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Mamluks and Their Relatives in the Period of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517)

The age of the Mamluk Sultanate is regarded as the period in which the “mamluk principles,” as defined by David Ayalon, were most clearly expressed. These were: the mamluk’s loyalty to his master, solidarity among mamluks serving the same master (*khushdāshīyah*), and the concept of “one generation nobility” (i.e., that sultans and amirs did not bequeath status, privileges, or property to their sons).¹ The prevalent view regarding the Mamluk Sultanate is that dynastic and hereditary tendencies were weak throughout its reign.² It is similarly believed that, under the Sultanate, blood ties, marital bonds, and ethnic solidarity were of marginal importance in comparison with the pseudo-familial ties between the master and the mamluk, and between mamluks of the same household.³ Furthermore, it has been argued that in this era the right to rule and hold key positions in the Sultanate was reserved exclusively for mamluks. According to this argument, the ruling elite’s main characteristic was its mamluk descent; all mamluks were of elite status; and mamluks were proud of their slave origin even after manumission.⁴

In my dissertation, I have examined a variety of social ties of sultans and amirs in the period of the Mamluk Sultanate. I argue that, throughout the period, blood ties, marital ties, and ethnic solidarity were of greater importance than what is commonly thought in scholarly research. Notwithstanding this, significant changes are evident in the patterns of social ties upon the transition from the Turkish to the Circassian ruling class (1382–1517). Only under the latter do we see the waning of the biological family, the decline of agnate lines, the enhanced

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¹See for example David Ayalon, “Mamlūk Military Aristocracy: A Non-Hereditary Nobility,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987): 205–10.

²See for example P. M. Holt, “The Position and Power of the Mamlūk Sultan,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38 (1975): 237–49; Amalia Levanoni, “The Mamluk Conception of the Sultanate,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26 (1994): 373–92.

³See for example Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Rāziq, “Al-‘Alāqāt al-Uṣrīyah fi al-Muṣṭalaḥ al-Mamlūki,” *Al-Majallah al-Tārīkhīyah al-Miṣrīyah* 23 (1976): 155–81; David Ayalon, *L’esclavage du Mamelouk* (Jerusalem, 1951), 27–37.

⁴Linda S. Northrup, “The Bahri Mamlūk Sultanate, 1250–1390,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 245–51; Reuven Amitai, “The Mamlūk Institution, or One Thousand Years of Military Slavery in the Islamic World,” in *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age*, ed. Christopher Brown and Philip D. Morgan (New Haven and London, 2006), 62.



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prestige of pseudo-familial ties, and the erosion in the dynastic and hereditary principles.⁵ In what follows, I will focus on a specific type of mamluks' social ties: their relatives who resided within the territory of the Sultanate.

It is commonly held that the phenomenon of the importing or migration of relatives of mamluks into the territory of the Sultanate was characteristic of the Sultanate's Circassian period. According to Ayalon, during the second half of the fifteenth century, a large number of such relatives were brought into the Sultanate and received positions as amirs, without having to undergo military training. Ayalon even calls the second half of the Circassian period "the period of rule by brothers-in-law and relatives."⁶ The fact that a marked presence of mamluks' relatives is evident specifically in a period in which the importance of blood ties seems to have declined remains unexplained. D. S. Richards points out that it is possible to find instances of the importation of mamluks' relatives into the Sultanate also during the fourteenth century (i.e., during the Turkish period).⁷ In what follows, I will survey additional instances, which Richards has not mentioned, of the arrival of mamluks' relatives into the Sultanate during the Turkish period (1250–1382). I will examine the identity of the mamluks whose relatives were brought into the Sultanate, and analyze the patterns of bringing in relatives, during both the Turkish and Circassian periods. I will also discuss the changes that can be identified in these patterns after the transition to Circassian rule, and relate them to other changes that occurred in the change of ruling classes. Additionally, I will argue that only a small cadre of favored mamluks could bring their relatives into the Sultanate. This group of mamluks could shed the signs of slavery, the most important of which was the lack of family ties. Only this group, and not all the mamluks, can be regarded as elite.

THE TURKISH PERIOD

In both the Turkish and Circassian periods, the bringing of relatives was the prerogative of the ruling sultan. It will be demonstrated that almost all of the family members brought into the Sultanate were relatives of the ruling sultans or of amirs related by marriage to the sultans. All the instances of bringing in the sultan's relatives occurred after he had taken power. As to amirs' relatives, they were almost always brought into the Sultanate after the amirs had married into the sultan's family.

⁵Koby Yosef. "Ethnic Groups, Social Relationships and Dynasty in the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517)" (in Hebrew) (Ph.D. diss., University of Tel-Aviv, 2011).

⁶David Ayalon, "The Circassians in the Mamlūk Kingdom," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 69 (1949): 144.

⁷D. S. Richards, "Mamluk Amirs and Their Families and Households," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge, 1998), 36–37.



