AnIsl 58 (2024), p. 3-10

Jo Van Steenbergn

Introduction

## Dernières publications

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 9782724710885 | *Musiciens, fêtes et piété populaire* | Christophe Vendries |
| 9782724710540 | *Catalogue général du Musée copte* | Dominique Bénazeth |
| 9782724711233 | *Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales 40* | Emmanuel Pisani (éd.) |
| 9782724711424 | *Le temple de Dendara XV* | Sylvie Cauville, Gaël Pollin, Oussama Bassiouni, Youssreya Hamed |
| 9782724711417 | *Le temple de Dendara XIV* | Sylvie Cauville, Gaël Pollin, Oussama Bassiouni |
| 9782724711073 | *Annales islamologiques 59* | |
| 9782724711097 | *La croisade* | Abbès Zouache |
| 9782724710977 | *???? ??? ???????* | Guillemette Andreu-Lanoë, Dominique Valbelle |

© Institut français d'archéologie orientale - Le Caire

JO VAN STEENBERGEN[*]

# Introduction

## History Writing, Mamlukisation and Social Memory
## in Late Medieval Egypt

*I*N NOVEMBER 2021 the Mamlukisation of the Mamluk Sultanate-II project (MMS-II, European Research Council "Consolidator Grant" project, 2017–2021) organized its closing conference in Cairo, Egypt. This journal issue brings together a selection of papers presented at this conference. They all question in different ways the complex contextual, textual, and semiotic layers which connect texts of history from late medieval Egypt to the social, cultural and above all political environments of their production, reception, and circulation. This relates to the central research question that MMS-II pursued: how were political order and historical truth jointly constructed in the late medieval Middle East, especially by 15th-century scholars historians and their Arabic texts of history?

The history of 15th-century Egypt, at the time of the "Mamluk" Sultanate of Cairo, is traditionally considered a period of socio-economic and political decline following 13th- and 14th-century successes. In recent research, however, this 15th-century history has been revalued as a highly creative era of cosmopolitan transformation, of local and regional empowerment, and of renewed state formation. In the MMS-II project "The Mamlukisation of the Mamluk Sultanate-II: Historiography, Political Order and State Formation in Fifteenth-Century Egypt and Syria" this revaluation has been captured in the notion of "Mamlukisation". This neologism refers to MMS-II's central hypothesis that newly framed social memories of a glorious past of Muslim championship and *mamlūk* leadership were part and parcel of these processes of transformation, empowerment, and state formation, as were contemporary laments that things no longer are what they used to be. Studying the production

* Jo Van Steenbergen, UGent, jo.vansteenbergen@ugent.be

of these social memories in contemporary texts, MMS-II aimed to contribute to ongoing new appreciations of the rich and eclectic fabric of late medieval and early modern Islamic imaginations of normative political order and to shed new light on the interaction between those imaginations and some of the major narrative sources for medieval Islamic history. MMS-II asked what happens to current understandings if we consider these texts not merely as sources and observers of Mamlukisation, but also as historical actors who helped to make this and related transformations come about.

