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Killing and kinging: Altaic notions of kingship and the legitimation of al-Zāhir Baybars' usurpation of the Mamluk Sultanate, 1249-1260*

Willem Flinterman

The Mamluks[1] were military slaves of Turkic origin who in 1250 usurped the throne of their master, al-Sālih Ayyūb (r. 1240-1249), the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt. The Ayyubids had become dependent on *mamlūk* military power, which allowed the army commanders, the mamlūk emirs, to appropriate political power. In 1250, the emir Aybak al-Turkmānī (r. 1250-1257) was raised from their ranks to become the first Mamluk sultan. During the first decade of Mamluk rule, however, chaos and violence reigned supreme. Four sultans succeeded each other in ten years; two of them were killed, as were several contenders. In 1260 al-Zāhir Baybars I (r. 1260-1277) killed his predecessor al-Muzaffar Qutuz (r. 1259-1260), usurping the novel Mamluk sultanate. After this last murder a higher degree of political stability was established. With his usurpation of the throne Baybars managed to safeguard the sovereignty of the *Bahriyya* household, at the expense of the other households that had been established by mamlūk emirs after al-Sālih Ayyūb's death.[2] The Bahriyya Mamluks would remain in power until 1382, when they were toppled by the Burjiyya household, who would remain in power until the Ottoman conquest of 1517.

An acute difficulty for the Mamluk sultans was the acquisition of legitimacy. The parvenu sultan had to explain his position to a number of

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[1] The Anglicized word 'Mamluk' refers to the Mamluk Dynasty or sultanate (1250-1415). The Arabic word *mamlūk,* when used as a noun, means 'slave soldier'. When used as an adjective, it refers to the mamlūk household, i.e. the socio-military unit where each *mamlūk* was garrisoned.

[2] There were several mamlūk households in Cairo, each under the patronage of an important emir or the sultan. The sultan had the largest household. The Bahriyya household was founded by al-Salih Ayyub, named after the Nile (al-Bahr in colloquial Arabic) and consisted mainly of *mamlūks*.

parties. First, his slave background was improper and a welcome source for mockery among neighboring rulers. Most seriously, the Ayyubid princes, who remained in power in the Levant, categorically refused to acknowledge Mamluk rule. Secondly, in Egypt, he represented an extraneous, foreign elite, lacking the ancestry or traditional authority that could make his claim to the throne of Egypt credible and acceptable to local standards. Most of their subjects considered the Mamluks to be mindless hulks, violent and parvenu. Thirdly, the Mamluk sultan had to justify his authority and privileges towards his comrades, the emirs, whose *fiat* was indispensible for domestic peace.

Islam offered a first religious resort to overcome this problem. The Mamluks developed an ideal of kingship. Domestically, they expressed royal-cum-religious authority by patronizing the traditional Islamic values and the court of grievances (*maẓālim*), which heard complaints of the sultan's subjects against state officials. Additionally, they spent a considerable amount of their wealth on the creation of cultural capital, especially religious architecture. In foreign affairs, the sultan manifested himself to the world as the Islamic ruler *par excellence*, styling himself as the ultimate champion of Islam, the protector of the sharia law, and the 'servant' of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. All these were traditional qualifications that *sunnī* Islam required of its leaders. The ongoing war effort against the Mongols only enhanced the Mamluk sultan's image as the Guardian of Islam. It was therefore of importance that Mamluk rhetorics of power stood out against Mongol ideals of kingship, which had became powerful and influential in the Middle East in the wake of the conquests of Chengiz Khan, earlier in the thirteenth century.[3]

Yet, this traditional Islamic decorum did not necessarily exclude more heterodox notions of kingship. Especially during the early Mamluk sultanate, certain elements in the representation and depiction of the sultan seem to suggest a heterogeneous frame of reference. The native, cultural background of the Mamluks, the majority of whom was of Qipchaq Turkic extraction, I would like to argue, could be the reason why a native, tribal, tradition of kingship, that I will call Altaic – explained hereafter – continued to influence the ideas with which the Mamluk sultan 'defined himself as a

[3] A. F. Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge 2008) 12-16.

sovereign,' and reinforced the legality and legitimacy of his reign, vis-à-vis various audiences.[4]

In this article I will experiment with the validity of this thought by highlighting elements in the story of Baybars' rise to power and ultimate usurpation of the sultanate, as given in a contemporary biography by court-historian Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir (1223-1292). I would like to argue that, in this work, 'tribal' notions of sovereignty and kingship are used to explain Baybars' ascent to power to the internal audience of the Mamluk elite. Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir was, as head of the chancellery, one of the important 'spin doctors' at the Mamluk court, actively involved in matters of state.[5] It seems therefore that through the analysis of this text, we can gain insight into the composition of the representation of the Mamluk sultan.