We cannot identify relatives of mamluk sultans or amirs who were brought into the Sultanate at the beginning of the Turkish period. We may assume this was because most of the mamluks in this period were Kipchaks whose families had been uprooted due to the Mongol invasion, and whose enslavement entailed complete detachment from their families. Due to the fact that during almost the entire Turkish period the Sultanate was not ruled by slaves, but by the Qalawunid family (1279–1382), the importation of relatives of the sultan is largely irrelevant, and in that period the phenomenon was effectively limited to the relatives of amirs. Nonetheless, we find instances in which the Qalawunid sultans brought their maternal relatives into the lands of the Sultanate. For example, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (d. 1341), beginning in 1304, brought in a number of his mother's relatives, at least two of whom immediately became senior amirs.⁸

The importation of mamluk amirs' relatives started only in the fourteenth century. It may be that locating the relatives of mamluks, in order to bring them into the Sultanate, only became possible at this time, since many of the mamluks in this period were Mongol captives (some from noble Mongol families), or Turco-Mongol slaves from the Golden Horde who had been sold by their families. The first relatives of a mamluk amir brought into Egypt were the relatives of the Mongol captive Salār al-Manṣūrī (d. 1310), whose father had been a senior amir in Anatolia. Salār's daughter married Mūsā ibn 'Alī ibn Qalāwūn in 1299. The marriage was consummated in 1304, and shortly afterwards, in 1305, Salār's relatives were brought into Egypt and immediately became amirs.⁹ This pattern of bringing in the relatives of a mamluk amir (and promoting them) after marital ties had been established with the Qalawunid family recurs throughout the Turkish period. All the mamluks whose relatives were brought into the Sultanate dur-

⁸Al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn al-Ṣāliḥī wa-Awlādihi*, ed. Barbara Schäfer as *Die Chronik aš-Šujā'īs* (Wiesbaden, 1977), pt. 1 (text), 33, 41, 175, 250–51; al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rīfat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āshūr (Cairo, 1934–73), 2:236, 283, 309, 324, 378; K. V. Zetterstéen, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Mamlükensultane in den Jahren 690–741 der Hiġra nach arabischen Handschriften* (Leiden, 1919), 196, 218; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Kitāb al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1963–72), 9:57, 88, 103, 10:57, 236; Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Al-Durar al-Kāminah fī A'yān al-Mi'ah al-Thāminah*, ed. 'Abd al-Wārith Muḥammad 'Alī (Beirut, 1997), 1:281, 2:139–40; al-Ṣafadī, *A'yān al-'Aṣr wa-A'wān al-Naṣr* (Beirut, 1998), 1:652–54, 2:635–36; al-Birzālī, *Tārīkh al-Birzālī*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut, 2006), 3:419; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab* (Cairo, 1963–98), 33:203, 231, 225, 278; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar wa-Jāmi' al-Ghurur*, ed. H. R. Roemer (Cairo, 1960–82), 9:393; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah* (Damascus, 1977–97), 2:207, 575.

⁹Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Zubdat al-Fikrah fī Tārīkh al-Hijrah* (Cairo, 1993), 410, 413; al-'Aynī, *Iqd al-Jumān fī Tārīkh Ahl al-Zamān*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo, 1987–92), 4:75; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 32:127, 163, 170, 396; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:621; Zetterstéen, *Beiträge*, 152; al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh*, 44, 157, 220; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 2:51, 106–7; al-Ṣafadī, *A'yān*, 2:306–7, 393.



ing this period were Turkish/Tatar slaves, related by marriage to the Qalawunid family. In addition to the case of Salār, we know that the families of Baktamur al-Sāqī, Arghūn al-Kāmīlī, Baybughā Urūs, Ṭāz al-Nāşirī, and Jaraktamur al-Ashrafī were brought into the Sultanate after these amirs had married into the Qalawunid family (see the table below). The families of Bashtāk al-Nāşirī, Yalbughā al-Yahyāwī, and Qawşūn al-Nāşirī probably also arrived in Egypt after these amirs had created marital bonds with the Qalawunid family.

TABLE: MAMLUKS WHOSE RELATIVES WERE BROUGHT INTO EGYPT DURING THE TURKISH PERIOD¹⁰

<i>Name of Mamluk</i>	<i>Year of Death, Age at Death</i>	<i>Year of Marital Tie with the Qalawunids</i>	<i>Age when Marriage Took Place</i>	<i>Year when Relatives were Brought In</i>
Salār al-Manşūrī	(d. 1310, bit less than 50)	1299	About 38	1305
Baktamur al-Sāqī	(d. 1332, about 50)	Before 1313~	30 or less	1314–16
Qawşūn al-Nāşirī	(d. 1341, about 40)	1326	About 25	At latest 1330
Bashtāk al-Nāşirī	(d. 1341, less than 40)	1332~	30 or less	1336
Yalbughā al-Yahyāwī	(d. 1347, 20–25)	Before 1340	Less than 18	At latest 1338

