

AMIR MAZOR

UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA

Social Mobility and Political Power: Turkification Processes in the Mamluk Sultanate

*If you want to live an exalted life
and people to find your bad deeds good
you have to wear the garment of the Turks and learn their language;
and if not, then stay away from them and be pious¹*

Written by a fourteenth-century Muslim scholar in the Mamluk Sultanate, this poem sheds light on the opportunities for social advancement of individuals who adopted Turkish cultural features. This phenomenon, which may be designated *Turkification* or *Mamlukization*, has received little attention in Mamluk studies, even though it played a significant role in social mobility throughout the Mamluk Sultanate.

The term Turkification, which I use in this article, is semantically derived from the terminology used by the medieval Muslim historians to indicate the Mamluk elite: “Turks” (*atrāk*). This designation refers to the members of the foreign military-political rulers, originating from several ethnic groups, most of them from the peoples of Central Asia, and representing the cultures of that region. Thus, Turkification in the context of this article applies to the embracing of cultural markers and practices that were common among the ruling elite—the *atrāk*—and identified with it.

The sultanate was definitely a society based on class. Contemporaneous Muslim authors schematically divided Mamluk society into four main strata: (1) *al-khāṣṣah*: the ruling class, namely the foreign Mamluk military-political elite; (2) *al-a’yān*: the native or immigrant notables consisting mainly of the ulama (who served as qadis, jurists, *mudarrisūn*, hadith scholars, Sufi practitioners, preachers, and the like), as well as bureaucrats and distinguished merchants and doctors; (3) *al-‘āmmah*: the common people; and (4) the bottom stratum: the *arādhil* or *awbāsh al-‘āmmah* (the mob of the common people) who, according to Marxist terminology, we may denote as lumpenproletariat. Representatives of Islam, the

¹Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Inbā’ al-ghumr bi-abnā’ al-‘umr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Hyderabad, 1967–76), 5:28; also mentioned by Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’ li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsī’* (Cairo, 1935–36), 1:323. Translation of the poem is taken from Koby Yosef, “*Dawlat al-Atrāk* or *Dawlat al-Mamālik*? Ethnic Origin or Slave Origin as the Defining Characteristic of the Ruling Elite in the Mamluk Sultanate,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012): 391.



©2024 by Amir Mazor.

DOI: 10.6082/5vmr-0617. (<https://doi.org/10.6082/5vmr-0617>)

DOI of Vol. XXVII: 10.6082/msr27. See <https://doi.org/10.6082/msr2024> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

ulama, and other *a'yān* constituted an intermediate class between the masses (*al-ʿāmmah*) and the ruling elite (*al-khāṣṣah*).²

In this hierarchical structure of Mamluk society, professional, scholarly, familial, and especially ethnic affiliations were crucial factors in defining the social status and class of an individual. From a cultural standpoint, the main dividing line ran between the members of the ruling “Turkish” elite—those who “had the last word”—and the civilians, whom we may designate as Arab. The mamluks, members of the Mamluk elite, in all likelihood consciously and zealously maintained their Central Asian traditions and customs in order to distinguish themselves from the local population and signify their membership in the ruling class, perhaps to support an ideology of otherness that reaffirmed their political legitimacy.³ The practices maintained by the ruling elite included external, intellectual, and religious features. In addition to adopting Turkish names, the Mamluk elite spoke in a Turkish dialect. Furthermore, the mamluks enjoyed the prerogative of horseback riding and sword bearing, while their subjects were confined to mules or donkeys.⁴

The mamluks also distinguished themselves by their dress, which was considered to be much more honorable than that of any other class. Like the mamluks’ names and spoken language, this distinctive raiment goes back to the Mamluk regiment of al-Muʿtaṣim (the Abbasid caliph) in the ninth century. However, new Asian garments were introduced to the Mamluk elite during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Imported from Central Asian regions, these sartorial elements increased social stratification. The new Central Asian fashions included caps, coats, and belts.⁵ There were different kinds of headgear, the most prominent of which were the *kallawtāh* or *kallaftāh* caps. As for Asian coats, jackets,

²Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, 1967), 79ff.; Jonathan P. Berkey, “Culture and Society during the Late Middle Ages,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 386–87.

³*Ibid.*, 391–92; David Ayalon, “The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2 (1968): 322–24.

⁴Riding on horseback, which may be interpreted as related more to status than ethnicity, symbolizes a fundamental concept in the Mamluk mentality, which has its roots in the Central Asian way of life. As noted by Ayalon, the close ties between the Mamluk and his horse began in his early childhood “while he was still amid the steppes or wild mountains of his country of origin, where, both peace and war, the horseman was the backbone of society.” See: David Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom: A Challenge to a Mediaeval Society* (London, 1956), 61–63. On *furūsiyah* practices and its connection to Mamluk culture, see note 8 below.