Altaic notions of kingship

A common adjective to specify the non-Arab influences that effected cultural expressions throughout the Middle East after the collapse of the Caliphate and the migration waves of Turkic and Mongolic peoples is 'Turco-Mongolic'.[6] In this article, however, I prefer to use the term 'Altaic' when referring to notions of royal sovereignty, and practices of succession, because these notions seem to have been shared beyond the 'Turco-Mongolic' sphere proper. The term 'Altaic' is originally a linguistic one that refers to a postulated family of languages, including Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic, spoken over a large stretch of inner Eurasia. Here it refers to cultural features shared among the peoples who spoke these languages. The adjectives Turkic or Mongolic I will only use when such precision is possible.

The Altaic world was vast, stretching from Korea to Hungary. Almost as vast were the social, cultural and political differences among the peoples who inhabited it. An overwhelming majority, however, practiced a pastoral-nomadic lifestyle or had only recently made the transition to a sedentary-agrarian way of life. Typically, the family and the clan were the

[4] Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology*, 12-16.
[5] U. Haarmann, *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit. Islamkundliche Untersuchungen* I (Freiburg 1970) 97-101.
[6] J. Fletcher, 'Turco-Mongolian Monarchic Tradition in the Ottoman Empire', *Harvard Journal of Ukranian Studies* 3-4 (1979-80) 236-251.

basic underpinnings of society and its political structure. A number of clans could form a tribe, ruled by a chief. Moreover, in political terms, it was not uncommon for a number of kindred tribes to form a confederation under the leadership of a *khān* or *kağān*, roughly meaning 'king', if not 'emperor'. The eleventh and twelfth centuries also saw the rise of a number of Turkic sultanates, founded by nomadic tribes who had migrated into the Middle East and adopted Islam and a sedentary lifestyle. The Saljuq sultanate (1071-1325), which covered at the height of its power Persia, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia, serves as the best example of such a state.[7]

Altaic political culture was diverse, and not all the peoples had a clear tradition of kingship. However, two notions of sovereignty and monarchy surface in the sources. The first is the idea that sovereignty is shared among all male members of the ruling clan. Where it is possible to speak of a state, it was viewed as the common property of the ruling clan.[8] The second, directly related, notion of Altaic kingship becomes evident in the practice of succession. The idea of shared sovereignty implied that, after the death of a khan, succession was open to all male clan members. Those claiming the throne would not uncommonly fight each other until death. The winner had automatically proven his physical aptitude to rule, which made his accession acceptable to all. Joseph Fletcher uses the term 'tanistry' to describe this phenomenon.[9] This violent practice probably had its origin in the harsh ecology of the steppes, where a weak leader in war would bring starvation instead of bounty. Key to the ideological explanation of this tradition, however, was the belief that kingship could not be administered by human institutions but only bestowed by divine provenance. By winning the struggle for succession, a ruler automatically demonstrated that his rule was ordained by God, or any other divine principle.

Not so much a notion of kingship, but rather characteristic of succession practices throughout the Altaic world, was the acclamation or acknowledgment of a new leader by his peers. In the Mongol case, tribal councils, called *khuriltai*, performed this function. After the death of the

[7] P. Golden, *Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples* (Wiesbaden 1992).

[8] Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 11; H. Inalcık, 'The Ottoman Succession and Its Relation to the Turkish Concept of Sovereignty' in: Idem ed., *The Middle East and the Balkans under Ottoman rule* (Bloomington 1993) 37-69.

[9] J. Fletcher, 'Turco-Mongolian Monarchic Tradition in the Ottoman Empire', *Harvard Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 2-4 (1979-80) 236-251; Inalcık, 'The Ottoman Succession and Its Relation to the Turkish Concept of Sovereignty', 37-69.

khan, several pretenders to the throne could rally support and have themselves acclaimed the new khan in tribal councils. Violent struggle between the different cadres of support would ensue after conflicting acclamations. When a victor had emerged, he would be acclaimed khan for a second time and a oath of loyalty would be sworn by the chiefs of the other clans.[10]

