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Ubi sumus? Quo vademus?

Mamluk Studies – State of the Art

With numerous figures

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Studying Mamluk Historiography. From Source-Criticism to the Cultural Turn

The Mamluk era with its encyclopaedic chronicles and massive biographical dictionaries is arguably the last period in Middle Eastern history for which narrative texts can claim a central position for documenting society.¹ For the subsequent Ottoman era, by contrast, documentary sources start to be available to such an extent that historiographical texts, although still of importance, are increasingly relegated to the back seat of historical inquiry. Narrative historiography played a particularly central role in modern Mamluk Studies during the 1950s and 1960s when the field gradually emerged as an independent area of academic inquiry. The work of the field's pioneers, such as D. Ayalon, relied almost exclusively on narrative historiographical texts, while documentary sources were virtually absent from this generation's ground-breaking work.² The next wave of scholars during what might be called the field's formative period, from the 1970s onwards, initially kept to this tradition and typically undertook their doctoral research on narrative historiographical texts. U. Haarmann and D. Little, for instance, both wrote their PhD theses on chronicles and biographical dictionaries of the earlier Mamluk period.³

Over the last 40 years, however, documentary sources have gradually started to play a more important role in writing Mamluk history and have, to an extent, challenged the primacy of narrative historiography. Many of the contributions to this volume, and to the preceding 2011-conference, bear testimony to this development in their discussion of numismatic, archaeological and epigraphic sources to name but a few. Arguably, it is this widening of the source basis that has to a large extent driven innovation in the study of Mamluk history in recent decades. This is evident when considering the programmatic or 'state of the art' articles in the *Mamlūk Studies Review*, the publication of which, in 1997, was a

1 Thanks are due to Stephan Conermann for organising the conference and editing this volume. This paper has greatly benefited from the vivid discussions that took place throughout the three-day conference.

2 For Ayalon's work cf. Elad, *Bibliography*.

3 Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*; Little, *Introduction*.

crucial stepping-stone in the field's history. It is striking that most such articles over the past fifteen years have been linked to specific documentary source genres. In particular the journal's early volumes emphatically promoted the use of sources ranging from textual documents in the narrow sense of the term, via architecture to archaeological artefacts.⁴ By contrast, the journal's early articles, which aimed to establish the direction of future research, hardly featured theoretical debates or methodological issues. The salient exception was W. Clifford's reflection on *Mamluk History and Social Theory*, but it is only in more recent years that overview articles have moved rather from sources to approaches and discuss questions pertaining to literature, gender studies and popular culture.⁵

The classical example for the 'discovery' of new documentary material that has significantly re-orientated the field of Mamluk Studies and driven innovation has been endowment deeds. Since the work of 'A. Ibrāhīm, M. Amīn and U. Haarmann, to name just three, integrated such deeds into the canon of sources in the 1970s, this material has become one of the defining source genres of the field.⁶ In the same vein, numismatics can now claim a considerably more central position than when the field of Mamluk Studies was forming in the 1970s. Recent work by S. Heidemann, Ḥ. Najīdī and W. Schultz has shown to what extent numismatic evidence is available and can refine our understanding of political and economic history.⁷

Archaeology is in many ways the late-comer to Mamluk Studies, as it has been and still is in so many fields of Middle Eastern history given its philological tradition. Yet the last decade has witnessed the first substantial publications dedicated to this field, especially those on sites in the southern Bilād al-Shām region by B. Walker and M. Milwright.⁸ Studies on architecture and buildings within urban spaces have also seen a spectacular rise since the 1970s and remain closely linked to the name of M. Meinecke and subsequently D. Behrens-Abouseif.⁹ Another documentary source genre that deserves more attention are the notes on manuscripts, such as reading notes (*muṭāla'ah*), certificates of transmission (*samā*), licences for transmission (*ijāzah*), ownership statements (*tamlīk/tamalluk*, often in combination with seals), statements that praise or dispraise the text (*taqrīz* in the former case), verses by the copyists, and endowment attestation (*waqfiyah/taḥbīs*). The study of this material, which gained

4 Little, *Documents*; Whitcomb, *Mamluk*; Petry, *Geniza*; Bloom, *Mamluk*; Bauden, *Mamluk*; Walker, *Ceramics*.

5 Clifford, *Ubi Sumus*; Bauer, *Mamluk Literature*; Berkey, *Popular Culture*; Rapoport, *Women*.

6 Ibrāhīm, *Silsilat*; Amīn, *al-Awqāf*; Haarmann, *Endowment*.

7 Heidemann, *Renaissance*; Najīdī, *al-Nizām*; Schultz, *Mamluk Money*.

8 Walker, *Jordan*; Milwright, *Fortress*.

9 Meinecke, *Architektur*; Behrens-Abouseif, *Cairo*.

pace in the 1990s, as exemplified in S. Leder's ground-breaking work on Damascene *samā'āt*, represents one of the most promising developments in the field with regard to new source genres.¹⁰

While this diversification of sources has substantially changed the field's outlook and profile in recent decades, the sheer volume of historiographical texts ensures that they will retain an outstanding position in Mamluk Studies. Tellingly, the very first issue of the *Mamlūk Studies Review* contained L. Guo's overview article of historiographical studies.¹¹ In the same vein, J. v. Steenbergen's *Mamluk History and Culture (1250–1517)*-project at the University of Ghent, running between 2009 and 2014, relies predominantly on historiographical narrative texts.¹² The production of works of *ta'rikh*, i. e. chronicles and biographical dictionaries, remained so prolific throughout the Mamluk era that this period's historiographical texts are even the main sources for some preceding eras. The chronicles of authors such as al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) are indispensable for the Fatimid era, for example.¹³ F. Bora's recent work on the relationship between Fatimid history and Mamluk historiography is the first work to address this issue in the detail it deserves.¹⁴ Given this volume of *ta'rikh*-texts and their encyclopaedic character it is no wonder that Mamluk-era chronicles were among the first texts to be taken up in the early stages of Arabic and Islamic studies in Europe. The concise universal chronicle by Abū al-Fidā' (d. 732/1331) enjoyed unrivalled, though entirely undeserved, popularity for writing the history of earlier periods as, for instance, is evident in early eighteenth-century works by J. Gagnier and A. Schulten.¹⁵ In the Arabic-speaking lands themselves Mamluk *ta'rikh* texts remained exceedingly popular and they even played a prominent role in the early days of the newly emerging Arabic press in the mid-nineteenth century. One example is an early Mamluk chronicle, Abū Shāma's (d. 665/1267) *al-Rawḍatayn*, which was serialised from 1858 onwards by the Beirut-based newspaper *Ḥadīqat al-akhbār*, in the hope of attracting a larger audience.¹⁶

