

State Formation in the Fifteenth Century and the Western Eurasian Canvas: Problems and Opportunities

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1 Whither Eurasian State Formation? Claims, Pitfalls and Opportunities*

The concept, practice, institution and appearance of 'the state' have been hotly debated ever since the emergence of history as a discipline within modern scholarship. Over the past century debates over states and statist systems, and around issues of their emergence and transformation throughout human history, have been substantially molded by the visions of towering figures such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and many others. At the same time, they have taken on many different guises along a wide variety of intellectual trajectories. Indeed, research on states and their formation and transformation, already a vast field, continues to expand rapidly. Approaches and concepts have been legion, bringing in more specific if rarely un-problematic analytical or descriptive forms and types, such as the 'feudal state', the 'patrimonial state', the 'dynastic state', the 'bureaucratic state' or the '(early) modern state'. The scholarly bibliography on these forms and types of state in various disciplines of the social sciences and humanities is obviously colossal. Any attempt to reconstruct these debates in the context of the introduction to this volume on state formation in fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asian history therefore inevitably risks remaining at the most superficial level. Nevertheless, at this point we should probably emphasize two points related to these debates. These issues, outlined in the next paragraphs, offer grounds not just for the relevance of thinking carefully about state formation in any fifteenth-century

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research context. As this volume will also argue, these two points also combine to make a strong case for the importance of pursuing more 'entangled' and connected historical as well as historiographical trajectories to conduct such inquiries.

First of all, for a variety of reasons—some obvious and some less so—the adoption and elaboration of different visions, concepts and types of states and state formations have arguably been largely dominated by Eurocentrist approaches. Indeed, certainly in the Enlightenment and Hegelian traditions which are at the origin of all modern debates on the 'state', Eurocentrism is not just a small embarrassing problem that new generations of scholars have to correct. Since the development of the humanities and social sciences from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards, Eurocentrist categories of analysis and Eurocentrist empirical research programs have been central to all theories on the origins of the 'state'—and indeed of 'modernity' itself. The 'state' is doubtless one of the key conceptual pillars of modernity, along with 'rationality', 'capitalism', 'freedom', 'division of labor' and other such master signifiers. Indeed, descriptions of the past, whether the European idea of the 'past as a foreign country' or the Orientalist imaginary of the 'Other's' history or lack thereof, have always been a way of talking about the present or about unfulfilled futures. In this respect the 'state' and its relationship to 'society' have always represented a central stake in the debate.

This presentist or even teleological and Western bias in the classical sociology of modernity has now almost universally been recognized. In fact, in recent decades there has been a noticeable increase in interest in the development of more specific tools and insights for the study of premodern and non-European polities and for gaining a better understanding of premodern and non-European 'statist' practices, institutions and discourses of power, distinction, integration, redistribution and order. Nevertheless—and this is the second important point for comparative purposes—, understandings of states and state systems tend to move at greatly differing speeds in different fields of historical research, and these fields themselves often employ extremely divergent epistemological and heuristic parameters. As such, our understandings of states and state systems generally continue to lack proper and nuanced awareness of recent research achievements and advances in cognate contexts, whether European or non-European. The concept of 'the state' is widely used in more or less theoretically informed ways across history. However, people working in different regional and chronological fields of specialization hardly ever understand the notion in similar ways, and the complex dynamics of this great divergence are often even less appreciated across such different research traditions. Dominant paradigms within these traditions may be influenced by

various diverging, or even incompatible, forms of social theory. This can complicate valid comparative research, especially when apparently similar categories of analysis—including the very notion of the ‘state’ itself—mean different things in different research traditions. This is particularly true when these different meanings are not explained explicitly, are only used in extremely fuzzy ways, or retain an imported, even exogenous or anachronistic, flavor to them.

This volume wishes to help build bridges between these multivalent conceptions of state formation, making links between different conceptions of how Eurasian practices, institutions and discourses of legitimate violence, resource redistribution, social differentiation, political integration and order have changed over time and across space. We work on the basis of the simple proposition that, despite the available, perhaps even conflicting, macro-narratives, this intellectual process of more ‘entangled’ trans-regional and trans-dynastic writing about history benefits most from starting bottom-up and considering relationships between the specific practices and interpretations of the different socio-cultural formations of the Eurasian zone. Furthermore, we work on the basis of the claim that the particularities and ‘entanglements’ of non-European rulers and elites require much more empirical and interpretive research to shift the balance away from Eurocentrist (or other-centrist) analytical perspectives, and toward more decentered considerations of diverse Eurasian trajectories of state formation. Here we actually encounter another, arguably even more fundamental, caveat that hampers the building of these interpretive bridges in meaningful, stable ways. Within the entire field of late medieval Eurasian political history there are huge differences in how many research traditions have dealt with the rich and often abundant variety of extant source material. Most relevant to consider for this volume and its focus on Western Eurasia is the disparity between the topics that have been studied (and restudied) on the basis of the relatively abundant sources for late medieval and early modern European history and the substantially more modest amount of cases that so far have been the object of any historical analysis for Islamic West-Asian history.¹ This disparity means that macro-analytical