These major narrative sources for medieval Islamic history from 15th-century Syria and Egypt were the product of practices of Arabic history writing that experienced substantial changes from the later 12th century onwards. At that time, Egypt and Cairo were set on a new trajectory that made them acquire an increasing centrality in regional and trans-regional configurations of power, culture, and commerce. Capturing the memories of these profound social, cultural, and economic changes, local and regional practices of history writing followed suit. About a century ago, the French Orientalist Edgard Blochet (1870–1937) summarily described this transformation as follows: "à l'époque des sultans mamlouks, en Égypte, tout le monde fut plus ou moins atteint de la manie d'écrire des histoires, de grosses histoires principalement, les plus volumineuses que l'on pouvait (At the time of the Mamluk sultans, everyone in Egypt was more or less marked by the urge to write texts of history, grand texts of history in particular, as voluminous as possible)".[1] As far as we currently know, between the 13th and early 16th century more Arabic historiographical texts were written in the cosmopolitan metropolis of Cairo (and in the strongly interconnected urban centers of Syria and the Hejaz) than ever before or after in premodern Islamic history. Especially the early to mid-15th century stands out as a period of intense and widespread historiographical production.[2] Also the many qualitative changes that redefined practices of history writing throughout these centuries have been suggested to be "culminating in the Mamlūk 'imperial bureaucratic chronicle'" of that early to mid-15th century.[3] More precisely, the very different sociocultural contexts that had marked history writing in the 13th and early 14th century—especially panegyrist court membership in Cairo and traditionist/traditionalist scholarship in Damascus—became increasingly intertwined from the later 14th century onwards. Specialists of ḥadīṯ, their traditionalist epistemology, and their traditionist practices even began monopolizing historiographical production in Cairo after the turn of the century.[4] However, in the wider context of radically changing cultural practices, identified by Konrad Hirschler as an increased use of the written word in cultural activities and an increased participation of non-scholarly groups,[5] historiography was but one, and by no means the most prominent one, of many textual practices, from the transmission of ḥadīṯ to the belles lettres of adab and the story telling of sīra.[6] At the same time, the growing

1. Blochet 1916, p. 365; Van Steenbergen 2021, p. 2.
2. Van Steenbergen 2021, pp. 3–5.
3. Little (1998, p. 413), referring to Khalidi (1994, p. 183).
4. Van Steenbergen 2021, pp. 5–7.
5. Hirschler 2012, p. 197.
6. Van Steenbergen 2021, p. 9.

body of history texts integrated many aspects of those other practices, even when not just traditionalist scholarship but also a particular selection of texts—from the *Kāmil fī l-Tārīkh* by Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233) and the *Mirʾāt al-Zamān* by Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1258) to the *Tārīkh al-Duwal wa-l-Mulūk* by Ibn al-Furāt (d. 1405)—increasingly led the way, in Damascus and eventually also in Cairo.[7]

Most relevant research in the past decades has been focused on demonstrating that this integration of other genres as well as the expansion and diversification of genre boundaries have been a defining characteristic of Arabic history writing.[8] In recent years, the study of late medieval Arabic historiography has made several turns away from more traditional philological and positivist concerns for this integration of genres and for related questions of originality, authenticity and veracity. Many have taken up various calls to action to finally start considering these texts of history—as Sami Massoud still felt compelled to repeat in the mid-2000s— "more than simple repositories of facts that help modern-day historians in their attempt to reconstruct the past: they also need to be approached as literary constructs that reflect the social configuration of the environment in which they were written and "the cultural norms and conceptual assumptions" that played a role in their production".[9] Historiographical practices and the constructed-ness of texts of history as well as the social, intellectual and practical agencies of historians have indeed been at the forefront of several research agendas and publications since the mid-2000s. This includes especially scholarship that studies historians' construction of their texts as acts that were not only intellectually and culturally but also socially and therefore historically meaningful, and that tries to understand the complex whole of social and intellectual strategies that not only made texts of history, but also contributed to the making of history itself, or at least to the making of its individual or even collective imaginations, and thus of its social memory.[10]

As already suggested above, this focus on the performative nexus between authorial agencies and sociocultural strategies has been of central importance for MMS-II's study of early to mid-15th century Arabic texts of history. These were produced by two different but highly interconnected and politically engaged generations of Egyptian, Syrian, and Meccan scholars, administrators, and courtiers, and they were mediated by their rather different experiences of, respectively, the eventful turn of the 14th century and the far more stable decades of the mid-15th century. Many of these multi-volume texts had, and continue to have, an enormous impact on the historical knowledge of their authors' own time and space as well as of preceding

---

7. For more details on these many changes, see Van Steenbergen (2021, pp. 10–15). For this canonization of a particular set of history texts, see especially: Guo 1998, pp. 82–93; Bora 2012, pp. 135–139; Massoud 2007, pp. 191–193, where he considers Ibn Ḥijjī (d. 816/1413), Ibn Duqmāq (d. 809/1407), Ibn al-Furāt, al-Maqrīzī and al-ʿAynī (d. 855/1451) "the five 'classical' authors" who left "the five most original sources" for the history of the turn of the 14th century.