⁵Norman A. Stillman, “Costume and Clothing,” in *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Josef Meri (New York, 2006), 1:162. On the import of clothing from Central Asia, see: Michael D. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1979), 56–57.



and vests, the so-called *qabā' al-turkī* or *qabā' al-tatarī* bear noting. Military belts called *ḥiyāsah* were worn over the outer garment.⁶

Other traditional aspects of the Mamluk elite encompassed dietary habits and even religious customs.⁷ *Furūsiyah* exercises were another distinguishing feature of the mamluks from which Arab natives were excluded. This military training included archery, handling a lance and sword, riding horses in the hippodrome, playing polo, wrestling, and hunting. Identified with the Turks from a very early stage, *furūsiyah* was also called *funūn al-atrāk*. These exercises combined genuine Turkish and Middle Eastern warlike traditions.⁸

The fact that the elite had distinct characteristics does not mean that the boundary separating this class from the lower strata was impenetrable. Relative to the medieval world, the Mamluk Sultanate's populace enjoyed a substantial degree of social mobility.⁹ For the most part, social advancement initiatives started with a native actively forging professional and friendly contacts with a patron, who was usually a member of the Mamluk military elite. From the tens of cases documented in the sources, the following instructive example warrants attention. Ibrāhīm ibn Khālid ibn 'Abbās al-Anṣārī (d. 713/1314) was a copper-smith who worked with his father in the coppersmiths' market in Damascus. He supplied amirs with copper products. Owing to his immense ambition, Ibrāhīm ibn Khālid's business thrived. One of his main patrons was the amir Aqqūsh al-Afram. When al-Afram became governor of Greater Syria, he appointed the smith to the office of *wālī al-ḥarb* (the prefect of police) of Damascus. Ibrāhīm received an amirate and the *laqab* (honorific) Jamāl al-Dīn. Al-Ṣafadī summarizes

⁶The *kallawtāh* or *kallaftāh* were small yellow or red caps that were worn without a turban wrapped around them. See: R. Dozy, *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes* (Leiden, 1881), 2:482; L. A. Mayer, *Mamluk Costume* (Geneva, 1952), 28–29. On the costume of the Mamluk amirs, see *ibid.*, esp. 21–35.

⁷On some of the Central Asian practices preserved by the Mamluks, see Reuven Amitai's recent study: "Echoes of the Eurasian Steppe in the Daily Culture of Mamluk Military Society," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, third series, 26, nos. 1–2 (2016): 261–70, esp. 264–67. On food habits: Amalia Levanoni, "Food and Cooking during the Mamluk Era: Social and Political Implications," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 201–22; On "pagan" shamanistic practices: Amitai, "Echoes," 265, n. 20. Nevertheless, as noted by Amitai, these Eurasian steppe rituals were rare.

⁸Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars introduced *furūsiyah* on a large scale to the Mamluk Sultanate and it was developed especially by the mamluks of Qalāwūn. See Amir Mazor, *The Rise and Fall of a Muslim Regiment: The Maṣṣūriyya in the First Mamluk Sultanate, 678/1279–741/1341* (Göttingen, 2015), 45–46.

⁹Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, esp. 185. Berkey, "Culture and Society," 395. Social mobility within the ulama sector seems to have been more limited; see: Irmeli Perho, "Climbing the Ladder: Social Mobility in the Mamluk Period," *MSR* 15, no. 2 (2009): 9–34.



this commoner's meteoric rise thus: "He who jumped from the copper market up to the status of one whose hand is kissed."¹⁰

In other instances, Turkification played a crucial role in the social advancement of members of the *‘āmmah* and *a‘yān* classes. The main practices adopted by native members of these classes were Mamluk dress codes, riding habits, and spoken language.

DRESS, COSTUME, AND RIDING PREROGATIVES

The external features of Turkification are exceedingly manifest, for they could be observed by everyone in the public sphere. Concerning individuals of different social status, several studies clearly demonstrate that appearance functions as the most effective mode of communication, establishing identities and selves, on the one hand, and attributing identities to others, on the other.¹¹ The malleable dimension of these undertakings is most telling. An individual could manipulate the impressions formed of him by others via deliberate self-presentation, using quasi-theatrical performances of appearance.¹² In so doing, an individual could deliver information to other people who were inclined to decode aspects of appearance *in terms of social class or profession*. In other words, it is through *social interaction* that people learn to interpret, utilize, and modify socially constructed meanings of dress within their cultural settings. Moreover, clothing and costume have a priority over verbal discourse in communicating identity, for these elements can be discerned in social encounters before a conversation is initiated.¹³

In Mamluk society, dress and costume signified class, ethnic, religious, and professional affiliations in the most explicit way. However, it does not seem as though there were strict "state regulations" concerning the dress code. Mamluk-era historians often point out that a Mamluk subject who aspired to get closer to the elite "began to dress in the clothes of the Turks" or "the military." At the very least, the Mamluks evidently turned a blind eye to this phenomenon; and

¹⁰Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān al-‘aṣr wa-a‘wān al-naṣr*, ed. ‘Alī Abū Zayd et al. (Beirut, 1998), 1:71–72; al-Birzālī, *Tārīkh al-Birzālī*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut, 2006), 119–20.

¹¹Mary Ellen Roach Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, "Dress and Identity," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10 (1992): 1–8, esp. 7.

¹²See Ervin Goffman's doctrine of self-presentation in: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh, 1956).