¹ To illustrate this point, there still exist no simple narrative biographies for many, if not most, of the local and regional rulers and sultans of late medieval and early modern West-Asia. Moreover, most existing biographical studies of the last decades continue to be regarded as having a kind of pioneering and referential status, due to the absence of any other serious studies. Fifteenth-century cases in point are Babinger's study of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II, published in 1959, Darrag's study of the Egyptian sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay, published in 1961, Woods' monograph on the Aqquyunlu Turkmen polity, first published in 1976 (and republished in an expanded edition in 1999), Petry's two monographs on the reigns of the Egyptian sultans Qaytbay and Qansawh, published in 1993 and 1994, and Manz' biography of the

approaches in early modern European history have far more solid empirical grounds than those of Islamic West-Asian history. In the past there have been serious attempts to transcend the specificity and peculiarity of European trajectories and develop more universal models. These certainly include Weber's 'Herrschaftslegitimität' and related ideal types, Marx's 'Mode of Production' and the superstructure or later Marxist reformulations and, more recently, Mann's 'power networks' or Bourdieu's '*capital étatique*'. However, these conceptualizations are all marked not just by a desire to integrate non-European experiences in their analyses, but they are also impeded by the fact that any understanding of the latter is derived from a rather limited number of studies.² Thus, the Eurocentrism mentioned above may also be seen as a function, not of some intentional form of orientalism, but of this uneven empirical situation.

2 Whither the Fifteenth Century: Islamic West-Asia's Trajectories of State Formation in Context

This volume aims to promote and enable more balanced and more connected interpretations in current understandings of premodern rulers and elites of fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia.³ This vast space, stretching between the worlds of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean and between those of the Hindukush and the Sahara (see map 1), is considered here as representing a central and interrelated Eurasian political landscape. Furthermore, this West-Asian

central-Asian ruler Temür, published in 1999 (Babinger, *Mehmed der Eroberer*; Darrag, *L'Égypte sous le règne de Barsbay*; Woods, *The Aqquyunlu*; Petry, *Twilight of Majesty*; Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians*; Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*).

- 2 A good example of this point is Bourdieu's "From the King's House to the Reason of State" (originally published in French in 1997)—aiming "to pinpoint the logic of the historical process which governed the crystallization of this historical reality that is the state", and "to construct a *model* of this process". In this work, for non-European history, Bourdieu limited himself to referring to Muzaffar Alam's *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1708–1748* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), to Robert Mantran's *L'Histoire de l'empire ottoman* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), and to Pierre-Etienne Will's "Bureaucratie officielle et bureaucratie réelle. Sur quelques dilemmes de l'administration impériale à l'époque des Qing", *Études chinoises* 8/1 (1989): 69–141, which is extremely limited in comparison to the list of more than thirty books and articles on late medieval and early modern European history.
- 3 For the historiographical background, challenges and relationships of comparative, connected and 'entangled' history, see Duindam, "Rulers and Elites in Global History: Introductory Observations", pp. 7–18; Conermann, "The Mamluk Empire", pp. 22–25 ("Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the study of spaces of interaction"); Werner & Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison".

landscape, itself the object of different research traditions, is considered as in need of far more detailed and ‘entangled’ approaches, especially for the fifteenth century. This introduction therefore does not only wish to make a case for the relevance and importance of our choice to focus on ‘the state’ and on Islamic West-Asia. In addition, we also wish to account here for this volume’s claim that Islamic West-Asian state formation in the fifteenth century represents a coherent subject of study.

In recent decades, interest in the fifteenth century has been gaining momentum in at least some generalizing and globalizing approaches to history writing. A case in point is the impressive volume *‘l’Histoire du monde au xv^e siècle’*, first published in 2009 and directed by Patrick Boucheron, professor of the “Histories of Power in Western Europe, 13th–16th centuries” (*Histoire des pouvoirs en Europe occidentale, XIII^e–XVI^e siècle*) at the Collège de France. Boucheron and his team framed the fifteenth century as moving from a Eurasian to a global scale of integration, “from Tamerlane to Magellan”, and identified the period not just as the “age of the world’s opening up and accomplishment”, but also as “an aggregation of a rich variety of experiments and potentialities”.⁴ Historiographical traditions continue to develop for at least some of these experiments and potentialities albeit in diverse ways. In the Western Eurasian context, this high appreciation of the intrinsic value of studying the fifteenth century is illustrated by the vitality of late medieval and early modern European history writing as well as the relatively intensely studied field of Syro-Egyptian ‘Mamluk’ history.⁵ A similar momentum is arguably picking up in other fields of Western Eurasian history, such as those defined by early Ottoman, Timurid and other fifteenth-century dynasties.⁶

Despite this momentum within particular research traditions, however, most textbooks and general works on West-Asian, Eurasian and world history have not yet followed suit. Even more recent comparative works of (political) history that try to pursue more globalizing diachronic approaches seem to face

4 Boucheron, “Introduction. Les boucles du monde: contours du xv^e siècle”, p. 23 (“Le xv^e siècle, âge d’ouverture et d’accomplissement du monde? Sans doute, mais qui ménage également une somme profuse d’expériences et de devenir possible”; “De Tamerlan à Magellan? Contours du xv^e siècle”).

