

BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF Doris,  
*Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate:  
 Gifts and Material Culture  
 in the Medieval Islamic World,*

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In Mamluk political culture, gift exchange was a *sine qua non* of foreign policy. Gifts were exchanged even among enemies during warfare. They were an essential component of diplomatic communication like letters and oral speeches. The gift economy was shared by the many diplomatic interlocutors of the Mamluk sultanate. It resonated with artistic life, the trade system, court fashion, and knowledge transfer. Its evolution also reveals subtle political and cultural changes « across the centuries of Mamluk domination ». For the first time, a monograph uncovers this key and yet obscured aspect of Islamic material culture and global diplomacy. *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate* offers a broad picture by covering the entire period of the Mamluk sultanate and its diplomatic relations with Muslims and non-Muslim powers. Doris Behrens-Abouseif treats a wide-range of cases, including Mongols, Byzantines, Venetians, Turkmens and Ethiopians. The author's extensive use of primary written sources brings the Mamluk diplomatic world to life. Pleasant to read and nicely illustrated, this monograph is also suitable for students and non-Arabists.

The book is composed of three parts: (I) "The culture of gifts"; (II) "Gifts in geo-political contexts"; (III) "The gifts".

The first part, divided in two chapters, "The world of the Mamluks" and "Protocol and codes of gift exchange", is a general introduction to medieval diplomatic gift exchange. Behrens-Abouseif shows how the Mamluks took pride in their worldwide connections and involved themselves in long-term diplomatic exchanges when necessary. She reveals that the Mamluk diplomatic practices were in continuity with Roman, Sasanian, Arabic and Byzantine traditions and that Cairo was part of a centuries-old network that integrated European and Islamic courts (p. 12). For instance the *tuḥaf*, rare and precious presents including exotic animals, was a key component of the gift package of the Mamluks, and a "universal" category shared by the Islamic and European cultures of the time (p. 17-18). Behrens-Abouseif demonstrates that gifts were associated with rituals of giving ceremonials, protocols, and court etiquette (p. 13).

Gifts were displayed in front of a selected audience. They expressed royal generosity, a key feature of medieval kingship. The gift-giver knew that the visit of his envoys at a counter-part's court was the ideal moment to advertise himself and impress important people outside the inner circle of his followers. Rulers' self-representations were at stake, hence the protocol of diplomatic gift exchange was not only discussed in chancellery manuals but also in *Mirrors for Princes* (p. 19-20).

Gifts, sometimes sent in huge quantity by the diplomatic partners, were meant to be redistributed. They were not only intended to please the ruler but also the women at court and the elite. In the Chinggisid context, which was half of the Eurasian world in the 1250s-1350s, the *khatun*-s (royal wives and princesses), attended diplomatic ceremonies and were intended to receive their part of the gifts. In the Mamluk case, diplomatic presents were considered the property of the *bayt al-māl*, "the Treasury House" (p. 26). Gifts that were not instantly redistributed to the emirs were kept or sold by the sultans in order to finance a public building or to reciprocate the giver (p. 19, 30).

Gifts demanded interpretation. Their value was subjective and varied according to the statuses of both the sender and the recipient. To master the language of the gifts was essential in a social order that hinged on hierarchy and ranking. At least three types of diplomatic gifts coexisted: presents exchanged between two rulers on an equal basis, tribute, and encrypted message. In Arabic, various terms were used for diplomatic gifts, such as *hadiyya*, *taqdima*, and *in'ām* - but they sometimes had more than one meaning. For instance, *taqdima* signified both 'gift' and 'tribute', while *in'ām* usually designated gifts granted by the sultan to a subordinate. Besides, as Behrens-Abouseif explains, the terminology was not standardized and must be contextualized (p. 22). In cases of tribute, reciprocity operated differently, as the sultan would offer diplomas of investiture, *khil'a* (robes of honour), horses, war equipment and individual gifts for the envoys (p. 23). To interpret gifts properly was thus crucial as the gift packages always mirrored the balance of power between the diplomatic partners (p. 24-26). Rulers also treated the envoys according to the same balance of power (p. 13-16). The sultan offered envoys hospitality according to the rank of their ruler and the content of the letters which they carried. Sometimes, this translated into lodging, servants, food, horses, presents, cash, and entertainment; and at other times, it resulted in mocking, beating, and ill-treatment, or execution. The author notes that the Mamluks' custom was to

reciprocate gifts along with their own envoys—who held the tricky responsibility for delivering them in good condition (p. 31). The secretaries of the *diwān* registered the received gifts and the reciprocated Mamluk presents according to an age-old administrative pattern: a list described the items and their monetary value (from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands of dinars)—a common practice in other Islamic and European courts (p. 20-22, 26-27).