¹³Michael Argyle, *Bodily Communication* (London, 1988), 233–54, esp. 233–37; G. P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self," in *Human Behavior and the Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*, ed. Arnold M. Rose (New York, 1962), 86–118.



at most, civilians were given a free hand to wear Turkish apparel.¹⁴ The sources mention cases in which civilians did not wear clothes that accorded their social position, preferring to don others for various reasons. Al-Ṣafadī mentions an amir of *ṭablahānāh* in Damascus (d. 723/1323), who did not wear the requisite garment.¹⁵ Another case in point is a certain *kātib inshāʿ* (correspondence secretary) who used to replace his official clothes with those of a Bedouin or mamluk soldier (*jundī*) on his travels, apparently for safety reasons.¹⁶ Moreover, there is testimony that even Jews could occasionally dress up as Muslims, due to temporary needs, wearing a white (instead of yellow) turban.¹⁷ It seems that adopting a sartorial style was sometimes an effective manipulation intended to publicly convey one's desired social, professional, and even religious status.

The phenomenon of Turkification in terms of one's external features is illustrated by two commoners who managed to attain one of the highest state positions—the vizierate of Egypt. Muḥammad ibn al-Shaykhī, known as Dhubyān, started his career sewing head shawls and skullcaps in a Cairo market. He traveled to Mardin as a Sufi, where he managed to make connections with senior officials. Dhubyān returned to the Mamluk Sultanate as part of an expedition of Ilkhān Aḥmed Tegüder (r. 678–80/1280–82), son of Hülegü. Upon his arrival, the sources indicate, “he began to dress in the clothes of the *ajnād*” (simple mamluk soldiers) and managed to associate himself with the top-ranking amir Baybars al-Jāshnakīr (r. 1309–10), who would go on to become sultan. Thanks to these steps, Dhubyān received an amirate of *ṭablahānāh*. He was appointed to high state positions, like *shādd al-dawāwīn* (supervisor of the financial system), *wālī* (governor) of Cairo, *nāzir al-khāṣṣ* (controller of the privy purse), and finally, the vizierate of Egypt. Dhubyān strengthened his ties with the Turkish elite even more by marrying the daughter of a senior amir, Bahādur Raʿs Nawbah.¹⁸

A more revealing case involves Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Babāwī (d. 869/1465), member of the mob of commoners (*awbāsh al-ʿāmmah*) who rose to

¹⁴However, in some cases garment objects such as the *kallaftāh* turban were bestowed by the Mamluk ruler on a civilian. See, for instance, al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān*, 1:81–82.

¹⁵Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *Al-Wāfi bi-al-wafayāt*, ed. Helmut Ritter et al. (Beirut, 2008–13), 4:89.

¹⁶Al-Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān*, 1:336. For other instances see: Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 54–55.

¹⁷Dotan Arad, “Being a Jew Under the Mamluks: Some Coping Strategies,” in *Muslim-Jewish Relations in the Middle Islamic Period: Jews in the Ayyubid and Mamluk Sultanates (1171–1517)*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen, 2017), 29.

¹⁸The details about Dhubyān in the different sources are sometimes contradictory; see: Mazor, *The Rise and Fall*, 184, n. 249. See also: Donald S. Richards, “The Office of Wilāyat al-Qāhira,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras IV, Proceedings of the 6th, 7th and 8th International Colloquium*, ed. Urbain Vermeulen and Jo Van Steenberghe (Leuven, 2001), 447–48; idem., “Baybars al-Manṣūrī's *Zubdat al-Fikra*,” in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c. 950–1800)*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden, 2001), 43.



become a vizier in Egypt. At every stage of his climb up the social ladder, his advancement was expressed and symbolized in clothing and riding practices. Al-Babāwī had initially filled the role of watchman, shepherd, or another job of this ilk in the Upper Egyptian village of Babā al-Kubrā. At some point, he moved to Cairo and began serving as a kitchen worker under a leading cook. Thereafter, al-Babāwī landed a position as an apprentice to one of the meat merchants. Soon after, he became a meat merchant himself. As Ibn Taghrībirdī notes, “his condition improved, and he rode a donkey.” Al-Babāwī grew very rich while his business thrived. In fact, the vizier appointed him meat supplier of the Royal Mamluks. At this point, the upstart “was riding a mule with a saddlecloth made of sheep fur, and he wore a blue shirt (*qamīṣ*) as is customary among the senior merchants.” Due to his great wealth, Sultan Khushqadam (r. 1461–67) appointed him *nāzīr al-dawlah*—the director of the financial offices. At this juncture, al-Babāwī abandoned the *zafūrīyah*—dress of the merchants and the butchers of the market—and started to don upper-class accoutrements. Specifically, he began regularly wearing a turban (*imāmāh*) and an upper coat with long sleeves (*al-farajīyah*), which was associated with the ulama, as well as the raiment of the scribes (*tazayyā ziyy al-kuttāb*). Additionally, the parvenu began to ride a horse, sporting boots (*khuff*) and a *mihmāz* (an iron spur above the boot).¹⁹ These trappings publicly demonstrated his high status. Some notables looked suspiciously at this, however, since al-Babāwī was, according to Ibn Taghrībirdī, illiterate and completely ignorant. Nevertheless, the sultan continued to promote him, appointing him vizier of Egypt. Despite the displeasure of Ibn Taghrībirdī and others about al-Babāwī’s dress and riding practices, one may conclude that external signs identified with the upper classes played a key role in the establishment of self-identity, on the one hand, and class representation *vis-a-vis* the people, on the other, by manipulating the public impression.²⁰

