'Nomen est omen

David Ayalon, the Mamluk Sultanate, and the Reign of the Turks.[1]

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Abstract:

This essay presents a survey and careful re-reading of some of David Ayalon's work, with a particular focus on his 1990 "Baḥrī Mamluks, Burjī Mamlūks — Inadequate Names for the Two Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultanate". It aims to explore the wider dimensions of Ayalon's discussions and to reflect on the meanings of naming patterns in particular for understandings of this polity's dynamic history. It endeavors to show

how —contrary to common assumptions— even from Ayalon's longstanding work it already transpired how 'the Mamluk Sultanate' was far more complex than its current name suggests. This is also suggested by Ayalon's finding that the name which contemporary sources almost generically used to refer to this polity was that of *Dawlat al-Atrāk*, the Reign of the Turks. This essay ends by suggesting that 'Reign of the Turks' was a complex signifier that cannot simply be exchanged for any other name: it refers to meaningful perceptions and representations of the identity of late medieval Syro-Egyptian political elites, along socially constructed and inclusive rather than simply *mamlūk* or ethnic lines.

1. Introduction

In the middle of the seventh/thirteenth century, at one of the crossroads of pre-modern civilizations, a polity successfully emerged in the Eastern Mediterranean that was to dominate Egypt, Syria and the wider Islamic world until the early tenth/sixteenth century. For a long time now research on its history has taken for granted a particular view on what unites the quarter of a millennium of its existence: throughout this long period manumitted military slaves, or *mamlūk*s, continued to be bound together into one tightly knit social group that systemically monopolized elite status, political authority and power in the regions of Egypt and Syria; and the ranks of this dominant group were continuously replenished by new slaves of —predominantly— Central-Asian stock, excluding in the process all other social groups —including *mamlūk*s' own descendants— from attaining similar status. As a result of this view's prevalence, this polity is indeed defined —in modern historiography and current global usage alike— as the 'Mamluk Sultanate', its ruling elite as 'the Mamluks', and all aspects of its long history and rich culture as being first and foremost 'Mamluk'.[2]

In recent decades, an immense upsurge of interest and research in all things 'Mamluk' has substantially mitigated this picture of a successful Islamic Sultanate of slaves that —due to its long-term slave rule— would have been sociologically exceptional and historically incommensurable. It has become clear by now that what is today still known as Mamluk society, culture and economy were fully integrated into the late medieval world of West-Asia and beyond, and that specific 'Mamluk' realities across time and space —from the mid-7th/13th to the early 10th/16th centuries, from South-East Anatolia to Upper Egypt— were far more complex, diverse and dynamic than sweeping Mamluk

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[2] As this is an exploratory essay rather than an article with new data or their interpretations, references will be limited to what is deemed strictly necessary to support the main ideas developed here.

generalizations can account for. It is above all well-established by now that status, authority and power in late medieval Egypt and Syria were objects of competition among various social groups, which transformed substantially over time, which included former military slaves but also others, and which —in their attempts to achieve, organize or maintain dominance— applied a wide plethora of social strategies that in essence did not differ much from social practices at work elsewhere in the West-Asian world between the 5th/11th and 12th/18th centuries.

What is remarkable, however, is that while gradually coming to terms with these dynamic and complex realities of the Mamluk Sultanate, questions have nevertheless hardly ever been raised about the continued assumption that these realities belong to one historical-chronological entity, connected by some shared essence that justifies the continued use of a 'Mamluk' identifier and that makes them distinct from Ayyubid realities before 648/1250 or from local Ottoman realities after 922/1517.[3] This question of the phenomenon of the Mamluk Sultanate — of the assumption of a direct relationship between late medieval Syro-Egyptian experiences on the one hand and some connecting Mamluk essence on the other— is what this essay wishes to address. More precisely, in more modest ways than such a grand statement might suggest this essay wishes to add its voice to the debate on the perceptions and representations of *The Mamluk Sultanate*, and of the value and validity of such a terminology in particular.[4] It will do so in even more modest ways: by considering and reconsidering the very rich and valuable material that was collected by David Ayalon, amongst others

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[3] This question of what this distinguishing 'Mamluk' essence would be if not *mamlūk* slavery, is not resolved either by Donald Richards' widely quoted remark in this respect —in a remarkably brief but extremely rich chapter that should be considered seminal for the gradual coming to terms with the full complexities of 'Mamluk' social realities— that "throughout this piece I have used *mamlūk* to denote an individual who has that legal and social status and distinguished it from the adjective Mamluk (with a capital 'M' and without italics), which is used to describe the totality of the state, society and culture etc." (Richards, Mamluk amirs and their families 40).

[4] See also Yosef, Dawlat al-Atrāk or dawlat al-Mamālīk?, 387-410.

in one of his later articles, published in 1990, in which he addressed exactly such ontological issues, but explicitly refused to fully consider the outcome of his results: "Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks — Inadequate Names for the Two Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultanate".[5] More precisely, this essay will explore the ramifications —left untouched by Ayalon himself— of the article's outcome that a 'Mamluk' identity was largely alien to contemporary representations of late-medieval Syro-Egyptian experiences. If 'The Mamluk Sultanate' turns out to be another construction of the modern mind, it is relevant to question whether and how these experiences may be connected otherwise.