Gifts also had a symbolic value. Not only were exotic animals and *tuhaf* highly appreciated, but also recycled items that had prestigious owners or that were used during wars; consecrated objects which had acquired a special value from being sent to *hajj* and holy places; and personal cloth or weapons that the giver had worn (p. 31). Rulers could ask for something special and often gift-giving concealed odd bargains: for instance, in the 1320s Khan Uzbek of the Golden Horde asked Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad to provide him with religious books in exchange for the gorgeous female slaves and young mamluks that the Sultan demanded (p. 32).

In part two, the author examines the foreign relations of the Mamluks and the role played by gift exchange in these relations. The subjectivity of the Mamluk accounts and the incompleteness of their records reveal how the Mamluks perceived and engaged with their surrounding world. Behrens-Abouseif uncovers the chronological evolution of the gift-giving process based on available sources within four geo-political areas: the Red Sea and Indian Ocean connection (Ch. 3: Yemen, India); Africa (Ch. 4: Ethiopia, Nubia, Maghrib, West Africa – Mali and Borno); the Black Sea, Anatolia, Iran and Central Asia (Ch. 5: the Golden Horde at the Black Sea, the Ilkhanids and the Jalayirids in Iran and Iraq, the Timurids in Iran and Central Asia, the Turkmens – Qara Qoyunlu, Aq Qoyunlu, Dhul-Qadir; the Safavids, the Ottomans); and Europe (Ch. 6: Castile and Aragon, the Cyprus connection, Venice, Florence and France).

In part three, chapter 7, “Tradition and Legacy”, Behrens-Abouseif analyzes the pattern of the Mamluks’ gift selection. She distinguishes old universal components (p. 121-27) and more specific Middle Eastern legacies, especially those of the Fatimids and Ayyubids (p. 127-32). She notes that a strong continuity existed between the Mamluk period and Antiquity in practices and tastes; a slight decrease of the monetary value of the gifts; a drop in the circulation of gemstones between courts; and the centrality of weapons and horse trappings in the Mamluks’ gift package (p. 129). Chapter 8 “Gifts for and from the Mamluks” synthesizes the variety

of gifts that the rulers exchanged: spices, porcelain, mamluk slaves, craftsmen, animals, local products such as balsam and theriac, religious items, and textiles. The author discusses Mamluk artifacts preserved today in major museum collections, pointing out differences and similarities with the descriptions of the gifts in the written sources. She addresses the question of Mamluk artistic identity, showing it had more original and complex standards than scholars have previously understood. The final chapter, entitled “Gifts and Mamluk identity”, highlights the tension between the traditional component of the diplomatic gifts and forms of princely self-representation, which was rarely personalized. It is noteworthy that Mamluk diplomacy was not associated with commercial publicity. The sultans avoided giving objects that were common export goods, even if they were fine Mamluk craft productions (p. 171). Rather, diplomatic gifts were intended to please and impress a ruler’s counter-part, and they were a powerful way of self-representation. A case in point were the ceremonial epigraphic textiles that the Mamluks dispatched everywhere and especially to the Golden Horde (p. 172-73). Behrens-Abouseif concludes the chapter with an examination of the aesthetic tastes of the Mamluk aristocracy. She demonstrates, from the perspective of the Mamluk sources, that urban architecture in Cairo, ceremonial spectacles, and street parades were the greatest expressions of Mamluk art and its visual cultural identity (p. 176-79).

*Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate* is a pioneering book, useful for students and important for the field. It discusses the terminology used in the Mamluk sources for textiles, weaponry, and animals, encouraging historians and Arabists to offer new definitions for a range of terms associated with diplomatic gifts. The book demonstrates the complex yet crucial methodological combination of written and material sources for studying diplomatic practices. However, one can note that the three parts of the monograph show some overlapping and that examples are sometimes used twice. The vast coverage of cases may explain a few factual mistakes (on p. 64 the author mentions Mamluk masons who were sent for the mosque being built in the Golden Horde city of “Saray on the Volga” though it was in fact the Crimean city of Solkhat. The same example is used again and properly rectified on p. 139 as “the masons sent by Qalawun to the Golden Horde to carve Mamluk monumental inscriptions on a Crimean Mosque”) and some inconsistent spelling (“Sassanian”, p. 12; “Sasanian”, p. 20). In some cases, Behrens-Abouseif does not provide sufficient historical analysis of the phenomena she describes, for

instance, on the connections between diplomacy and commerce. Moreover, Behrens-Abouseif's anthropological approach could use some more in-depth analysis (besides brief mentions of the Maussian gift, on p. 17, and the gift-giving concept). Anthropological notions of debt, loan, barter, money, and token could have been used by the author to review the many symbolical functions of diplomatic gifts and the tension it often generated among rulers. Notwithstanding these issues, the value of this work is clear. Behrens-Abouseif has demonstrated that diplomatic gift exchange is a topic in its own right - one which will certainly yield rich and exciting new research.

*Marie Favereau*