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Turkomans in Syria and Circassian Power

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In this paper, I show the growing role of the Turkomans in Syria under the Mamluk rule and present three important points. Firstly, I briefly discuss the circumstances of their presence and how they were presented by the sources. Then I analyze their nomadic lifestyle in the late middle Ages. Thirdly, I examine why the Turcomans preferred their brothers-in-race, the Ottomans.

Egypt, Syria and Hedjaz were in the same geographical and political region and were all under the rule of the Mamluks from 1258 to 1517. The Turkomans were the predominant force in the 15th century throughout Asia, particularly in Anatolia and northern Syria. Thus, we must consider them and recount briefly how when they went in Syria. I will then analyze the nomadic existence in the 14th and 15th centuries in the entire Muslim world in general and especially in the Mamluk kingdom. Last I will explain the Turkomans' choice between Circassian and Ottoman power.

I. *The Turkomans of Mamluk Syria*

In the late middle Ages many Arabic sources¹ referred to Mamluk Syria. However, in this paper, I concentrate on al-‘Aynī, a Syrian chronicler from the border region of ‘Ayntāb, a small city in the north, who spoke the Turkish language, and had an intimate knowledge of both the central Circassian power and the Turkoman tribes.

The Turkomans comprised nomadic tribes and were differentiated from the Turks by the fact that they lived under kharkāwāt, [tents], bred sheep. They were considered to be thieves and highwaymen who attacked caravans and even villages or towns to gather booty for their livelihood².

The Mamluk sources give many the names of Turkoman tribes such as al-Ajāqiyya, al-Aghājira, al-Būzūqiyya, al-Bayādhiyya, al-Qarāmāniyya, al-Qarāyulūk and al-Mīrakiyya. They also include expressions characterizing the Turkomans, two in particular being Turkumān

1 Al-Sayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, II, p.292 ; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-zāhira*, XIV. ; Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk*, IV, p.563.

2 Hopwood (K.), (1991), pp.179-194.

or Tarākima³ (or Tarākimīn), *Turkumān al-Tā'a*, who were subservient to Mamluk rule and *Turkumān al-'Uṣāḥ*, the rebels.

The manner in which al-'Aynī, presented the Turkomans in his writings is interesting. In the biographies of two Sultans that he dedicated to them — *al-Sayf al-muhannad fī sīrat al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh al-Mahmūdī*⁴ and *al-Rawd al-zāhir fī sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir Ṭāṭar*⁵ —, he relates important and precise information about their origins. He lists the names of 22 Turkomans tribes or clans including “Qanaq, Qaba’ or Qaban, Bāyandār, Uwā or Yu’ā, Salghur or Salur, Afshār or Awshār, Biktilī or Bikdilī, Bakdhar, Bayāt, Yazghar or Yazar, Uymar, Qarā'yillik, Ulqāyillik, Akdar or Yakdar, Urkār or Yurkar, Tūtar, Yandulugh, Tūkar or Dukar, Bujnak, Jūlduz, Habaṭī, Jarqala’ or Jarqalū⁶. But the names in the lists in the two books do not coincide. He details the clans’ genealogies and outlines some of their characteristics. He claims they were descended from the Oghuz⁷ (or Ghuzz) confederation and that each clan [i.e. *batn*] had its own tamgha, probably totem. A lengthy list of these logos, which are like abstract seals, is included, and each tribe, clan or family had its own.

Another list compiled by al-Zāhirī⁸ contains the names of other tribes “from Ghazza to Diyar Bakr known as *tā'ifa*, people: Ibn Qutlubak, Ibn Kabak, Ibn Saqlasīz, Ibn Dulghādir, Ibn Ramadhān, al-Ūzāriyya, Bakdalū, Bāzātiyya, Būzjālūlār, Mar'ashkulār, Arākiyya, Awaj-Ukhlū, Būz-Ukhlū⁹, al-Aynāliyya, al-Kharbandaliyya, al-Kandaliyya, al-Qanjūliyya and all these are divided into numerous groups (*fīraq*)”.

Al-'Aynī gives further cultural information: “The Turkomans who live today in *Bilād al-Rūm* — i.e. Seljuk's Anatolia — and Syria are descendants of those who went with Sultan Alp Arslān and were nomads who lived in *Kharkāwāt* made with wood and felt”¹⁰. The names of the tribes or only clans also appeared in the other sources but some of them are the same.

