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Mongols in Mamluk eyes

Representing ethnic others in the medieval Middle East

van den Bent, J.M.C.

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Conclusion

Following the rapid Mongol conquest of large parts of Eurasia, authors in the Islamic world, including the Mamluk sultanate sought to make sense of this people, their appearance on the scene of history, and the dynasties they came to form. In this light, an image of the Mongols as 'violent infidels' quickly arose and became widespread in the Islamic world. However, a closer inspection of the representation of Mongols in the Mamluk sultanate shows that the complexities of its social and political contexts led to the appearance of a variety of images of Mongols. On the one hand, these images show a certain discursive consistency,[1] but, at the same time, the agency and purposes of individual authors played an important part in their development.

In their attempts to make sense of the Mongols, Mamluk-era authors were involved in categorisation. Social scientists have stressed the importance of categorisation, in addition to identification, in the dialectics of ethnicity. Categorisation, even if it does not necessarily reflect the identification of the categorised group in question, helps bring order to a complicated world. As the Mongols were a 'new' people, Mamluk-era authors could not simply rely on their predecessors' work for information about them, but had to work creatively. Mamluk-era authors in part made sense of the Mongols by placing them into the general Islamic worldview that consisted of both a division of peoples into offspring of the sons of Noah and the arrangement of the world into climes. They thus categorised the Mongols as descending from Japheth, and especially as being closely related to the more familiar and similarly northern Turks. In this manner they reused existing ideas and stereotypes to classify and interpret the Mongols as a people.

With this classification came, for authors in the Mamluk sultanate, insight into the Mongols' innate characteristics: stereotypes are an important element in the creation of cultural distinctiveness. Building on a longstanding tradition of environmental theory, the Mongols' origin in the cold north was considered to lie at the root of their violence and courage. Their northern origin was also connected to their infidelity and barbarism. As is generally the case with stereotypes of outsiders, the violence and infidelity of the Mongols are clearly negative, as is mostly the case for their barbarism, although their courage – a stereotype also projected on the Turks – is positive. The arrangement of the Mongols into the Islamicate worldview thus laid the groundwork in the Mamluk sultanate for stock images of the Mongols as an ethnic group.

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[1] Said, *Orientalism*, 273.

These basic images appear time and again in the work of Mamluk-era authors: when they write about historical events in which the Mongols were involved, particularly episodes of military aggression, when they discuss aspects of Mongol culture such as the Yasa, in reports on Mongols immigrating to the sultanate, and so on. At the same time, more contextualised images came to be developed, as Mamluk-era authors also sought explanations on a historical level: why did they come, how did they conquer so much of the world? To this purpose, they employed earlier texts, but in their use of them, Mamluk-era authors placed their own emphases and at times elaborated on their source material in order to do so. The general trend is that they underscore elements of Mongol violence and cruelty, particularly against Muslims, and their crimes against Islam, as well as spotlighting Mongol untrustworthiness and trickery – images that would live on in the popular epic known as the *Sīrat Baybars*.[2]

Stereotypes, however, are much more informative about the categorisers – even if they might be somehow rooted in reality – than about the categorised. They show what the categorisers find important in themselves. Similarly, it is the people themselves who decide what cultural stuff functions as an ethnic marker. In their descriptions of Mongol conquests and Mongol history, authors also included stories, anecdotes and information on Mongol cultural practices. Here they paid attention to many of the same elements as their colleagues of classical antiquity and medieval Europe did in their writing about different ethnic groups. Topics such as language, food, sexuality, law and religion frequently appear in discussions of the Mongols and historical events in which they played a role.[3]

These are all matters in which Mongol practices could be opposed to Islamic ones, thus serving to other the Mongols. Language not only functioned as an indicator of ethnic background, it could also be used to oppose the Mongols to Islamic culture. Al-Ṣafadī's statement that Ghazan would pretend not to understand Arabic even though he could, revolves around the suggestion that Mongol custom or law is somehow incompatible with Islam, for otherwise he would not have hesitated to speak the language of Islam. Food practices and dietary taboos are a recurring element in othering discourses and similarly occur in Mamluk-era depictions of Mongols. They appear in particular in description of the early Mongols, which show them as barbarians eating haram foods – pork, dog, carrion – or even, according to al-Dhahabī, human flesh. Dietary taboos reappear in the slaughtering practices of the Oirats in the Mamluk sultanate, which go against Sharia regulations. Sexuality is also a recurring topic: Mongol women, and Chinggis Khan's mother (or ancestress) in