2. David Ayalon and the Mamluk Sultanate

In the course of many of his extremely rich and multifarious contributions to current understandings of 'Mamluk' history, the late Israeli scholar David Ayalon (1914-1998) undoubtedly remained one of the most fervent supporters of the long-standing 'Mamluk' paradigmatic vision of a late medieval Syro-Egyptian history that was rooted in more than 250 years of slave dominance. As the doyen of contemporary 'Mamluk' studies, Ayalon continued to refer constantly to a 'Mamluk System' of rules, values and norms of behavior, inculcated through military slavery, as the stable backbone for the Sultanate's long history.[6] Occasionally, however, Ayalon also displayed in some of his writings an implicit awareness of the more complex realities that made up the longstanding 'Mamluk' social experience. At those moments one is left with the

[5] Ayalon, Baḥrī Mamluks, Burjī Mamlūks, 3-52.

[6] Among Ayalon's many publications on the Sultanate that were informed by this paradigmatic notion, its nature, impact and limitations have been summed up most explicitly in his: Mamluk Military Aristocracy, 205-210. Ayalon's thinking about the 'Mamluk System' was also summarised in Amitai, The Rise and Fall of the Mamluk Institution 19-32. A full bibliography of Ayalon's work was published in the following obituary: Amitai, David Ayalon, 1914-1998, 1-12.

impression that —without ever being very explicit about it— Ayalon conceived of the 'Mamluk System' as representing primarily a heuristic device and a discursive ideal for contemporary and modern historians alike, in their attempts to understand, represent and gain control over the full scope of late medieval Syro-Egyptian complexities.

Already in his "The Circassians in the Mamlūk Kingdom", published in 1949, Ayalon explained in unequivocal terms how throughout the eighth/fourteenth and ninth/fifteenth centuries a variety of political leaders of *mamlūk* origins continued to "bring over their relatives from their country of origin", with the added practice that "older immigrants frequently obtained high posts as *amīr*s, or at least as *Khāṣṣikiyya*, without being slaves and without undergoing training in the military schools". The reality of this practice and its impact on the structure of Syro-Egyptian politics made Ayalon even claim that "indeed, it would be no exaggeration to call the second half of the Circassian period 'the period of rule by brothers-in-law and relatives.'"[7]

Towards the end of this 1949 article, Ayalon also already mitigated the 'Mamluk System' paradigm from the angle of heredity, explaining how in the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries in particular succession of fathers by their sons "had not altogether been abandoned".[8] The basic idea suggested there of large-scale continuity in institutional practices among political elites between the Ayyubid and (early) Mamluk Sultanates was fully developed in two, much later, publications. In his 1977 "Aspects of the Mamlūk Phenomenon: B. Ayyūbids, Kurds and Turks", Ayalon came to the following conclusion:

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[7] Ayalon, The Circassians in the Mamlūk kingdom 144. In recent years, this issue has been explored further for this and other periods in Van Steenbergen, *Order Out of Chaos* 81-2; Loiseau, *Reconstruire la maison du sultan* i, 198-9; Broadbridge, Sending home for mom and dad 1-18; Yosef, Mamluks and their relatives 55-69.

[8] Ayalon, The Circassians 146.

The previous presentation and discussion prove, in my view, the existence of very strong ties binding the Ayyūbid and the Mamlūk regimes and demonstrate the continuity of these two regimes. As I have already stated elsewhere, one has, first of all, to go back to the Ayyūbids in order to discover the sources of the Mamlūk Sultanate, including the Turkish influences on it. … The model for Sultan Baybars, one of the greatest founders of the Mamlūk state, was his patron al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb. Baybars is stated by his biographer, Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, to have revived the government, the law and the usages of the Ayyūbid ruler. Of equal importance is the evidence of al-Qalqashandī, who wrote the classical book on the Mamlūk Chancellery. He says: "The Ayyūbid reign, which is the origin of the Mamlūk reign".[9]

The same idea of continuity was further developed in the 1981 article "From Ayyubids to Mamluks", but within a much larger and more ambitious historical framework, since Ayalon suggested that "the Zangids, the Ayyūbids, and even the Mamlūks, were to this or that extent, successor states of the Seljuks". This idea, with a specific focus on Ayyubid-'Mamluk' continuities, was then again elaborated in much detail, returning eventually again to the point already made back in 1949 about the obvious continuity in hereditary practices. This point was made even more explicitly, with specific reference to the continuity of dynastic realities in the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries: at that time, both Ayyubid and 'Mamluk' polities —as with quite a few others in the medieval world of Islam— were very similar in being dominated by a powerful combination of dynastic rulers and their families on the one hand, and military elites of predominantly *mamlūk* origins on the other hand. Ayalon explained this as follows:

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[9] Ayalon, Aspects of the Mamluk phenomenon 31-2.

