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Sultans with Horns: The Political Significance of Headgear in the Mamluk Empire

INTRODUCTION

When the number of Ottomans increased in Cairo [after the Ottoman conquest in Muḥarram 923/February 1517] they started to ask the *awlād al-nās*¹ whom they saw wearing the red *zamṭ* or the *takhfīfah* [both were distinctive Mamluk hats]: Are you a Circassian? And then they cut their heads off. Thereafter all the *awlād al-nās*, even the sons of the [high ranking] amirs and the sons of former sultans, quit wearing the *takhfīf* and the *zumūt* in Egypt.²

Mamluks were apprehended by the Ottomans throughout Egypt in these early days of Ottoman rule and they were easily recognizable by their headgear. Therefore many of them and their sons got rid of their hats as they represented a potential threat to their lives. However, after the first impetus of the conquest had slowed down, Mamluks were allowed to wear the red *zamṭ* again for a while by the new Ottoman governor of Egypt, Khāyrbak, a former Mamluk amir himself. In the summer of 924/1518 this practice was then finally forbidden, but some Circassian Mamluks disobeyed the order and the governor reinstated it in Shawwāl 927/September 1521, saying that anyone still wearing the red *zamṭ* after the announcement, whether Mamluk, son of a Mamluk, or even Ottoman, would be hanged without mercy.³ Mamluk headgear thereafter disappeared from Egyptian heads as did the specific Turkish names of the Mamluks, which had marked their elite status for centuries. From now on, it was Ottoman turbans and Arabic names for the remaining Mamluks.⁴

One has to keep in mind, though, that the hats which disappeared at the end of the Mamluk Empire in the early sixteenth century bore little resemblance to

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¹ “The sons of the people,” i.e., the descendants of the Mamluk soldiers.

² Ibn Iyās (d. ca. 930/1524), *Badāʾiʿ al-Zuhūr fī Waqāʾiʿ al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafá (Wiesbaden, 1961), 5:150.

³ *Ibid.*, 263, 407.

⁴ For the continuity of the Mamluk element in Egypt after 1517 see: Michael Winter, “The Re-emergence of the Mamluks Following the Ottoman Conquest,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann (Cambridge, 1998), 87–106.



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the ones Mamluk officials had on their heads at the beginning of their reign in the mid-thirteenth century. The world of fashion has always been somehow fickle, and the *haute couture* of the Mamluk Empire was no exception to this rule. New trends concerning color, shape, and size of headgear were set in general by sultans or amirs. The latest fashion then travelled down the Mamluk hierarchy.

The aim of this article is to present the changing fashions of headgear of the ruling elite in the Mamluk Empire throughout their reign in Egypt and Syria, and to show how fashion and headgear functioned as markers of social differences in a medieval Islamic society. The emphasis lies therefore on official representative headgear and not on military helmets or veils for women.

The main historical sources for the article are the usual suspects of Mamluk historiography like al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442)⁵ and Ibn Iyās (d. ca. 930/1524).⁶ In these sources, the topic of headgear fashion is only a minor concern and consequently one must piece information together from several places. Only seldom has an author devoted a passage of his work especially to aspects of clothing like al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418) does in his well-known secretarial manual *Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshá*, in which he describes the garments of Mamluk officials and ulama.⁷ The secondary literature concerning Mamluk headgear is scarce. To my knowledge no books or articles have been devoted so far to this aspect of Mamluk history. Nevertheless, considerable information can be drawn from Mayer's general work on Mamluk costume and from Dozy's *Dictionnaire détaillé des noms des vêtements chez les Arabes*.⁸

In addition to these works, the institutions of *tashrif* and *khil'ah*, i.e., the receiving of robes and other apparel of honor by rulers, in the Islamic and Mamluk context has been the subject of two recent publications by Diem and Springberg-Hinsen, where information on ceremonial headgear is to be found.⁹

⁵ Al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (London, 2002–4); idem, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. M. Ziyādah and S. A. ʿĀshūr (Cairo, 1934–73).

⁶ Ibn Iyās (d. ca. 930/1524), *Badā'ī' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'ī' al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafá (Wiesbaden, 1960–75).

⁷ Al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), *Ṣubḥ al-Aʿshá fī Ṣinā'at al-Inshā'* (Cairo, 1914), 4:39–43.