Al-'Umarī, al-Qalqashandī and Khalīl al-Zāhirī provide interesting informations on the territory of the province of Aleppo and *Zubda* in particular details how the province continued to expand and to include large sections of South Anatolia¹¹. Thus the northern border region was unstable, mobile not sure, but the province became to be of great strategic importance in this later period.

3 Kellner-Heinkele (B.), EI², X, (2002).

4 1966-67, pp.20-21.

5 1962, pp.4-5. He repeats the same number of the turkmān's tribes but he does not give their names.

6 *Al-Sayf al-muhannad, loc.cit.*, I make two remarks about this list : First, I find only 21 names but al-'Aynī gives other names in *al-Rawd al-zāhir, loc.cit.*; then, the problem of giving a foreign word or name like here from Turkish to Arabic, explains easily the two versions given by al-'Aynī for the same name of one tribe. Look at the explanations given by Ibn Taghrībirdī about this problem, *Nujūm*, XI, p.226.

7 Bazin (L.), (1998) ; Altan Çetin, 2009.

8 *Zubda*, p.105.

9 That's probably the Turkish suffix *oghlū* which mean *ibn* in Arabic i.e. son of ; I think that are the names of the little dynastic Emirates of theses regions.

10 *Al-Sayf al-muhannad*, p.26.

11 *Zubda*, pp.50-52.

II. *Nomadism in the Muslim World*

We know that the Turkomans came in the Near East in the mid-11th century when the Seljuk entered Baghdad with Tughrilbeg and became the Sunni protectors of the Abbassid Caliphate. Their forebears had come to Anatolia and become known as the Seljukids of Rum. They founded many principalities after the Battle Manzikert in 1071. Other Turkomans entered in Syria as the Fatimid power and presence began to slowly collapse. A second wave arrived in the 13th century when the Mongol invasion pushed out many different tribes in Asia toward the East and Turkoman tribes settled in Anatolia, Iraq, Armenia and Syria, where they remained to found many emirates.

I now address two phenomena: first, the general nomadic lifestyle throughout the Muslim world, from the mid-11th century and second, if we apply Ibn Khaldun's theory, the situation in the 14th in the western and eastern Muslim areas. The many pages of the *Muqaddima* and the *Kitāb al-'ibar, Book of Examples*, reveal that that nomadism is pivotal to events in the Islamic Mediterranean world.

Ibn Khaldun's theory about the importance of the Bedouins in the Muslim world is undoubtedly correct¹². The power of the Bedouins and Turkomans grew and they became the major actors in the region because they were involved in every Syrian rebellion against the Mamluk Sultanate. The struggle for power was between the urban State and a nomadic people, between two kinds of ways of life. The balance often shifted perhaps because of the extreme mobility of the Turkoman tribes and the instability of the Mamluk state at the end of the 14th century.

When Ibn Khaldun observed events, he linked the Bedouin Arab tribes and the Turkoman tribes who were often allies against the Mamluk State. They had the same way of life¹³ and they fought together in the border region. When they doubted they could win, they fled, then returned and tried again.

Ibn Khaldun observed this nomadic trend first in Maghrib, then in Egypt and Syria. He saw what happened in Maghrib with the Hilal and Sulaym tribes and then noticed the same characteristics when he went to the Near East. Orientalists who specialized in the history of the Maghrib thought that Ibn Khaldun was referring to the mid-11th century and they wrote at length about the Hilalian catastrophe¹⁴. There followed a great division between those who agreed with this theory and those who thought it was wrong. I am convinced that he included

12 Chapoutot-Remadi (M.) et Bouhdiba (A.), 2006.

13 *Muqaddima*, ed. Beyrouth, 1968, pp.114, 123, 125, 135, 215, 259, 486. Ibn Khaldun speaks about the lifestyle of all the nomadic tribes Arabs, Turks, Turkomans... in all this numerous pages. Then, in the VIth volume of the *'Ibar*, he relates the history of the most prominent Arabic tribe of Mamluk Syria, the Al Faql, pp.12-26.

14 Idris (H.R.), (1968). Many others authors like Marçais (G.), Gauthier (E.F.), Poncet (J.), contributed to the polemic.

the 14th century depredations of the Bedouins, the anarchy, the instability and the crisis generated in the Muslim world by nomadism. His important writings on the Turkish peoples in Asia and the Arab tribes in Syria explain the problems of the Mamluk State. Maqrīzī, his most devoted and able disciple¹⁵, then wrote an epistle about the Bedouin tribes of Egypt that included many pages on the crisis.