¹⁰For the relevant details about Salār, see footnote 9 above. For Baktamur, see Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Şāfī wa-al-Mustawfā ba'da al-Wāfī*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo, 1984–2006), 6:330–3; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 33:239; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:746; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 3:154; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:497; al-Şafadī, *A'yān*, 1:183–86. For Qawşūn, see al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 3:21; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 33:26; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:279; al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh*, 148, 192; Zetterstéén, *Beiträge*, 148, 192. For Bashtāk, see Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 3:468; al-Şafadī, *A'yān*, 1:672, 709; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 1:281; Zetterstéén, *Beiträge*, 194, 218; al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh*, 131. For Yalbughā, see Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:686–87, 4:61–62; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:473, 571, 799; al-Şafadī, *A'yān*, 2:563–64, 5:585–91; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 1:203, 2:148; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 12:155; al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh*, 45. For Arghūn Shāh, see al-Şafadī, *A'yān*, 1:457–62, 2:577; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 2:130; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:689; al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh*, 267; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:552, 574, 584. For Arghūn, see al-Şafadī, *A'yān*, 1:466–76; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:819, 895, 3:262. For Baybughā, see al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:689, 819, 905; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 10:90, 11:31; al-Şafadī, *A'yān*, 2:86–95. For Ṭāz, see al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 2:869, 886, 3:66, 736, 814, 840; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 10:247, 286, 302; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 1:370, 397–98; al-Şafadī, *A'yān*, 2:567–71; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 1:287–88; Zetterstéén, *Beiträge*, 206. For Jaraktamur, see Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 3:522.



Arghūn Shāh al-Nāṣirī	(d. 1349)	Before 1340	Less than 30	?
Arghūn al-Kāmīlī	(d. 1357, less than 30)	1344	Less than 17	1350
Baybughā Urūs	(d. 1353)	1344–45?	?	1350
Ṭāz al-Nāṣirī	(d. 1361)	Before 1349	?	1351
Jaraktamur al-Ashrafī	(d. 1376, less than 20)	Before 1376	Less than 20	After the marriage

As can be seen from the table, almost all the amirs whose families were brought into the Sultanate had married into the Qalawunid family at an early age. Throughout the Mamluk Sultanate's reign, mamluks rarely started a family before the age of thirty.¹¹ In this period almost all the mamluks who had children before this age had established marital ties with the sultans while still young. Some of these mamluks were only formally slaves,¹² while most of the rest were favored mamluks who had been raised from their youth by the sultan, or those whom he chose to advance from an early age due to his affection for them. This small unit of privileged mamluks constituted an important part of the ruling elite. They were distinct from the large body of mamluks, and shed the characteristics of slavery, most important of which was the lack of family ties. Unlike the majority of mamluks, the favored mamluks were not prevented from creating families. Not only did they become relatives of the royal family, they also

¹¹I discuss this subject in detail in my dissertation. This assertion is based on data culled from the sources and gathered in a database including all the social ties of Mamluk sultans and amirs. Naturally, we have more information concerning sultans. In the Turkish period, almost all of the Turkish/Mongol mamluk sultans who ruled Egypt started a family while in their thirties, and usually around the age of 35 (except al-Mu'izz Aybek who started a family when he was 40 or even 45). Circassian mamluk sultans, by contrast, started families while in their forties or later, usually after the age of 45 (except al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, who started a family when he was about 35). There is no reason to believe that the data concerning the sultans is not representative of the general situation. However, data concerning a few dozen amirs reveals that in the Turkish period, only rarely did mamluk amirs start a family before the age of 30, while in the Circassian period they only rarely did so before the age of 35. It seems that the Circassians were perceived in a most negative manner during the Turkish period. They were discriminated against, manumitted at a later age, and thus delayed from starting their own families. Under those conditions, it seems that the Circassian mamluks developed a slave ethos and ascribed more importance to pseudo-familial ties.

¹²The best example of such a mamluk is Qawṣūn al-Nāṣirī. He was an adult when formally sold to al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. Qawṣūn was proud of not being a real slave, and of being exempt from the normal procedure of training and promotion; see al-Ṣafadī, *A'yān*, 4:138.



established families of their own, from a young age, and brought their own relatives into the territory of the Sultanate. Upon their arrival, these relatives became amirs. The sons of these favorite mamluks had quite a good chance of becoming amirs, both because their fathers were attached to the royal family, and because their fathers had parented them while young.¹³

The situation of the non-Turkish mamluks was worse than that of the majority of the Turco-Mongol mamluks. Since there is no evidence supporting the sale of non-Turkish mamluks by their families, we may assume that most of them were war captives, and therefore their enslavement was more traumatic than that experienced by their Turco-Mongol counterparts.¹⁴ As soon as the non-Turkish mamluks entered the Sultanate, their connection to their families was severed forever. The Turco-Mongol mamluk, however, had the possibility of becoming a favored mamluk, marrying into the Qalawunid family, establishing a family while still young, and bringing his relatives into the Sultanate. This privilege was almost totally unavailable to non-Turkish mamluks, who were undoubtedly perceived by their contemporaries as being “more enslaved” than the Turco-Mongols.

By bringing in their in-laws (*aṣḥār*), and promoting them to senior amirates, the Qalawunids definitely reinforced the idea that the right of being part of the ruling elite belonged to those who had a family (i.e., those who were not slaves), which thereby strengthened their legitimacy to rule. Beginning at least with the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (1310–41), until the Circassian period, the Mamluk Sultanate was ruled by a royal family, its relatives, and its in-laws.

THE CIRCASSIAN PERIOD

There was a greater presence in the Sultanate of relatives of the sultans during the Circassian period. Nonetheless, I do not believe that the phenomenon of bringing in relatives was more characteristic of the Circassian ruling elite than of the Turkish one. One reason why more relatives of the sultans can be identified in the Circassian period is that, in contrast to the Turkish period, most of the sultans in this period were mamluks themselves and not descendants of sultans. While the Turkish period was typified by bringing relatives of amirs who had married

¹³See for example Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 12:152, 155; idem, *Al-Nujūm*, 10:194, 11:4; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 3:523; al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān*, 5:191; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 3:180, 301.