After the disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) and the increasing migrations of Turkic peoples into the heart lands of the Middle East, Islamic and tribal monarchic traditions in many cases, such as that of the Saljuqs, began to overlap and, especially in the eastern parts of the Middle East became blended with Persian, native cultural elements. In the wake of the increasing power of non-Arab, Perso-Turkish polities breaking away from the Caliphate, Islamic scholars, such as al-Mawardī, acknowledged the political status quo by explaining that violent usurpations, under some conditions, were permissible, for instance to do away with a weak ruler who jeopardized the safety of the Muslim community. In traditional *sunnī* terms, however, rebellion against divinely invested authority was considered illegitimate. Finally, the tribal principle of tanistry, *a fortiori*, was alien to orthodox Islamic political thought. Moreover, the Muslim ideal of kingship required that a sultan had to be more than just a military hero. He had to give moral and religious guidance to his people too.[11]

Baybars' rise to prominence and the murder of Tūrānshāh

Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Bunduqdarī, who in 1260 ascended the throne of Egypt in 1260 as al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars I, was, like most of his fellow mamlūks, a Qipchaq Turk. He was born between 1220 and 1228 somewhere on the Pontic steppes. His tribe probably fled their land in 1241/1242 (639 AH[12]) to the Crimea, possibly in fear of a second Mongol onslaught from the East. Thinking they were safe, their camp was raided and nearly all members of Baybars' tribe were killed. Baybars himself was among the youths who were sold into slavery. Baybars changed hands a few

[10] Fletcher, 'Turco-Mongolian Monarchic Tradition', 239.
[11] Inalcık, 'The Ottoman Succession and Its Relations to the Turkish Concept of Sovereignty', 37-69.
[12] The siglum used to indicate years of the Islamic calendar. The letters stand for *Anno Hegirae*, i.e. 'Of the Year of the Hijra'.

times, before coming into the possession of the Ayyubid sultan al-Sālih Ayyūb and taken to Cairo. In the Ayyubid capital, he entered the royal mamlūk household, the Bahriyya, located on al-Rawda Island in the Nile.

Having nothing to lose but his master's favour, Baybars' star rose on the battlefield. A pivotal event in his career, and in the history of the Middle East, presented itself with the battle of Mansūra and its aftermath. In 1249, while Mongol terror was nearing the Ayyubid borders in the East, King Louis IX of France (r. 1226-1270), heading the Seventh Crusade (1248-1254), landed in Damietta and subsequently conquered that city. A few months later, while the French troops were headed south with the intention to take Cairo, sultan al-Sālih Ayyūb died. In secrecy, a delegation left for Damascus to collect al-Sālih's son, the Syrian viceroy al-Muʿazzam Tūrānshāh (r. 1249-1250). The Ayyubid army, which consisted mainly of Mamluk soldiers from the Bahriyya household, clashed with the French near Mansūra, on the Nile north of Cairo. The mamlūk force proved superior to the French army and when Tūrānshāh entered the scene at the end of the day, the battle already was as good as won.

Victory was only enjoyed briefly as the mood was spoilt by factional tensions. The Bahriyya remained loyal to their late master's widow, Shajarat al-Durr, who also was of Turkic origin. Tūrānshāh, who showed a clear preference for his own mamlūks, frustrated the political ambitions of the Bahriyya and Shajarat al-Durr. Eventually, the Bahriyya, striving to secure their position, decided that Tūrānshāh had to be killed and duly murdered him. It is likely that Baybars, who by then belonged to the prominent emirs of the Bahriyya, was an accomplice in this plot.

A lion among its cubs

Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir probably exaggerates Baybars' role in the battle of Mansūra when he describes, in poetic simile, how Baybars 'stood among his comrades like a sun among the bright stars and like a lion (*ka-l-'asad*) among the cubs it protects'.[13] There is, however, a symbolic content to this metaphor too. Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's seems to pun on the heraldic link between Baybars and this animal.

[13] Muhyī al-Dīn bin 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-Zāhir fi sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*' [The blossoming garden that is the life story of the Conspicuous King] in: *Baybars I of Egypt*, S. F. Sadeque ed. and trans. (Dacca 1956) translation: 77, Arabic text: 2.

Fig.1: The lion emblem of sultan Baybars. Detail from a relief on the Jisr Jindas, a bridge over the Ayalon river in Palestine, commissioned by Baybars in 1272. (source: commons.wikimedia.org, author: Eman).