Another native who managed to reach the position of vizier towards the end of the fifteenth century was Tāj al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Razzāq. Unlike the previous two subjects, he came from a family of bureaucrats and served as a financial officer (*mustawfī*) in Qaṭyā. After netting the position of the city’s *wālī* and *nāzīr*, he was subsequently appointed vizier, *ustādār*, and then supervisor of the districts of northern Egypt (*al-wajh al-baḥrī*). As governor of Qaṭyā, al-Maqrīzī writes, “he took off the clothes of the scribes [*ziyy al-kuttāb*] and put on a *qabā’* and *kallaftāh* headgear, girded a sword around his waist, and people started calling him amir.”

¹⁹Most of these garments were worn by the ulama; see: Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 52–54; Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a’shā fī ṣinā’at al-inshā’*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1987), 2:144.

²⁰Abū al-Maḥāsīn Yūsuf Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-zāhirah fī mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, ed. Fahīm Muḥammad Shaltūt et al. (Cairo, 1929–72), 16:278, 640–42.



It seems that ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s Turkish outfit and manners were appropriate to a senior Mamluk amir, above his status as governor of the provincial town of Qaṭyā. In any case, they contributed to raising his status in the eyes of those around him and to his appointment, eventually, as vizier.²¹

The adoption of external Mamluk trappings was not only prevalent among the lower strata and bureaucrats, but among the ulama as well. The competition among the latter for status and remunerative positions was both horizontal and vertical. To advance beyond the ulama ranks, one had to gain patronage and forge ties with members of the Mamluk elite.²² Therefore, it is not surprising that some ulama dressed as mamluks in an apparent attempt to integrate to a greater extent among the *khāṣṣah* class. Of the four professors (*mudarrisūn*) at Shaykhū al-‘Umarī’s *khānqāh* in Cairo, al-Maqrīzī notes that Khalīl, the Maliki professor of the institution, adopted the garb of a mamluk soldier (*mutajannad al-shakl*). Not coincidentally, this same professor had an *iqṭā‘* in the *ḥalqah* military unit.²³ Besides his knowledge of *furūsiyah*, the scholar, Sufi, and *muftī* of Gaza, Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf ibn Bahādur al-Iyāsī (d. 852/1448), used to wear the garment of the Turk (*kāna bi-ziyy al-turk*).²⁴ Another notable scholar from Damascus, al-Badr Ḥasan ibn Abī Bakr (d. 891/1486), embraced the Mamluk sartorial style.²⁵

LEARNING AND KNOWING THE TURKISH LANGUAGE

Learning and/or knowing the Turkish language was another effective strategy for ulama and bureaucrats eager to shore up their status, capital, or influence mainly on the basis of their intellectual abilities. In this context it should be emphasized that language is not only a means of communication, but also an expression of identity and culture. Thus, shared language provides a reassuring quality relating to a sense of familiarity, trust, social capital, and cultural

²¹ Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma‘rifat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muṣṭafá Ziyādah and Sa‘īd ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ ‘Āshūr (Cairo, 1934–73), 3:924–25; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi wa-al-mustawfá ba‘da al-wāfi*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn (Cairo, 1984–2009), 7:314–18; idem., *Al-Nujūm*, 2:41–42.

²² Joseph Escovitz, “Patterns of Appointment to the Chief Judgeships of Cairo During the Bahri Mamluk Period,” *Arabica* 30 (1983): 147–68.

²³ Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā‘iz wa-al-i‘tibār bi-dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-al-āthār fī Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1854), 2:421. The *ḥalqah* unit was composed of non-mamluks and mamluks. During most of the fourteenth century it was no longer considered an elite unit; see: Mazor, *The Rise and Fall*, 22–23.

²⁴ He was among the *awlād al-nās* since his grandfather’s name was Bahādur; see: ‘Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Malaṭī, *Nayl al-amal fī dhayl al-duwal*, ed. ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Salām Tadmurī (Beirut, 2002), 5:266–67; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw‘ al-lāmi‘*, 10:91.

²⁵ *wa-kāna bi-ziyy al-atrāk fī malbasihi* (al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 8:27).



identification.²⁶ Similar to external characteristics such as clothing, language choice serves to construct a self-identity and contributes to greater integration of an individual into other social groups. Put another way, “speaking a given language in different spatial contexts can define individuals as ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’ and affect their sense of identification and belonging.”²⁷