5 For more or less comprehensive overviews of these fields of political history, see Watts, *The Making of Politics*; Van Steenbergen, Wing, and D’hulster, “The Mamlukization of the Mamluk Sultanate?”.

6 See recent publications such as Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran*; Kastritsis, *An Early Ottoman History*; Asutay-Effenberger and Rehm, *Sultan Mehmet II*; and also, for ‘European’ history beyond traditional notions of the Latin Christian West: Nowakowska, *Remembering the Jagiellonians*.

a lack of good data, or of easy ways into those data and their interpretations. Too often this “age of the world’s opening up and accomplishment” continues to be narrowed down to one or more specific (and specifically remembered) events such as the “fall” of Constantinople in 1453, the end of the “Hundred Years’ War”, the “discovery” of a New World in 1492, or the “re-conquest” of Granada. These events tend to be seen as marking some well-defined moment of new, early modern beginnings, as though starting from a clean slate. In general, such works of history, along with the widely shared historical imaginations that they represent, continue to situate themselves comfortably in the stretched world-historical paradigm of a fourteenth-century collapse of the Mongol Eurasian order, and of post-Mongol transitions to the (apparently) more stable and therefore more interesting appearances of early modern states and empires.⁷ They tend to reduce fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia either to a space in which only the Ottoman imperial formation, with its expanding European presence, really mattered, or to a preparatory stage for the rise of the Islamic world’s so-called ‘Gunpowder Empires’ more in general.⁸ There thus remains a mismatch between these general and generalizing imaginations and the diverse historiographical traditions that have developed around particular fifteenth-century “experiments and potentialities”. In fact, these traditions are increasingly exposing the notion of Asia’s early modern ‘Gunpowder Empires’ as a misnomer, which may offer a useful perspective to understand the Ottoman case, but not those of its early modern peers.⁹ Surely it is time to raise awareness of the many similar *pars-pro-toto* assumptions that continue to reduce appreciations of Islamic West-Asia’s fifteenth-century history to equally unhelpful generalizations.

As Boucheron’s summarizing phrase “from Tamerlane to Magellan” implies, in many ways a central figure in these “experiments and potentialities” was the Central-Asian Turko-Mongol ruler Temür, or Tamerlane in European parlance.¹⁰ Temür passed away after a brief illness in the Central-Asian town of

7 See Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, and the organization along this paradigm of Darwin, *After Tamerlane*. See for instance also Egger’s discussion of fifteenth-century Syro-Egyptian political history, reduced to the simple phrase that “[t]he Circassians dominated Egypt for the next 135 years, until their defeat at the hands of the Ottomans in 1517”. (Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1750*, p. 296).

8 See Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*; Reinhard, *Empires and Encounters*. This point is also made in Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran*, pp. 290–291.

9 Reinhard, *Empires and Encounters*, pp. 28–29.

10 See also Darwin, *After Tamerlane*; and Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories”, pp. 736–740, where he identifies “the reformulation of Eurasian politics in the context of the great

Otrar in February 1405, on his way to attack and conquer Ming China. Temür died in somewhat anticlimactic circumstances, bedridden rather than on horseback, as might have befitted a long life of local, regional and trans-regional Eurasian empowerment. Temür had a remarkable career indeed, characterized by conquest, plunder and fearsome havoc, but also by accommodation, efflorescence and successful state formation. His accomplishments left a defining mark on the diverse social, cultural, economic and political landscapes of Central-, South- and West-Asia and of Eastern Europe, like that of few individuals either before or after. Throughout these regions, from Samarkand in Transoxiana to Herat in Khurasan, from Delhi in northern India to Cairo in Egypt, and from Muscovy in the North to Hormuz in the South, thanks to Temür's politics of power and conquest, balances of power were recalibrated, social groups and communities were reconfigured, connections were reformed, and elites were redefined.¹¹ Many new contingencies, setbacks and opportunities arose from this remarkable, even revolutionary moment of intense Eurasian connectivity at the turn of the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. In complex ways many of these changes fed directly or indirectly into the multiple conflicting, overlapping and complementing power relations that, about a century later, crystallized into the early-modern Eurasian imperial formations of Ottomans, Safavids, Mughals and Uzbeks. How that happened is the story of Turko-Mongol rulers and elites, of Muslim political communities, and of various interrelated trajectories of post-Temür state formation in fifteenth-century Western Eurasia.

enterprise of Amir Timur Gurgan (d. 1405) [...] as the convenient, obviously symbolic, point of departure" He offers here a highly nuanced but yet again typical imagination of the fifteenth century as a mere beginning of (or transition to) the early modern "age of geographical redefinition", of "a heightening of the long-term structural conflict that resulted in relations between settled agricultural societies on the one hand, and nomadic groups [...] on the other", of "changes in political theology", and of "new or intensified forms of hierarchy, domination and separation".