Baybars used the *lion passant gardant* (fig. 1), a lion walking from right to left with the head turned over its left shoulder, as his personal coat of arms.[14] A relation with the meaning of Baybars' name, might explain this choice. 'Baybars' likely is a derivative of the Qipchaq words *bäy* and *bars*, meaning respectively 'prince' and 'lion' or 'panther'.[15] But more than just a reference to his name, in choosing his emblem, Baybars might also have been sensitive to tradition. The 'lion', as one among several symbols of monarchic sovereignty, was not uncommon in the post-Abbasid Middle East. It appeared on architecture and coinage. The Saljuqs strongly associated this animal with kingship, possibly appropriating older, Persian royal imagery. Several Saljuq sultans adopted the regnal name 'Arslan', meaning 'the lion', and abundantly used the animal to decorate royal

[14] C. A. Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry a survey* (Oxford 1953) 9, 106-108.
[15] J. Sauvaget, 'Noms et Surnoms de Mamelouks', *Journal Asiatique* 238 (1950) 31-58: 42.

architecture (fig. 2).[16] The Mamluks, or rather Baybars, might have inherited this symbol from the Saljuqs. However, there is also a theory that suggests that Baybars adopted the lion as an symbol inspired by Mongol coins that featured the animal. [17] Whatever the exact inspiration for Baybars' deployment of the lion emblem, sensitivity to a culturally hybrid tradition of royal representation might well be it.

Fig. 2: Example of the decorative use of lions in Saljuq Architecture. Detail of a Yakutiye Medressa, Erzurum, Turkey. (source: commons.wikimedia.org, author: Bertramz)

To turn to the function of the lion-metaphor in the text, the image of a lion among its cubs seems to underscore the position of Baybars among the Bahrī emirs as one of *primus inter pares*. Baybars protected his comrades, as if they were his family. This figure of speech is less figurative than it might seem. Within the mamlūk household, the soldiers were in fact part of the same adopted family. The mamlūks of the same household addressed

[16] S. Redford, 'Thirteenth-century Rum Seljuq Palaces and Palace Imagery', *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993); S. Redford, 'A grammar of Rum Seljuk ornament', *Mésogeios* 25-26 (2005) 283-310.

[17] D. Gasagnadou, 'Note sur une question d'heraldique mamluke: l'origine du "Lion passant à gauche" du sultan Baybars I al-Bunduqdar', *Islam* 66 (1989) 98-101.

each other with *'akh'*, meaning 'brother'.[18] Within this 'band of brothers' Baybars stood out because of his bravery and physical strength. According to Ibn 'Abd al Zāhir, Baybars already 'bore the stamp of kingship' and his 'physiognomy revealed what God was to bestow upon him.' Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir words suggest that Baybars' strong physique is a manifestation of divinely bestowed kingship.[19]

Evidently there was no real blood relation among the Bahriyya themselves or their patron al-Sālih. But they did belong to the same extended family, of which al-Sālih was the *pater familias*. Because of this near-familial relationship between patron and mamlūks in Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir could suggest that the sovereignty of the Ayyubids extended itself to the Bahriyya, of whom Baybars was most likely and most suitable to be king. This in any case seems to be what the author tries to establish when he describes the bond between Baybars and al-Sālih in terms that are usually associated with blood relation:

> al-Malik al-Zāhir was brought up with al-Malik al-Salih's refinement, and he learned from his noble blood, benefitted from the excellence of his kingly endowments and acquired them. He acquired the approved virtues of al-Salih and assimilated them. He had natural gifts, and in him these lights shone sparkling bright […] thus his mind was ambitious to ascend to kingly rank. He was justified in seeking to protect the people.[20]

It is tempting to see in this an echo of the Turkic tradition of 'collective sovereignty', which holds that the polity, the sultanate, was the common possession of the ruling house or clan, in this case the house of the late al-Sālih Ayyūb, and *in extenso* the loyal posse of his mamlūks, the Bahriyya.[21]

But Baybars' time had not yet come. Not he, but Aybak would take the throne of al-Sālih. Maybe because Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir had to explain this flaw in the history of Baybars' success, he does not style Baybars as the murderer of Tūrānshāh. He could have done so, and other chroniclers in

[18] D. Ayalon, 'Mamlūk', in : C. E. Bosworth, W. P. Hendriks et. al. ed., *The Encyclopedia of Islam* VII (2nd ed. Leiden and Boston 1993) 314-321: 318.
[19] Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-zāhir,* trans.: *77,* Arabic. 2.
[20] Ibidem.
[21] Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 220.

fact did.[22] Although he grants Baybars an important role, it is the Bahriyya *en groupe* who committed regicide:

> So al-Malik al-Zāhir and a group of his comrades pounced on al-Malik al-Muʿazzam with the fury of a hunting lion, and threw themselves upon him like the on-rush of an unleashed torrent, and so God had ordained his death.[23]