The prominence of narrative historiography in modern studies is very much due to the veritable explosion that history writing experienced in Syria and Egypt from the seventh/thirteenth century onwards. The previous sixth/twelfth century can legitimately be called the 'dark century' of historical writing in the

10 Leder et al., *Muḥam* (1996); Leder et al., *Muḥam* (2000); cf. Görke, Hirschler, *Manuscript Notes*.

11 Guo, *Historiographic Studies*.

12 Cf. <http://www.mamluk.ugent.be/>.

13 Cf. for instance Lev, *State*.

14 Bora, *Representations*.

15 Gagnier, *De vita*; Schulten, *Vita*.

16 Hirschler, *Arabic Historiography*, 118–20.

area with few significant works being produced. For Northern Syria for instance, al-‘Azīmī’s (d. after 556/1161) extremely concise chronicle is the main textual witness that we have for the early decades of this century.¹⁷ Compared with the elaborate and sophisticated historical narratives of the Mamluk era, it is almost a euphemism to label this bare list of events a ‘chronicle’. From citations in later works, especially those by Ibn al-‘Adīm it is evident that a richer historiographical tradition existed in Syria during the fifth/eleventh and the sixth/twelfth centuries.¹⁸ Among these were the works of authors such as Yaḥyā b. ‘Alī al-Tanūkhī Ibn al-Zurayq (d. c. 442/1051)¹⁹, ‘Abd al-Wāḥid b. Mas‘ūd b. al-Ḥusayn (presumably from Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān, fl. 527/1132–3)²⁰, the *qāḍī* ‘Abd al-Qāhir b. ‘Alawī (presumably from Ma‘arrat Maṣrīn close to Ma‘arrat al-Nu‘mān, fl. 571/1176)²¹ and Abū Maṣṣūr Hibbat Allāh b. Sa‘d Allāh (presumably from Aleppo, his son Aḥmad died in 628/1231²²).

Hardly any biographical information on these authors is available as none of the rich biographical dictionaries of the following centuries included them. Information other than their names can only be guessed at from the citations that can be ascribed to them. It seems that their works were mostly chronicles, but only in one case, that of ‘Abd al-Qāhir, is the title of the work known, *Nuzhat al-nāzīr wa-rawḍat al-khātir*.²³ The subsequent explosion of historical writing is not so much a Mamluk-specific phenomenon, as we see the first inklings of change towards the end of the sixth/twelfth century in the early Ayyubid period. The cluster of works produced by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn’s courtiers ‘Imād al-Dīn al-Iṣfahānī (d. 597/1201), Ibn Shaddād (d. 632/1234) and al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil (d. 596/1200), but also by scholars such as Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571/1176) initiated a new phase in the

17 The decline of historiography in Syria, reaching back into the 5th/11th century, was not experienced in Egypt to the same extent. The dearth of Egyptian historical writing for the Fatimid period is also very much due to the subsequent destruction of Fatimid/Ismā‘īlī works.

18 The second prime source for this period’s lost historiographical tradition is the biographical dictionary of Ibn ‘Asākir, *Ta’rīkh*,

19 Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Bughyat*, 2:864; 5:2262; 6:2971; 7:3357 (‘I read in the hand of ‘Umar b. Muḥammad al-‘Ulaymī, known as Ḥawā’ij Kash ... who stated that he transmitted it from the hand of Ibn Zurayq, that is Abū al-Ḥasan Yaḥyā b. ‘Alī ... Ibn al-Zurayq who was a scholar of history [...]’); 9:3872.

20 Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Bughyat*, for instance: 3:1299; 4:1630 (‘I read ... in this chronicle, year 527 ...’); 4:1958, 6:2699 (‘the chronicle that he composed was a continuation (*dhayl*) of the *Summary* of al-Ṭabarī[’s chronicle]’).

21 Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Bughyat*, for instance: 5:2421 (title), 7:5858.

22 Ibn al-‘Adīm, *Bughyat*, 2:741 (‘I got hold of a volume in the hand of ... Hibbat Allāh ... that contains a list of the governors of Aleppo ... and he was interested in history.’). On his son cf. al-Dhahabī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 621–30, pp. 304–5.

23 On these authors cf. also the editor’s introduction in al-‘Azīmī, *Ta’rīkh* and Bianquis, *Damas*, 22–32.

historiography of the region.²⁴ The reason for this historiographical revival have not been studied in detail, but the reestablishment of stable political structures and urban-centred courts, a process started under the Zangids, certainly contributed.

Mapping the Field of Mamluk Historiography

At first glance it might seem that the study of Mamluk historiography is well advanced and on a par with the study of early Arabic historiography. This impression is given by the coverage of the period in the three grand monographic surveys of Islamic/Arabic historiography: F. Rosenthal's *Muslim Historiography*, T. Khalidi's *Arabic Historical Thought* and C. Robinson's *Islamic Historiography*. They all follow the traditional periodisation and end their surveys at the 1517-watershed when the Ottoman conquest and the subsequent rise of Ottoman Turkish as the lingua franca purportedly introduced a new period. Whatever quibbles one might have with this periodisation, from a Mamlukologist perspective it has proved very useful to ensure coverage of the field. This periodisation is also applied in the survey articles of Islamic/Arabic historiography such as those by S. Humphreys in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, L. Guo in the *The New Cambridge History of Islam* and K. Hirschler in the *Oxford History of Historical Writing*.²⁵ In addition, we now have a number of survey articles specifically on Mamluk-era historiography ranging from L. Guo's *Mamlūk Studies Review* article via D. Little's contribution to the *The Cambridge History of Egypt* to R. Irwin in the *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period* volume.²⁶

However, these surveys are deceptive to a degree because they suggest that they provide an authoritative overview even though we lack detailed studies on most historians and their works. The situation has barely changed since L. Guo remarked in 1997 that 'we continue to witness a dearth of articles, and even fewer monographs, devoted to Mamluk historians and their writings.' The only exception is obviously Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) who has been subject to an unrivalled number of studies, some of them focusing on his historical production, most notably those by 'A. al-Azmeh and A. Cheddadi.²⁷ Yet even al-Maqrīzī, whose oeuvre constitutes arguably the most-cited historiographical material in current Mamluk scholarship has not been dealt with in a compre-

24 'Imād al-Dīn, *al-Barq*. vols. 3 and 5 idem, *al-Fath*; Ibn Shaddād, *al-Nawādir*. Ibn 'Asākir, *Ta'rikh*.

25 Rosenthal, *History*; Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*; Khalidi, *Historical Thought*; Humphreys, et al., *Ta'rikh*; Guo, *Historiographic Studies*; Hirschler, *Islam*.