In dealing with the Mamlūk vis-à-vis the Ayyūbid regime, what we call the non-hereditary character of the Mamluk sultanate should be viewed in its right perspective. A considerable number of states had already been established in Islam by Mamlūks *before* [sic] the creation of the Mamlūk Sultanate. It was dynasties springing from those Mamlūks who ruled those states. … Whatever the reason, we witness dynasties of Mamlūks basing their power on a nucleus of a mainly non-hereditary military aristocracy. Among those dynasties, there were very strong and respectable ones, not less respectable than those descending from free-born rulers. One of them was the very respectable dynasty of the Zangids, the patrons of the founders of the Ayyūbid dynasty.

Now there is no indication whatsoever that the Mamlūks, when they came to power, ever dreamt, individually or collectively, of creating a non-hereditary Sultan's office. This, as far as it materialized, came about, at least in the Baḥrī-Qipchaqī period, without any planning. During most of that period the Mamlūk Sultanate was ruled by the Qalāūnid [sic] dynasty, which lasted longer than the Ayyūbids, and if only its uninterrupted rule is considered, almost as long. Only Ibn Taghrībirdī, in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, questions the wisdom of the reigning Sultan in appointing his son as his successor, knowing full well that he would be quickly overthrown.[10]

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[10]. Ayalon, From Ayyubids to Mamluks 55-6. This point was repeated in similar terms in Ayalon's article "Mamlūk Military aristocracy" where he summarised it as follows: "The so-called non-hereditary office of the sultan under the Mamlūks was not a thing which had been planned in any way. It just came about; and it does not apply to the whole of the Mamlūk reign." (p. 209). In recent years, this issue has also been explored further for this and other periods in Van Steenbergen, Is anyone my guardian…? 55-65; Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* Cambridge, 2008; Bauden, The sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad 53-81; Loiseau, *Reconstruire la maison du sultan* i, 200-3; Broadbridge, Sending home for mom 1-18; Van Steenbergen, The amir Yalbughā al-Khāṣṣakī 423-43; Yosef, Ethnic groups, social relationships and dynasty in the Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517); Van Steenbergen, Qalāwūnid discourse 1-28; idem, The Mamluk Sultanate as a military patronage state 189-217.

It is clear from all this that in spite of a continued insistence on understanding late medieval Syro-Egyptian socio-political life through the prism of the 'Mamluk System', Ayalon also always remained somehow aware of —if not struggling with— that life's larger level of complexity. The Sultanate's reality simply displayed far more parallels and continuities with preceding and contemporary social systems in West Asia than a simple focus on two centuries and a half of slave rule might suggest. As he himself noted from an early date onwards, these parallels and continuities consisted not in the least of the prevalence of inclusive social strategies, prioritizing kinship and lineage over slavery —a recurrent tendency that was topped in Ayalon's analyses by the Qalāwūnid dynasty in the 8th/14th century and by "the rule by brothers-in-law and relatives" in the 9th/15th century.

In 1990, Ayalon published yet another article in which he tried to come to terms with this larger complexity of the Sultanate's reality. In "Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks" the analysis focused not so much on social strategies, but rather on related issues of definition, identification and periodization: through which comprehensive units of analysis has the complex historical reality been represented; and how useful or meaningful are they, and are in particular the names used to refer to the two standard periods in 'Mamluk' history? After a survey of "the Islamicist literature" and of "Mamlūk Source Evidence" Ayalon concluded that the ethnic denominations Qipchaq Turks and Circassians —rather than the widely used *mamlūk* corps names Baḥrī and Burjī— are the only meaningful ways to represent the regime's two periods of reign, covering the periods 648-784/1250-1382 and 784-922/1382-1517 respectively. This conclusion represented a clear shift in focus from a purely *mamlūk* to an ethnic category in order to grasp what really meaningfully connected each of these two periods and

transformed them into historically coherent units of analysis. In Ayalon's analysis, such a shift was the only possible solution for the remarkable discrepancy between modern usage of the terms Baḥrī and Burjī, and contemporary Syro-Egyptian historians' obliviousness to those *mamlūk* identities.

> As a matter of principle, I think that the terminology of the contemporary sources should be adopted, unless there are weighty considerations against it. Under no circumstances should it be replaced by a terminology which has little foundation and may be misleading.
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> In our particular case the sources lay particular stress on the ethnic element: first on the transformation from Kurdish Ayyūbids to the Turkish Mamlūks, and then from the Turkish Mamlūks to the Circassian Mamlūks. The decisive contribution of the Baḥriyya Mamlūks to the creation of the new sultanate did not induce these sources to call it after them. The justification for calling the second reign Burjī is infinitely smaller…. This fact is reflected even in the terminology adopted by some of the Islamicists…. So the designations which, in my view, Islamicists should prefer, and which will be the nearest to that of the sources would be: the reign of the Turkish Mamlūks and that of the Circassian Mamlūks (or in an abbreviated form, the reign of the Turks and that of the Circassians). For the first reign Turkish-Qipchaqi may also be considered.[11]