⁸ L. A. Mayer, *Mamluk Costume* (Geneva, 1952); Reinhart P. Dozy, *Dictionnaire détaillé des noms des vêtements chez les Arabes* (Amsterdam, 1845). On the clothing section of al-Qalqashandī see Urbain Vermeulen, "La Tenue protocolaire à la Cour Mamlouke," in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras IV: Proceedings of the 9th and 10th International Colloquium Organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 2000 and May 2001*, ed. idem and Jo van Steenberg (Leuven, 2005), 491–96.

⁹ Werner Diem, *Ehrendes Kleid und ehrendes Wort: Studien zu Tašrif in mamlükischer und vormamlükischer Zeit*, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, vol. 54, 2 (Würzburg, 2002); Monika Springberg-Hinsen, *Die Hil'a: Studien zur Geschichte des geschenkten Gewandes im*



Besides written sources we possess images of Mamluk garments in contemporary Mamluk and Ottoman manuscripts. Unfortunately, there are not many of these and they do not provide much detail concerning the headgear of Mamluk dignitaries. Besides the manuscripts there are also images of Mamluk costume on metalwork.¹⁰

Especially during the second half of the fifteenth century, an increasing number of European pilgrims, merchants, diplomats, and artists traveled to the Mamluk Empire and some of their drawings provide us with a realistic impression of court scenes in the Mamluk context. As for the actual textiles, we have little left. There was apparently no tradition of keeping ceremonial or everyday clothing in the Mamluk Empire. The Ottoman invasion and the prohibition of Mamluk garments which accompanied it surely did not encourage the survival of Mamluk textiles. According to Mayer, all that has come down to us from Mamluk times are an undercoat, two pairs of trousers, a hat, and a few caps.¹¹

THE MAMLUKS AND TEXTILES

It seems that, especially since Abbasid times and the introduction of a monumental court culture in Baghdad after 145/762, clothing, and more specifically luxury clothing, became increasingly popular. Early Islamic aversions to silks and satins, evidence of which can be found in the hadith literature, were consistently ignored by all but a pious few.¹² Clothes had been, even before that date and now even more so, a clear marker of social differences. Under the Fatimids, a costume supply house known as *dār al-kiswah* oversaw the supply of ceremonial costumes for public occasions from the caliph down to government clerks. The most striking fashion item of the caliph's attire was the so-called "noble crown" (*al-tāj al-sharif*). It consisted of an enormous turban, in which a headscarf (*mandīl*) was wound around a cap (*shāshīyah*) in a very unique manner in the shape of a myrobalan (cherry plum/*ihlīlajah*).¹³ Therefore, it seems that oversized headdresses for rulers were not a Mamluk innovation.

The mode of dress of the military elite in the Middle East changed with the arrival of the Turks and the establishment of Turkish dynasties, starting with the Saljuq Empire in the eleventh century. The typical outer garment of this period is represented by their shirts. The Saljuqs and Ayyubids wore the "Turkish shirt" (*al-aqbīyah al-turkīyah*), in which the hem crossed the chest from right to left, whereas

islamischen Kulturkreis (Würzburg, 2000).

¹⁰ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² Y. K. Stillman, "Libās," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 5:735, 737.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 738; al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 2:468–69.



the Mamluks preferred the “Tartar shirt” (*al-aqbīyah al-tatarīyah*) with the hem crossing the other way around. Over this shirt, Mamluk dress consisted of the so-called *takalāwāt*, of which we know little. The Mamluks then wore the so-called *qabāʾ al-islāmī* (“Islamic shirt”) as the last layer. This was tailored in the Arab style. Metal plaquettes (*ḥiyāsah*) or sashes (*band*) were worn over the garment. The sleeves of the coats were often indicative of rank and social status. Higher status was shown through longer and more ample sleeves.¹⁴ In Circassian times, the Tartar coat with its tight sleeves was replaced by the *mallūtah* loose shirt with broad sleeves, which became the standard fashion in the fifteenth century.¹⁵