26 Guo, *Historiographic Studies*; Irwin, *Mamluk History*; Little, *Historiography*.

27 Al-'Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn*; Cheddadi, *Ibn Khaldūn*.

hensive survey. We now have a number of excellent articles on his works, many of them by F. Bauden in his *Maqriziana*-series and a special issue of the *Mamlūk Studies Review* on him, as well as an unpublished PhD-thesis on his historical outlook, but a dedicated monograph has not yet been published.²⁸ Moving beyond these two authors the picture becomes increasingly dire. Ibn Taghribirdī (d. 815/1412) authored a crucial biographical dictionary of rulers, officers and scholars from 650/1248 to 855/1451, *al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi*, two chronicles of Egypt, *al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah* and *Ḥawādith al-Duhūr* and further condensations and summaries.²⁹ Yet the only monograph on him does not aim to comprehensively study the author as a historian and the published articles are less numerous and far less informative than those on al-Maqrīzī.³⁰ For most authors even substantial articles, such as S. Conermann on Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 955/1548), are the exception. The sole period of Mamluk history writing which can now claim relatively good coverage is the early Mamluk era.³¹

In addition to the lack of focused studies on individual historians, overview articles of Mamluk-era historiography are also deceptive in another sense, namely with regard to the philological quality of editions. Students of the Mamluk era now have an unrivalled number of edited texts at their disposal. The large-scale biographical dictionaries of the like of al-Dhahabī and al-Birzālī from the eighth/fourteenth century, al-Nuwayrī's (d. 733/1333) monumental encyclopaedia *Nihāyat al-arab* and an ever increasing number of chronicles have become available in printed and digitised formats.³² Yet, despite the crucial importance of historiographical texts, the scholarly field relies in many cases on editions that can be described as 'non-critical' at best. These editions are often outdated reprints of those produced in the late 19th/early 20th century. To return to the example of Abū al-Fidā' and his concise universal chronicle: The first complete edition of this text was published in 1870 in Istanbul without information on the manuscript used. Some four decades later the Cairene Ḥusaynīya press reissued the work with only slight amendments. Since then this

28 Bauden, *Maqriziana* IX; special issue: *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7/2 (2003); Dalil-Essakali, *La conception*. The closest we get to a monograph is F. Sayyid's introduction in F. Sayyid, *Le manuscrit*.

29 Ibn Taghribirdī, *Ḥawādith*; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Manhal*; Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm*.

30 Sievert, *Der Herrscherwechsel*; Lajnat al-Ta'rikh, *Al-Mu'arrikh Ibn Taghribirdī*; Perho, *Al-Maqrīzī*.

31 Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*; Little, *Introduction*. Further monographs include for instance Guo, *Syrian Historiography*; Morray, *Ayyubid*; Hirschler, *Arabic Historiography*, on Ibn Wāṣil and Abū Shāmāh.

32 Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*; al-Birzālī, *al-Muqtafi*; al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat*; Digital resources such as *Maktabat al-ta'rikh wa-al-ḥadāra al-islāmiya* (al-Turāth) and *al-Maktaba al-Shāmīla* (freeware, <http://shamela.ws/>) are of increasing importance despite their emphasis on texts concerning the early Islamic period.

edition has been reprinted in different places (Baghdad [1968?], Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmīyah [19??], Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif [1998–1999]) without any substantial improvement.³³ This state of affairs is also driven by the fact that pre-modern historical works enjoy a popularity in the modern Middle East that is simply non-existent elsewhere. Consequently, publishing houses in Beirut, Cairo and other cities massively reprint and produce what C. Gilliot has called in his surveys of newly published source editions in the *Mélanges de l'Institut dominicain d'études orientales* 'commercial editions'. These editions routinely do not even state what manuscript(s) were used, they generally do not try to establish an overview of the known manuscripts and their critical apparatus is often rather poor.³⁴ Rather than aiming at a scholarly audience they are better understood as coffee-table editions for an educated lay readership that appreciates the richly decorated and splendid covers.

At the same time, the production of serious critical editions in European or US-American universities and research institutes has virtually stopped in recent decades. There are a few exceptions such as M. Rahim's wonderful edition of the final parts of Ibn Wāṣīl's (d. 697/1298) chronicle covering the early Mamluk period or the long-running project of editing al-Ṣafādī's biographical dictionary.³⁵ That the production of editions has ground to a virtual halt or has at least significantly slowed down in US-American and European academia is also closely tied to the rise of 'performance'-driven and competitive mechanisms for financing academic research. Initiatives such as the German *Exzellenzinitiative* or the British *Research Excellence Framework* have tended to undervalue 'mere' editorial work and have pushed the field at the same time towards interdisciplinary and transregional work that leaves little room for producing editions. While initiatives like the Ghent-project and the Bonn-based *Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg for History and Society during the Mamluk Era* have been of great benefit for the field, the strings attached to their funding might be framing the field in ways that are detrimental in the long term.

Consequently, even for the canonical works such as those by al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and Ibn Khaldūn, editions are being used that fall way short of even the most basic requirements of philological scholarship. For instance, al-Maqrīzī's encyclopaedia of historical topography, his *Khīṭaṭ*, was used for some 150 years in the entirely unsatisfactory Bulāq-edition of 1853. A. Sayyid's new edition of this work has certainly improved the quality of the text, yet it still falls short of a truly critical edition.³⁶ For a widely used chronicle such as Ibn

33 Abū al-Fidā', *Mukhtaṣar* (1869/70); *ibid.* (1907).

34 For remarks on editorial techniques of Mamluk historiographical texts cf. also Guo, *Historiographic Studies*, 15–27.

35 Rahim, *Chronik*; al-Ṣafādī, *al-Wāfi*.

36 Bauden, *Review: Sayyid, al-Mawā'iz*.

Taghrībirdī's *Nujūm* the situation is worse still. This chronicle was edited in Cairo from the 1920s onwards in a decade-long process. Although the quality of most volumes is mediocre at best, it is this edition or reprints of it that are routinely used until the present day.³⁷ Leaving the groundwork of editing to colleagues based at Middle Eastern universities, as has increasingly been the case in recent decades, cannot be the solution. The edition output of an individual such as 'U. al-Tadmūrī is simply awe-inspiring, including al-Dhahabī's massive biographical dictionary, Ibn Wāṣil's universal history and al-Birzālī's dictionary to name but a few.³⁸ However, it is evident that more reliable editions require cooperation between individual academics and institutions that are able to sustain such large projects. It is thus one of the great challenges of the field to direct more resources into activities as 'non-excellent', 'non-transregional' and 'non-innovative' as editing new sources or re-editing those editions of unsatisfactory quality. While source genres such as coins, deeds and manuscript notes have offered and will continue to offer crucial departure points for research, narrative historiography can only continue to play a central role in the field if the groundwork of offering a secure philological basis for these texts is carried out.

