

*Mamluk Cairo,
a Crossroads for Embassies
Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*

Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche eds

Leiden Brill 2019

(Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts 161)

[ISBN 9789004384620]

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Between the late 10th and early 16th centuries, for more than half a millennium Egypt's metropolis of Cairo was a central node in the many networks that tied together people, objects and thoughts across the medieval Afro-Eurasian world. These regular flows of men, commodities and words that were meeting in Cairo intensified in particular in the thirteenth century. At that time, unprecedented Mongol campaigning from Inner Asia transformed not only Egypt into a bulwark of Muslim leadership, but also the entire Eurasian landmass into a world that was more intensely connected than ever before. In subsequent centuries, state formation, commerce and religion continued to provide for all kinds of impulses to maintain both these connections and Cairo's centrality. Cairo's Citadel of the Mountain was one of those rare medieval places where one could meet envoys of the rulers of France in Europe, Borno in West-Africa or Malwa in central India and see them impressed by the sultan's Chinese porcelain. Between the worlds of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, all kinds of goods, resources and ideas changed hands and heads on Cairo's many markets and in its numerous religious infrastructures. For three centuries the Syro-Egyptian Sultanate of Cairo provided an occasionally heavily contested framework of local and regional power, order and sovereignty for these Afro-Eurasian exchanges, impressions, meetings and flows. Only in the early sixteenth century, upon the Ottoman conquest of Syria and Egypt in 1516 and 1517, a different, Ottoman framework took precedent, and the priority of Cairo's centrality was definitely lost to the Ottoman sultan's court and metropolis in Constantinople.

In September 2012, Frédéric Bauden and Malika Dekkiche, both at that time related to the university of Liège (Belgium), organized a major conference dedicated to understanding this trans-regional positionality of late medieval Cairo. The conference explored this especially from the perspective of state formation, leadership interaction and political communication, and invited a whole host of different specialists to consider the relationships that connected the court in Cairo to all kinds of other courts and leaderships in Europe, Asia and Africa. Bauden and Dekkiche have

subsequently turned to the daunting task of bringing together many contributions to this conference in a single and coherent volume. For this they employed the double thematic rubric of ‘Mamluk’ diplomatics – the study of documents of political communication involving the sultan’s court in Cairo – and ‘Mamluk’ diplomacy, or diplomatic history —the study of practices and discourses of political communication and exchange at and with the sultan’s court in Cairo. The result is this gigantic volume, entitled *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies. Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*. True to this title the volume demonstrates in impressive and rich detail how the sultan’s court in Cairo was actively related, through highly formalized personal and written negotiations of mutual interests, to a world that stretched from China through Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pontic-Caspian Steppe to Northwestern Europe. It also shows how current understandings of the making, changing and results of those relationships remain in many cases uneven, for reasons of scant sources, limited scholarship, or both. Last but not least, *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies* presents itself successfully as a solid new touchstone that can reinvigorate these types of studies and enable them to move forward and tackle that unevenness. It takes comprehensive stock of how the wide-ranging field of pre-modern diplomatic history research has considered trans-regional relationships involving the Sultanate’s court in Cairo, identifying the available source material and its multivalent interpretations and demonstrating the variety of mostly descriptive voices with which scholars continue to speak. At the same time, *Mamluk Cairo* invites to bridge this occasionally discordant diversity of sources, interpretations and voices by at least invoking the analytical benefits that may be won from ‘connected history’ approaches as well as from a turn to ‘new diplomatic history’ and its more critical social and cultural concerns.

The entire volume consists of no less than 28 chapters, 26 of which are organized in seven distinct parts. Five parts consist of a combination of survey chapters and case studies of how Cairo was related with five particular politico-geographical spaces that were identified and organised as such distinct entities in Cairo’s chancery practice (Mongol dynasts and their West-Asian successors; Turko-Mongol and Turkmen rulers in West-Asia; Muslim dynasties in North-Africa and on the Iberian Peninsula; monarchs and leaderships in Arabia, India and Africa; kings, lords and communities in the Latin West). The first part takes an entirely Cairo-centric perspective and engages with diplomatic practices and conventions at the Sultanate’s court, and with their meanings. The final, seventh part consists of cases that involve the material dimensions of political communication and circulation. A short preface and two long introductory chapters precede these seven parts. Whereas the preface explains the volume’s making, rationale and structure, the two chapters present in painstaking detail the current state of research on, first, diplomatics (by Bauden) and, secondly, diplomatic history (by Dekkiche). Combined they act as a referential framework for both the volume’s subsequent parts and for the field more in general. A long list of figures and tables illustrate the different chapters and their arguments. A

detailed index (843-881) allows for the volume to be used as a highly beneficial work of reference.