¹⁴For evidence that during the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad non-Turks were enslaved in war while Turks were sold by their families, see al-ʿUmarī, *Kitāb Masālik al-Abṣār wa-Mamālik al-Amṣār: Mamālik Bayt Jīnkiz Khān* (Wiesbaden, 1968), 69–70. Al-ʿUmarī states explicitly that the Circassians were war captives. Unfortunately, we cannot corroborate this information because biographies of Circassian mamluks from the Turkish period usually do not contain data concerning the method of their arrival into the Sultanate.



into the Qalawunid family, the Circassian period is characterized by bringing in relatives of the sultans themselves, with a decline in the arrival of relatives of the amirs. The dimensions of this phenomenon, however, should not be overstated, since only three sultans—al-Zāhir Barqūq (1382–99), al-Ashraf Barsbāy (1422–38), and al-Ashraf Qāyrbāy (1468–96)—brought a large number of family members into the Sultanate and made them amirs, some of senior rank. Al-Ashraf Barsbāy brought his wife's relatives, as well as his own.¹⁵ Al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (1412–21), al-Zāhir Ṭaṭar (1421), al-Zāhir Khushqadam (1461–67), al-Ashraf Īnāl (1453–61), al-Zāhir Yalbāy (1467), and al-Zāhir Timurbughā (1467–68) did not bring a single relative of theirs to Egypt, and al-Zāhir Jaqmaq (1438–53) brought only his sister.¹⁶

The second reason as to why more relatives of the sultans can be identified in the Circassian period is related to changes in the patterns of the slave trade in this period. There is substantial evidence that, in the Circassian period, Circassian relatives were bought as slaves together or individually. We know, for example, that Qānībāy, the relative of al-Zāhir Ṭaṭar, was in Egypt before Ṭaṭar, and recognized the latter upon his arrival in the land; Jarkas al-Muṣārī, the brother of al-Zāhir Jaqmaq, was bought by al-Zāhir Barqūq before he purchased Jaqmaq; and Ṭawkh, the elder brother of al-Ashraf Īnāl, was purchased together with Īnāl by al-Zāhir Barqūq.¹⁷ The phenomenon apparently assumed additional momentum beginning

¹⁵For the relatives of Barqūq, see al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw' al-Lāmi' li-Ahl al-Qarn al-Tāsi'* (Cairo, n.d.), 2:326, 284–85, 6:221–22, 10:302–3, 12:59, 74, 115; al-Sakhāwī, *Wajiz al-Kalām fī al-Dhayl 'alā Duwal al-Islām* (Beirut, 1995), 1:376; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl al-Amal fī Dhayl al-Duwal*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut and Sidon, 2002), 2:387, 3:110; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 1:242–43, 4:255, 350–51; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 3:105–7, 217, 6:11–15, 9:37, 67; idem, *Al-Nujūm*, 14:144; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 4:188. For the relatives of Barsbāy and his wife, see Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'i' al-Duhūr* (Cairo, 1960), 1:349, 412, 469, 504; al-Jawharī, *Inbā' al-Haṣr bi-Abnā' al-Aṣr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1970), 80, 312; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 3:7, 21, 36–38, 63, 220, 6:85, 163–64, 218, 10:224, 280, 303–4, 12:17, 164; idem, *Wajiz*, 2:697; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 4:186, 199, 278, 332, 369, 405, 418, 5:45, 50, 6:26, 90, 22, 377, 381, 434, 7:95, 183; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 3:6–7, 4:23–24, 217, 5:14–16, 326, 9:63–64, 12:134–35; idem, *Al-Nujūm*, 14:258, 15:246; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 4:646, 1132. For the relatives of Qāyrbāy, see Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith al-Zamān wa-Wafayāt al-Shuyūkh wa-al-Aqrān*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut and Sidon, 1999), 1:334, 382; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i'*, 1:613, 633, 636, 639, 650; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 7:171, 207–8, 231, 279, 312, 381, 8:105, 107, 151–52, 231; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 2:315, 3:64, 6:227; idem, *Wajiz*, 3:1222.

¹⁶Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 2:272, 3:44, 6:168; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 5:306, 6:382, 7:343, 8:146; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i'*, 1:413, 577, 2:906.

¹⁷Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 14:197–98, 16:58; idem, *Al-Manhal*, 4:211, 275–76; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 2:328. For other relatives of sultans who apparently were not brought into the Sultanate by these sultans, but bought as slaves by others, see for example Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 11:168, 15:306; idem, *Al-Manhal*, 11:272; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 4:607–8, 1149; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 10:169. For mam-luk relatives who were apparently bought together or one after the other, see for example Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 12:242, 15:141, 165, 172–73, 287, 16:282; idem, *Al-Manhal*, 8:257, 9:64, 12:138; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 3:43, 65; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 7:268.



at the end of the reign of al-Ashraf Barsbāy or during the time of al-Zāhir Jaqmaq. It took on graphic dimensions in the reign of al-Ashraf Qāyrbāy, Barsbāy's mamluk, since the number of his relatives mentioned in the sources is unprecedented, even though Qāyrbāy was not responsible for bringing most of them. Many of them came to Egypt as slaves before he became sultan.¹⁸