As is also true for Ayalon's somewhat reluctant sensitivity for the greater complexity of the Sultanate's social life, his introduction of new names for late medieval Syro-Egyptian history's periodization, largely inspired by contemporary historiography, seems to have taken root in today's study of the 'Mamluk' Sultanate. A clear illustration

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[11]. Ayalon, Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks 23.

of this surely is the fact that the editorial committee of the *New Cambridge History of Islam* decided for the 'Mamluk' chapter to be duly subtitled "the Turkish Mamluk sultanate (648-784/1250-1382) and the Circassian Mamluk sultanate (784-923/1382-1517)".[12]

3. The Mamluk Sultanate vs. the Reign of the Turks

As announced above, the purpose of this brief survey of the complexities of David Ayalon's thought, however, is not so much to assess the latter, but rather to think further about some of the new directions that were suggested by, but never fully explored in, his research. A fine example of this certainly is the intriguing suggestion to rethink late medieval Syro-Egyptian periodization. A shift in terminology and focus surely may be relevant, but it remains to be demonstrated that the exchange of a *mamlūk* for an ethnic tag makes that same old double periodization of 'Mamluk' history really more meaningful. Apart from the fact that this illustrates how the ethnic majority in the military shifted from Turks to Circassians towards the end of the 8th/14th century (which was in fact caused by factors mainly external to Syro-Egyptian realities), it remains unclear how these ethnic names provide better insight into the many transformations undergone by the Sultanate's social, cultural and economic realities.

More germane to the argument of this essay, however, is the fact that in the same "Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks" article, Ayalon almost inadvertently came to a related outcome about meaningful identifications of the Sultanate in historiography, refusing however to adopt a consequential attitude similar to the one he applied to the two periods' names. In the process of searching for more correct names for these two periods, Ayalon also demonstrated that rather than 'Mamluk Sultanate' it was in fact

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[12]. See Levanoni, The Mamlūks in Egypt and Syria 237-284.

Dawlat al-Atrāk (the Reign of the Turks), or variants thereof, that was the real name preferred by the majority of contemporary Mamluk historians to refer to this polity throughout its long history. In fact, Ayalon had again already suggested this much earlier, in his 1960 contribution to the 25th Congress of Orientalists in Moscow, published in 1963. In that paper, he had made the following observation:

> "Though they belonged to various races, the Mamluks were usually designated by the name *Turk.* This was only natural, because the most common general name which the Muslim sources gave to all the peoples of the Eurasian steppe was *Turk* as well. The name *Turk* as designating Mamluks persisted throughout the Middle Ages. The Mamluk sultanate was called *Dawlat al-Turk* or *Dawlat al-Atrak*, a name which was not changed even when the Kipchaki Turks were superseded by the Circassians. The Mamluk sultans were called *Mulūk al-Turk* up to the very end of the sultanate."[13]

In 1970, this view was re-iterated by Bernard Lewis in his "Egypt and Syria"-contribution to the *Cambridge History of Islam*. In this chapter, Lewis stated that "the state which [the Turkish *mamlūk*s] established is known to scholarship as the Mamluk Sultanate; contemporaries called it *dawlat al-Atrāk*—the empire of the Turks."[14] In his 1990 article, in the context of his search for better names for the two Mamluk periods, Ayalon further reviewed this particular issue in much detail. He searched for such naming patterns in a wide array of narrative sources across time and space, from Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 654/1256), Abū Shāma (d. 665/1267) and Ibn al-ʿAmīd (d. 672/1274) to al-Suyūṭī (d. 910/1505) and Ibn Iyās (d. 930/1524). In doing so, however, he also noticed how "some authors, especially those who lived in the first reign, either forgot

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[13]. Ayalon, The European-Asiatic Steppe 47-8.
[14]. Lewis, Egypt and Syria, i 214.

completely to mention the fact that there had been a change of rule from the Ayyubids to the Mamluks, or alluded to that fact in a rather vague way".[15] One telling example he mentions concerns the well-connected Syrian secretary and biographer of *mamlūk* descent Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363), about whom Ayalon explains that he stated "in the biography of the Ayyūbid Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb… that after him his Turkish Mamlūks became the rulers 'up to this day' (*wa-baqiya al-mulk baʿdahu fī mawālīhi al-atrāk*)".[16] As transpires from references such as this one, the common name 7th/13th- and 8th/14th-century sources almost generically used when they wanted to refer to the rule to which they were subjected was indeed that of *Dawlat al-Turk, Dawlat al-Atrāk, al-Dawla al-Turkiyya*, or other combinations with the term *Turk*. More precisely, out of a total of 72 relevant references recorded by Ayalon for the entire period, 34 were made by authors from this first time span; all —from Ibn al-ʿAmīd's chapter entitled "The beginning of *dawlat al-turk* and their seizure of power in the country of Egypt…" to Ibn Khaldūn's similar chapter entitled "The Account of *al-dawla al-turkiyya* which sustains *al-dawla al-ʿAbbāsiyya* in Egypt and Syria from after Banū Ayyūb and up to this Time…." and Ibn Duqmāq's statement in his *Nuzhat al-Anām* that in the year 650/1252 "the reign of the *turk* began (*wa-fīhā kāna mubtadaʾ mulk al-turk wa-mabdaʾ ʾaḥwālihim*)"— univocally agreed on representing the regime through a *turk*-related lens.[17]