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[2] See Herzog, 'La mémoire'.
[3] See Nippel, 'Ethnic Images', 35; Geary, 'Ethnic Identity', 19–21.

particular, are portrayed as promiscuous and their society as either supportive of this (the men apparently lacking sexual jealousy) or insufficiently corrective. The importance of law as cultural stuff is visible in the significance of the Yasa to the dynasties in the Mongol successor khanates themselves as well as in the attention paid to it in the Mamluk sources, in which elements such as sexuality and food taboos also appear. Moreover, the importance of Mamluk-era authors' own Islamic frame of reference is distinctly visible in their depiction of Chinggis Khan and Yasa as a negative mirror image of the prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an respectively. Religion thus plays a special role in Mamluk discourse on the Mongols. Not only are the latter frequently described as sun worshippers in the background information given on them and are they often referred to as infidels, many of the other elements of their image – including all those mentioned in this paragraph – can be related to Islam and mirrored in it.

The focus on Islam in the image of the Mongols in the Mamluk sultanate has various causes and reasons. For one, Islam simply was a very important element of the authors' own culture and identity, a key part of their cultural stuff. Not only were they Muslims living in a world that was culturally shaped by Islamic mores and ideas, from dietary practices to sexual morals, many of them were in fact religious scholars. Islam thus was a key cultural marker for these authors. However, the focus on Islam served other purposes as well. The condemnation of the Mongols could not be solely based on perceived ethnic characteristics, due to the supposedly close ethnic relations between the Mongols and the Turks. As the Mamluk elite in this period was predominantly of Turkish descent and even included a significant number of ethnic Mongols – who had arrived there either as mamluks, immigrants, or were offspring of Mongol women – that would have caused problems within the sultanate. A focus on Islam solved the problem of this potential tension of collective ethnic categorisations of the Mongols and Turks. Not only were the Mamluks Muslim and therefore on the right side, this approach also tied in with the Mamluks' own legitimising ideology in which they presented themselves as protectors of Islam. The key enemy against which they promised to protect their subjects were the infidel Mongols.[4] The close ethnic relationship between the Mongols and the mostly Turkish Mamluks, as expounded by Ibn al-Nafīs, could even be of help in this sense. With Islam as the primary distinction between the two, that also meant that the border could be crossed relatively easily upon conversion, allowing for a fairly smooth integration, as in the case of Mongol mamluks and the Mongols of the early *wāfidiyya* (while the lack thereof made that supremely difficult, as was the case with the Oirats).

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[4] See Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology*.

However, an insider-outsider dichotomy that hinged on Islam was also potentially problematic. While early relations between the sultanate and the Ilkhanate were easily described in a framework of jihad against infidels while those with the Golden Horde could be formulated in terms of a Muslim alliance, later religious developments in the respective khanates challenged this. While a number of ilkhans converted to Islam from the 680s/1280s onwards, a number of Berke's successors chose Mongol shamanism over Islam. Yet Mamluk-era authors, despite these historical circumstances, broadly continued the existing discourse. As long as the enmity between the sultanate and the Ilkhanate lasted, the ilkhans' Islamic credentials were disputed, aided, in part, by Shia inclinations on their side. The reverse held true for representations of the Golden Horde. Although Berke Khan had been Muslim, many of his successors were not. Nonetheless, Mamluk-era authors emphasised Islamic elements in the Golden Horde even if its ruler was not Muslim, influenced by the friendly relations between the northern khanate and the sultanate. So on the one hand, Islam and being Muslim was an important part of the identity of Mamluk-era authors, and the conversion (or lack thereof) of Mongols mattered, such as in the case of the Oirat *wāfidiyya*. On the other hand, however, religion could be used in a more flexible manner when political circumstances called for that.

The images of Mongols that were current in the Mamluk sultanate between the middle of the seventh/thirteenth century and middle of the eighth/fourteenth century thus had a certain discursive consistency, as Edward Said termed it. Describing European Orientalism, he stated that this 'consistency was a form of cultural praxis, a system of opportunities for making statements'. Moreover, he emphasises, such representations operate 'for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting'.[5] The discourse on the Mongols in the Mamluk sultanate was greatly influenced by the historical and intellectual contexts in which its authors worked.