As in the Turkish period, in the Circassian period the importation of relatives was the sultan's prerogative. Al-Ashraf Barsbāy, al-Zāhir Jaqmaq, and al-Ashraf Qāyrbāy all brought members of their families into the Sultanate after each had become the sultan, and al-Zāhir Barqūq brought his relatives after becoming *atābek* (commander-in-chief and regent) and the de facto ruler of the Sultanate. Unlike the Turkish period, in the Circassian period we find hardly any instances of amirs bringing in their relatives. Similar to the Turkish period, the amirs who had established marital ties with the families of the sultans had the possibility of bringing their relatives into the lands of the Sultanate. The three most prominent instances of the bringing of an amir's relatives in the Circassian period are the bringing of the relatives of Īnāl al-Yūsufī (d. 1391), Taghrībirdī min Bashbughā al-Zāhirī (d. 1415), and Yashbak min Salmān Shāh al-Faqīh (d. 1473). The three were related by marriage to the family of al-Zāhir Barqūq or that of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh.¹⁹

Taghrībirdī min Bashbughā al-Zāhirī, the father of the famous historian Yūsuf ibn Taghrībirdī, was bought by Barqūq at about the time he became sultan (1382). Taghrībirdī was about 24 years old when his firstborn son was born in 1395.²⁰ In the Circassian period, it is not common to find mamluks who had offspring before the age of 35, and most began to have children while in their forties.²¹ This said, in the Circassian period, as in the Turkish period, there was a small cadre of favorite mamluks who had married into the families of the sultans at an early age and had established their own families while still young.²² At times, they were also able

¹⁸See for example al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 2:274, 3:36–38, 53, 65, 76, 6:227, 10:166, 11:276; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 6:368, 7:138, 166–67, 172, 175, 254, 268, 358, 381; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i'*, 1:409, 455, 468, 504, 577, 622; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 16:364.

¹⁹For Īnāl al-Yūsufī, see Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 1:438; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 2:274, 10:270; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 2:349–51, 12:130–31. For Yashbak min Salmān Shāh, see al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 3:65. For Taghrībirdī min Bashbughā al-Zāhirī, see Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 2:200–1, 4:42, 46, 174, 5:316–23, 368, 6:316–17, 8:401, 9:54–57; idem, *Al-Nujūm*, 12:106, 13:118, 14:252, 15:135; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 2:329–30, 12:19, 132; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 4:206.

²⁰Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 2:309, 4:40–41.

²¹See footnote 11 above.

²²I found nine instances in the Circassian period in which mamluks had children before the age of 35 (including Taghrībirdī). In six of these instances the mamluks were related by marriage to the family of the Sultan, or were closely connected with it. For details, see al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 2:270–72, 315, 3:53–55, 7:131, 8:291, 11:234, 12:21, 25, 27, 59, 89, 90, 165, 167; idem, *Wajīz*, 1:332;



to bring their relatives into the Sultanate, although this phenomenon was much less widespread than it had been in the Turkish period. Taghrībirdī is the best example of such a favorite mamluk. He was the brother (or relative) of Shīrīn, the wife of Barqūq and the mother of Barqūq's son al-Nāṣir Faraj. Taghrībirdī also had numerous marital ties to the Barqūq family.²³ Taghrībirdī's relatives were brought into the Sultanate.²⁴ He also was related by marriage to the sultans al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh and al-Zāhir Jaqmaq, since Shaykh was married to the daughter of Shīrīn, and Muḥammad ibn Jaqmaq married Taghrībirdī's granddaughter.²⁵

The question arises, why did the phenomenon of bringing relatives of those bound by marriage to the sultan's family wane in the Circassian period? Two possible answers present themselves. First, because of the changes in the slave trade patterns, many mamluks already had relatives in the territory of the Sultanate. Second, during the Circassian period, the mamluk amirs who had marital ties to the sultan's family were fully "annexed" to the royal family. In that period, the status of the women of the sultan's family devolved to those amirs, who were often buried in the mausoleums of the sultans, together with their sons. The sources from the Circassian period contain many references to the sons of amirs who married daughters of sultans as descendants in a cognate line of the sultans (*asbāt*), and these sons were given a royal title (*sīdī*).²⁶ Family and marital ties in the Circassian period were a factor that balanced the erosion of the biological family, the decline of the agnate lines, and the decline of the dynastic and hereditary principles.

"JOSEPH'S LAW": A REASSESSMENT

Ulrich Haarmann discovered that European travelers who visited Egypt at the end of the Circassian period had found an explanation for the almost exclusive rule of the Mamluk Sultanate by mamluks, in the Biblical precedent of Joseph (in Haarmann's terminology, "Joseph's Law"). For example, Arnold von Harff,

al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 5:281, 301, 402, 7:84, 97, 186, 312; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, 1:342, 570, 647, 650, 736, 2:994; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 14:254, 15:459, 16:319; idem, *Al-Manhal*, 2:346–47, 9:98–100; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 4:786.

²³Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 2:200–1, 4:42, 5:368, 12:131; idem, *Al-Nujūm*, 11:7, 13:118, 14:129, 252, 15:135; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 2:329–30, 10:270, 12:19, 132; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 4:206.

²⁴See footnote 19 above.