If the Altaic rationale is followed, it could be reasoned that the Bahriyya's murder of Tūrānshāh was an legitimate attempt to gain kingship, because the rivaling parties belonged to the same divinely favoured house. The short and aborted rule of Aybak, who was the first of the Bahrī Mamluks to sit on the throne, 'proved' however that the sultanate had not yet been granted to the member of the house most worthy thereof.[24]

The murder of Qutuz and Baybars' usurpation

Not long after Tūrānshāh's murder, the Bahrī commander Aybak al-Turkmānī became sultan. Soon a rift occurred between Aybak and his own royal mamlūk household, called the Muʿizziyya, on the one hand and his old household, the Bahriyya, now led by the emirs Aqtay and Baybars, on the other. The conflict soon escalated and Aqtay was murdered by Aybak's men in the citadel. His head was thrown over the Citadel wall on the field beneath, where, allegedly it landed at the feet of Baybars, who had unsuccessfully come to the rescue. This was a warning not to be ignored and that same night Baybars and a large part of the Bahriyya fled to Damascus. In foreign service, Baybars took part in several military campaigns against Egypt.

In 1259 the Muʿizi mamlūk al-Muzaffar Qutuz (r. 1259-1260) became sultan. The animosity between Baybars and the new sultan was deep, for it

[22] Jamal al-Dīn Muhammad ibn Wāsil, *Mufarrij al-Kurūb fi Akhbār Banī Ayyūb / Die Chronik des Ibn Wāsil, kritische Edition des letzten Teils (646/1248 – 659/1261) mit Kommentaar, Untergang der Ayyubiden und Beginn der Mamluken Herrschaft* Arabische Studien 6, M. Rahim ed. (Wiesbaden 2010) 77.
[23] Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-zāhir*, 80.
[24] R. Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages, The early Mamluk sultanate 1250-1382* (London and Sydney 1986) 44.

was Qutuz who had killed Aqtay, who moreover had been Baybars' closest friend. Qutuz in his turn, was continually on his guard against the Bahrīs and felt he could not rest until Baybars, their leader, was eliminated.[25]

In the face of a new menace, however, Baybars and Qutuz had no alternative but to join forces. In 1258 the Mongols had conquered and ransacked Baghdad, killing the Abbasid caliph. Now, the Mongols were coveting the remains of the Ayyubid sultanate. War was imminent and Qutuz sought reconciliation with Baybars. The united army of the Mamluks met their Mongol adversaries at 'Ayn Jālūt in northern Palestine.

The battle ended in a Mamluk victory, and afterwards Qutuz became the ruler of both Egypt and Syria. Before the battle, he had promised the governorship of Aleppo to Baybars. Now he broke his word, appointing another candidate. With old animosity thus revived, Qutuz decided to get rid of Baybars. He left Damascus, considering Cairo the most suitable place to set up an ambush. Baybars, however, had been informed about Qutuz's plan and followed the sultan on his way to Egypt. It was his intention to kill the sultan, before he was killed himself. According to most sources, an opportunity presented itself when Qutuz decided to leave the road to go on a short hunting expedition. According to Shāfi' bin 'Alī, a nephew of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir who made an abridgment of his uncle's *vita*, Baybars' men set loose a rabbit or hare (*'arnab*) and, when Qutuz chased it, the conspirators followed and slew the sultan.[26] Allegedly, Baybars and his men rode back to Qutuz's army tent, where several men were gathered, among them the *'atābak* i.e. the chief in command of the army, and several emirs of the Mu'iziyya. Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir describes how, after a unclear difference of opinion, the emirs agreed Baybars should be sultan. The same night Baybars rushed away to Cairo and the next day entered the citadel to ascend the throne.[27]

[25] P. Thorau, *Sultan Baibars I. von Ägypten, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Vorderen Orients im 13. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden 1987) 98-100.

[26] Shāfi' bin 'Alī bin 'Abbās, *Husn al-Manāqib al-Siriyya al-muntaẓa'a min as-sīra al-Ẓāhiryya*, A.-A. al-Hutayt ed. (2nd edition Riyad 1989) 66; Thorau, *Sultan Baibars I.*, 56-62.

[27] Shāfi' bin 'Alī bin 'Abbās, *Husn al-Manāqib*, 68; Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-Ẓāhir,* trans.: 96, Arabic: 16; Thorau, *Sultan Baibars I.*, 91-105.