While such groundwork is indispensable, the exact role of historiography within the field depends on the ways in which Mamluk historiographical texts are used and what approaches have been applied for studying such texts in their own right. In the following, this article argues that historiographical texts, especially biographical dictionaries, still have a crucial role to play in fields such as social history and cultural history. Yet the potential of these texts for advancing the field can only be fully harnessed if they are seen as more than repositories of social and or cultural facts.

Approaches and Debates

The study of Mamluk historical writing started within the framework of source-critical approaches and these approaches have remained a crucial feature of the field. U. Haarmann's and D. Little's works examined – though not exclusively – their respective sources according to their source value for modern historians. Such an approach has remained a salient feature of the field and also underlies more recent work such as K. Franz's study of the process of compilation in chronicles and S. Massoud's discussion of late eighth/fourteenth-century chronicles.³⁹ The underlying assumption of many of these studies is that the

37 Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm*.

38 Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*; Ibn Wāṣil, *al-Ta'rikh al-Ṣāliḥī*; Al-Birzālī, *Al-Muqtafī*.

39 Franz, *Kompilation*; Massoud, *The Chronicles*.

isolation of reports on a specific issue/event/person can bring about a better understanding of their historicity. While such questions will obviously remain at the heart of historical inquiry into any given topic, it is less obvious whether such dedicated studies will contribute a great deal to our understanding of historical works. For instance, the field of early Islamic historiography has moved on and has increasingly departed from the view of historical texts as a collection of individual reports in the *khbar* style. Rather, and especially for the texts written from the fourth/tenth century onwards, the view of these texts has shifted towards seeing them more as coherent narratives that have to be analysed as such.⁴⁰

Certainly, the strict chronological system that prevailed in chronicles curtailed to some extent the possibilities of crafting such coherent narratives. Nevertheless, recent scholarship has become more interested in the authorial voice of chroniclers, which became more distinct and less timid not only in the introductions, but also in the main texts. This interest in the chronicler's voice included an interest in how an authorial decision was made to organise events and of how to endow them with new meanings. The increased textual room for manoeuvre allowed the chroniclers to craft texts more individually and a comparison of works that report the same events in the Middle Period suffices to show how these authors used this room. Beyond the organisation of historical works, the distinctive authorial presence also became evident in the increased use of the authorial 'I' and the intrusion of autobiographical elements into the texts. For instance, while Abū Shāma described his personal life in Damascus in detail in his wonderfully eccentric cross between a biographical dictionary, chronicle and autobiography, Abū al-Fidā' detailed his efforts to regain rule in his northern Syrian hometown of Hama. This development culminated in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in historical works that are diary-like accounts with the author repeatedly at centre-stage, such as the chronicles by Ibn Ṭawq (d. ca. 1431) and Ibn Ṭūlūn.⁴¹

The shift from analysing historical works in terms of narratives/authors rather than *akhbār*/compilers does not only mean that the coherency of the texts moves into focus, but also that the social context of the author takes on increasing importance. This shift has been evident in the field of Mamluk historiography, not so much as an outcome of a sustained scholarly discussion of the issue, but more because of a simple shift towards individual authors. As discussed above, the number of works that we have in this regard are still limited, but Morray's discussion of the late Ayyubid-early Mamluk transition-period

40 As reflected in Donner, *Narratives*; El-Hibri, *Reinterpreting*; Shoshan, *The Poetics*; El-Hibri, *Parable*.

41 Abū Shāmah, *al-Dhayl*; Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*; Ibn Ṭawq, *Al-Ta'īq*.

biographical dictionary of Ibn al-'Adīm is a splendid example. By drawing from the text itself Morray is able to give a unique insight into the social and intellectual world of this scholar and thus contextualise the production of the text.

Arguably, a more important outcome of the shift towards narratives and authors is that it puts an end to the lingering discussion on the 'litarisation' of Mamluk historiography. U. Haarmann proposed this evocative term in 1969 and it has since remained a constant feature in debates on this period's historical writing. With this term Haarmann drew attention to the increasing use of the anecdote, of dialectical elements and of direct speech, as well as the authors' tendency to invent oral sources and their rigorous attempts to dedicate the same textual space to each year irrespective of the importance of the year's events.⁴² B. Radtke has already drawn attention to the fact that these elements were not necessarily new, but had existed in earlier periods.⁴³ However, the main problem with this term is that it implied a dichotomy between literary fictional texts on the one hand and historical factual texts on the other. With the move towards narratives and authors this dichotomy is no longer a useful category for understanding the development of historical writing. The question is now rather how literary forms were changing over time, what different means authors employed and how they ascribed meaning to events. U. Haarmann's observations on the Mamluk period gain new significance because he had rightly observed that changes did take place in the way authors crafted their narratives. The recent and rich scholarship on historiography in the formative period has certainly shown that litarisation was not a new phenomenon, but U. Haarmann was right in saying that the use of the anecdote as a standard element in Mamluk historical writing was an important but under-researched phenomenon.

The Uses of Historiographical Texts

Owing to the centrality of narrative historiography, chronicles and biographical dictionaries have been used in virtually every study of the Mamluk era that has been published in recent decades. This holds true for the different fields of historical inquiry ranging from political and institutional history via cultural and intellectual history to social and economic history. In this sense the profile and outlook of these texts and their authors have proved to be highly influential well beyond the tenth/sixteenth century. To cite the two most obvious examples, the Mamlukologist biases towards urban centres as the central area of research

42 Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 159–83; Haarmann, *Auflösung*.

43 Radtke, *Weltgeschichte*.

and Egypt as the main region of research are both a direct reflection of the outlook of Mamluk-era authors.

Mamluk historiography is as urban-centred as a historiographical tradition might be. The authors resided almost without exception in large urban centres and the events they describe generally took place in the urban landscapes of the Mamluk realms. The seventh/thirteenth-century *History of the Fayyūm*, central to Y. Rapoport's project at Queen Mary/University of London on rural societies, is one of the rare exceptions dealing in detail with villages and villagers.⁴⁴ As much as the urban tunnel vision of al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and their like has remained influential until the present day, so did their Egypt-centred world-view. Throughout the Ayyubid and the early Mamluk periods, historical writing about the Egyptian/Syrian lands took place largely in Damascus, Aleppo and the lesser Syrian towns. Yet from the mid-eighth/fourteenth century onwards, Egypt started to supersede Syria as the main centre for the production of historical knowledge. While Syrian authors like Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah (d. 851/1448) continued to produce historical works in the ninth/fifteenth century, it was evident that the heyday of Syrian historiography had come to an end. At the same time, the increasingly Egypt-based authors paid rather scant attention to Syrian events unless they were interlinked with events in Egypt. This Egypt- and Cairo-centrism has been reflected in the profile of modern Mamluk scholarship and it is not by chance that work challenging this regional bias is often based on new source genres such as the above-mentioned archaeological work by B. Walker and M. Milwright on southern Syria. In the same vein, the 2007-*Mamlūk Studies Review* special volume (XI/1) on the Mamluk provinces also contained a significant number of articles based on material culture.

