ḥusaynī, *Kitāb Nafā'is Majālis al-Sulṭānīyah*, 133 f. In the early fourteenth century, in the struggle between the son of the sultan, al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, and his "purely" Mamluk opponent, Baybars, the formula *"al-mulk 'aqīm"* epitomized the ideal of personal effort over inherited position.

[116] André Thevet and Jean Chesneau, *Voyages en Égypte 1549-1552,* ed. Frank Lestringant, Collection des voyageurs occidentaux en Égypte 24 (Cairo, 1984), 178: ". . . voire les enfans sortis d´un Mamelu, ne pouvoient estre honorez du tiltre d´hommes d´armes: qui estoit cause, que le Soldan ne pouvoit faire que ses enfans luy succedassent."

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state itself. Sultans from the reigning house—Qalāwūn´s sons and grandchildren—ruled over Egypt longer than the Ayyubids, although they were born in the land and should have been excluded from power according to stricter Mamluk rules. The longevity of his house was favored by the fact that the Egyptian-born al-Nāṣir was able, with iron self-discipline and determined politicking, to shake the stigma of non-Mamlukdom and was seen by contemporaries as a true and even exemplary Mamluk.

From the end of the fourteenth century, European travel reports are available as a source for these important events. Simone Sigoli cites the reservations, for example, of the caliph to the usurpation of the throne by Barqūq at the expense of the Qalawunids:[117] as an illegitimate ruler, he must first buy the loyalty of the amirs.[118] Also de Mignanelli, in his report made possible by his intimate proximity to the ruler, Barqūq, emphasizes the at that time still uncontested validity of the dynastic principle. He writes in *Ascensus Barcoch* how it was held against Barqūq that he was a slave, that is, in contrast to all of his predecessors since al-Manṣūr Lājīn, he had come to the throne as a real Mamluk. It is further noted that, in deposing his rival Barakah, he nevertheless had himself sanctioned by the Qalawunid shadow caliph as custom dictated. It required fine maneuvering, according to the author of *Ascensus Barcoch*, well versed in events at the court and in the provinces, but in the end, the rebel Barqūq was able, after two attempts, to ascend to the sultan´s throne and depose the last Qalawunids, allies of his opponents.

The next break in this development, the diversion of funds originally earmarked for Barqūq´s son to the *dīwān al-mufrad,* was not registered by a single western traveler. Nonetheless, we do hear from Piloti about what was perhaps the most important turning point, in terms of institutional history, in the history of the office of the sultan.[119] I am thinking of the execution of Sultan Faraj, the son of Barqūq, in the year 1412. This was done with the blessing of the shadow Caliph al-Musta'īn,[120] at the behest of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, who was so conscious of his own Mamlukdom. The farce that immediately after this event the previously mentioned Abbasid shadow Caliph al-Musta'īn held the throne for a short time, only to be removed soon afterwards once the new strong man had rid himself of

[117]Sigoli, ″Pilgrimage,″ 175.

[118]Ibid., 174.

[119]Piloti, *L´Égypte,* 12-13.

[120]With appeal to supposed violations of the law: ″that he has treated infinite pagans [i.e., Muslims] unjustly *[il avait fait infinis payens contre justice]* and that he has eaten pork and drunk wine on Friday . . .″ Ibid., 13.

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his internal opponents, also found its way into Piloti, though naturally he does not really grasp the institutional impotence of the office of the caliphate.[121]

At that time, in 1412, cracks began to appear in the law of the succession of father by son, which had been recognized without question as valid from within and without. This was a relic of the Seljuks and Ayyubids, as whose heirs the Mamluks saw themselves. It becomes predictable that the sons, whose succession was regularly pushed through the election councils composed of the most powerful oligarchs by their fathers before death, will only be left in office as sultan until the victor in the power struggle among full Mamluk competitors is determined. The observations of Schiltberger and Tafur (the latter comments on the career chances of Mamluk sons generally, not only of the princes, or *sīdī*s) reveal a clear hierarchy between the Mamluks of the first generation and their immediate descendents. For the Mamluk descendents of the fourth generation, according to Tafur, the blue blood of their forefathers carries no weight whatsoever.

After a further thirty years, the glut of travel reports begins and we near the end of the sultanate. At this point the hopes of the sons of Mamluks are finished, that is the hope to slip into their father´s shoes despite having been born in the wrong place. All of the European reporters corroborate this, as brief, muddled, and biased as their portrayal of the fact may be. The last attempt is made by Qāytbāy. He has his half-grown son Muḥammad appointed as sultan in his stead while he is still alive and thereby provokes the opposition of the entire Mamluk establishment. In the hundred years from Mignanelli´s Barqūq biography to Arnold von Harff´s colorful portrayal of the civil war between al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qāytbāy and his ″full Mamluk″ challengers, the opinion of the foreigners on what is legitimate has turned 180 degrees. The son of the ruler is at this point no longer destined to succeed as on the basis of his lineage but rather, quite on the contrary, disqualified through his relationship.

[121] See ibid., and ff.

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