The law of the Turks

All the sources but al-Zāhir acknowledge Baybars as the chief conspirator in the plot to kill Qutuz, but they do not mention him as the murderer. Most sources agree that it was his *silahdār*, the 'arms bearer', who killed sultan Qutuz.[28] Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir emphatically refutes this. He claims that it was Baybars who delivered the fatal thrust into the sultan's stomach: 'The sultan al-Malik al-Zāhir did this himself and attained his object alone.'[29] Given Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's strong bias towards his patron, it seems likely that he wants to prove Baybars directly responsible for a reason. This reason, it seems, is legitimating Baybars' usurpation itself. Whereas it was of less importance for Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir to style Baybars as the murderer of Tūrānshāh, it was apparently essential in this case to portray Baybars as the killer of Qutuz. Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, by mouth of the 'atābak, uses Baybars' regicide as an argument to assert that Baybars should take the throne. The setting is the audience tent (*dihlīz*) of Qutuz:

> The sultan [Baybars] sat beside the cushion (*tarraha*) [when] a difference of opinion arose in the course of discussion. Then the Atabek said: "Listen, O our friends, by God, if al-Malik al-Muzaffar were alive, or if he had a son to whom we had pledged our allegiance, I would have been the first one to fight with my sword. But now the opportunity has passed, and there is no doubt that the person who killed him at his own peril and performed this great task, did surely not do it for the sake of another person, and not sacrifice and endanger himself so that the authority might go to someone else, and so he who killed him deserves his position". The sultan said: "I am the one who has done this thing". The party agreed to this. Then the sultan rose and sat on the cushion, and the party remained silent.[30]

When the 'atābak explains that most of the men present 'are unemployed' and 'come out of great difficulties', Baybars takes an oath, solemnly swearing to protect their interest. After this act, one by one the emirs and all the others present swear their oath of fealty to Babyars, acknowledging him as sultan.[31]

[28] Thorau, *Sultan Baibars I*, 100-105.
[29] Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-Zāhir*, 96.
[30] Ibidem.
[31] Ibidem.

In the description of this scene there are three elements that are clearly reminiscent of Turkic custom regarding the accession of a new Khan. First, Baybars' elevation to the throne by peer election seems to harken back to tribal acclamation ceremonies, as described by Fletcher.[32] Baybars was appointed sultan by the emirs, not unlike a new khan would be acclaimed by tribal leaders. Secondly, the setting in which the oaths of fealty were sworn, as depicted by Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, is significant. It is a tent, rather than a palace, throne hall, or any other edifice that typically accommodates the accession practices of sedentary peoples. A new study has shown that during the early Mamluk sultanate, the Mamluks associated the tent with royal authority and used it as a place for public, royal representation; a *locus* for political palaver, agreeing with the practice of the Qipchaq steppes.[33] In this context it should be noted that a special cushion (*tarraha*) fulfills the function of a royal seat. Only later, it must be admitted, an accession ceremony would take place in Cairo, followed by a procession and a banquet, to celebrate the succession in a more urban style. Thirdly, and most convincingly, Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir lets the 'atābak formulate the principle of 'bloody tanistry' that scholarship has associated with Turkic practices of royal succession: he who most violently proves his will and ability to be king by killing his contester shall rule.

This norm is even explicitly associated with Turkish lore in an abridgement of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's text by his nephew, Shafi'i bin 'Ali:

> "What does the law of the Turks (*'asat al-Turk*) say?" They answered: "That kingship should go to him who has killed." He then replied: "And who is the one who has killed?" "He," they answered, pointing at al-Malik al-Zāhir [Baybars]. He then took him by his hand and made him sit as king [on the royal cushion][34]

[32] Fletcher, 'Turco-Mongolian Monarchic Tradition', 239.

[33] A. Fuess, 'Between dihlīz and dār al-'adl, forms of outdoor and indoor royal representation at the Mamluk court in Egypt' in: Idem and J. P. Hartung ed., *Court Cultures in the Muslim World* (New York 2011) 149-167: 150.

[34] Shāfi'ī bin 'Alī cited in U. Haarman, 'Regicide and the "Law of the Turks"' in: M. M. Mazzaoui ed, *Intellectual studies on Islam, essays written in honor of Martin B. Dickson* (Salt Lake City 1990) 127-135: 128; Shāfi' bin 'Alī bin 'Abbās, *Husn al-Manāqib,* 66.

Khowayter, the editor of the text of Shāfiʿī bin ʿAlī, explains this word '*asa* as 'law' (*qanūn*), 'rule' (*nizām*) or 'procedure' (*nahj*).[35] Etymologically, the word is said to be akin to *yāsā(q)*. This word has been used by Mamluk authors to describe Turkic or Mongol customary law, as distinct from the Muslim sharia.[36] It might be proposed that it is in this sense, that the word is used here. In Arabic, the word 'Turk' could refer to a variety of Turkic or Mongoloid peoples. The fact that Shāfiʿī bin ʿAlī states that Baybars was 'of Turkish ethnicity' (*turkī al-jins*) seems to demonstrate that the word is used first and foremost to refer to the likes of Baybars', that is the Turkic mamlūks.[37] The Mongols, on the other hand, are referred to as *al-Tatar*.