Several studies have indicated that the knowledge of Arabic among the mamluks was superficial and that they spoke Turkish—most likely in a Qipchaqi dialect in the first period, and Oghuz Turkish during the second.²⁸ The ability to communicate with members of the ruling elite in the language of their culture enabled members of the ulama to gain and nurture intimate ties with the elite. With respect to the case at hand, proficiency in the Turkish language often afforded greater opportunities for political influence and social status. In fact, knowledge of this tongue was crucial for penetrating the upper echelons. The importance of the Turkish language in Mamluk politics and administration was recently emphasized in several studies. Discussing the knowledge of Turkish among non-mamluks, Yosef argued that “the defining characteristic of the ruling elite was ethnic-linguistic and not slave origin.”²⁹ Eychenne concluded that “on peut admettre que la plupart des administrateurs civils, au contact des élites mameloukes disposaient de rudiments de turc leur permettant d’avoir des échanges usuels dans cette langue.”³⁰ Moreover, Eychenne demonstrated the crucial role of the Turkish language in creating and strengthening personal relations between military and civilian elites.³¹

Indeed, there were a few instances of civilians who tried to secure high positions in the religious, political, or bureaucratic establishments, but their efforts were hindered by their inadequate knowledge of Turkish. For instance, after being selected amir and *ustādār* in 846/1442, Ibn al-Kuwayz’s appointment

²⁶Alberto Chong, Jorge Guillen, and Vanessa Rios, “Language Nuances and Socioeconomic Outcomes,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 69, no. 2 (2010): 693–95.

²⁷Gill Valentine, Deborah Sporton, and Katrine Bang Nielsen, “Language Use on the Move: Sites of Encounter, Identities and Belonging,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, new series 33, no. 3 (2008): 385.

²⁸Mazor, *The Rise and Fall*, 42–45, and see references for studies on this issue, esp. 44 n. 80. For more recent studies: Amitai, “Echoes,” 264; Koby Yosef, “Cross-Boundary Hatred: (Changing) Attitudes towards Mongol and ‘Christian’ Mamluks in the Mamluk Sultanate,” in *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Stephan Conermann (Göttingen, 2019), esp. 155, 168–71, 201–3; Mathieu Eychenne, *Liens personnels, clientélisme et réseaux de pouvoir dans le sultanat mamelouk (milieu XIIIe-fin XVe siècle)* (Damascus, 2013), 157–58, 186–87.

²⁹Yosef, “Dawlat al-Atrāk,” esp. 390.

³⁰Eychenne, *Liens personnels*, 186.

³¹*Ibid.*, 160–88.



was considered by Ibn Taghrībirdī a big mistake mainly due to his lack of Turkish.³² Another case in point is Muḥammad al-Ḥalabī, a native of rural Aleppo (d. 855/1451). He managed to attain the position of second *ḥājib* in Aleppo by dint of appreciable exertions and wearing military attire. However, the fact that he “did not know a single word of Turkish,” as Ibn Taghrībirdī noted in his condemnation, and spoke in the peasant dialect of his birthplace, facilitated his downfall.³³

It is no coincidence, then, that we find chief judges and senior shaykhs in the Mamluk Sultanate who were highly skilled in the Turkish language. In fact, amirs inclined to favor the Turkic-speaking ulama, both in their personal relations and in their appointments to teaching and preaching positions.³⁴ In several cases, these ulama hailed from Anatolia or the eastern regions of the Muslim world. Hence, they probably did not learn Turkish on their own. According to Nasser Rabbat and Barbara Flemming, it was during the Circassian period that native Turkish speakers from Anatolia, Iraq, and Azerbaijan came to the Mamluk Sultanate in search of employment and patronage. Rabbat claims that the learning of Turkish by natives was an extremely rare phenomenon in the sultanate.³⁵ However, ulama members occupying high positions in the sultanate who had arrived from the above-mentioned regions can be found in the sources as early as the second half of the thirteenth century and throughout the 1300s. In addition, there were native civilians who learned the Turkish language on their own.

The Shafi‘i qadi of Damascus and *shaykh al-shuyūkh* in Egypt, ‘Alī ibn Ismā‘īl al-Qūnawī al-Tabrīzī (d. 729/1329), was born in Konya in 668/1270 and arrived in Damascus in 693/1294.³⁶ Due to his knowledge of Turkish (along with Persian and Arabic), he gained the esteem of the sultan, who appointed him to prestigious religious positions.³⁷ Similarly, the Hanafi chief qadi Ḥusām al-Dīn Ḥasan al-Ghūrī, who was trained in Baghdad and reached the sultanate in 738/1337–38,

³² Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 15:354; Yosef, “Dawlat al-Atrāk,” 390.

³³ Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 16:6; Yosef, “Dawlat al-Atrāk,” 391.

³⁴ Eychenne, *Liens personnels*, 160–88, esp. 187.

³⁵ Nasser Rabbat, “Representing the Mamluks in Mamluk Historical Writing,” in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt, c. 950–1800*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden, 2000), 69; Barbara Flemming, “Literary Activities in Mamluk Halls and Barracks,” in *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, ed. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon (Jerusalem, 1977), 251–53.

³⁶ Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Umar Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa-al-nihāyah*, ed. ‘Alī Shīrī (Beirut, 1993), 14:169; Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Al-Durar al-kāminah fī a‘yān al-mi‘ah al-thāminah*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Jād al-Ḥaqq (Cairo, 1966), 3:93–97.