- 11 See Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*. This Timurid factor, and its different Turko-Mongol legacies, rebooted leadership formations from Cairo to Samarkand and from Edirne to Herat, but not in the Maghreb, al-Andalus or Yemen. This is an important reason for not explicitly including these and other complex and fundamentally different Islamic political landscapes within discussions in this volume. The Eurasian steppes between the Black Sea and the Aral sea, dominated since the thirteenth century by the Muslim leaders of the Mongol Golden Horde, represent another very different landscape that is not included here, not least because "the Golden Horde was not able to recover from Timur's onslaught [...] [b]y the fifteenth century, only the steppe remained, and even it was threatened from the east by a cluster of Mongol-Turkic clans from Siberia [...] [and t]he breakup of the Golden Horde coincided with the rise of Muscovy". (Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1750*, pp. 384–385).

The European 'Far West'¹² was not at all similarly affected by the changes that were generated by Temür's Eurasian campaigns. Western Europe very much followed its own fifteenth-century dynamics of local and regional political change and transformation. In many ways these developments were as distinct within the wider Eurasian world as their cultural umbrella of Latin Christianity was from the Turko-Mongol Muslim identities that dominated politics in West-Asia. Nevertheless, at the turn of the sixteenth century, in Europe too diverse local and regional power relations were crystallizing into a handful of early-modern states and empires. Even though the roots of this process stretch back way beyond the beginning of the fifteenth century, that era certainly also witnessed dynamics of political formation that were highly significant at the eve of early modernity. Over time those European dynamics moreover became more consistently connected than ever before to what happened in Islamic West-Asia. One crucial factor for the growth of this Western Eurasian connectivity in the fifteenth century was the continuation and intensification of resource flows across the Mediterranean, not least in the context of the booming Indo-Mediterranean spice trade. Another factor was the continued westward expansion of the Ottoman Sultanate in the Balkans, in Hungary and in the Eastern Mediterranean, which had a substantial impact on European political imaginations, worldviews and interests. In fact, the latter fact seems to have made the Islamic 'East'—in whatever 'othering' way it was imagined or encountered—more present than ever before at the courts and headquarters of European princes and statesmen.¹³

This intensifying political entanglement of various European and West-Asian elites during the fifteenth century is well illustrated by the famous case of the Ottoman prince Jem Sultan (d. 1495). After his defeat in the Ottoman succession struggle of 1481, Jem sought and found a welcome refuge from the wrath of his victorious brother, sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512), in various places. The

12 For the notion of a "European Far West", see Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, p. 17.

13 This understanding of the upsurge of this particular Eurasian connectivity in the fifteenth century builds, on the one hand, upon Abu Lughod's famous thirteenth-century Afro-Eurasian economic "world system" and her idea of its unravelling, from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards, both as a result of the Black Death pandemic and the disintegration of the Mongol empire. On the other hand, it also builds in eclectic ways upon, amongst others, Braudel's notion of a "long sixteenth century", which for him began in the fifteenth century, Darwin's conception of "the death of Tamerlane [as] a turning point in world history" and Reinhard's assumption that from the turn of the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries onwards "there was a gradual increase in the frequency of various interactions within and between cultural areas—a highly plausible thesis though not definitely provable" (Braudel, *La méditerranée*; Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*; Darwin, *After Tamerlane*; Reinhard, *Empires and Encounters*, esp. p. 8).

first to welcome him at court was the sultan of Cairo, al-Ashraf Qaytbay (r. 1468–96). Jem then fled to the Knights Hospitallers in Rhodes, who brought him to France. Finally, he ended up in Italy, first with the Pope in Rome, and eventually with the King of France, Charles VIII (r. 1483–1498), in Naples. Throughout his adventures, Jem's hosts, supporters and enemies in East and West appear to have been highly interconnected in that they had similar ways of politicizing his symbolic value as a legitimate pretender to the Ottoman throne, and hence as a potential threat to Bayezid's authority and as an effective check on Ottoman territorial expansionism, especially in Eastern Anatolia, Hungary and the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴ Although this shared understanding and appreciation of Ottoman political culture may have been quite unique and exceptional, the point here is that by the 1480s and 1490s a case like Jem's had gained unprecedented importance to quite a few of Europe's and West-Asia's rulers. Jem's adventures therefore demonstrate that at least some European ruling elites were increasingly being drawn into an expanding political space of Western Eurasian dimensions. In the sixteenth century, this gradual emergence of a novel space of political interaction culminated in the scramble for influence, control and global political order that resulted in many of the great powers of the Early Modern East and West. However, the oft-neglected early stage of this process of contested global integration is the post-Temür fifteenth century, which was marked both by the endless competition for resources and sovereignty among local and regional rulers and by new sets of players who were acquiring new levels of agency and increasing political significance on a Western Eurasian platform.