In the Mamluk Empire social class was evident by one’s outer appearance. Riding horses as well was almost exclusively limited to members of the ruling military elite.¹⁶ The ulama had to content themselves with mules, although according to al-Qalqashandī, high ranking ulama rode mules of such quality that their price equaled that of horses.¹⁷ Christians and Jews were only allowed to ride donkeys. Headgear also marked religious differences. A sultan’s decree (*marsūm*) of the year 755/1354, which was announced in Damascus and reinforced the so-called regulations of the caliph ʿUmar (r. 12–22/634–44) (*al-shurūṭ al-ʿUmarīyah*), insisted that Christians had to wear blue and Jews yellow linen. Moreover, Christians had to wear one white and one black shoe. The turban of Christians and Jews was not to exceed 10 ells, which must be a reference to the length of the cloth taken to bind the turban, as otherwise the term restriction acquires a totally new sense.¹⁸ Other surviving decrees of Mamluk officials hint at the fact that the color regulation applied only to the cloth of the turbans, i.e., blue for Christians and yellow for Jews, the rest of their clothes being the same as those of other Mamluk subjects¹⁹ (fig. 1).

The frequent repetition of these discriminatory rules in Mamluk sources indicates that they were not enforced. It seems that Christians and Jews had the same tendency to enlarge their turbans as did the members of the Mamluk military and learned elite with their respective headgear.

The ulama were apparently distinguished by the size of their turban (*ʿimāmah*)

¹⁴ Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 4:40; Stillman, “Libās,” 739; Vermeulen, “La Tenue protocolaire,” 492.

¹⁵ Ibn Iyās (d. ca. 930/1524), *Alltagsnotizen eines ägyptischen Bürgers*, trans. Annemarie Schimmel (Stuttgart, 1985), 22 (introduction by Annemarie Schimmel.)

¹⁶ David Ayalon, “The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy,” in *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 14 (1968): 323. (Reprinted in idem, *Studies on the Mamlūks of Egypt [1250–1517]* [London, 1977]).

¹⁷ Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 4:42.

¹⁸ Ibn Sibāṭ (d. after 926/1529), *Tārīkh Ibn Sibāṭ*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmurī (Tripoli, 1993), 2:711.

¹⁹ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 65.



and therefore as a class were named *arbāb al-ʿamāʾim*, masters of the turbans. The wearing of turbans was not limited exclusively to the ulama, but for them it was much bigger, sometimes reaching abnormal sizes.²⁰ The expression “to enlarge one’s turban” became a synonym for showing off.²¹ The practice encountered criticism even among the ulama. When the eminent scholar of thirteenth-century Cairo, al-Sulamī, also known as *sultān al-ʿulamāʾ*, was asked if the wearing of an enlarged turban was an heretical innovation (*bidʿah*) he responded in a fatwa (legal opinion) that all kinds of exaggerations were to be condemned and that people should follow in general the example of the Prophet concerning their dress. Nevertheless, he saw nothing wrong in the idea that ulama should wear distinctive dress in order to be easily recognizable in case of the need to answer questions for the faithful.²²

FORMS OF OFFICIAL HEADGEAR IN THE MAMLUK EMPIRE

HEADGEAR OF THE CALIPH: Ideally, the caliph would bestow ceremonial clothing on the sultan, but in the case of the Abbasid shadow caliph of Cairo it was in practice the other way around. Ibn Taghrībirdī reports a striking episode that illustrates this fact: “On Monday, 1 Shaʿbān [808/22 January 1406] Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir sent for Abū al-Faḍl al-ʿAbbās, son of the caliph al-Mutawakkil ʿalā Allāh Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad, and recognized him as caliph after the death of his father. The former then put on the *tashrif* [ceremonial clothing], received the title of al-Mustaʿin billāh and went back to his home.”²³

An integral part of the ceremonial clothing of the caliph was his turban. He sported a fine round specimen with a trailing two-foot-long and one-foot-wide endpiece at the back which covered the entire back of the turban.²⁴ The usual color of the caliph’s clothes was black and so was his turban, over which was worn a black embroidered head shawl.²⁵ The reason for the black color was due to the fact that it always had been the color of the Abbasids. Unfortunately, there is no surviving image of a Mamluk caliph from Cairo. Their shadowy existence meant that caliphs were not in the public eye and therefore they neither figure in manuscript illustrations nor in drawings of European visitors, who would have

²⁰ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 49; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 4:42; al-Maqrizī, *Histoire des Sultans Mamlouks de l’Égypte*, trans. M. Quatremère (Paris, 1847), 1:1:244, n. 119.