²⁵Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal*, 3:476–80; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 2:316–17, 12:51; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 5:284.

²⁶See for example Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i*, 1:349, 469, 574, 577, 736; Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith*, 2:66. In the Turkish period there are hardly any references to descendants in a cognate line of the sultans, and the use of the term *sīdī* is limited to sons of sultans. In that period, sons of amirs who had marital ties to the Sultan's family were buried with their fathers and not in the mausoleum of the sultan. I discuss this in detail in my Ph.D. dissertation.



who visited Egypt in 1496, maintained that the government in Egypt was in the hand of slaves because “since the time of Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and came to Egypt, it had never been doubted that the sultan had to be an infidel [that is, one not born a Muslim].” According to Haarmann, von Harff apparently deduced this idea from the comparison that Felix Fabri (who visited Egypt in 1483) had drawn between the mamluks and the Joseph narrative.²⁷ Haarmann regards these theories by European travelers in light of the travelers’ overarching perceptions of the Mamluk Sultanate as exotic and strange, and he apparently does not think that these ideas were based in Egyptian/Mamluk concepts.²⁸ In addition to von Harff and Fabri, we could mention another European traveler who related the Biblical Joseph narrative to the Mamluk context. Pietro Martire de Anglería, the ambassador of the Granadan kings who visited Egypt in 1501, asked himself the question that had been asked by European travelers before him: how did slaves become the rulers of such a great empire? Pietro Martire indicated that there were a number of views regarding this question. One opinion that he set forth is that in order to show their gratitude for the benevolence of Joseph, who freed (“habia librado”) Egypt by resolving the famine in the land, ever since the Egyptians have given the reigns of government in their country to slaves. Pietro Martire comments that, in his opinion, this was merely a fairy tale, but does not specify the sources of his information regarding this “fairy tale.”²⁹ Our first inclination is to assume that these were other European travelers who had spent time in Egypt before him, but there is no unequivocal evidence of this. The tale that he relates is not mentioned by Fabri or von Harff, who connect the Biblical Joseph narrative and the mamluks. I will argue below that the connection between the mamluks and the Biblical Joseph is not a European invention. The European “fairy tales” are based on at least a nucleus of Egyptian (and Muslim) tales, and the mamluks themselves found some linkage between themselves and the Biblical narrative, although it appears that they emphasized parallels different from those highlighted by the Europeans. While the European travelers found an explanation in the Joseph narrative for the fact that only slaves were entitled to rule in Egypt, the mamluks themselves stressed the fact that some of them, like Joseph, had found redemption by being reunited with their families af-

²⁷Ulrich Haarmann, “Joseph’s Law—The Careers and Activities of Mamluk Descendants before the Ottoman Conquest of Egypt,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Philipp and Haarmann, 61.

²⁸Ulrich Haarmann, “The Mamluk System of Rule in the Eyes of Western Travelers,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 5 (2001): 1–24.

²⁹Pietro Martire de Anglería, *Una embajada de los Reyes Católicos a Egipto (Según la “Legatio Babylonica” y el “Opus Epistolarum” de Pedro Mártir de Anglería)*, edited and translated by Luis García y García (Valladolid, Spain, 1947), 112–14.



ter a lengthy separation. The comparison that the mamluks drew between themselves and Joseph is indicative of the mamluks' self-perception, the importance they ascribed to the link with relatives, and their aspiration to reunite with their relatives as a way to shed their slave status.

The image of the Biblical Joseph was present in Mamluk Egypt. A number of places in Egypt, for instance, were named after Joseph, and there are numerous references to the Biblical character in the contemporary literature.³⁰ There are many instances in the sources of comparisons between Joseph and the mamluks or Mamluk-era Egyptian rulers. The comparison between the Biblical Joseph and the mamluks or rulers in Egypt was based on a number of motifs common to the story of Joseph's life and the life history of the mamluks/Egyptian rulers. Joseph was a stranger in Egypt, as were the mamluks; both Joseph and the mamluks had been sold into slavery; both Joseph and some of the mamluks had been so sold by their families; Joseph had been imprisoned in Egypt but succeeded in being freed from prison;³¹ Joseph ruled in Egypt, like at least some of the mamluks; and Joseph was reunited with his family after not having seen them for as lengthy a period as at least some mamluks. The typical Joseph-mamluk comparison did not contain more than a single motif. This comparison apparently became more elaborate in the Circassian period, in which a large number of mamluk sultans ruled, and its emphases may have changed.

It appears that at least until the late Turkish period the comparisons between the Joseph narrative and the lives of the mamluks tended not to employ the "slave who rises to power" motif. The first Joseph-mamluk comparison that I found did not come from the territory of the Mamluk Sultanate. The Afghan al-Juzjānī, who in 1259 completed a biographical dictionary, the last parts of which are concerned with the Ghūrīs and the slaves who succeeded them, compares the mamluk sultan of Delhi, Aybek, with Joseph, because both had been sold into slavery by their brothers.³² It should be noted that when von Harff compared Joseph to the mamluks he referred to the fact that both Joseph and the mamluks were sold into slavery by their families. The first association of Joseph with a mamluk in the territory of the Mamluk Sultanate is with al-Zāhir Baybars (d. 1277), which appears in Ibn al-Mughayzil (d. 1296). One of the amirs of the Ayyubid ruler al-Ṣāliḥ

³⁰See for example al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandrānī, *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, ed. Etienne Combe and Aziz Suryal Atiya (Hyderabad, 1968–76), 5:49, 244, 6:412; al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 3:1125; Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar*, 8:4; al-Ṣafadī, *A'yān*, 5:600; and see also Ulrich Haarmann, "Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt," *BSOAS* 43 (1980): 56–57. The story of Joseph was a popular theme in Arabic and Persian literature and the first Turkish version of the story appeared in 1233; see S. L. West, "The Qiṣṣa-i Yūsuf of 'Alī: the First Story of Joseph in Turkic Islamic Literature," *Orientalia Aca-demiae Scientiarum Hung* 37/1–3 (1983): 69–84.

