



*Mongols in Mamluk Eyes. Representing Ethnic Others in
the Medieval Middle East*

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Summary: Mongols in Mamluk Eyes. Representing Ethnic Others in the Medieval Middle East

In the seventh century AH, or the thirteenth century CE, the Islamic world was shaken by the sudden invasion of the Mongols and their subsequent conquest of large parts of Islamic territory. Not only did the local population suffer the shock of many deaths, vast destruction, and extensive plunder, the Muslim world was faced with a spiritual disaster as well: the fall of Baghdad to Hülegü (c. 613-63/1217-65) and his armies and their murder of the Abbasid caliph al-Mustaʿsim (r. 640-56/1242-58) sent shockwaves through the Islamic world. Mongol dynasties would rule parts of the Islamic world for centuries to come. But although Hülegü and his successors of the Ilkhanate made various attempts to expand their realm to the Mediterranean coast, the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and Syria managed to prevent that, regularly waging war against them for decades.

The ruling elite of the Mamluk sultanate (648/1250-922/1517) was formed by men who had come to Egypt as military slaves, so-called mamluks (*mamlūk*, pl. *mamālīk*), and had been taken predominantly from Turkic areas in Central Asia. The establishment of Mamluk rule in Egypt – Syria at that time still being ruled by the Ayyubids, the Mamluks' predecessors – coincided with the Mongol advance into the Middle East. They first defeated the Mongols at the battle of ʿAyn Jālūt (Goliath's Spring), in the Jezreel Valley in the Galilee on 25 Ramaḍān 658/3 September 1260. Yet, while the Ilkhanate remained the primary enemy of the Mamluk sultanate until the peace agreement of 723/1323, the Mamluks developed and maintained friendly diplomatic relations with another Mongol khanate, the Golden Horde, from the early 660s/1260s onwards. They shared an enemy in the Ilkhanate – against whom they were the Mamluks' most important ally – traded, and exchanged diplomatic missions.

This dissertation investigates, analyses and contextualises the representation of the Mongols in Mamluk Syria and Egypt, c. 656-761/1260-1360. There was a basic image of the Mongols as 'violent infidels', but a closer study shows that representations of the Mongols were more elaborate and intricate than that. The formation of images and stereotypes of the Mongols in the Mamluk sultanate took place in complicated and diverse cultural and political contexts, and was therefore far from straightforward and unanimous. There are various reasons for this complexity and diversity. For one, the Mongols were a 'new' people in the Islamic world, arriving suddenly and unexpectedly. Mamluk-era authors could therefore not simply rely on earlier texts to make sense of them, but had to work creatively in combining existing stereotypes of other peoples and ideas on ethnicity with new information. Second, the Mamluk sultanate made for an ethnically complicated

context for such image formation. The Mamluk elite itself was predominantly of Turkish descent – most mamluks being imported from Turkic Central Asia, and Mamluk rule often being referred to as *dawlat al-atrāk* ('the dynasty/state of the Turks') – and the Turks and the Mongols were widely regarded as closely related ethnically: wholesale condemnation of anything Mongol based on ethnic stereotypes would cause problems. Moreover, there were ethnic Mongols present in the upper Mamluk echelons, either because they had been imported as mamluks themselves, or because they had arrived as immigrants. The population over which they ruled, however, including most of the authors who wrote about the Mamluks and the Mongols, were local Syrians and Egyptians. Third, the Mamluk sultanate had different relationships with the Mongols of the Ilkhanate and those of the Golden Horde, respectively. This was further complicated by the Ilkhanid conversion to Islam around the turn of the century – an important part of Mamluk rhetoric against the Ilkhanids had been based on an image of the Mamluks as defenders of Islam and Muslims against the infidel Ilkhanids. Mamluk-era authors thus wrote about Mongols, who formed a key Other, in a complicated social and historical context.

Given these circumstances, the development of ideas on and stereotypes of Mongols in the first century of the Mamluk sultanate is a highly relevant case study into processes of image formation, selfing and othering. This study analyses how these images were developed from existing discourses combined with new information, but also investigates when, where and why they were used. In this way, it brings to light the variations in representations of the Mongols across genres, periods, authors and groups of Mongols, thus showing the agency and creativity of authors, as well as offering an analysis of images' differing functions and effects, in a variety of contexts – political and otherwise.

Chapter 1 explores how Mamluk-era authors made sense of the previously unknown Mongols by incorporating them into existing traditions, both climate- and humoral theory and the biblical division of peoples between the sons of Noah, connecting them to other northern peoples, including the Turks. It also shows how environmental theory was used to explain perceived physical and mental characteristics of the Mongols. This incorporation of the Mongols into existing ideas on northern peoples served as the basis for Mamluk-era images of the Mongols: courageous and savage, with wide chests, broad faces and narrow eyes.