The situation as reconstructed by Ayalon for 9th/15th- and early 10th/16th-century representations is less clear-cut, due to a recurrent focus on a Circassian —as opposed to a pre-784/1382 Turkish— dominance. Nevertheless, in 23 recorded cases, again reference continues to be made to the same *turk*-related lens, including the

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15. Ayalon, Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks 18.
16. Ibid. 19.
17. Ibid. 12, 15, 16.

representation of sultan Barqūq as "the twenty-fifth of the *mulūk al-turk* who ruled Egypt" by Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (d. 851/1448) and similarly as "the twenty-fifth of the *turk* kings and their descendants in Egypt" by Ibn Iyās (d. 930/1524).[18] Unlike Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba, however, the latter author also simultaneously referred to Barqūq as "the first of the Circassian kings in Egypt", illustrating how most 9th/15th-century authors considered the long history of the *dawlat al-atrāk* as including that of the *dawlat al-jarākisa*.[19] In this vein, Ayalon notes the following about Ibn Taghrī Birdī's representation of Barqūq:

> "the twenty-fifth of the *turk* kings in Egypt … and the first of the *jarākisa* kings (*wa-huwa al-sulṭān al-khāmis wal-ʿishrūn min mulūk al-turk … wal-awwal min mulūk al-jarākisa*)." Sultan Faraj, Barquq's son, was "the twenty-sixth of the kings of the *turk* and the second of the *jarākisa* (*al-sādis wal-ʿishrūn min mulūk al-turk wal-thānī min al-jarākisa*)", and so on.[20]

In an overwhelming majority of these sources, and whatever the particular names adopted for any of the Sultanate's periods or reigns, there clearly also emerged from Ayalon's study a picture of an overwhelming contemporary consensus that the most relevant long-term perspective on late medieval Syro-Egyptian history was that of the *Dawlat al-Atrāk* or its variants. As a result, Ayalon already formulated very convincingly the only conclusion that can possibly be drawn from all this:

> "Although the foregoing list of citations is far from complete and could be greatly augmented without difficulty, I think it constitutes quite a representative sample of the terminology relating to the two successive Mamlūk reigns, as used by the sources. … As far as the sources themselves are concerned, the terms current in

[18]. Ibid. 6-17, 18.
[19]. Ibid. 19.
[20]. Ibid. 17.

them, which the reader encounters with great frequency (examples, in addition to those cited above, can be multiplied with great ease) are: *dawlat al-turk, dawlat al-atrāk, al-dawla al-turkiyya, mulūk al-turk, mulūk al-atrāk,* and the like, …. *Dawlat al-turk*, etc., might mean either the entire Mamlūk reign or only the first reign; and *mulūk al-turk*, etc., may refer either to the Mamlūk sultans in general, or only to the sultans of the first reign. *Turk* and *atrāk* (sing *turkī*) might mean Mamlūks of any ethnic group, or only Turkish Mamlūks."[21]

In the end, however, Ayalon refused to proceed along his own conclusions, and to propose to exchange not just Baḥrī and Burjī for Qipchaq-Turkish and Circassian, but also Mamluk for Turk. He stated as a very specific reason for not doing so the ambiguity involved in the use of the term Turk, referring according to him either to the social status of military slavery or to shared ethnic origins, or to both: "The confusing element in the sources' terminology (and this applies not only to the Mamlūk period) is that the terms *turk*, *atrāk*, *turkī* have a double meaning: Turk and Mamlūk."[22] Consequently, Ayalon concluded that "a literal translation of *dawlat al-turk*, or one of its variants, should not be adopted, if only because of the double meaning of the term *turk*. 'The Mamlūk sultanate' seems to me to be the most appropriate name."[23]

4. The Reign of the Turks: discourse, identity and integration

From all the above, the least one could say is that there appears a remarkable inconsistency between Ayalon's revisionist views on the Sultanate's periodization on

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[21]. Ibid. 22-3.
[22]. Ibid. 23.
[23]. Ibid. It should be noted here that Ayalon also saw a potential problem of confusion with current usage of the word "Turk" in European languages, especially "when dealing with the Ottomans and their relations with the Mamlūks" (pp. 23-4).

the one hand, and on the other hand his conservative attitude towards the use of "the Mamluk Sultanate". As mentioned above, Ayalon himself actually already suggested ("As a matter of principle, I think that the terminology of the sources should be adopted ….")[24] that the value of notions used by contemporaries to identify the contexts in which they operated should be acknowledged. Especially when such notions are shared by a majority of contemporaries as varied in time, space and social backgrounds as the historians reviewed by Ayalon were, there should be little doubt about why they should be considered valuable and important: they clearly operated as signs and markers of a dynamic hegemonic discourse, appearing at the crossroads of dominant (and often competing) understandings and perceptions of long-term late medieval Syro-Egyptian social practices. It was in these dynamic, subjective and context-bound ways that such notions remained meaningful across time and space to various social groups, including also to some of the latter's representatives: historians and their audiences. Today, these notions' continued presence in extant contemporary media of communication —such as in chronicles and biographical dictionaries— has therefore also preserved them as tools to try and unearth those meanings and their context-bound subjectivities, and thus continues to make them valuable for today's understanding, perception and representation of those selfsame social practices.[25]

This is especially true for the dominant identification of the long-term nature of late medieval Syro-Egyptian rule with the term *turk* and its variants. There should be no doubt that this is an extremely complex signifier, that meant different things to many different people at many different times. This was discussed in much detail by Ulrich

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[24]. Ayalon, Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks 23.