Robert Irwin, in an article about this same problem, asserted that Ibn Khaldun reduces the troubled Syrian history under the reign of Barqūq, only as the revolt of two amīrs against the Sultan without seeing the tribal rebellion which support these events. I am not sure that he is right in his analyze¹⁶. We must remember that Ibn Khaldun lived always in the circles of the power, at the royal court, so he explains the events from the top.

Nevertheless, I agree that the Syrian authors Ibn Şaşrā¹⁷ and al-Qāḍī Shuhba¹⁸, then the Italian Bertrando de Mignanelli¹⁹ give much more details about the rebellion and the alliance between Bedouin and Turkoman²⁰.

During the period when the Mamluk Sultanate was powerful, in the Bahri period until the death of Muḥammad b. Qalāwūn (741/1340), the Turkomans were relocated to the coastal region of Syria to protect them from the Crusaders. The Turkoman were involved in all the Mamluk wars against the Mongols, the Crusaders and the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia.

Aleppo and its territory was at this time strategically important as the key to Syria which was a buffer state that protected Egypt, the very center of the Mamluk sultanate. The Turkoman settled especially in the North in Aleppo territory and in the Dhū'l Qādirid the Turkoman emirate²¹ which replaced the Armenian kingdom after its conquest by the Mamluks in 1374²², basing their settlement on Mar'ache and Malatiya. This territory or this emirate was created when the Cilician Armenian kingdom disappeared; because, as is commonly known, nature abhors a vacuum, and so the Turkoman Dhū'l Qādirids replaced the Armenians. This small principality was established in the vicinity of Turkomans principalities in southern Asia Minor such as Karamān, Diyar Bakr, Āmid, and the Ottoman.

Thus the balance was disrupted. This, along with the entire Asian situation, was carefully examined by Ibn Khaldun. Indeed even Tamerlane brought with him Turkomans and accelerated the turkization of the Mongols. The question is, who gained and who prevailed at the end? The Asian map was dominated by many Turkoman states which were confederations of nomads. Thus, the Turkoman prevailed in the 15th century, and the reason for this lay in the hands of the nomads.

15 Chapoutot-Remadi (M.), (2008).

16 Irwin (R.), 2003, pp.251-264.

17 Brinner (W.) ed., 1963.

18 Darwich (A.), 1993.

19 Fischel (W.), (1959).

20 *Ibid*, p.257.

21 Veccia Vaglieri (L.), El², II, pp.246-248.

22 Chapoutot-Remadi (M.), (1991).

In the end, the Dhū'l Qādirid principality came under pressure from both Ottomans and Mamluks. At one time considered as protégé by the Ottomans and at another time by the Mamluks, it nevertheless played a major role.

III. The Choice between Circassian and Ottoman

The end of the Seljukids of Rum dynasties toward the mid-14th century and also the end of the Kingdom of Small Armenia (Cilicia) provided a vital opportunity for the Turkoman emirates of southern Asia Minor and northern Syria to expand. Importantly the Syrian Turkomans initially played a role as protectors of the Syrian coast and also as an auxiliary force in the Mamluk army. In the mid-14th century, they gained strength and took a larger role in all the Syrian rebellions of the governors of Aleppo and Damascus. They joined forces with the Bedouin Arabs but played another role in South Anatolia. The outcome remained unclear throughout the 15th century because the Mamluk were sometimes victorious in the confrontations with the different Turkoman emirates²³.

There were some long-term and prominent structural factors such as the weakness of the Mamluk army. It seems paradoxical to speak about weakness, when we know that every Circassian sultan purchased thousands of mamluks, a number never equaled before in the Bahrī period. For example, Barqūq purchased 5000 mamluks, Barsbāy 2000 and Qaytbāy 8000, but these recruits were gathered too quickly. They were not provided with entertainment and the enlistment period was reduced to only 12 or even 8 months, which was not sufficient time for them to be integrated into the Mamluk system. In addition, these recruits created a turbulent and insecure climate not only in Cairo but anywhere in the Mamluk territory and especially Syria.

Another internal factor that arose in the late period was the age of the Sultans. Most came to power as older men: Ṭaṭar was 50 years old, Barsbāy 45 while Jaqmaq and Aynāl were both 70. Nevertheless, the Mamluk state was powerful and sometimes victorious against his traditional enemies like Franks. Barsbāy succeeded in his struggle against Cyprus and he dominated the Red Sea, which was so important for the spice trade and the economic life of the kingdom. He drove out the Western merchants who came to Alexandria and also the French Corsairs.