³¹It is common for contemporary sources to refer to imprisonment as a metaphor for enslavement.

³²Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge, 2003), 7, 63.



Ayyūb (d. 1249) is quoted as saying to al-Zāhir Baybars: “God put you in the place of Joseph, and put in your hand the souls of his servants.”³³ The fact of Baybars being a mamluk is marginal in this comparison, and Baybars is compared to Joseph simply because both ruled in Egypt. An additional Joseph-mamluk comparison in Turkish-period sources is that between the amir Baybughā Urūs and Joseph, based on their both having been imprisoned and freed. In this instance, too, Baybughā’s being a mamluk seems marginal.³⁴ In sources from the Turkish period, we also find a comparison between Joseph and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn. al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn is quoted as saying that he was a foreigner in Egypt, just like Joseph was a foreigner in that land.³⁵ In that case, the Egyptian ruler to whom Joseph is compared was not a mamluk. The most significant comparison between Joseph and mamluks in the Turkish period comes in the context of family reunification. The historian Baybars al-Manṣūrī (d. 1325) relates that Salār al-Manṣūrī’s family arrived in Egypt in 1304. He adds that: “He was pleased by the reunification and his family’s presence after a lengthy separation, and having despaired of meeting them. For since he had been separated from his family in the battle of al-Abulustayn during the reign of al-Zāhir Baybars in 1276, thirty years had passed. His family came to him from afar, and his desires were met by their closeness. As [God] had done for Joseph son of Jacob, their hearts rejoiced at the reunion.”³⁶ At least in the Turkish period, the most prominent motif in the mamluk-Joseph comparison is connected to the fact that they were separated from their families, and were reunited after the great suffering caused by their being apart.

The Joseph-mamluk comparisons become markedly more frequent in the time of Barqūq. In the case of Barqūq himself, the comparison with Joseph was patently upon the initiative of this sultan, who had brought his father and his family to Egypt in 1380, when he was the *atābek*. According to al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), Barqūq was the only Circassian mamluk sultan whose father was a Muslim: his father came to Egypt, converted to Islam, and died about a month before Barqūq assumed the throne.³⁷ Barqūq chose to meet his father upon the latter’s arrival in Egypt at al-‘Ikriṣhah, which, according to Barqūq’s confidant Ibn Duqmāq (d.

³³Ibn al-Mughayzil, *Dhayl Muffarij al-Kurūb fī Akhbār Banī Ayyūb*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Beirut, 2004), 89–90; For a similar comparison between Baybars and Joseph, see al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandrānī, *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 6:5.

³⁴Al-Ṣafādī, *A’yān*, 2:88.

³⁵Al-Yūsufī, *Nuzhat al-Nāzir fī Sirat al-Malik al-Nāṣir*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥuṭayṭ (Beirut, 1986), 297.

³⁶Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Zubdat al-Fikrah*, 413; see also Zetterstéen, *Beiträge*, 132.

³⁷Al-Suyūṭī, *Husn al-Muhāḍarah fī Tārīkh Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1967–68), 2, 120; see also al-Sakhāwī, *Wajīz*, 1:249.



1407), is where Joseph met his father when Jacob came to Egypt.³⁸ Al-Maqrīzī (d. 1441) tells us that Barqūq also established a religious trust for the tomb of Joseph's brothers.³⁹ Before the time of Barqūq, there are hardly any references in the sources to al-ʿIkrishah, and no source preceding the reign of this sultan mentions al-ʿIkrishah as the meeting place of Joseph and his father.⁴⁰ There are more references to al-ʿIkrishah in the sources beginning in the time of Barqūq.⁴¹ In the Circassian period al-ʿIkrishah apparently was a ceremonial site.⁴²

Barqūq clearly compared himself to the Biblical Joseph. As in the Turkish period, the comparison was based on their both having been separated from their families, with whom they were eventually reunited. Once Barqūq took power, the prevalent conception was that the ruler had to come from an established family. Barqūq's having made the effort to bring his family to Egypt before he crowned himself as sultan shows that he was compelled to take account of the conception that only those who had a family (that is, those who were not slaves) could legitimately rule, but might also attest to his comparing himself to Joseph as a slave who shed this status and assumed power. Barqūq's comparing himself to Joseph was not limited to their both having succeeded in reuniting with their families. Ibn Ṣaṣrā (d. after 1399) observes that, like Joseph, Barqūq was imprisoned and freed and takes this opportunity to mention that Barqūq returned to power, as had Solomon (!).⁴³ This comparison does not explicitly refer to Joseph and Barqūq as slaves who ascended the throne, but it comes very close to making such a statement.