The next two chapters analyse how authors made use of Mongol cultural stuff. Origin stories, an important part in the creation of ethnic identity, were used to malign the Mongols, as I argue in chapter 2. The Mongols' own narrative of Chinggis Khan's ancestress Alan Qo'a and her reported immaculate conception was used to paint Chinggis Khan's male ancestor (or even himself)

as a bastard child – and the Mongols as fools for believing the story of a sun-ray induced pregnancy. Another, non-indigenous, story about Mongol origins was recounted by Ibn al-Dawādārī, who used it to paint an image of the Mongols that emphasizes the same characteristics (courage, strength, savagery) that were derived from the environmental theories as discussed in chapter 1. Moreover, he used the myth to explain contemporary circumstances and concerns, particularly the shared heritage and enmity between the Turks and Mongols.

Arguably the most famous part of Mongol cultural stuff was the Yasa – a supposed legal code, promulgated by Chinggis Khan, about which many questions remain in today's scholarship. Mamluk-era authors made enthusiastic use of the Yasa and its founder in their othering strategies, depicting Chinggis Khan and his Yasa as photonegatives of the prophet Muhammad and the Sharia. In Chapter 3, I argue that authors did so from a very early stage in Mamluk-Ilkhanid relations: rather than from the ninth/fifteenth century onwards, as previous scholarship has asserted, the Sharia and the Yasa were contrasted in the late seventh/thirteenth-century already. The discourse of opposing the Yasa and Islamic rules and mores was then developed in more detail in the eighth/fourteenth century. Chapters 2 and 3 also stress the importance of individual authors' agency, and show how they purposefully used their source material to bring a message across, which at times resulted in different images of the Mongols or their culture.

Differences in the depiction of Mongols not only depended on individual authors, but also on to which group of Mongols they belonged, which is especially visible in the different representations of the hostile Ilkhanids and the friendly Golden Horde, respectively. Chapter 4 investigates how Mamluk-era authors portrayed the first Mongol armies, the later Ilkhanate and Golden Horde. Using a series of chronological case studies, I explore how writers in Egypt and Syria used the works of their predecessors and from thereon further developed images and stereotypes. From their descriptions of these early Mongols through the Mamluk-Ilkhanid war, aspects as courage, violence, infidelity and savagery were taken and expanded upon and joined by images of subterfuge and trickery. The Mongols of the Golden Horde, however, received drastically different press. Their Muslim khans, especially Berke (r. 655-64/1257-66) were praised for their piety, but even in the case of khans who were not Muslim, authors made an effort to connect them to Islam nonetheless, for instance by emphasizing their advancement of Islam and/or Muslims over other religions and their adherents. Depictions of Mongols were thus strongly influenced by political concerns.

The importance of context in the use of images of ethnic Others is similarly evident in the case of Mongols within the Mamluk sultanate. In chapter 5, I use three case studies to investigate

the way in which Mamluk Mongols were represented. The reports around the various groups of Mongol immigrants, *wāfidiyya*, to the sultanate as well as the reign of the Mongol Mamluk sultan Kitbugha (r. 694-6/1294-6) show that their ethnic backgrounds were not necessarily problematic. Problems instead arose due to *jinsiyya* – favouritism based on ethnicity shown by Kitbugha to the Oirat *wafidiyya* of 695/1296 – and the Oirat refusal to convert to Islam, in addition to the factionalism in which some members of the elite considered Kitbugha a usurper to the throne. That tensions regarding Mongol Mamluks should be sought in these issues, rather than in their *jins* (ethnicity) itself, is exemplified by the metalwork produced by Muḥammad ibn al-Zayn, particularly in the basin now known as the Baptistère de Saint Louis. This work – which I consider to have been made for a Mamluk audience rather than a European one, as has been argued in the past – depicts the military and courtly elite of the Mamluk sultanate: the *khāṣṣakiyya*. Among them are ethnic Mongols, recognizable by their faces that follow the physical descriptions of Mongols as found in the ethnographic tradition discussed in chapter 1.

This study thus reveals the development of representations of Mongols by authors in the Mamluk sultanate, thereby contributing to the developing field of research into ethnicity in the medieval Middle East, showing how contemporary scholars were actively involved in processes of ethnic identification, categorisation and othering. Through their intellectual efforts, which included the gathering of new information, (de)selection and use of existing sources, these scholars developed a discourse on the Mongols that generally tied in with the concerns and programme of the Mamluk military elite. That meant that different images were created for different groups of Mongols, in which Islam played the role of an important cultural marker. Yet, although there was a certain discursive consistency to the way the Mongols were represented in the Mamluk sultanate, there was also ample variation: across genres, between authors, and with regard to the latter's aim. The images of the Mongols were thus actively constructed and used for a variety of purposes in response to, and in interaction with, the sultanate's complex ethnic and political contexts.