Before continuing I must emphasize that the Turkoman diaspora was important factor to the occupation of the territory, yet the Turkoman perceived that they were marginalized and in the same time this phenomenon could grow in their mind that they were marginalized. Marcel Bazin is correct in using the term “macrodiasporas”, when referring to the Turks who went from the Altaic mountains in Central Asia to the Mediterranean coast²⁴. The Turkoman

23 For example under the reign of al-Ashraf Barsbāy. Cf. *Zubdat kashf al-mamālik*, p.137.

24 *CEMOTI*, n°30 special number about diasporas ; he distinguishes four criteria for his definition of

occupation of all Anatolia increased in the form of little states that resemble an oil stain. These states progressively united within the political state as the Ottomans. The process was long and often disrupted by crises, anarchy, Tamerlane's eruption into Asia Minor but the slowly state slowly coalesced.

The different Turkish communities within the two Mamluk dynasties shared similar racial attitudes. Egyptian and Syrian sources explained frequently that Mamluk relations between the Khanate of Kipchak (Golden Horde) and the Bahri Mamluk dynasty were based on ethnic affinity — *al-mayl ilā al-jinsiyya* — and then frequently used this term to explain the nature of some of the alliances between the different Mamluk factions. It seems that Qiptchaq and Turkomans felt this affinity²⁵, but when the Circassians came to power with Barqūq, the ethnic change was radical as David Ayalon noted it “Barqūq, who made his fellow Circassians the ruling class in the Mamluk kingdom, brought about one of, if not the greatest racial transformations ever witnessed in that state since its foundation”²⁶. The same sources said that this Sultan hated the Turks and kept them away²⁷. Al-Mu’ayyad Shaykh tried to diversify and to purchase Mamluks Turks but the situation radically changed and it was too late. Perhaps there was a new and growing hostility between Circassian Mamluks and Turkomans, an additional factor of division and trouble.

For the Mamluk, slavery was a symbol of their relationship to the “Mamluk military aristocracy of one generation”. However the Turkomans were free, so they rarely rose to the higher ranks of the emirate in the Mamluk army, but they became a new force in South Asia because all the Tribes are Turkomans and thus they had a true affinity. Nevertheless, there was another side: anarchy, rivalry and a struggle for power between the Turkoman princes.

Maqrīzī spoke about yet another important factor and evoked the contemptuous attitude of the rebels toward the central power: “The Turkomans were a rampart, a wall against the danger; they contributed to the Mamluks rural revenues.... The Sultan could rely on them when the war broke out. Now the injustice and misrule changed the balance of power !”²⁸.

Mamluk expeditions in the northern border region of Syria became almost regular, even yearly from the Middle of the 14th century. However, the Mamluk emirs who led the expeditions were often defeated and sometimes killed. The first import rebellion in the region was that of the Malatyan governor Timurbughā-Minṭāsh al-Afḍalī and his allies the governors of Sivas and al-Bīra, which had been under the reign of Barqūq since 789H/1387. The rebellion spread throughout Syria and Egypt and Barqūq was deposed for a short period.

diaspora, which are significant for the Turkish case.

25 Chapoutot-Remadi (M.), (2000), p.182 *sqq.*

26 Ayalon (D.), 1977, IV.

27 *Sulūk*, III, 2nd part, p.943 ; *Al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, III, p.336 ; *Nujūm*, XII, p.108 ; The racial antagonism was reciprocal. The amīr Altunbughā al-Sultānī fled from the kingdom saying “I don’t want to stay in a land governed by a Circassian ruler”, *Nujūm*, XI, p.229.

28 *Sulūk*, III, 1st part, p.348.

The danger passed only six years later when Mintāsh was killed. Throughout the struggle the Mamluks at times won battles but were finally defeated.

The power of the Mamluk declined and the new Turkoman principalities of northern Syria and southern Anatolia no longer considered the Mamluk as a threat or an important force in the region. The results of the expeditions under the reign of Barqūq when, they became annual, showed and the results showed evidence of weakness. The process had been ongoing for a century and a half but the change began in the mid-14th century which Ibn Khaldun understood very well. In his *'Ibar* and his *Rihla*, he made pertinent comments, even briefs about the Ottoman ascension. However, he could not know that the Ottomans, who were nomads as were their others brothers-in-race, would build a widespread empire. I repeat that the mid-14th century and the 15th century was a period that changed the face of the world; it was the era of the Turkish.

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N.B. The Arabic sources for this period are numerous, so I refer only to the most important ones for this study.

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