If '*asat al-Turk* indeed is a reference to the native customs of the mamlūks, there might have been a strong Qipchaq element in it, as most of the Mamluks were of Qipchaq origin. This poses a problem: the Qipchaqs did not have a monarchic tradition, because they were a loose federation of tribes.[38] A way out of this might be that the principle of tanistry also applied to non-state forms of political organization. If not the succession of khans, then maybe that of tribal chiefs was governed by this principle? Another explanation could be that the word Turk had a broader and more general meaning. Could 'asat al-Turk then refer to the custom of violent succession as rehearsed within other 'Turkic' states, such as the Saljuq sultanate?[39]

Before drawing any conclusions, two last observation need to be made. The first is that neither Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir's nor Shāfiʿī bin ʿAlī deemed it necessary to prove that Qutuz's reign was illegitimate. Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir even insinuates the opposite, when he lets the 'atābak say: 'if al-Malik al-Muzaffar were alive, or if he had a son to whom we had pledged our allegiance, I would have been the first one to fight with my sword.'[40] This, apparently, expresses the view that Baybars aborted the regency of a legitimate ruler. Does Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir acknowledge that Qutuz, via his

[35] Shāfiʿ bin ʿAlī bin ʿAbbās, *Husn al-Manāqib,* 67 no. 3.

[36] Haarmann, 'Regicide and the "Law of the Turks"', 127; R. Amitai-Preiss, 'Ghazan, Islam and Mongol Tradition: a view from the Mamlūk Sutlanate', *Bulletin of the Journal of Oriental and African Studies* 59.1 (1996) 1-10.

[37] Shāfiʿ bin ʿAlī bin ʿAbbās, *Husn al-Manāqib,* 57.

[38] P. B. Golden, 'The Qipčac of Medieval Eurasia: an Example of Stateless Adaptation in the steppes' in: G. Seaman and D. Marks ed., *Rulers from the Steppe, State Fromation on the Eurasian steppes* (Los Angeles 1991) 132-157.

[39] Haarmann, 'Regicide and the "Law of the Turks"', 132-133.

[40] Ibn ʿAbd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-Zāhir,* 96.

master, Aybak, who originally was a Bahrī mamlūk, had inherited a legal share in al-Sālih' sovereignty? The second observation is that, according to Ibn Abd al-Zāhir's, no one of the men present, not even the emirs of the Mu'iziyya, expressed the need for further retaliation upon learning of the death of their sultan. Apparently Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir could convincingly use the costum of tanistry to conclusively prove Baybars' right to the throne.

These two observations taken into consideration, it could tentatively be argued that Baybars' usurpation is represented as the final and concluding act – *à la Turca* – in a struggle for succession among contenders with an equal right to the throne.

Internal legitimacy

A final question is of importance: did Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir include these Turkic elements to convince a specific audience of Baybars' right to the throne? To answer this question, it seems wise to first say a few things more about Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir himself; his position at court and the origin and intention of his biography.

Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir came from a family of scribes and had excellent credentials. He was soon appointed Head of the Chancellery by Baybars, who trusted him with the composition of official letters both regarding internal matters and diplomacy. His biography of Baybars he wrote under strict supervision of his master, who would reward his scribe with robes of honour after completing a section that was to the his satisfaction. Baybars needed the literary cunning of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir for political effect, whereas Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir enjoyed the privileges and royal protection that came with this capacity.[41] It is within the context of this relationship, that the text of the biography should be understood. It is safe to say that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir was concerned to offer a legitimizing framework that explained Baybars rise to power and usurpation.

Based on elements in the text itself, it can be said that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir directed his words to one group in particular. On several occasions, Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir describes how Baybars was loyal to the emirs of the realm and served their interests well. It seems reasonable to suggest that one of

[41] E. Strauß, 'Muhî'ddîn 'Abdazzahir', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 45 (1938) 191-202.

the objectives of the text was to please this very group, and therefore the Mamluk military elite itself should be included in the audience of the text.