³⁷ Al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān*, 3:288–89; Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah*, 14:169; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 3:93.



used to speak in Turkish with Sultan al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr (r. 741–42/1341) for the purpose of gaining an advantage over bureaucrats and judicial rivals.³⁸

Another episode reflects the immediate impact of communication in Turkish with members of the Mamluk elite. During the riots that swept through Lower Egypt in 754/1353, a Muslim mob attacked Christians, destroyed a church, and built a mosque in its place. Chaired by the senior amir, Shaykhū, and the four chief judges, an inquiry on this matter was held in the Cairo citadel. When it appeared as though the tide of the proceedings was turning in favor of the Christians, the Sufi shaykh and Hanafi scholar Akmal al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Bābārtī (d. 786/1384) appealed to amir Shaykhū *in Turkish* and convinced him to back the Muslims on this issue. Al-Bābārtī was born in al-Bābārt in the Erzurum district of eastern Anatolia and was therefore a native Turkish speaker.³⁹

Turkish speakers who arrived at the sultanate during the Circassian period enjoyed close relations with the sultans and amirs. Among them were Iṣḥāq ibn Ismāʿīl al-Qirimī (d. 880/1475) and his nephew Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm (d. 888/1484), who were appointed *qāḍī al-ʿaskar* (chief judge of the army) and to other religious posts.⁴⁰ The sultan reportedly accepted Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm's request to be named *qāḍī al-ʿaskar* after the candidate, who was fluent in Turkish, exchanged “some words with him in” that tongue (*wa-kallamahu baʿḍ kalimāt bi-lughat al-turk*).⁴¹

There are several cases of individual ulama and clergy families who reached Cairo or Damascus from Aleppo and filled senior positions in the bureaucratic, political, or scholarly spheres thanks to their knowledge of Turkish. Due to the geographic proximity between Aleppo and Anatolia (al-Rūm), it is likely that they were native speakers of Turkish. However, we are hard-pressed to clearly determine whether they knew Turkish from childhood or subsequently learned the tongue to advance their careers. ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl al-Qaysārānī (whose *nisbah* alludes to the fact that he may have originated from al-Qaysārīyah in Anatolia) arrived from Aleppo with his two sons—Sharaf al-Dīn Khālid (d. 759/1358) and Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyá (d. 753/1352–53). They developed close relations with top-ranking amirs in Syria and held senior bureaucratic positions in Damascus, like *muwaqqāʿ al-dast* (scribe responsible for responding to petitions), *kātib al-inshāʿ*, *kātib sirr* (confidential secretary to the governor), and *wakīl bayt*

³⁸ These efforts, however, were not always successful; see al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:555–56, 611.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:900–1; Tamer el-Leithy, “Coptic Culture and Conversion in Medieval Cairo, 1293–1524” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton, 2005), 69–70. Akmal al-Dīn is mentioned sometimes by the *nisbah* (geographical attribution) al-Rūmī (al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:864).

⁴⁰ Al-Malaṭī, *Al-Majmaʿ al-mufannan bi-al-muʿjam al-muʿanwan* (Kuwait, 2011), 1:532–35; al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmiʿ*, 2:276.

⁴¹ Al-Malaṭī, *Al-Majmaʿ al-mufannan*, 1:103–5.



al-māl (supervisor of the treasury). Khālīd is said to have spoken Turkish as eloquently as a nightingale sings (*wa-kāna faṣīḥan fī al-lughah al-turkiyah ka-annahu bihā bulbul*).⁴² Another Shafī‘ī qadi from Aleppo, an Arab according to his name and *nisbah*—‘Alī ibn Sālim al-Kinānī (d. 747/1346–47)—managed to intervene in the affairs of the ruling elite by virtue of his Turkish skills.⁴³ The same can be said for Ghāzī ibn Aḥmad Ibn al-Wāsiṭī (d. 1312)—an administrator best known for his polemical treatise against the Jews and Christians.⁴⁴ A Sufi shaykh from the Shaykhūniyah *khānqāh*, he merited admiration, sympathy, and immense popularity among the amirs owing to his superb Turkish.⁴⁵ Another scholar from Aleppo, whom al-Sakhāwī considered “stupid” (*aḥmaq ahwaj*), was nevertheless fluent in Turkish. He formed close bonds with members of the Mamluk elite and obtained senior religious positions at a very early age, such as that of shaykh al-Shaykhūniyah.⁴⁶ It also seems that the grammarian Ibn al-Naḥḥās (d. 698/1299) was appointed professor of Quran exegesis (*tafsīr*) in the madrasah of Sultan Qalāwūn’s new Maṣṣūriyah complex on account of his own knowledge of the Turkish language.⁴⁷

Also pertinent to this discussion are native officials who *evidently* acquired Turkish on their own. For instance, Sulaymān ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 744/1343–44), known by the nickname Ibn Kātib Qarāsunqur, was a senior bureaucrat who learned the Qipchaqi dialect. He served in a number of top jobs, foremost among them *sāhib al-dīwān* (head of the ministry) of Damascus’s governor and vizier.⁴⁸ The deputy of the Hanbali qadi in Damascus (d. 741/1340–41), Burhān al-Dīn

⁴² Al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān*, 2:308–11, 5:550–60; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 5:189; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 10:328; idem., *Al-Manhal*, 5:199. On this family, see also: Eychenne, *Liens personnels*, 169.