There are additional indicators that, in the Circassian period, the mamluk-Joseph comparison might have been based on the "slave who rises to power" pattern. There is an instance in this period in which verse 12:21 from the Quran ("We have given Joseph an exalted place on earth") was read during the sultan's coronation.⁴⁴ Al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandrānī (who wrote his book in 1373) interprets this verse in the context of the Joseph narrative: according to him, Zulaykhah, Pharaoh's wife, bought Joseph and imprisoned him, but after his imprisonment

³⁸Ibn Duqmāq, *Al-Nafḥah al-Miskīyah fī al-Dawlah al-Turkīyah*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmūrī (Beirut, 1999), 234–35; see also Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 11:182.

³⁹Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 3:944.

⁴⁰For rare occurrences of al-ʿIkrishah in Turkish-period sources, see Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar*, 9:228; al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān*, 1:563.

⁴¹See for example al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 4:385, 398.

⁴²See al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk*, 4:506; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 14:98; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Dawʿ*, 1:53; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 7:200.

⁴³Ibn Ṣaṣrā, *Al-Durrah al-Muḍīʿah fī al-Dawlah al-Zāhirīyah*, ed. William M. Brinner (Berkeley, 1963), 94.

⁴⁴Al-Buqāʿī, *Tārīkh al-Buqāʿī* (Cairo, 1992–93), 1:305.



Joseph became a great king, just as the faithful believers go to Paradise after their “imprisonment” in this world. The meaning of this verse according to al-Nuwayrī is therefore: the Egyptians thought that Joseph was their slave, but he turned them into his slaves when he sold them food during the famine. Upon the arrival of Joseph’s family in Egypt, he declares: “O people of Egypt, you are my slaves, but I free you today in honor of my meeting my father.”⁴⁵ The reading of this verse during the coronation of a Mamluk sultan might attest that during the Circassian period it was the mamluks themselves who made the connection between the mamluks and Joseph the slave who rose to become the ruler.

Two observations should be made in this context. First, al-Nuwayrī’s commentary on the Quran verse reveals a (confused) similarity to the tale heard by Pietro Martire. Both Martire’s tale and al-Nuwayrī’s commentary expressly mention Joseph as the one who acted beneficently with Egypt during a time of famine. But while Martire maintains that Joseph freed the Egyptians when he gave them food, al-Nuwayrī states that Joseph enslaved them by this act. Al-Nuwayrī nonetheless relates that Joseph freed the people of Egypt, but in the context of his family’s arrival in Egypt. Second, the Joseph-mamluk comparison in Mamluk sources stresses the aspect of liberation that followed the distress (*al-faraj ba‘da al-shiddah*) in the life stories of both—distress that ensued from enslavement, imprisonment, and separation from one’s family. The most frequent motif in the comparisons to Joseph in the Mamluk sources is the reunion with one’s family that leads to redemption and liberation. It is not incidental that the liberation of the people of Egypt is connected with the arrival of the family of Joseph, who freed them when he himself was redeemed. I found only a single instance in the sources from the Mamluk period in which an explicit comparison between Joseph and the mamluks is based on the fact of both having been slaves who became rulers. Even, however, in this instance, the aspect of redemption following distress is emphasized. Al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandrānī has al-Zāhir Baybars make the following declaration: “If it had not been for what Joseph’s brothers had done, he would not have become king of Egypt. One who withstands travail will in the end prevail, since suffering is the key to rewards.”⁴⁶

The European travelers were not the first to compare the mamluks and Joseph. While, however, the Mamluk sources highlight the aspect of redemption in the narratives of Joseph and the mamluks who rose to power, the European travelers

⁴⁵Al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandrānī, *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 2:121; Ibn Abī Ḥajalah (d. 1374) interprets this verse as following: Joseph became a king after suffering the hardships of imprisonment; see Ibn Abī Ḥajalah, *Sakardān al-Sultān*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad ‘Umar (Cairo, 2001), 121.

⁴⁶Al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandrānī, *Kitāb al-Ilmām*, 4:79. According to al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandrānī, Aydekīn al-Bunduqdār, the master of Baybars, replied: “Because you withstood the rigors of enslavement, you became king of Egypt.”



stress the mamluks' exclusive right to rule, based on the Biblical Joseph precedent. We cannot reject out of hand the possibility that, in the Circassian period, the mamluks themselves supported the idea that the right to rule of one who had been a slave was based on the Biblical Joseph precedent. Possibly, a Joseph-mamluk comparison based on a "slave who rose to assume power" narrative could be found in this period. But the most important lesson, in my opinion, to be learned from "Joseph's Law" is that the mamluks regarded the separation from their families as traumatic. Anyone who was reunited with his family after a period of distress was regarded as having been redeemed from servitude like Joseph in the Bible, and as becoming a legitimate ruler. Long before Orlando Patterson defined a slave as someone lacking family ties,⁴⁷ the mamluks perceived themselves as slaves because of the absence of such family ties. Even among the military slaves, only the outstanding few succeeded in completely freeing themselves of their slave status and becoming members of a ruling elite with family attachments. The other mamluks certainly cannot be regarded as an elite proud of its slave status.

⁴⁷Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Massachusetts and London, 1982), 4–13.