In chapter 1 Frédéric Bauden presents a complete survey of the rather limited and specific extant documents (30 originals and 100 translations; most in Barcelona, Florence and Venice; mostly letters, decrees, safe-conducts and lists of gifts) as well as of the alternative sources (chancery manuals, formularies and letter collections) that are available for the study of diplomatic contacts involving Cairo. He furthermore takes stock of Mamluk diplomatic research, points out the relatively meagre state of its understanding of typologies of documents, their formal features and their genesis and handling, and identifies the work that still needs to be done – and redone – before any genuine manual of Mamluk diplomatics can be made. A most useful appendix with a pioneering ‘survey of documents (originals and/or copies) related to the diplomatic relations by and with the Mamluk Sultanate and preserved in archival repositories’ (66-85) closes this chapter. In the second chapter Malika Dekkiche considers the study of political communication from and with the Sultanate’s court in Cairo within the wider research contexts of diplomatic history and premodern Islamic history. She furthermore surveys scholarship on the contacts with different Afro-Eurasian powers, and draws attention to increased interest in material dimensions of these contacts. Dekkiche demonstrates above all how a traditional diplomatic approach, with its textual focus on authentic documents and a single-minded interest in issues of war and commerce, is opening up to a complex variety of much richer and historiographically more rewarding topics, from claims to legitimacy and sovereignty to a multiplicity of diplomatic actors and occasions.

The three contributions to the volume’s part 1, ‘Diplomatic Conventions’, give insight into this widening understanding of the complexity as well as richness of the relations between historical leaderships. Dekkiche’s chapter stresses that chancery scribes’ creative engaging with formal rules of letter writing to various rulers represented performative acts that imagined the world politically. Reinfandt’s “Strong letters at the Mamluk court” continues this line of argument, demonstrating how also letters between the court in Cairo and its own agents and representatives performed claims to hierarchy, order and sovereignty. Frenkel’s “Embassies and ambassadors in Mamluk Cairo” complements these two chapters with a description of ceremonial receptions and gift giving in diplomatic contexts, as other sets of practices that equally performed the court’s sovereignty, hierarchy, organization and imagination of the world.

Part 2, ‘The Mongols and their successors’, consists of five contributions. Anne Broadbridge looks more closely at envoys from Cairo, concluding that mostly military men of lower status only were sent to Ilkhanid Tabriz and that theirs was a very difficult and onerous job. Marie Favereau’s chapter reconstructs in the fullest of details the realities, strategies and ambitions involved in the first years of exchanges and

alliances between the leaderships of the Sultanate and of the Golden Horde on the Pontic-Caspian steppe. Reuven Amitai considers what may be said about different intentions informing the correspondence between the Sultanate's and the Ilkhanate's leaderships between 1260 and 1301. Hend Gilli-Elewy presents a local perspective on these relationships between Cairo and Tabriz, as seen from the perspective of Baghdad's transforming connections to both in the later 13th and 14th centuries. Patrick Wing finally takes account of a post-Ilkhanid Jalayirid ruler's three very different visits to Syria, and how that informs about the changing nature of claims to sultanic sovereignty in Cairo. Part 3, 'The Timurids, the Turkmens, and the Ottomans', consists of three contributions that all focus on 15th century Turko-Mongol and Turkmen successors of Mongol and post-Mongol rulers in West-Asia. Michele Bernardini retells the story of Timur's (r. 1370-1405) Syrian campaign of conquest, as reported in contemporary Persian sources. Frédéric Bauden reconstructs and interprets a chancery document that was re-used as scrap paper by the Cairo historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442) but began its life in 1415 as a letter from the QaraQoyunlu Turkmen chancery to the sultan in Cairo. In chapter 13 Kristof D'hulster identifies the adjustment of rules of letter-writing to the changing relations between the sultans of Cairo and of Constantinople in the 1460s; echoing Dekkiche and Reinfandt in chapters three and four as well as more in general John Wansbrough's seminal study *Lingua franca in the Mediterranean* (1996), D'hulster considers this adjustment a function of the performative interplay between, on the one hand, the claims to sovereignty, hierarchy and political order that these rules represent and, on the other hand, the shifting balances in the endless negotiation of mutual interests between leaderships.

The three chapters that make up this volume's part 4, 'the Western Islamic lands', include two general introductory appreciations of diplomatic practices and relationships in Nasrid Granada and Hafsid Ifriqiya by Barbara Boloix Gallardo and Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi respectively; both chapters offer more insight into the changing relationships with Cairo between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries in particular, concluding that interaction remained a one way Granada-to-Cairo affair only in the former Nasrid context and changed from inimical to friendly in the latter Hafsid context. An example of this more constructive Hafsid connection is presented in chapter 16 by Lotfi Ben Miled, who tries to reconstruct in some detail Hafsid mediation between the Ottoman sultan and his counterpart in Cairo in the late 1480s and early 1490s. Part 5, 'Arabia, India, and Africa' groups together a diverse set of five chapters. Eric Vallet's "Diplomatic Networks of Rasulid Yemen in Egypt" offers – against a general background of introducing Qalawunid-Rasulid relations – an important and thought-provoking reconsideration of the nature of Rasulid missions to Cairo, as part of more deeply entangled and more permanent networks of local and regional interaction and involving many more actors than just sultans and their agents. John Meloy considers an exchange of letters between Cairo and the Malwa sultanate in India in the mid-15th century related to events that had unfolded in Mecca in the