⁴³ Al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān*, 3:373; idem., *Al-Wāfi*, 21:127. “He spoke Turkish and had a tremendous ability to intervene in the affairs of the respectable people and to gather with the military and the bureaucracy” (*wa-kāna yataḥaddathu bi-al-turki wa-lahu qudrah ‘azīmah ‘alā mudākhalat al-nās wa-al-ijtimā‘ bi-arbāb al-suyūf wa-arbāb al-aqlām*).

⁴⁴ Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:28: “He knew Turkish and intervened in the affairs of the amirs” (*ya‘rafu bi-al-turki wa-yudākhil al-umarā‘*). For another instance of a Turkish speaker who became a high administrator thanks to his knowledge of this language, see: al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān*, 1:333–40; Eychenne, *Liens Personnels*, 169–70.

⁴⁵ Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw‘ al-lāmi‘*, 2:115–16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8:235–36.

⁴⁷ According to al-Ṣafadī, Amir Sanjar al-Shujā‘ī, who was the supervisor of the Maṣṣūriyah complex building, summoned Ibn al-Naḥḥās and was pleased to reveal that he knew Turkish. Al-Shujā‘ī informed him that the Sultan had decided to appoint him as a *tafsīr* professor at the *qubbaḥ* of the complex and immediately ordered him to enlarge his turban (al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yān*, 4:197).

⁴⁸ Al-Ṣafadī, *Al-Wāfi*, 15:340–42; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 2:335; Rabbat, “Representing,” 69; Eychenne, *Liens Personnels*, 172–73.



Ibrāhīm ibn Aḥmad ibn Hilāl, learned the language from Turkish concubines that he had purchased in the slave market.⁴⁹ Lastly, Ibn Malīḥ al-Muqrī (a Cairo native born in 818/1415) was a Hanafi scholar and Sufi who excelled at reciting from the Quran. The fact that he was proficient in Turkish evidently contributed to his appointment as the Royal Mamluks' Quran teacher in the barracks (*ṭibāq*) of the Cairo Citadel.⁵⁰

The final three cases revolve around ulama and officials who were well integrated into the Mamluk elite and gained enormous power. While all of them adopted external and symbolic Mamluk trappings, the main factor behind their social advancement was mastery of the Turkish language.

Shaykh Burhān al-Dīn Ibn al-Karakī managed to build a relationship with the amir Qāyṭbāy before the latter became sultan. Upon his master's ascension to power, Ibn al-Karakī was appointed *imām* of the sultan's palace. As an expression of his high status, this man changed his riding habits and garb. "At the beginning of his *ustādh's* reign," al-Malaṭī writes, Ibn al-Karakī "rode a she-mule with a camel saddle, then advanced to riding his mule on a horse saddle," before shifting to a horse. Ibn al-Karakī also dressed in the luxurious clothes of the Turks, rather than the vesture of the ulama. However, it was his knowledge of Turkish that endeared him to the ruling elite and paved his path to obtaining countless religious positions, including muezzin, preacher, and shaykh of many respected institutions, despite being (according to al-Malaṭī) a mediocre scholar and having an arrogant-cum-lustful character.⁵¹

Jamāl al-Dīn Ibrāhīm, also known as Jamāl al-Kufāh (d. 745/1344), came from a family of Coptic officials who had converted to Islam. He served as *nāzīr al-dawlah*, *nāzīr al-jaysh*, and *nāzīr al-khāṣṣ*. In so doing, his purview unprecedentedly covered the administration of the state, the military, and the treasury, to the point of becoming "tantamount to the state" (*wa-ṣāra huwa 'ibārat[an] 'an al-dawlah*). Accordingly, Jamāl al-Kufāh received the title *mushīr al-dawlah* (state counsellor) and vizier. The Turkification that this figure went through paved the way for his success. He became popular among the Mamluk elite due to, above all, the fact that he spoke Turkish *fluently and eloquently*. He received an amirate of a hundred, wore the clothes of the Turks and the *kallawtāh*, acquired mamluks, and even used to play polo with the sultan at the hippodrome.⁵²

⁴⁹ Al-Ṣafadī, *A'yān*, 1:45; Eychenne, *Liens personnels*, 171–72.

⁵⁰ Al-Malaṭī, *Al-Majma' al-Mufannan*, 1:394–95.

⁵¹ See his biography in *ibid.*, 1:61–73: on his riding, 62; his knowledge of Turkish, 63; his Turkish costume, 70.

⁵² Al-Ṣafadī, *A'yān*, 1:142–46, esp. 144; *idem.*, *Al-Wāfi*, 6:180; Shams al-Dīn al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn al-Ṣālīḥi wa-awlādihi (Die Chronik Aš-šūḡā'is)*, ed. Barbara Schäfer (Wiesbaden, 1977), 1:275; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 10:11; Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*, 1:82; al-



The most striking example is that of Saʿd al-Dīn Ibrāhīm ibn ʿAbd al-Razzāq, known as Ibn Ghurāb (d. 808/1406), who hailed from a family of Alexandrian Coptic bureaucrats. He acquired the Turkish language at an early stage in his life and career, while serving his first patron—Amir Maḥmūd the Ustādār. In addition, Ibn Ghurāb learned to understand the “mentality” of the Turkish elite and their “insidious” political conduct.⁵³