[25]. On hegemonic discourse, see in particular Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy*; De Vos, Discourse theory163-180, esp. pp. 164-169; a seminal work in this respect is of course Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*. I am grateful to my master students, especially Jan Beke, for enriching discussions and debates on subjectivity, discourse, hegemony, identity, nodal points, (empty) signifiers, and their like, that have inspired some of the ideas presented here.

Haarmann in his "The Arab Image of the Turk".[26] Relevant in this particular context is that Haarmann illustrates how also late medieval Syro-Egyptian religious scholars tried to impose a particular (negative) perception of everything *turk*, through meaningful constructions that made *turk* represent an identity that was the exact opposite of everything their own scholarly identity was meant to stand for. To illustrate this, Haarmann explained how "al-Sakhāwī, for instance, belittled the achievement of his colleague and teacher Ibn Taghrībirdī, who was the son of one of the highest Mamluk emirs of the time, when he asked disparagingly: '[W]hat else can be expected of a Turk?'"[27]

But this was certainly not the only way in which *turk* was made meaningful by and for contemporaries. As Ayalon demonstrated, when counting *turk* rulers —which happened especially in reports of the accession of a new one— contemporary historians made no distinction whatsoever between *mamlūk*s and *mamlūk*s' sons, grandsons, great-grandsons and great-great-grandsons; a fine example of this can be found with Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba (d. 851/1448), whose notice of the start of Barqūq's sultanate in 785/1382 after the long-standing Qalawunid dynasty evoked the following comments from Ayalon:

> "In speaking of Barqūq's accession to the throne Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba says that he was the twenty-fifth of the *mulūk al-turk* who ruled Egypt; the twenty-third of them who ruled Syria as well; and the eighth of those of them who were themselves slaves (*mimman massahu al-riqq*). But he says nothing about his being the founder of the Circassian reign."[28]

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[26]. Haarmann, Ideology and history 175-196.
[27]. Ibid. 181-4 (quote on p. 183).
[28]. Ayalon, Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks 16-7.

In this case, it was the particular link with the term *mulūk*, rulers, rather than any ethnicity or slavery that made *al-turk* a meaningful signifier for Ibn Qāḍī Shuhba. The same is surely also true for many of the other references collected by Ayalon. The connection between *al-turk* and its variants with the noun *mulūk* was found by him with authors as diverse as Ibn al-ʿAmīd (602-672/1205-1274), Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. after 735/1335), al-Mufaḍḍal b. Abī al-Faḍāʾil (d. after 748/1348), Ibn Ḥabīb (710-779/1310-1377), Ibn al-Furāt (735-808/1335-1405), al-Maqrīzī (764-845/1363-1442), Ibn Taghrī Birdī (812-874/1410-1470), Ibn Bahādur al-Muʾminī (835-876/1432-1472), and Ibn Iyās (851-930/1448-1524).[29] Furthermore, this revealing connection between signifiers such as *al-turk* or *al-atrāk* and issues of political power and authority over late medieval Egypt and Syria is similarly alluded to by the appearance of the former in direct combination with the equally suggestive signifier *dawla*, referring to a dynasty, a coherent period of religiously sanctified rule in Muslim history.[30] As seen above, this connection was so overwhelmingly omnipresent that already in the early 1960s even Ayalon himself came to the conclusion that in reality "the Mamluk sultanate was called *Dawlat al-Turk* or *Dawlat al-Atrak*".[31]

In these and related combinations, the term *turk* was then clearly used by contemporary historians to distinguish and identify those performing that rule and domination, no matter whether they shared Qipchaqi, Circassian, Anatolian, Mongol or any other origins, and no matter whether they were *mamlūk*s, their sons, their grandsons, their relatives, or non-*mamlūk*s whatsoever. In the explicit connection with terms denoting hierarchy, authority and power, *al-turk* and *al-atrāk* were used above all in late medieval Syro-Egyptian narrative historiography to mean that specific social group that

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[29]. Ibid. 12-9.
[30]. Ibid. Rosenthal, dawla, *EI*² ii, 177-8.
[31]. Ayalon, The European-Asiatic Steppe 47-8.

shared at least the perception of their political domination, elite status and social distinction in Egypt and Syria since the 7th/13th century. 'The Reign of the Turks' and its variants were meaningful signifiers of the long-term hegemony of that ruling group's particular political discourse, often contested by cultural elites but effective nevertheless.