Arabian Hijaz. In the jointly authored chapter 19, Stephan Conermann and Anna Kollatz survey the relations between the courts of Cairo and of Delhi and Ahmadabad, explaining how the latter two's search for some form of legitimacy from the former should (not) be interpreted. The final two chapters of this part shift the focus to the political landscapes of Africa, where the even sparser than general survival of relevant source material complicates any comprehensive understandings of diplomatic relations. This is the case for the Christian ruler of Ethiopian Abyssinia, introduced in the fullest possible detail by Julien Loiseau, as well as for the Borno sultanate in the North of present-day Nigeria, appearing, as Rémi Dewièrè argues, from a sole surviving letter from 1391 to be fully integrated into the Arabo-Muslim epistolographic and political universe.

Part 6 is composed of five chapters that turn the attention to the regions for which most authentic documentary materials have survived, the Latin West, represented here especially by the mercantile communities of Florence and Venice and the dynastic politics of Portugal and Cyprus. Pierre Moukarzel first presents a generalizing descriptive overview of diplomatic missions and political communication between European powers and the Sultanate. Maria Filomena Lopes de Barros zooms in on the contexts and meanings of the only letter and diplomatic mission from Portugal to Egypt, in 1454; she understands this mission from the Muslim community of Lisbon to the sultan in Cairo especially from the very peculiar perspective of the politics of Catholic kingship on the Iberian Peninsula. Nicholas Coureas surveys the exchanges of envoys and missions between Lusignan rulers of Cyprus and Cairo sultans, from the latter's submission of the former in 1426 onwards and shifting from negotiations over tribute payments to settlements of disputes regarding succession to the Lusignan throne. Gladys Frantz-Murphy uses the identification of a document as a draft commercial decree between Venice and the last sultan of Cairo to demonstrate that such commercial decrees had always been the highly variable outcomes of very context-specific negotiations of commercial stipulations and conditions. In this part's last chapter Alessandro Rizzo offers a new dating and interpretation of three letters from the late 1490s, as informing about particular changes in the commercial relations between Florence and Cairo as well as in leadership arrangements in both political centres. The two chapters in this volume's final part, 'Material Culture', present extant samples of metal pen-boxes (by Ludvik Kalus) and China ware (by Valentina Vezzoli) from, especially, 14th century Egypt. In both cases, these objects appear as physical remains and direct witnesses of practices of letter writing, gift giving and court ceremonial, and thus of late medieval Cairo's centrality as a crossroads for embassies and a meeting place for people, ideas and objects from the Afro-Eurasian world.

These many contributions to *Mamluk Cairo* demonstrate the great richness and diversity both of that late medieval world and of how a wide range of actors in Cairo and elsewhere tried to carve out their own spaces within it. As Dekkiche in the second chapter concluded for both the field in general and this volume in particular,

scholarship deals increasingly with «the role of diplomacy in the process of establishing a state's legitimacy», «recent research also shows a greater plurality of actors involved in diplomacy and diplomatic contacts [...] [as well as] the great multiplicity of occasions that could generate contact between courts», and «non-verbal communication, and the subliminal messages they contained, is now increasingly being studied» (159-160). Obviously not all 28 contributions have been equally successful in making this turn to a new diplomatic history that is open to considerations of multi-causality, interpretive fuzziness and processes of negotiation of multiple interest, instead of more traditional top-down and civilizational explanations. At the same time, certain questions and widespread assumptions certainly also remain open for further debate. These include some of my personal hobbyhorses, such as what shared historical qualification 'Mamluk' actually refers to, or at least what is 'Mamluk' about a long range of different sultans and their courts in the urban center of Cairo that were never identified as such in any of the documents and other sources used in this volume, especially considering the explanation (105, fn. 5) that the term refers here to «all members of the military and civilian elites that served the interests of the sultan [...] [and] is used as opposed to the term of '*mamlūk*' that refers to military slaves» (a subtle negative qualification that does not necessarily return in contributors' use of the term throughout the volume). Another issue for further debate concerns the typical naivety with which many of the volume's authors tend to take for granted historical descriptions and explanations in the many narrative sources of the period, while at the same time adopting increasingly critical attitudes in readings and interpretations of rare surviving documents. Evidently, there is no reason to not also consider the former narrative sources as 'strong' texts, negotiations between genre-specific conventions and shifting socio-cultural realities, and prescriptive as much as descriptive world-making projects that were devised by a plurality of actors. As Bauden and Dekkiche make very clear, however, these are not this volume's main concerns and claims, and perhaps rightly so. It rather represents a first of its kind gathering point to open and further debates, discussions and research along these and many other avenues of the late medieval Sultanate's post-positivist scholarship and, especially, its 'new diplomatic history'. All one can conclude is that *Mamluk Cairo* has certainly been successful at that, and that it will deservedly become the first point of calling for anyone interested in 'Mamluk' diplomacy and diplomatics.