8. See further details and references in Van Steenbergen (2021, pp. 10–15).

9. Massoud 2007, pp. 195–196; quoting Shoshan (2004, p. ix), but also paraphrasing Humphreys (1991, p. 135), also noted in Guo (1997, p. 27).

10. See further details and references in Van Steenbergen (2021, pp. 15–19).

times or other regions and localities, and they have been defining the historical writing of later generations of historians. However, this important body of 15th century Arabic historiographical texts by the likes of Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī (1365–1442), Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-ʿAynī (1361–1451) and Aḥmad b. ʿAlī Ibn Ḥaǧar al-ʿAsqalānī (1372–1449) and by their younger colleagues such as Ǧamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf Ibn Taġrībirdī (1411–1470) and Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqāʿī (1406–1480), has so far only partially and haphazardly been identified and studied, and hardly ever from the critical social and literary perspectives of authorial agencies and sociocultural strategies. Remarkably, despite the size and import of this corpus, other, especially earlier, generations of Syrian and Egyptian historians have so far featured most prominently at the afore-mentioned forefront of critical research agendas.[11]

In line with its critical research agenda, MMS-II approached this important corpus of Arabic historiographical texts from different angles that ranged especially from surveying its current material existence in editions and manuscript collections across the world to studying specific authors whose textual legacies make up a significant component of this corpus.[12] MMS-II's closing conference sought to situate this specific research again within its wider historical and historiographical contexts, of 13th- and 14th-century socio-political successes and 15th-century radical transformations as well as of quantitative and qualitative changes in the writing of history and critical turns in their study. Conference papers tackled some of the many dimensions of the textual construction of social memories in these wider historical and historiographical contexts. More specifically, these papers and their discussion were informed by one or more of three sets of questions that had also guided a central component in MMS II's research[13]:

– what are the relevant socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts of a text or a textual corpus, and what can be said about an author's positioning within these contexts?
– how are a text and its narratives organized and structured and what do inter- and para-textual relations reveal?
– what textual themes, didactic purposes and layers of meaning are being communicated in a text, or in a set of texts?

These three themes of the contextual, textual, and meaningful construction of Arabic historiography, and of that historiography's simultaneous construction of meanings, texts, and contexts, in late medieval Egypt also make for the framework of inquiry within which the

---

11. For earlier generations, see especially Hirschler (2006), Bora (2019); but see also the critical assessment of the value of Bora's archival turn in Liebrenz (2022); for the early 10th/16th century, see now also Kollatz (2022). As always, the exception for the early to mid-9th/mid-15th century is al-Maqrīzī, whose scholarship has been extensively and deeply studied, most recently in Rabbat (2023), and by Bauden in his Maqriziana series of articles and chapters as well as in the Bibliotheca Maqriziana (Brill, Leiden) series of critical text editions. For further details and references for the early to mid-9th/15th century, see Van Steenbergen et al (2020, pp. 40–45).
12. See Van Steenbergen et al 2020, pp. 45–55; for some results, see the following websites: https://www.mmsii.ugent.be/researchoutput/, https://ihodp.ugent.be/bah/
13. See Van Steenbergen et al 2020, pp. 47–52.

nine contributions to this special issue operate. Having been selected for publication from the papers that were presented at MMS-II's closing conference, together these nine articles present a variety of case studies that help to obtain further insights both into different dimensions of that process of historiographical construction and into some of the more recent critical turns in the study of those different dimensions.