Central to this volume are these complex phenomena of competition and empowerment, of power elites and political communities, and of varying trajectories of state formation across fifteenth-century Western Eurasia, and in particular in the Nile-to-Oxus and Bosphorus-to-Indus complex of what is defined here as Islamic West-Asia. These phenomena relate to particular historical stories of political experimentation and accommodation as well as fragmentation and conquest. They also pertain to a wide-ranging legacy of historiographical stories which are either inspiring analytically or which hold more direct descriptive value. Qualifications like these are of course largely valid for any construct of time and space, and one must also acknowledge that some conscious interpretive framing is involved in the singling out of histories of power and claiming some form of connectivity for them, particularly when these histories are as diverse and varied as those of fifteenth-century CE Latin Christian Europe and of ninth-century AH Islamic West-Asia. Nevertheless,

14 Vatin, *Sultan Djem*; Hattox, "Qaytbay's Diplomatic Dilemma".

among the many paths of political transformation present during this broadly defined time and space, some clearly proved more attuned than others to local and globalizing circumstances on the threshold of the formation of early modern states and empires, in the European 'Far West' as much as elsewhere. These many winding roads, dead-end streets and expanding routes of history are more intertwined than might be expected. Indeed, the stories leading up to Temür's death in Otrar at the beginning of the century after a long career of Eurasian conquest, and the developments leading to Jem Sultan's death in Naples nine decades later after being held hostage to the French king, the Pope and the Knights Hospitallers can be seen as meaningful instances in ongoing processes of political entanglement and competition for resources and sovereignty on a Eurasian scale.

However, one must admit that it can also be problematic to connect 'Tamerlane to Magellan' and Temür's Chagatai Transoxiana to Jem Sultan's Renaissance Europe in such a straightforward way. This may easily appear as yet another form of the above-mentioned reductionist, over-generalizing or Eurocentric readings. This is certainly not the approach that this volume wishes to promote. As suggested before, we do not regard the history of the fifteenth century as a mere prelude to early modernity. In the European 'Far West' as well as in Islamic West-Asia, many roads were taken, and even more not taken, by rulers and elites of all kinds and these did not necessarily progress to early modern centralizations. Historically, the trajectories that did not transform into early modern political formations—from the Duchy of Burgundy to the so-called Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo—are as meaningful as those that did survive the turn of the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries. In fact, historians should pay attention to the former for many more reasons other than just their disappearance. These finite trajectories are equally relevant if only because they are not burdened by any teleological impressions of fulfilling imperial destinies or of progressing towards Early Modernity.

This volume and its contributions actually originate from a collaborative research project on fifteenth-century state formation in the Sultanate of Cairo. They have emerged in particular from this project's concluding conference, which promoted a comparative approach to the question of fifteenth-century state formation.¹⁵ In line with this approach, this volume takes up the specific

15 'The Mamlukisation of the Mamluk Sultanate: Political Traditions and State Formation in fifteenth century Egypt and Syria' (ERC Starting Grant, 2009–14, UGent, PI Jo Van Steenbergen); International Conference "Whither the Early Modern State? Fifteenth-Century State Formation across Eurasia. Connections, Divergences and Comparisons" (Ghent, 10–12 September 2014) (organizers Jo Van Steenbergen, Malika Dekkiche, Kristof D'hulster; participants: Lisa Balabanlilar, Michele Bernardini, Wim Blockmans, Marc

challenge to demonstrate that the political organization of the Sultanate in fifteenth-century Egypt and Syria around the alleged priority of military slaves (*mamlūks*) is less particular or unique than is so often assumed, and that this organization is much better considered as a fully integrated part of the larger context of West-Asian appearances and negotiations of political order and social power. This Sultanate's state was grounded in century-old West- and Inner Asian traditions and practices. Throughout the later medieval period it continued to pulsate as a formidable regional power from Cairo, one of the late medieval world's largest and most vibrant urban hubs, home to up to a quarter of a million inhabitants and well connected globally via myriads of interlocking political, commercial and cultural networks and resource flows. Moreover, in the fifteenth century this Sultanate appeared more than ever in the format of a non-dynastic state from the practices of a diverse range of military, legal, scribal and financial specialists and entrepreneurs, the military, commercial and agricultural resources that they managed, the Sunni Islamic value system that they nurtured and reproduced, and the structuring stratagems of a long-standing bureaucratic and ideological apparatus with which they operated. According to at least one modern scholar, extensive archival research has suggested that the rise of new social groups and new structures of landholding in fifteenth-century Egypt and Syria, along with the larger socio-economic and cultural transformations which caused them, were tantamount to paradigm-shifting changes that would have generated Egypt's own form of 'modernization' were it not for the Ottoman conquest of 1517.¹⁶ One contribution to the above-mentioned *'Histoire du monde au xv^e siècle'* indeed even claimed more generally for the wider West-Asian landscape that "from Central-Asia to Egypt the fifteenth century appears as a moment of modernization of the Islamic state, mostly however without being completed or coming too late to avoid the attrition of central authority".¹⁷

Boone, Stephan Conermann, Georg Christ, Yasser Daoudi, Malika Dekkiche, Kristof D'hulster, Jan Dumolyn, Suraiya Faroqi, Roy Fischel, Antje Flüchter, Albrecht Fuess, Jean-Philippe Genet, Jane Hathaway, Stephen Humphreys, Dimitri Kastritsis, Metin Kunt, Beatrice Manz, Christopher Markiewicz, John Meloy, Coline Mitchell, Stéphane Péquignot, Carl Petry, David Robinson, Vasileios Syros, Peer Vries, John Watts, Patrick Wing, André Wink, Koby Yosef).