The construction of 'the Reign of the Turks' as a particular hegemonic discourse was, however, not just a matter of literary and historiographic tastes. It was at the same time also a matter of social perceptions, of the successful construction in social reality of a particular identity that represented, contributed to and derived its meanings from that same 'Reign of the Turks', that same hegemonic discourse. As mentioned above, for Ayalon meanings for the term *turk* were not really to be explained in discursive ways, but rather more from the perspective of ethnic realities first and foremost, with the complicating addition that the ethnic term *turk* and its variants also carried the connotation of referring to a (former) military slave.[32] These realities transpire from many of his examples mentioned above, such as in the case of the doubled references to "the *mulūk al-turk* and their descendants", where *al-turk* clearly refers to those 23 out of 48 Mamluk sultans between 1250 and 1517 who shared a background in Turkish descent and military slavery. They also appear —to name but one other example mentioned by Ayalon— when the Allepine historian Badr al-Dīn Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 779/1377) began his chronicle of the Sultanate's history from the early 1250s up to his own time —tellingly entitled *Durrat al-Aslāk fī Dawlat al-Atrāk* ('The String of Pearls on the Reign of the Turks')— with an equally suggestive statement, translated by

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[32]. Ayalon's ethnic understanding of the term *turk* in this particular context of the Sultanate's political elites has now been further emphasised, to the exclusion of slavery and with a particular focus on the linguistic perspective, by Yosef: idem, Dawlat al-Atrāk or Dawlat al-Mamālīk 390-9. See esp. p. 391: "Membership in the ruling elite was not restricted to *mamlūk*s but rather to the ones who knew Turkish, and the defining characteristic of the ruling elite was not slave origin but rather ethnic origin and language".

Ayalon as "this is a book which comprises [the history of] *dawlat al-atrāk* and their descendants."[33]

In many of these and other instances, however, it can equally be argued that the term *turk* was used to refer to an identity that had much more than just ethnic or even servile origins in common.[34] In his afore-mentioned 1960 contribution to the 25th Congress of Orientalists in Moscow, published in 1963, Ayalon himself had already alluded to such a wider dimension when he stated that "the most common general name which the Muslim sources gave to all the peoples of the Eurasian steppe was *Turk*."[35] *Turk* in this context clearly refers to a vague Eurasian connection, to outsiders' perception of a shared Eurasian steppe identity that might be rendered into English as Turkish-ness. Transferred to the late medieval Syro-Egyptian context, the same signifier *turk* surely evoked in similar but more abstract ways the idea of such a Eurasian connection and the subsequent construction of a shared identity. Again, some of Ayalon's publications proof a very helpful starting point to reconstruct the subtle realities of this identity, from his 1951 "L'esclavage du Mamlouk" and his 1953-4 "Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army", over his 1961 "Notes on the Furûsîyya Exercises and Games in the Mamlûk Sultanate" and his 1968 "The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy", to his 1975 "Names, Titles, and Nisbas of the Mamlûks".[36] They all paint

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[33]. Ayalon, Baḥrī Mamlūks, Burjī Mamlūks 14.

[34]. For inspiring other examples and parallels of this discursive process of the construction of complex elite identities in pre-modern societies, see Buylaert, De Clercq and Dumolyn,Sumptuary legislation, material culture and the semiotics 393-417; Kunt, Ottomans and Safavids 191-205, esp. 197-9 (Speaking of the position and careers of *devshirme* boys and other slaves, Kunt made the following observation: "Taken together these 'new Turks', so to speak, came to represent Ottoman Rome par excellence. … By the mid-sixteenth century the Ottoman military-administrative elite was made up of these new Turkish-speaking Muslim officers who called themselves not Turkish but 'Roman' or 'Ottoman'; it was in this sense that Ottoman writers could comment that the 'Ottomans' took the best qualities of many nations and blended them into a new, superior race…" [p. 199].).

[35]. Ayalon, The European-Asiatic Steppe 47.

[36]. Ayalon, *L'Esclavage du Mamlouk*; idem, Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army; idem, Notes on the Furûsîyya Exercises and Games in the Mamlûk Sultanate; idem, The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy; idem, Names, Titles, and "*Nisbas*" of the Mamlûks.

a picture of a political elite and its military power base that is indeed distinctly Turkish in the many aspects of its public representation, not in the least in the way they are being portrayed in contemporary historiography. Despite the complexity of this elite's composition —consisting of *mamlūk*s and many other social categories, and stemming from Qipchaqi, Circassian, Mongol and many other backgrounds, as Ayalon already acknowledged— it was yet bound together and distinguished from other relevant social groups by this Turkish public representation. This was achieved most importantly via the acquisition of any number of privileges, ranging from specific apparel and issues of horsemanship, over particular types of retinue and symbolic communication, to more strictly cultural issues of personal names and language, all linked one way or another to that abstract but connecting idea of Turkish-ness.[37]