These qualifications facilitated Ibn Ghurāb’s assimilation into the Mamluk ruling class and his ability to cultivate intimate friendships with the sultans and amirs. Consequently, he attained highly influential positions at a young age under the reign of the first Circassian sultans, Barqūq and his son Faraj. Above all, his case epitomizes social mobility from the *aʿyān* to the *khāṣṣah* classes. Ibn Ghurāb was deeply involved in political intrigues among the Mamluks, and was responsible for laying the groundwork for Barqūq’s second tenure as sultan. At the zenith of this upstart’s power, he simultaneously held the offices of *ustādār*, vizier, *nāẓir al-khāṣṣ*, *nāẓir al-jaysh*, and *kātib al-sirr*. Ibn Ghurāb reached such heights that a number of observers expected him to assume the sultanate itself. Near his death at the age of 30, the official received an amirate of 100 and the honorable position of *rāʾs al-mashūrah*.⁵⁴ Befitting his status, Ibn Ghurāb dressed in the Turks’ customary military attire (*ziyy al-jundī/ziyy al-atrāk*). He even set up an orchestra at the entrance to his house, as was the practice of senior Mamluk amirs. He also wore the Mamluks’ *kallaftāh* turban on his head. Near his death, this figure rode alongside the sultan while equipped with the Mamluk symbols of war, not least a sword and a *qarqal* brigandine.⁵⁵

Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 2:675–76. See also: Rabbat, “Representing,” 69–70; Ulrich Haarmann, “Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage: Mamluks and Their Sons in the Intellectual Life of Fourteenth-Century Egypt and Syria,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33, no.1 (1988): 92; Eychenne, *Liens personnels*, 161–62. On the role of the polo game in Mamluk court culture see: Amitai, “Echoes,” 266–67 and notes 25–28.

⁵³As al-Sakhāwī puts it: “He was knowledgeable in the Turkish language, the cunning, deception, and moral characters of the rulers” (*ʿārifan bi-al-lughah al-turkīyah maʿa al-dahāʾ wa-al-makr wa-al-maʿrifah al-tāmmah bi-akhlāq ahl al-dawlah*). *Al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ*, 1:67. For his Turkish learning: 1:66.

⁵⁴*Rāʾs al-mashūrah* was the head of the supreme council of high-ranking amirs, mainly in the Turkish period. See: David Ayalon, “Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army III,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16, no. 1 (1954): 69.

⁵⁵Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ*, 1:65–67; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*, 13:48–49, 156–57; al-Malaṭī, *Nayl*, 3:88, 130. On the *qarqal* armor see: Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 40–41.



CONCLUSIONS

In his pioneering study on medieval Muslim cities, Ira Lapidus persuasively concludes that “barriers of class stratification” in Mamluk society “were reduced by relative ease of mobility.”⁵⁶ Being a male and a Muslim constituted the key prerequisites for social advancement, followed by lineage and social networks. However, the case studies here reveal that the adoption of Turkish or Mamluk cultural trappings on the part of natives from the *awbāsh*, *al-‘āmmah*, and *al-ā’yān* classes was another significant factor behind social mobility, which could lead to integration with the *khāṣṣah* ruling class.

Embracing Turkish or Mamluk dress codes, riding habits, court culture, and the spoken language of the elite served as both *means* and *manifestations* of the native subjects’ advancement. In other words, the relation between Turkification and social mobility was not always a case of chronological cause and effect. Several cases indicate that it was a vicious circle interaction between the two processes, in which each process strengthened the other. The adoption of Turkish practices bolstered self-identity on the one hand, and indicated one’s social position on the other. At the same time, it encouraged the continuation of social climbing. Such Turkification led to the assimilation and integration of individuals into the ruling elite. Moreover, it enabled them to achieve and maintain effective political and bureaucratic power and ascend the ranks of scholarly society.

It would be speculative to come to any clear-cut conclusions concerning the phenomenon of Turkification based on the unsystematic collection of the twenty or so case studies discussed above. Issues such as the relationship between personal relations and elements of Turkification, changes and developments of the phenomenon during the Mamluk period, or mobility trends toward certain positions deserve further research. However, some findings can be pointed out: all the practices of Turkification discussed in this article were adopted by native subjects throughout the entire Mamluk period, both Turkish and Circassian; intellectual practices were mainly pursued by members of the *ā’yān* educated class; among the fifteen Turkish speakers discussed in the article, it seems that at least half of them learned the rulers’ spoken language, to one degree or another; the initiative required for intellectual efforts such as learning Turkish or improving already existing skills in the language created greater options for social advancement and achievement of political influence; a combination of several elements of Turkification resulted in the accumulation of the greatest political power and influence.

⁵⁶Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 185.



From a broader perspective, another conclusion from this short article is instructive. Considering the medieval Christian West's highly segmented urban fabric, where the ruling nobility was a caste above the rest,⁵⁷ the opportunities for social mobility within the Mamluk Sultanate for those who actively pursued Turkification is further evidence of the major differences in the structure and dynamics between Islamic and European societies.

⁵⁷See: *ibid.*, esp. 4–8; 185–192.