16 Abū Ghāzī, *al-Juzur al-tārikhiyya*; see also idem, *Tatawwur al-Ḥiyāza al-Zirāʿiyya*. For a review and constructive critique, see Sabra, "The Rise of a New Class?"

17 Loiseau, "Le siècle turc", p. 49: "De l'Asie centrale à l'Égypte, le xv^e siècle est bien un temps de modernisation de l'État islamique, le plus souvent inachevée ou trop tard menée pour éviter l'épuisement de l'autorité centrale".

These remarkable interpretations of failed Syro-Egyptian or even West-Asian trajectories of modernization represent a kind of counterfactual and negative history that will not be pursued at all in this volume. As suggested before, we do not wish to regard the history of the fifteenth century as a mere prelude to early modern successes or failures. Nevertheless, readings such as these certainly confirm both the relatedness of fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia's different post-Temür leadership configurations and the relevance of approaching the Cairo Sultanate as another West-Asian trajectory of pre-modern state formation. In fact, this volume will claim that adopting this entangled and trans-dynastic approach enables new understandings of the complexity of the Sultanate's fifteenth-century formation and enriches the ways in which Ottoman as well as other West-Asian trajectories can also be explored. This hopefully invites a better-informed integration of this central Eurasian landscape, even in any future considerations of fifteenth-century state formation in general.

3 **Whither This Volume: Bringing Islamic West-Asia's Trajectories of State Formation into Focus**

After explaining why and how fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asian state formation makes for a relevant and consistent subject, in this last section this introduction will also account in more detail for this volume's organization. This volume is constructed around extensively contextualized case studies pertaining to the Cairo Sultanate's as well as to Ottoman and Timurid-Turkmen trajectories of state formation. Undoubtedly various caveats are necessary when considering this construction around region-specific case-studies. These concern in particular the massive amount of material and cases that cannot be dealt with here, which may lead to new *pars-pro-toto* arguments. However, this caveat should not invalidate the fact that a consciously historicized and contextualized focus on high-end political dynamics of state formation in fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia generates insights from which there is still much to learn. This is especially due to the fact that, by definition, centralizing power formations have always left a substantial mark on both state and non-state historical realities, in political as much as in economic, social and cultural terms. The different cases that are presented in this volume certainly attest to that. They contribute substantially to current understandings of various trajectories of state formation that were pursued, or experienced, by various post-Temür power elites in political centers such as Constantinople, Edirne, Cairo, Tabriz, Herat and Samarkand. These cases also point to the wider social, cultural and economic impact of those trajectories across and beyond Islamic West-Asia,

and they complement this deepening of various trajectories' understandings with valuable discussions of the diverse and challenging sources on which any scholarly engagement with those trajectories is based.

Furthermore, rather than presenting these cases simply in the splendid isolation of their specific contexts and academic idioms, this book pursues the projection of these cases onto a broad canvas of old, new and competing paradigms of state formation. This volume actually presents a first-of-its-kind entangled and trans-dynastic consideration of power, politics and state formation across fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia's diverse but at the same time highly interconnected power elites. This is achieved by the joint presentation of different case studies, but above all by offering extensive historical and historiographical context for these cases. This takes the form of a general historical introduction that offers empirical counter-arguments for any reductive assumptions, and formulates an interpretative call to overcome traditional dynastic boundaries and consider more carefully different experiences of widely shared political realities. This should add to growing insights into the artificial nature of the disciplinary (and linguistic) boundaries that continue to separate early Ottoman, Timurid-Turkmen and Mamluk historiographies. As such, this volume invites historians of West-Asian realities to rethink what they know about their subject within the underexplored wider framework of Western Eurasian state formation studies. For this reason, we also engage with the hotly debated subject of state formation in the late medieval Latin Christian West of Eurasia. This materializes in a detailed discussion of the theoretical frameworks that have informed the study of the state in fifteenth-century research. This joint reconstruction of highly idiosyncratic European and West-Asian trajectories of state studies aims to put all the relevant conceptual cards on the table, so to speak, in order to enable more balanced, reflexive and de-centered future interactions between and beyond the different traditions of research on Islamic West-Asia. In these ways, this volume wishes to stimulate wider audiences and to open up a wider debate over interpretive engagements with specific West-Asian cases and with the specific historical, historiographical and empirical contexts that continue to define these cases' appearances on the brink of the rise of early modern Western Eurasian states and empires.

This volume consists of three complementary parts. The first part consists of two introductory chapters that evoke in critical and entangled ways theories, conceptualizations and current understandings of state formation in different research traditions that are particularly relevant for fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia. The first chapter actually presents a new introductory interpretation of the entanglement and particularities of the power

elites, the institutions and practices, and the transformations that, since the days of Temür, left their marks on the rough political landscapes of Islamic West-Asia. Emphasizing the segmented nature of Turko-Mongol politics and socio-economic organization, this chapter describes ongoing dynamics of expansion, fragmentation and circulation, and recurrent attempts at Ottoman, Turko-'Mamluk', Timurid and Turkmen political stabilization and administrative penetration. It also argues that widely used binaries, such as those of 'Turks' and 'Tajiks', 'elites' (*khāṣṣa*) and 'commoners' (*āmma*), or commanders and administrators, fed into claims and explanations that contributed to the many appearances of social order across West-Asia, amidst highly complex Ottoman, Timurid, Turkmen and Syro-Egyptian realities of segmentation, competitive empowerment and state formation.