One of the more striking dimensions into which these case studies offer new insights undoubtedly concerns the diversity of social and cultural contexts affected by and/or affecting texts of history. These range here from Coptic milieus, urban neighborhoods and families, the royal courts of Cairo, Tabriz and Delhi, and Egypt's tribal communities to the great Fatimid crisis of the mid-11th century, lethal iterations of plague in the 15th century, and all kinds of other momentous occasions in Egypt's urban and rural histories. Many contributions furthermore demonstrate that at each of these occasions, historiography and social memory more in general offered a specific type of strategic tools for groups or individuals to make claims that were always somehow highly political and involving relationships of power. This political dimension helps Perinne Pilette to understand much better changes in Coptic historiography not just as part of the remarkable transformation of Coptic-Arabic literary production between the 12th and 14th centuries, but also as representative of deep social changes in Egypt's Coptic community. Matthew Barber on the one hand, and Yossef Rapoport and Lahcen Daaif on the other, present very specific but highly complementary examples of how in the early 15th century the historian al-Maqrīzī staked his claim to a politically relevant position of expertise, authority, and acumen. They show how al-Maqrīzī did this by very meaningfully and strategically constructing texts about, respectively, the socio-economic crisis of 806/1403–1404 and Egypt's history of tribal communities and rural control. Clément Onimus and Georg Leube similarly identify these types of meaningful and even strategic textual construction and claiming of authority as an important background for understanding how Ibn Ḥaǧar al-ʿAsqalānī and one of his students, known as Ibn Aǧā (d. 1476), rendered different sets of events and occasions in very different courtly contexts in their very different texts of history. Interestingly, both authors turn out to have pursued this construction not only, as both Onimus and Leube argue, in similarly performative ways, but also in a remarkably parallel and narratively interdependent representation of a particular moment of intense competition involving Ibn Ḥaǧar and some of his colleagues.

Engaging head on with recent critical turns in the study of Arabic historiography and of textual practices more in general, Georg Leube moreover proposes to use the media-theoretical concept of *Aufschreibesysteme* (F. Kittler) to further understandings of that performative nexus between historiographical construction and social practice. In contributions that are less directly concerned with those critical turns, Hoda El Saadi and Omaima Hassan El Mahdi approach this nexus from related but more generic perspectives of "discourses" and interpretations (*tafsīrāt*). El Saadi argues that the study of representations of marital relationships in different types of sources, including different texts of history, demonstrate how radically different representations appeared simultaneously because of their participation in very different and highly ambiguous discursive processes of meaning making that were determined by a diversity of textual as well as

social contexts. In her survey of 15th-century historiographical representations of the causes of plague epidemics, Hassan refers to similarly multivalent sets of plague interpretations as highly informative mediators of the complex nexus between historiographical construction and social practice. These positive appreciations of historiographical ambiguity and of the discursive or interpretive mediation between textual construction and social practice could certainly also be considered a useful analytical background for this special issue's final case study, in which Muhammad Abdul-Rahman reconstructs the different sets of historiographical representations, in Arabic as well as in Persian, of the changing diplomatic relationships between the sultanates of Cairo and Delhi.