However, the regional imbalance in modern studies has not only been addressed by the increased study of material culture, but also in historiographical studies themselves. One of the important developments that we have witnessed in recent decades in the field is that the rich tradition of Syrian historiography during the early Mamluk period has been brought to the forefront. It has been mainly the work of L. Guo that has consistently underlined the importance of the Syrian lands for producing historical works in significant numbers.⁴⁵ After the above-mentioned beginnings under Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, a continuous trickle of works was produced by the likes of Ibn al-ʿAdīm (d. 660/1262), Sibṭ b. al-Jawzī (d. 654/

44 Al-Nābulusī, *Taʾrīkh*. For Rapoport's project see <http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/ruralsocietyislam/>.

45 Most importantly Guo, *Syrian Historiography*, but also his overview article *History*. The vivacity of the Syrian historiographical tradition has now become a well-established notion, cf. Irwin, *Mamluk History*.

1256) and Abū Shāmah (d. 665/1267).⁴⁶ This culminated in the rich tradition of annalistic and prosopographical works authored by al-Yūnīnī (d. 726/1326), al-Jazarī (d. 739/1338), al-Birzālī (d. 739/1339), al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), al-Kutubī (d. 764/1363) and finally Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373).⁴⁷

Biographical Dictionaries and Social/Cultural Histories

Rather than reflecting on how the biases of narrative historiography has shaped the modern field of Mamluk Studies – fascinating as the topic might be – the following focuses on two specific uses of narrative texts, namely in social and in cultural history. These examples are also chosen because they highlight the importance of prosopographical historiography, i. e. biographical dictionaries, for advancing our understanding of Mamluk history. These texts have tended to stand on the side-lines of reflections on historiographical practice as, for instance, in the above-mentioned survey works by F. Rosenthal, T. Khalidi and C. Robinson. This neglect starkly contrasts with the position of biographical dictionaries that are without doubt the most remarkable field of narrative history writing in Arabic, especially during the Mamluk period. It is not an exaggeration to claim that ‘no other preindustrial society can claim such an abundance of information about various segments of the population’.⁴⁸ In the study of earlier periods of Middle Eastern history R. Bulliet’s work has shown their usefulness as one of the main repositories for factual knowledge and W. al-Qadi has recently reiterated their peculiar profile compared with chronicles, framing them as the ‘scholars’ alternative history’.⁴⁹

More pertinent to Mamluk Studies, biographical dictionaries were particularly helpful during the brief period when the field took up the challenges raised by social history or rather New Social History. New Social History reshaped the make-up of history departments and historical practice during the 1970s as it presented new questions and new methods, especially quantitative approaches. The classic in our field to stand in this tradition is evidently C. Petry’s *Civilian Elite*, the first study that tapped into the potential of computer-based prosopographical research. Among the subsequent studies J. Berkey’s *Transmission of*

46 Ibn al-ʿAdīm, *Zubdat* and idem, *Bughyat* (cf. Morray, *Ayyubid*); Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mirʿāt*; Abū Shāmah, *Al-Dhayl* and idem, *Al-Rawḍatayn*.

47 Al-Yūnīnī, *Dhayl* (cf. Guo, *Syrian Historiography*); al-Jazarī, *Ḥawāḍith* not edited yet, cf. for instance MS Paris, BN arabe 6739 (*Jawāhir al-sulūk fī al-khulafāʾ wa-al-mulūk*); al-Birzālī, *Al-Muqtafī*; al-Dhahabī, *Taʾrīkh*; al-Kutubī, *Fawāt* and idem, *ʿUyūn*, vol. 20; Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāya*.

48 Nawas, *Biography*, 112.

49 Bulliet, *Conversion*; Al-Qadi, *Biographical Dictionaries*. Cf. also Auchterlonie, *Historians*.

Knowledge must be singled out for its creative use of prosopographical data that is used here in combination with other sources, especially endowment deeds.⁵⁰ The central claim of New Social History was the possibility that social structures that determined politics and culture could be detected and analysed as objective and transpersonal patterns. However, Mamlukologists never really warmed up to the positivist epistemology and objectivist ontology that underlay a great part of New Social History and that dominated many of the articles in 'general' (that is, predominantly European and US-American focused) history journals in the 1970s such as the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of Modern History*. This reluctance in Mamluk Studies was arguably also linked to the very nature of biographical dictionaries and their focus on religious scholars. In consequence, social history in Mamluk Studies has always been linked to 'ulamology' and has thus had an inherent cultural bent lurking in the background.

New Social History experienced a spectacular demise in most fields of history from the 1980s onwards when the Cultural Turn worked its way through the different disciplines. While this demise was to some extent linked to simple fatigue following the hegemonic position and dominance that the social approach had held, the same cannot be said regarding its place within Mamluk Studies. Here, the potential of social-history approaches has not been really tapped into and still constitutes a crucial direction into which the field can move. This is especially the case as biographical dictionaries have been almost exclusively put to use for Cairo whereas the rich early Mamluk material for the Syrian towns such as Aleppo and Damascus has not been sufficiently taken into consideration.⁵¹

This regional bias towards Cairo is particularly problematic in the case of biographical dictionaries as it is precisely the heavily local and regional nature of these texts that make them so valuable. As they drill relatively deep into the social fabric of their local societies, they give unique insights into the lower ends of society that are often not evident from chronicles or other texts. Beyond doubt, almost all of those included were attached to the world of the religious scholar. Yet, in the local and regional dictionaries, such as Ibn al-'Adīm's *Bughyat al-Ṭalab* on Aleppo or al-Dhahabī's *Ta'rikh al-Islām* on Damascus the net is cast widely and we gain insights into the world of the city's part-time scholars and low salaried groups such as the *mu'adhdhins* of minor mosques who would not appear in the grand chronicles.⁵² There is one field closely linked to social history, women's history, for which Mamluk Studies has employed biographical dictionaries to some extent. This usage of biographical dictionaries was indeed

50 Petry, *Civilian Elite*; Berkey, *Transmission*.

51 The main exception obviously being Chamberlain, *Knowledge*.

52 Ibn al-'Adīm, *Bughyat*; al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*.

in the framework of 'women's history', before this approach was reconfigured as Gender Studies. The main aim in such studies has thus been to show the role of women and their contribution to various fields of social activities.⁵³