Even the historical trajectory of the construction of this identity in late medieval Egypt and Syria may be reconstructed. It is clear that, as the polity established by the very Turkish entourage of the last Ayyubid ruler of Egypt consolidated itself in the course of the 7th/13th century, the signifier *turk* came to represent an increasingly diverse reality, which —as seen above when discussing Ayalon's somewhat reluctant sensitivity for the greater complexity of Syro-Egyptian social life— displayed many more subtleties than traditionally acknowledged. Hence, *turk* continued to refer to the identity of the changing and increasingly diverse political elites of late medieval Egypt and Syria, an identity that was distinctively Turkish in public appearance and perception, and that was related to and favorably disposed towards the military slaves who continued to enter the Sultanate mainly from the Eurasian steppes. But it was also a discursively constructed identity, which was inclusive rather than exclusive, and which was generated through one or more specific symbolic, *turk*-related, and mostly

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[37] See now also Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks* esp. 146-160 ('L'invention d'une tradition militaire').

malleable features, such as names, language, apparel, martial qualities, and sometimes even lineage. Depending on the circumstances and contexts, any or more of these features could be acquired by, awarded to, or operationalized for anyone who wanted or managed to enter late medieval Syro-Egyptian political elites, whatever his origins. In this perspective, *turk* was also an actively constructed political identity, signified in historiography through combinations with terms such as *mulk* and *dawla*, and conducive in social practice to the distinction and the social integration of the multifarious individuals and groups who monopolized the region's resources from the mid-7th/13th century onwards. It was this process that generated a specific and variable semiotic framework of Turkish-ness, a way of life somehow derived from the Eurasian steppes but particular to and meaningful only for late medieval Syro-Egyptian realities under the 'Reign of the Turks'. For those who managed to enter into that framework at least the perception was created of both their integration into one political elite of *al-turk*, and their distinction from subjects and outsiders, the non-*turk*.

5. Concluding thoughts

This essay has limited itself very consciously to heuristic parameters defined by the wealth of information and ideas provided by the late David Ayalon. In view of the remarkable growth of 'Mamluk' studies in recent decades, this is surely a caveat that makes it very hazardous, if not impossible, to make any conclusive statements from the ideas presented here. That is not, however, the objective of this essay. As made clear from the outset, it rather aims at demonstrating how much work still needs to be done —even on such basic issues as the coherence and identities of the late-medieval Syro-Egyptian Sultanate—, and —most importantly— how this is not just a matter of unearthing new data from the growing amount of available source material. It is also a matter of reflexivity, of continuing to reflect on, to question, to problematize, and to revisit the very parameters and units of analysis with which the field is operating.

In this respect, exploring some of the strengths and weaknesses of Ayalon's pioneering research has turned out to be a most revealing reflexive process, generating insights that have proven more than worthy of further thought, debate and examination. Most importantly, it has transpired that the continued use of *dawlat al-atrāk* as a meaningful signifier across the changing complexities of late medieval Syro-Egyptian space and time can only be accounted for through its flexible and subjective understanding, along the lines of a distinctly constructed elite identity, meaningful and functional in a variety of ways to those who perceived or constructed it. It is only this sort of inclusive understanding of the perceived Turkish identity of the political elites that can accommodate all of the above references, as well as any other —perhaps more surprising— examples of its use, mentioned elsewhere by Ayalon. In his "From Ayyubids to Mamluks", he thus noted how "in speaking about the extinction of the

Fāṭimids, Ibn al-Athīr says *twice* [sic] that the rule passed from them to the *Atrāk*."[38]
He then added somewhat enigmatically that "a contemporary praising Saladin called
his reign *Dawlat al-Turk*, precisely the name of the later Mamlūk Sultanate".[39] A faint
but equally revealing echo of the latter discursive focus on the Turkish-ness —or
perhaps rather political elite-ness— of the Ayyubids may be found at the very end of
his "Aspects of the Mamlūk Phenomenon". There, Ayalon translated a reference from
the *littérateur* and scribe Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Qalqashandī (756-821/1355-1418) in his
early 9th/15th-century manual of court protocol in the following manner: "'The Ayyūbid
reign, which is the origin of the Mamlūk [*sic*] reign" (*al-dawla al-Ayyūbiyya allatī hiya
aṣl al-dawla al-Turkiyya*)".[40] Such a statement by a high-ranking chancery clerk —one
of the guardians of the rulers' self-representation and hegemonic discourse— can only
suggest that the signifier *Dawlat al-Atrāk* was indeed more than just a historiographic
construct: it was an intrinsic part of the perception, self-representation and identity of
the political elites of late medieval Egypt and Syria .

At the same time, this little fragment also exposes painfully clear the impact on our
understanding of any reluctance to translate phrases such as this one as their authors
had meant them. As explained, Ayalon refused to do so for the simple reason that *turk*
is a complex terminology. As demonstrated here, this is hardly an understatement.
Perhaps, however, it is also about time to acknowledge that a growing awareness of the
complexity of late medieval Syro-Egyptian realities deserves also to be reflected in the
way they are being represented today.

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[38]. Ayalon, From Ayyubids to Mamluks 46.
[39]. Ibid.
[40]. Ayalon, Aspects of the Mamlūk phenomenon 32.

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