These interlocking dimensions of historiography's mediation of diversity and ambiguity, of text and practice, of agency and performance, and of cultural as well as highly political social relations define both these nine case studies and MMS-II's research more in general. They reveal how history writing should always be considered a type of social construction and a social fact. They can also be interestingly juxtaposed to several other recurring themes and issues that have been identified in MMS-II's research as remarkable determinants in the social and cultural worlds of 15th-century historiography. These include Ibn Ḥaǧar's pivotal role as a central broker of relationships that involved many historians, across generations, but also the hegemony of an intellectual environment that was largely determined by the scholarly practices, institutions, and discourses of ḥadīṯ scholarship and traditionalism. Simultaneously, these central issues include the centripetal forces of royal courts, that of Cairo in particular, and their requirements for the construction of both panegyric and order. Within these diverse, indeed rather ambiguous, contexts of both courtly and scholarly circles, historians furthermore always wrote their texts of history as an articulation of their and their audiences' sense of belonging, that is, of their individual and collective identity claims.[14] Historians represented the past in a great variety of ways, but always also to make sense of a present order of things that should meaningfully involve themselves as well as their readers. In his contribution to the current special issue, Yossef Rapoport argues that down the line even very specific texts such as al-Maqrīzī's recycling of a 13th-century history of rural tribesmen in Fatimid and Ayyubid Egypt tend to be driven by very presentist, 15th-century concerns. In this case, Rapoport suggests, al-Maqrīzī intriguingly "mamlukised" the social memory of that rural history. Many of the eight other case studies presented here demonstrate how "mamlukisation" was just one among many strategies that were deployed by historians to mediate similarly interlocking dimensions and to pursue similarly presentist goals and intentions.

---

**14.** For more details on these themes and issues, see Van Steenbergen et al. (2020, pp. 55–61).

# Bibliography

## Secondary Sources

BLOCHET, ABI L-FAZAÏL 1916
E. Blochet, M. b. Abi l-Fazaïl, "Histoire des sultans mamelouks. Texte arabe publié et traduit en français", *Patrologia Orientalis* 12/3–59, 1916, pp. 345–550.

BORA 2012
F. Bora, "A Mamluk Historian's Holograph. Messages from a *Musawwada* of *Taʾrīkh*", *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 3, 2012, pp. 119–153.

BORA 2019
F. Bora, *Writing History in the Medieval Islamic World: The Value of Chronicles as Archives*, London, 2019.

GUO 1997
L. Guo, "Mamluk Historiographic Studies: The State of the Art", *Mamlūk Studies Review* I, 1997, pp. 15–43.

GUO 1998
L. Guo, *Early Mamluk Syrian Historiography: al-Yūnīnī's dhayl mirʾat al-zamān*, vol. I, Leiden, Boston, 1998.

HIRSCHLER 2006
K. Hirschler, *Medieval Arabic Historiography: Authors as Actors*, London, 2006.

HIRSCHLER 2012
K. Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices*, Edinburgh, 2012.

HUMPHREYS 1991
R.S. Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, Princeton, NJ, 1991.

KHALIDI 1994
T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, Cambridge, 1994.

KOLLATZ 2022
A. Kollatz, *A Window to the Past? Tracing Ibn Iyās's Narrative Ways of Worldmaking*, Göttingen, 2022.

LIEBRENZ 2022
B. Liebrenz, "Review of Writing History in the Medieval Islamic World: The Value of Chronicles as Archives. By Fozia Bora", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 142, 1, 2022, pp. 199–202.

LITTLE 1998
D.P. Little, "Historiography of the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk Epochs", in C.F. Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 412–444.

MASSOUD 2007
S.G. Massoud, *The Chronicles and Annalistic Sources of the Early Mamluk Circassian Period*, Leiden, Boston, 2007.

RABBAT 2023
N. Rabbat, *Writing Egypt. Al-Maqrizi and his Historical Project*, Edinburgh, 2023.

SHOSHAN 2004
B. Shoshan, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Ṭabarī's History*, Leiden, Boston, 2004.

VAN STEENBERGEN et al. 2020
J. Van Steenbergen, M. Banister, K.A. Goudie, M. Maslouh, Z. Mochtari de Pierrepont, R. Ben Othmen, "Fifteenth-Century Arabic Historiography: Introducing a New Research Agenda for Authors, Texts and Contexts", *Mamlūk Studies Review* 23, 2020, pp. 33–68.

VAN STEENBERGEN 2021
J. Van Steenbergen, "History Writing, Adab, and Intertextuality in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria: Old and New Readings", in J. Van Steenbergen, M. Termonia (eds.), *New Readings in Arabic Historiography from Late Medieval Egypt and Syria*, Leiden, Boston, 2021, pp. 1–29.