Beyond social history, biographical dictionaries will also prove to be a crucial resource for taking up the challenges of the Cultural Turn. This turn has made an explicit entrance into the field of Mamluk Studies, particularly in the form of Historical Anthropology. The most programmatic expression of the inroads culturalist approaches have made is the 2007-volume by S. Conermann and S. von Hees *Islamic Studies as Cultural Anthropology*, which contained several contributions touching upon the Mamluk era.⁵⁴ However, it is Th. Bauer's 2011-book *Culture of Ambiguity* which implements the programmatic claims of historical anthropology into the first large-scale study focused upon the Mamluk period.⁵⁵ The relatively slow arrival of the Cultural Turn in Mamluk Studies is a result of the field's inherent cultural bent, which characterised studies well before the 1980s. In contrast to the fields of European and American history, where the dominance of New Social History had been much stronger, Mamluk Studies had less of an impetus to turn with the same vehemence in the opposite direction.

While the uptake of such culturalist approaches has thus not been very accentuated in the field, the following will suggest that they have considerable potential to advance it, especially if applied to biographical dictionaries. One topic where biographical dictionaries can play a crucial role in cultural studies is suicide, to take just one example. Although the Qur'ān did not discuss suicide in detail, several *ḥadīths* unequivocally condemn it as illicit and threaten the culprit with severe punishment in hell. Later scholarly discussions primarily focused upon whether funeral prayers may be spoken over somebody who ended his or her own life. Yet, suicide seemed to be as frequent in Egypt and Syria as in other regions, as indicated by the relative importance of the subject in popular works. The classical article on this issue remains F. Rosenthal's piece which, like other contemporary works, discusses the phenomenon in Islam in general. However, it shows the author's usual breadth as well as his skills in drawing together disparate material into an argumentative whole.⁵⁶ For Mamluk Studies B. Martel-Thoumian has extensively discussed the issue with a characteristic focus on late-Mamluk chronicles.⁵⁷

F. Rosenthal argued that only an insignificant number of religious scholars

53 For instance Roded, *Women*; Afsaruddin, *Biographical Dictionaries*; Lutfi, *Al-Sakhāwī's*.

54 Conermann, v. Hees, *Islamwissenschaft*.

55 Bauer, *Ambiguität*. Bauer's argument transcends the Mamluk era, but due to the richness of Mamluk-era material and examples, it is an outstanding resource for our field.

56 Rosenthal, *On Suicide*.

57 Martel-Thoumian, *La mort*. The same focus on chronicle is evident in brief studies of the issue such as Jawād, *al-Muntaḥirūn*, who most probably used Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, *al-Ḥawādith*.

committed suicide in the premodern era.⁵⁸ More specifically, he enumerates for the Mamluk era eleven cases of suicide or attempted suicide, not very surprisingly all situated in Cairo. Of these, only two were scholars while the vast majority were leading officials or officers. This result is to a large extent driven by the fact that he predominantly used chronicles as a source basis, especially Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Nujūm* and Ibn Iyās' (d. ca. 930/1524) *Badā'i'*.⁵⁹ In Martel-Thoumian's study the number of suicide cases is larger at twenty-eight, but the focus on Cairo is again accentuated with only three cases registered beyond the city's walls. The most remarkable point is, however, that again leading officials and officers are at the centre. Scholars are virtually absent and there are no qadis, muftis or imams among those who decided to put an end to their lives.⁶⁰ For Cairo the source is not Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Nujūm*, as in F. Rosenthal, but al-Ṣayrafī's (d. 900/1495) *Inbā' al-Ḥaṣr*.⁶¹ However, as late Mamluk chronicles were the main source basis in both cases the results have been comparable with regard to the social profile of the individuals and their regional background.

Yet, it is in the biographical dictionaries that we encounter a wider cross-section of society and learn more detail about the backgrounds of those who decided to end their lives, forms of and reasons leading to suicide, as well as contemporary perceptions and representations of and reactions to such deaths. It is not by chance that this information is almost exclusively found in the biographical dictionaries and not in chronicles, as the latter tended to focus on the highest echelons of the cultural, social and political elites. For instance, the contemporary chronicles did not report the suicide of a minor scholar in seventh/thirteenth-century Damascus who was driven to desperation by slander. Confronted with accusations and aggrieved by loss of money this blind scholar eventually hanged himself in the western minaret of the Umayyad mosque.⁶² Taqī al-Dīn 'Īsā's suicide was only mentioned in one biographical dictionary and this person is entirely unknown from any other sources. Another example would be a certain al-'Izz al-Akhḷāṭī who hanged himself some decades later in his lodgings in the Damascene al-'Ādiliya madrasah.⁶³ Again this person is unknown from any other source and a perfect example of how deeply biographical dictionaries can reach into the layers of their contemporary society.

Beyond doubt, chronicles and biographical dictionaries are not watertight

58 Rosenthal, *On Suicide*.

59 Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i'*.

60 B. Martel-Thoumian, *La mort*. Among the 28 cases there is only one definitely referring to a scholar (no. 23), a *muqri'* who hanged himself in a *madrasah*, and another case where the individual is closely linked to the scholarly world (no. 13).

61 Al-Ṣayrafī, *Inbā'*.

62 Abū Shāmah, *Al-Dhayl*, 54–5.

63 Abū Shāmah, *Al-Dhayl*, 190 (year 654/1256).

categories and many historiographical works combine annalistic chronography with lists of those noteworthy individuals who deceased in these years. Yet what is noteworthy for the Mamluk period is the surge in numbers of more or less 'pure' biographical dictionaries with a very specific regional focus. The Cairo-centric large compendia of Ibn Ḥajar (d. 852/1449) and al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) are only the later expressions of a process that had begun earlier.⁶⁴ Of special interest for the present discussion are those dictionaries that focus on Syrian towns, such as the above-mentioned *Bughyat al-Ṭalab* by Ibn al-'Adīm on Aleppo or *Ta'riḫ al-Islām* by al-Dhahabī on Damascus. While Ibn al-'Adīm could easily include more than 8.000 individuals, al-Dhahabī's was able to include ten thousand biographies in his seventy-volume dictionary.⁶⁵ Of utmost interest are the final ten volumes covering the seventh *hijrī*-century (1203–1300), partly overlapping with the author's own lifetime. Here the Damascus-focus becomes ever more accentuated and increasingly obscure 'scholars' of his hometown make their appearance in the over 6.000 entries dedicated to this century alone. More fascinating still are the marginal biographical dictionaries that made their appearance. Staying with Damascus, this encompasses for instance Abū Shāmah's *Dhayl*, the above-mentioned eccentric cross between biographical dictionary, chronicle and autobiography. Some decades later a contemporary of al-Dhahabī, al-Birzālī (d. 739/1339), wrote a continuation of Abū Shāmah's *Dhayl*, in which he adopted the original work's mixture of some chronography and large chunks of prosopography for the following decades into the early eighth/fourteenth century. For the fifty-five years that he covered he included an impressive number of over 4,300 scholars in his biographical section.⁶⁶ The main point regarding al-Birzālī's work is again the very sharp regional focus that allowed the author to include numerous individuals on the margins of the scholarly community. Such scholars not only fell through the net of the pure chronicles, but also through those of the transregional biographical dictionaries, while they played here, in these biographical 'microhistories', a salient role. It is this richness of the material that makes such dictionaries crucial repositories for researching themes and approaches that have arisen in the framework of cultural history.