Part of the intellectual context were of course the older theories and texts that offered source material and/or laid the basis for some of the stock images and stereotypes that were developed further within the sultanate. However, the intellectual context of the sultanate itself also played a key role. Many authors were closely connected to the Mamluk ruling elite, professionally and at times even on a personal level. Many *'ulamā'*, including a significant portion of the authors discussed in this dissertation, were employed in the Mamluk administration, both in secretarial and religious positions, and they helped in developing their legitimisation strategies – mostly based on religion. Broadbridge described how the Mamluk assertion of legitimacy was based on an ideology

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[5] Said, *Orientalism*, 273.

that was formed by a large collaboration of minds that included the sultan and his advisors as well as the religious scholars who served the sultanate.[6] Although, as Amitai points out, these scholars were certainly no slavish followers of the Mamluks and relations could be strained,[7] the interests of the sultanate clearly influenced these authors' approaches to the Mongols and the political context explains the different images created of the Mongols of the Ilkhanate and those of the Golden Horde, respectively. Scholarly pursuits and political purpose thus interacted.

Another aspect of the intellectual context is the close interrelationship that some authors had, which influenced both source material and interpretations. The Syrian historians shared material to the extent that it is not always clear who wrote what first, Ibn Kathīr's personal relationship to Ibn Taymiyya is reflected in the former's work, and al-Ṣafadī was close to al-ʿUmarī, al-Dhahabī, and al-Subkī, to name but a few examples. This, too, furthered the development of a discursive consistency on the topic of the Mongols, in which the political and social contexts caused a distinction to be made between various groups of both inside and outside Mongols.

It is important to emphasise, however, that this discourse was not something that was somehow 'followed' by these authors. Rather, it was created by them and it was employed by them. Some of the stock images of the Mongols were developed based on environmental theories' and corresponding ideas about northern peoples that were centuries old. Yet, as Nirenberg has argued, the simple existence of those stereotypes says little about how people employ them. Mamluk-era authors used extant stereotypes for the Mongols because they found them meaningful and useful. Other elements of the Mongol image in the Mamluk sultanate were created by them. A flexible use of sources was key here. Not only were the Mongols moved into the existing structures of ethnic thinking, extant texts were adapted, commented upon, and sections of them were (de)selected. For instance, the image of the Mongol enemy as antagonist to Islam as well as that of their penchant for trickery and deceit were constructed in this manner, by spotlighting historical information to that idea, by emphasising and making explicit those aspects, and by interpolations and the addition of details that drove the message home. This agency is similarly seen very clearly in Mamluk-era authors' treatment of Mongol cultural stuff and the way they used those elements to construct images of the Mongols. This is especially visible in their discussions on the Yasa, but also in the narratives on Chinggis Khan and his ancestors.

Individual agency is also visible in both the differences between authors' respective descriptions of the Mongols and in the way in which some of them employed images of the Mongols

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[6] Broadbridge, 'Mamluk Legitimacy', 91–92.
[7] Amitai, *Holy War*, 94–98.

for other objectives, beyond describing the Mongols themselves. One element that influenced differences between authors' respective descriptions and areas of focus when discussing the Mongols, was the diversity in genres: geographic texts warrant a different approach to Mongols than chronicles, a sultan's biography has a different focus than a fatwa. In other instances, variations appear to derive from a diversity of source material available to and/or selected by the author. Al-Nuwayrī and especially al-ʿUmarī, although they in part adhere to the general discourse, at times depart from it in a manner that appears to be influenced by outside, Ilkhanid material. Especially al-ʿUmarī's frequent reliance on such sources, often oral informants, and the resulting differences between his texts and those of others shed light on the discursive consistency present in the sultanate. Yet even when authors have the same material at their disposal, as is the case with the Arabic translation of Juvaynī, their individual backgrounds, ideas, style and leanings are of import. Ibn Kathīr was an especially harsh critic of virtually all things Mongol, as was Ibn al-Dawādārī who – even in the years after the peace treaty with the Ilkhanate – wished that 'God the Exalted preserve [Egypt and Syria] from their evil and corruption, and make them *dār al-islām* until Judgment Day'.[8]