The second chapter takes this further with a theoretical contextualization that reconstructs the modern study of fifteenth-century rulers and states in each of the dynastic research traditions of Islamic West-Asia. This is pitched against a wider background of state studies that includes discussions of trends in the modern historiography of late medieval Europe as well as of the entanglements and particularities of those West-Asian research traditions. In general, this chapter offers a more explicit understanding of how research into the fifteenth-century state has diverged over the years, not only in reference to Latin Christian Europe and Islamic West-Asia in general, but also for many of the different dynastic and proto-nationalist constituents of each. It argues at the same time that this divergence also harbors within itself many opportunities for an enriching exchange of ideas, given that searching for shared conceptual tools is not just about identifying parallels and connections, but rather more about comprehending divergence from a shared model. The chapter ends by suggesting that such a model may well be found in a very practical approach and may be usefully constructed around the recurrent suggestions that states do not make history, but history makes states, as and when successful social practices of exclusion, integration, reproduction and appropriation start appearing, and presenting themselves, pertaining to a coherent apparatus of coercion, distinction, differentiation and hegemony, or to the central state.

The seven case studies in the subsequent two parts of this volume refer to the different political contexts of Islamic West-Asia, with a particular focus on the oft-neglected Syro-Egyptian Sultanate of Cairo, and to particular examples of just how history (and historiography) makes states. The common thread running through them all concerns the nature of the relationships between various elite groups, institutions and discourses (and their renderings in different sets of contemporary sources) on the one hand and rapidly transforming power centers in fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia on the other. These processes of

inclusion in, structuration of, or confrontation with the disposition of central or local power elites may have taken on various forms, depending on where and when these centripetal and centrifugal relationships manifested themselves. Everywhere, however, these processes revolved around the experimentation with and accommodation of power balances that gave shape to dynamic political orders. These orders were real, imagined or both, and always featured the distinctive, constitutive characteristic of having explicit links with a legitimate, transcendent form of central political authority, embodied in a particular ruler (or set of rulers), his (or their) court, and his (or their) representatives. Furthermore, these processes of inclusion, structuration and confrontation involve social relationships that did not just connect central and local elites, but actually constituted different social groups, or entangled networks, as central and peripheral elites, in potentially overlapping and conflicting ways. These 'centering' processes are considered here as representing interlocking thematic avenues within the wider field of the study of fifteenth-century West-Asian, and even Western Eurasian, state formations and transformations that enable us to consider and draw together the specific cases presented in this volume. More specifically, these processes are represented here as manifesting themselves with parallel but distinct 'centering' effects among central power elites in Cairo, Bursa and Constantinople (Part 2) and among local military, cultural and commercial elites in Iran, the Hijaz, Syria and the eastern Mediterranean (Part 3).

Part 2 considers the constitution of some of West-Asia's main centers of power in the fifteenth century. It opens with a case study of institutionalization from the so-called Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo, in Kristof D'hulster's 'The Road to the Citadel as a Chain of Opportunity'. In this chapter D'hulster looks into the upper end of courtly careers in fifteenth-century Cairo from the perspective of a bureaucratic *cursus honorum*, and reconsiders the sequential nature of the relationship between the *atabakiyya* ('chief military commandership') and the sultanate. By using the format of a critical and reflexive engagement with both fifteenth-century and modern historiographies on the subject, he explains that this institutional relationship was transformed as part of a state formation process that may be usefully identified as 'Mamlukization'. He suggests that such a structuration of what constituted the Sultanate's center and also its path dependencies deserve to be taken more into account in any historical interpretation. Chapter 4, by Albrecht Fuess, is entitled 'The Syro-Egyptian Sultanate in Transformation, 1496–1498'. Here, Fuess engages with a very similar problematic of accession to the sultanate in Cairo. He describes how by the end of the fifteenth century al-Nasir Muhammad b. Qaytbay (r. 1496–8) was attempting to reverse this process of 'Mamlukization' and he demonstrates how this sultan, as a royal son and heir, tried to reconnect with older, dynastic