64 Ibn Ḥajar, *Al-Durar*; Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*.

65 Morray, *Ayyubid*. The number for Ibn al-'Adīm is estimated as only one quarter of his work has survived.

66 Al-Birzālī, *Al-Muqtafi*. On this work cf. Rouabah, *Une édition*.

Biographical Dictionaries and the Archival Turn

While narrative historiography in its prosopographical form will thus play a crucial role as a repository of information serving the interest of both the social and the cultural historian, their main role in advancing Mamluk Studies lies elsewhere. As M. Chamberlain has argued in his study of early Mamluk Damascus the relative scarcity of documentary material and the extremely rich tradition of narrative historiography should not be read primarily in terms of deficiencies and absences. Rather the task is to read this material in its own right taking into account the social logic for the survival or loss of specific genres of documents and narrative texts.⁶⁷ Certainly, historians of the Mamluk era lack the plethora of documentary material available for Latin European medieval societies, such as charters, deeds, land grants and legal proceedings. Yet it is in the biographical dictionaries that authors recorded, presented and narrated what they considered to be worthy of remembrance. There was an underlying social logic to producing and more importantly preserving these works. These societies were characterised by the limited role of formalised and inheritable ascriptions of status, while they were primarily structured by informal commitments between individuals. In consequence, individuals, families and social groups in these societies displayed a relatively weak tendency to preserve documents such as deeds and charters. It was rather in the biographical dictionaries that the civilian elites remembered their – often very recent – past with the intention of securing their future. This argument on the social utility of the genre focuses on the social function of biographical dictionaries, which is comparable with the role of documentary sources in other traditions. As much as deeds and charters were crucial in securing the transmission of elite status over generations in Latin Europe and China, biographical dictionaries bore testimony to those informal relationships between individuals that secured the stability of Middle Eastern societies.

Taking this argument one step further, I propose the consideration that biographical dictionaries also serve as the archives of the societies we are concerned with. Within these archives, members of the cultural elites in Syria and Egypt recorded what they perceived to be the structural element of their social world, i.e. the multitude of contacts, relationships and bonds between individuals that shaped and constituted their societies. If we consider biographical dictionaries to be a form of archive this allows us to take into account the ‘archival turn’, one of the developments within the broader field of cultural

⁶⁷ Chamberlain, *Knowledge*, 1–26. For a criticism of Chamberlain’s position cf. Marina, *A Petition*.

history over the last two decades.⁶⁸ This recent scholarly interest in archives considers them not only as neutral sites for research and repositories of more or less reliable factual knowledge, but also as fascinating objects of study in themselves. Basically this means a move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject, i. e. the possibility of seeing the archive as a historical agent.⁶⁹

This reconsideration of the archive is part of a larger movement within the humanities, especially cultural theory, and goes back, amongst others, to Michel Foucault's early writings. His *Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge* have been particularly influential. These works are still of sufficient specificity to be of some value for practicing historians and they have been central in the development of Cultural Anthropology in its literary bent. Here he repositioned the archive as a space of enunciation because '[t]he archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. [...] It is *the system of [the statement-event's] enunciability*.'⁷⁰ In historical studies, this has been taken up in particular in post-colonial studies where it has proved to be particularly enriching for studying the production of colonial knowledge of or rather over the indigenous Other. At the same time it has also proved fruitful for medieval Europe. For instance, in her work on late medieval law and gender in England, Sh. McSheffrey has focused upon questions such as how the documents came to be archived in the first place, in whose interest they were preserved and how the documenting of particular events and processes – and not others – shapes how we conceptualise the past.⁷¹

Here again there is an element of Cultural History, but this time, instead of inviting us to study topics such as suicide on the basis of a different source material, it calls for a more substantial recalibration of our approach towards historiography. It asks for the interpretive practices that produced inter-subjective cultural patterns; it asks, in other words, how societies were underlain by systems of meanings that were as real and far-reaching as social structures. Applying such a perspective to the wealth of Mamluk biographical dictionaries that we have at our disposal thus allows us to ask questions that go well beyond the themes studied in social history along the lines of 'ulamology', but also beyond the 'archive-as-source' mode of cultural history. Such studies in the 'archive-as-subject' mode would allow us to understand the large number of these massive regional compendia stretching from Ibn al-'Adīm to al-Sakhāwī as agents in the historical process. They are thus works that were often composed because they were meant to do something, to be, at least potentially, perform-

68 The term 'archival turn' was to a large extent coined by Ann Stoler, an anthropologist-historian working on South and South-East Asia.

69 Stoler, *Archival Grain*, 44 – 46. Cf. also Stoler, *Colonial Archives*; Eichhorn, *Archival Genres*.

70 Foucault, *Archaeology*, 145/6.

71 McSheffrey, *Detective*.

ative. In this sense these texts coordinated the writers' and readers' meaning-making processes and oriented them towards 'shared mentally constructed spaces' where meaning was performed through the act of writing and re-performed through the act of reading.⁷²

Such a recalibration translates into concrete research on various levels. Firstly, if we start to see Mamluk biographical dictionaries as agents, questions pertaining to their emergence and their genesis come to the forefront. Just like archives in the classical sense, they were structured by implicit rules of what was to be preserved, what was to be discarded and how it was to be collected. F. Bauden's work on al-Maqrizi's autograph has been ground-breaking to gain insights into the actual making of historical chronography.⁷³ Similar work for biographical dictionaries would greatly enhance our understanding of these works' structure, their silences and the authors' strategies of inclusion and exclusion. Autographs are not always available to give us insights into the different stages of drafting works. Yet an internal comparison of textual strategies for diachronic works such as al-Dhahabī's *Ta'rikh* in the early periods and in the periods contemporary to the author will yield insights into authorial strategies that varied for the different periods. Especially in those instances where we have a multitude of biographical dictionaries for one period and one locality, the consideration of these texts as historical agents allows us to ask new questions about the different profiles, outlooks and strategies of these quasi-archival repositories. For instance, how did authors and readers envision social bonds of commitments, expound upon their problematic nature and focus or gloss over moments of conflict and rupture?