The goals for which images of the Mongols could be used similarly differed and were dependent on individual authors' concerns and decisions. In general, as mentioned above, these descriptions were part of, and/or related to, a wider political discourse in which the Mamluks were presented as civilised defenders of Islam against infidel Ilkhanid Mongols and thus served a purpose in that context. Images were, however, used in more specific manners as well. Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir and Ibn al-Nafīs, for instance, aptly employed stock images of the Mongols to legitimise the rule of Baybars and, especially in the case of Ibn ʿAbd al-Ẓāhir, to the greater honour and glory of the sultan. In a like manner, when the social and political contexts made that opportune, images of the Mongols could be used within Mamluk politics to oppose Kitbugha's rule and, especially, the position of the Oirat *wāfidiyya* in the sultanate. And later, of course, there was al-Maqrīzī's infamous use of the Mongol Yasa to criticise internal development in the Mamluk sultanate. Images of the Mongols could thus also be employed for purposes that were only indirectly connected to them, or actually not at all, but served internal debates instead.

The representation of the Mongols in this manner was very much a domain of the intellectual and political elite, and the question to what extent these ideas were present among the general population of Egypt and Syria is not immediately answerable. However, some of the

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[8] Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Durar al-Tījān*, ٥٣. He also tends to refer to the Mongols as *al-ʿaduww al-makhdhūl*, 'the forsaken enemy' (see also Haarmann, 'Großer Vater Mond', 128.).

anecdotes and stories incorporated by Mamluk-era authors appear to have circulated among the general population and contain images that concur with those developed by these authors. Similarly, Herzog's analysis of the *Sīrat Baybars*, although dating to a slightly later period, divulges some elements of the Mongol image among ordinary Syrians and Egyptians, and the notions of violence, infidelity and trickery are present in both registers. Yet, as befits the genre, the overall image is much less detailed and, due to the integration of the Mongols into Persian culture and society by the time the narrative took shape, the two peoples appear to have merged and the role of primary enemy is played by the Franks.[9] The latter especially suggests that this *sīra* is not entirely representative of the image of the Mongols in the Mamluk sultanate in the first century of its existence, when the Mongols were by far the bigger threat.

The images of the Mongols as they appeared in the texts of the scholarly elite in the first century of the Mamluk sultanate, however, I have expounded in this dissertation. They show that a discourse on the Mongols was developed that generally tied in with the concerns and programme of the Mamluk military elite, including the differentiation between various groups of Mongols under debate. At the same time, there was ample variation: across genres, between authors, and with regard to the latters' aim. The images of the Mongols were thus actively constructed and used for a variety of purposes in response to, and in interaction with, the sultanate's complex ethnic and political contexts. Through these conclusions, this research adds to the still small field of studies on ethnicity and ethnic representation in the medieval Middle East. While substantial attention has been paid to developments in ethnic identification and categorisation in medieval Europe, similar research on the Middle East is still in its early days. This, while the ethnic contexts of the region were often complex, as was the case in this instance: local Syrians and Egyptians, rulers with a different ethnic background, and various groups of Mongols all came into play. In the way Mamluk-era authors approached these issues, they were concerned with very similar cultural stuff as their European contemporaries were, and this dissertation has brought these processes to the fore. Many questions about ethnicity in the medieval Middle East yet await an answer, matters of identification, salience, integration, and representation alike.

The images of Mongols as developed by authors in the first Mamluk era remained relevant. For later authors, after the peace treaty with the Ilkhanids and its later collapse in 736/1335, they were still useful: in order to explain historical events, for contemporary concerns, and because some fear of Mongol aggression evidently remained, as is evidenced by Ibn al-Dawādārī's supplication. Timur Lenk's appearance in Syria in 803/1400-1 proved that the latter was justified.

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[9] Herzog, 'La mémoire'.

Although a thorough analysis of the (re)use of images of the Mongols in later Mamluk texts for Timur and his troops yet remains to be done, the texts by Ibn ʿArabshāh, for instance, suggest that – as was the case in diplomacy as described by Broadbridge – older images of the Mongols were indeed recycled. For where al-Dimashqī still complained about a dearth of information about the Mongols, who 'were not mentioned on the tongues of the people', this generation of scholars came fully prepared. And it lasted beyond that. The durability of the images of the Mongols developed in this period is evident in today's condemnations by politicians, journalists and authors in the Middle East of present-day enemies as 'the new Tatars' or 'the Mongols of this age'.