Indeed, the fact that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir so elaborately describes how Baybars is declared sultan by his emirs might be a first indication that the main characters of this passage and the intended audience of the text overlap. The author describes how the emirs present in the dihlīz swear the oath of loyalty to their sultan. He also describes emphatically that this act was reciprocated:

> The Atabek said to the sultan: "Most of the people of this party are unemployed and they have come out of great difficulties; hence the sultan should take the oath to them that he would help them" […] The sultan swore the oath to them.[42]

Other passages in the text also suggest an internal orientation. In a paragraph entitled 'his acts on behalf of his comrades' [*dhikra ma i'tamadahu fi haqqi khujdashiyyatihi*], it is explained how Baybars, throughout his career, had the interest of his peers at heart.[43] Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir describes how, after times of hardship during the reign of Tūrānshāh and during their exile, Baybars restored the position of the emirs who were his comrades and belonged to his *khujdashiyya* (also spelled *khushdashiyya*).[44]

> When God bestowed the kingdom on him, nothing diverted his attention from doing good to the older and younger ones of them, and he promoted them, whereas before they had believed that they would never regain their previous position; and he reunited them, whereas before they had dispersed in the country and hidden themselves till no one dare to use a word of Turkish or military saying.[45]

The reference to language of the Turks is significant, and seems to indicate two things. First, the Bahrī Mamluks spoke a Turkic language among

[42] Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-Zahir,* 96.

[43] Ibidem.

[44] This word is the common term used in Mamluk sources to describe the 'horizontal bracing' in the Mamluk elite.

[45] Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *al-Rawd al-Zahir,* trans.: 100, Arabic: 20. F. Sadeque translates this last sentence, as 'whereas before they had dispersed in the country and hidden themselves till no one dare to speak Turkish or use military language'.

themselves – this can be corroborated by the fact that Baybars on some occasions used an Arabic interpreter.[46] Turkic speech probably served as an identity marker, here invoked by Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir to appeal to a notion of 'Turkicness' apparently shared between Baybars and his comrades.

Because of the Turkic background of the Mamluks, and maybe because they inherited Altaic influences from the Ayyubids, who were of Kurdish descent, in a way, the 'way of the steppes' still mattered in the Mamluk elite. Altaic notions of sovereignty and kingship were part of the Mamluk political frame of reference. It was crucial because he needed to appeal to this frame of reference in explaining his position to the khujdashiyya. This was essential because Baybars needed them to endorse his position. He needed to capitalize on their support, and so help needed them to build his empire. Therefore, besides being styled as a virtuous ruler of Islam, Baybars is portrayed as a tribal *Heerkönig* to explain his position and power to his mamlūk ranks of support.[47] The fact that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, who himself was not of a Mamluk but of local origin, very well knew how to paint this hybrid image can be explained by his function as Head of the Chancellery, which put him in the engine room of the sultanate. It is also known that Baybars himself kept a close look on Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhirs work.[48]

Conclusion

Two notions recurred in Altaic traditions of kingship. The first is that sovereignty lays within the royal clan in its entirety. Consequently, kingship is open to all members of the ruling family. The second is that the most talented and physically apt member of the royal clan should inherit the throne, commonly through murder and war. This principle has been called tanistry. The ideological underpinning of this view, is that kinship cannot be acquired through a man-made institution but by divine appointment only.

It could tentatively be argued that these two notions echo in the biography of Baybars by Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir. Concerned to explain his rise to

[46] P. M. Holt, 'The Virtuous Ruler in Thirteenth-century Mamluk royal Biographies', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 24 (1980) 27-35: 33.
[47] D. Holt, 'Some observations on the Abbasid Caliphate of Cairo'*, Bulletin of the School of Oriental and Asian Studies* 47.3 (1984) 113-158: 152.
[48] Haarmann, *Quellenstudien*, 144-145.

power and usurpation of the Sultanate, he framed these events in a legitimatizing discourse. In doing so Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir appeals to a hybrid frame of reference that includes the Altaic notions of clan-sovereignty and tanistry. It could be argued that Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir indicates that the Bahriyya rightfully acquired sovereignty by killing Tūrānshāh. This crooked king, according to the historian, was a unworthy successor and by murdering him the Bahris executed divine will. Among the Bahriyya, it was Baybars, with his 'kingly endowments and natural gifts', who was physically and morally the most suitable one to be king. This became manifest when he killed Qutuz, the last of the Mamluk pretenders to the throne.

Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir was well versed in the ideological sensitivities that played a part in the dynamics of succession, and it has been suggested he consciously applied an Altaic frame of reference to legitimize Baybars' position, especially to entice the sultan's fellow Mamluks. Baybars remained to a large extent dependent upon his khujdashiyya to built his empire. In explaining Baybar's *coup* by referring to shared, native notions of kingship, and integrating them into the Islamic cadre of reference, the emir's acceptance of his rule and their support was sought.