traditions rather than the bureaucratic ones in order to bolster his claims to central authority and to counter the ambitions of veteran *mamlūk* grandees from his deceased father's entourage. Fuess also details how this particular moment of experimentation and accommodation was shaped by a cultural as well as a social program of substantial central reform, provoking harsh reactions, as can even be detected in the era's historiographical record. The experiment ultimately failed when this program's dynastic cornerstone of family rule proved too fickle. Chapter 5 by Dimitri Kastritsis, entitled 'Interpreting Early Ottoman Narratives of State Centralization', delves deeper into the social tensions that were evoked by processes of institutionalization and centralization, moving the focus to the early fifteenth-century context of Ottoman restoration and empowerment. Kastritsis engages in substantial historiographical detail with the case of the Çandarlı family, whose various members appeared as key agents of the expansion and organization of Ottoman power between the mid-fourteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries. At the same time, these figures appeared in contemporary and later narratives as corrupters of that centralizing power. The chapter presents a strong argument for considering the construction of these narratives not simply in a traditional context of reactions to post-1453 state centralization from increasingly marginalized peripheral elites, but in the post-Temür context of early fifteenth-century Ottoman fragmentation, competition between different Ottoman power centers and their opposing political discourses of Ottoman state formation and its trajectory, and the messy re-centering of Ottoman power around Mehmed I (r. 1412–21) and his entourage.

Part 3 discusses the constitution and accommodation of various local elites at the peripheries of fifteenth-century Islamic West-Asia's power centers. It opens with Beatrice Manz' 'Iranian Elites under the Timurids'. This chapter presents a revisionist discussion of the long history of Iranian landed elites, and explores their multivalent participation in local and regional politics in Timurid times. The chapter also calls for a more critical reading of the centering narratives of the available sources and their neglect or mere partial representation of non-central elites. Above all, Manz demonstrates here how beyond the Timurid courts and urban centers different processes of inclusion, structuration and confrontation were at work. This happened in centralizing and decentralizing ways that varied depending on time, place, actors and stakes, but always involved Iranian local elite families in far more active and connected ways and in far more meaningful military capacities than is generally assumed. Chapter 7, by John Meloy, is entitled 'the Judges of Mecca and Mamluk Hegemony', and it takes a similar *long durée* perspective to better

understand the changing relationships between local religious elites in the Hijaz and the Sultanate's court in Cairo. The particular processes of inclusion, structuration and confrontation at work here again reveal how they are multi-directional and multivalent ones, involving centering strategies and agencies as much as the pursuance of local interests and connections. Meloy argues that Cairo's penetration and integration of Hijazi politics through the appointment of local judges over time represented a type of Mamlukization that was shaped by ideological as well as by coercive and bureaucratic strategies. He shows how this had constitutive effects on all participants. These may be better understood through the concept of 'legibility': the Sultanate's state acquiring the ability to understand, or 'read' the social landscape of the Hijaz in ways that allowed it to participate, co-opt local elites, and contribute to shaping that landscape. Chapter 8, by Patrick Wing, entitled 'The Syrian Commercial Elite and Mamluk State-Building in the Fifteenth Century' shifts the focus to similar processes of experimentation, accommodation and co-optation at play amongst the newly emerging commercial elites in fifteenth-century Damascus. This chapter uses the case of the Banu Muzalliq family of merchants to explain how Cairo established new forms of control over the changing socio-economic landscapes of fifteenth-century Syria. Wing explains in particular how here too different processes of inclusion, structuration and confrontation were at work with varying effects on the constitution of the Sultanate's center and its relationships with local elites in Syria. The chapter also argues that those changing relationships of commercial, political and bureaucratic agencies need to be interpreted against a de-centered, entangled and regional canvas, allowing us to see these multiple ties as cosmopolitan and part of networks that connected Tabriz to Cairo and Venice to Mecca, rather than as merely Cairo-centric. The final chapter, by Georg Christ, entitled '*Cortesia*, *Zemechia* and Venetian Fiscal-ity in Fifteenth-century Alexandria', continues this cosmopolitan and commercial perspective by engaging in more detail with that Venetian connection, and its effect on the constitution of the Sultanate's center. Christ moves the discussion back to Egypt, and moreover brings in a different set of sources from Venetian archives. These offer highly complementary new insights into those same processes of inclusion, structuration and confrontation that constituted the Sultanate's peripheries, its center in Cairo, and its wider, regional connections. The chapter reconstructs in detail how the locally negotiated solution of a customs conflict in Alexandria in 1419 between the Sultan's agents and the Venetian community was unsuccessfully contested by the latter at the Sultan's court in Cairo. This chapter also considers this case against the wider backdrop of Venetian commercial involvement in the Sultanate's political economy

from the thirteenth century onwards, and within an interpretive framework of hybrid relations that are constructed creatively and locally and at the same time bound by trans-local arrangements. Christ concludes that Venice was integrated in multiple, complex and highly illustrative ways in the Sultanate's constellation of power, with constitutive effects for both Cairo's court and Alexandria's diverse elites.

To conclude, through these seven specimens of specific West-Asian studies in Parts 2 and 3 and their detailed empirical and theoretical contextualizations and interpretations in Part 1, this volume offers new and arguably better tools—including survey chapters, interpretive frameworks and illustrative cases—for building the aforementioned bridges, for a more meaningful integration of Islamic West-Asia's rulers and elites in the writing of fifteenth-century Eurasian histories. At the very least, it is hoped that this volume will contribute to creating new opportunities for future research to develop more informed, more connected and more valid comparative reflections on the meanings and potentials that emerge from these and many other micro-studies into various manifestations of fifteenth-century West-Asian, and Eurasian, state formation.

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