The enormous wealth of the Cairene prosopographical tradition in particular allows such questions to be studied in detail. Yet we also have sufficient material for other cases, such as al-Dhahabī's and Abū Shāma's dictionaries for seventh/thirteenth-century Damascus. One case-study to render the archival turn more concrete is the Ayyubid-Mamluk transition period during the early 650s/mid-1250s. Both authors covered this period in detail in their biographical works.⁷⁴ Abū Shāma was an eye-witness and was in his fifties. Al-Dhahabī reached maturity some four decades later, but it is evident that he had a very close interest in these years. Reading through these works we see that these authors constructed their archives in radically different modes. Each piece of information is embedded in a wider strategy to ascribe diverging meanings to the period's events.

In his narrative of these years, Abū Shāmah prioritised obituaries of those

72 Bazerman, *Textual Performance*, here 381.

73 Bauden, *Maqriziana I, Section 1*; idem, *Maqriziana I, Section 2*; idem, *Maqriziana II*.

74 The years covered are those between 651 and 655: Abū Shāmah, *Al-Dhayl*, 178–98; al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 651–60, pp. 87–223.

scholars who withdrew from society and were reclusive. His information on individuals is thus largely limited to their piety, learnedness and their charitable deeds. This flow of information implies a reclusive ideal world of scholars who were hardly affected by the dramatic changes taking place around them in this period. This is carefully interwoven with information on the author himself and on his family, who appear over and over again in a strikingly isolated and reclusive fashion. Tellingly, a poem for his wife is one of the two longest continuous sections in these years.⁷⁵ Compared with al-Dhahabī's work, his dictionary has considerably fewer biographies, indicating that Abū Shāmah carefully chose whom to include and whom to exclude, i. e. those who did not fit into this tranquil world of scholarly endeavours unaffected by the changes in the wider world.

However, at some points this idyllic world was disturbed and this is when Abū Shāmah turns to obituaries of the military and political elites. It is not that he was uninterested in them or that there were fewer of them compared with al-Dhahabī's work.⁷⁶ Yet these individuals appear as foreign elements, brutally interrupting the continuous flow of the text and thus of events. They are not part of the social and cultural map that Abū Shāmah tried to build up, but rather they strive to undermine it, to usurp control and to monopolise resources. The leading Mamluk Bahārī-officer and one of the main contenders for the Sultanate in the Ayyubid-Mamluk transition period, Fāris al-Dīn Aqṭay (d. 652/1254), breaks onto the scene as the one who 'suppressed the inhabitants' of Egypt and 'ruined' them.⁷⁷ Other biographies on members of the political and military elites are basically tales of court-intrigue, murder and treachery that are less skilfully narrated than in Hamlet, but not dramatically different in their bleak outlook.⁷⁸

Al-Dhahabī included in his text all the individuals featuring in Abū Shāmah's text, but the world that emerges from these years is one that is radically different and essentially more complex. Members of the military and political elites are still usurping power and eating into the wealth of the civilian elites. Yet they are less foreign than in Abū Shāmah's archive, as their actions and dealings are set into the wider context of the emerging Mamluk society – even a Fāris al-Dīn Aqṭay can be praised as 'noble and generous'.⁷⁹ At the same time, the scholars he included cover much wider ground and, most importantly for the present ar-

75 Abū Shāmah, *Al-Dhayl*, 196–8.

76 Al-Dhahabī includes more than six times the number of biographies of Abū Shāmah (235 and 35 respectively), but only twice as many biographies of members of the political and military elites (14 and 6 respectively).

77 Abū Shāmah, *Al-Dhayl*, 188.

78 Abū Shāmah, *Al-Dhayl*, 196.

79 Al-Dhahabī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 651–60, p. 118.

gument, are less reclusive than in Abū Shāmah's text. Rather they interact with wider society in roles such as trader, merchant, administrator, physician and notary witness. In other words the somewhat reclusive world of Abū Shāmah is here turned into one where the various groups of society interacted more closely. Al-Dhahabī envisaged the transition period to be as dramatic as Abū Shāma did, but he considered it to be less of an outside intrusion.

The example of the Ayyubid-Mamluk transition period shows how the same pieces of information in these two archives of the Damascene elites could gain entirely different meanings. These authors read the same obituaries in widely diverging ways and consequently envisaged the political and social processes in different modes. In some ways this completes the argument in my *Medieval Arabic Historiography* where I discussed the narrative modes in the two chronicles by Ibn Wāṣil and Abū Shāmah. The decisive difference in these outwardly similar chronicles was that Ibn Wāṣil saw just rule as a continuous reality in his recent past, whereas Abū Shāma was a staunch critic of his own times and situated a romanticised version of just rule in the periods of Nūr al-Dīn (d. 569/1174) and Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (d. 589/1193) in the late sixth/twelfth century.⁸⁰ The vision put forward by these two authors concerned only the person of the ruler itself and was basically a contribution to medieval political thought. In their biographical dictionaries, by contrast, al-Dhahabī and Abū Shāmah deal with a completely different level of society. Rather than being theoretical reflections on where ideal rule was situated and how it was to be conceptualised, the biographical dictionaries focus on wider urban society. For the period discussed here, the Ayyubid-Mamluk transition period, these texts thus allow us to gain an understanding of how political processes were envisaged to unfold in society at large.

This is not to argue that these biographical dictionaries, or Mamluk historiography in general, were free-flowing texts that do not allow access to historical processes and events beyond their discursive strategies or archival modes. Rather, it is the best of cultural history that has achieved the bridging of the turn to meaning on the one hand with a dedicated interest in social processes on the other. There is no denial that to bridge this gap is difficult as social and cultural histories are to some degree incompatible. Whereas social history tends to assume that structure is prior to social action, cultural history sees the social world as constituted by the interpretive actions of the actors who made it up. In consequence, while social historians analyse hard data for revealing objective structure, their culturalist-inclined colleagues tend to focus on the inevitably interpretive practices that produced cultural patterns. However, the archival turn as outlined here and as applied to biographical dictionaries does not

80 Hirschler, *Arabic Historiography*.

forestall the possibility of continuing to use these texts for questions pertinent to social history, or political history for that matter. The main point is rather that the Cultural Turn allows us to consider Mamluk historiography, be it in its prosopographical or its chronistic form, as a richer genre of texts than either social or political history considered them to be. In other words, by moving beyond source-critical questions and seeing the texts as more than repositories of facts, narrative historiography can return to play a central role in driving the field of Mamluk Studies.

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