²¹ Ibn Iyās, *Alltagsnotizen*, 22 (introduction by Annemarie Schimmel).

²² Al-Sulamī (d. 660/1262), *Al-Fatāwā al-Mawṣiliyah*, ed. Iyyād Khālid al-Ṭabbāʿ (Damascus, 1999), 65–66.

²³ Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874/1470), *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1970), 13:51; Diem, *Ehrendes Kleid*, 62.

²⁴ Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 3:280; Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 13.

²⁵ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 13.



hardly recognized their function anyway.

HEADGEAR OF THE SULTAN: During the ceremony of accession to office the Mamluk sultan received his official insignia: a black turban, a black robe, and a sword.²⁶ The black turban Sultan Baybars I (r. 658–76/1260–77) received for his coronation was apparently woven of gold material.²⁷ As already mentioned above, black represented the color of the Abbasids. The Mamluk sultans, having installed the Abbasid puppet caliph at the citadel, still upheld nominally the idea of an Abbasid caliphate. Mayer argues that the sultans wore these kinds of clothes exclusively for their inauguration ceremony, and that these clothes had more of an ecclesiastic character, as turbans of this type would not be worn by a Mamluk amir, and the black robe was usually observed only on shaykhs.²⁸

On other public occasions Mamluk sultans would wear different kinds of headgear. In the early days of the Mamluk sultanate this could be the *sharbūsh*, a headgear that resembled, according to al-Maqrīzī, a triangular-shaped crown put on the head without a kerchief around it. In the early Mamluk period it was often bestowed on Mamluk amirs as well.²⁹ The *sharbūsh* seems to have been quite popular with Turkish rulers of the tenth to thirteenth centuries, and seems to have come with the Turks from the east (figs. 2 and 3).

In Egypt the *sharbūsh* was apparently introduced by the Ayyubids and its existence is confirmed until the time of the Bahri Mamluks. On the so-called Baptistère de Saint Louis, a large brass basin inlaid with silver and gold from the early Mamluk period, we can identify enthroned figures of a ruler apparently wearing the *sharbūsh*. Behrens-Abouseif has convincingly made the case that these figures represent Sultan Baybars, the great Mamluk hero and victor over the Mongols and Crusaders³⁰ (figs. 4 and 5).

Finally we learn from al-Maqrīzī (who does not provide us with any reason for this) that the wearing of the *sharbūsh* was abolished by the Circassian sultans.³¹ Maybe the *sharbūsh* was too Turkish or Mongolian for them.

Since Ayyubid times, the alternative as official headgear had been the so-called *kallawtah* or *kallaftah* caps. These were small yellow caps that were worn without a turban wrapped around them (figs. 3 and 6).

The hair of the Mamluks at that time was worn long and fell down loosely on

²⁶ Al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 3:668.

²⁷ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 3:328.

³⁰ Doris Behrens-Abouseif, “The Baptistère de Saint Louis: A Reinterpretation,” *Islamic Art* 3 (1989): 6.

³¹ Al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 3:328.



their necks. Sultan al-Ashraf Khalil (r. 689–93/1290–93) then had the color of the *kallawtah* changed from yellow to red and ordered that a turban be wrapped around it. This remained the practice until his brother Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn (r. 693, 698–708, 709–41/1293, 1299–1309, 1310–41) had his head completely shaved after he went on a pilgrimage in 732/1332. This new skinhead look was then immediately copied by his entourage. The loss of hair was compensated for by the fact that the *kallawtah* cap arrangement with the turban grew much bigger in size and of better quality in the second half of the fourteenth century.³²

However, the most spectacular headgear of the Mamluk sultans ever has to be the so-called *takhfifah*, i.e., the “lighter one.” As the *kallawtah* caps with the wrapped turban around them grew larger and were hard to handle, on some occasions the Mamluks started to wear only a small, light turban, the *takhfifah ṣaghīrah*. The first mention of it can be found in the writings of Ibn Iyās. Sultan Barqūq (r. 784–91, 792–801/1382–89, 1390–99) had a *takhfifah ṣaghīrah* on his head when he appeared in public in the year 796/1394.³³ But this incidence did not trigger a completely new fashion wave. Apparently the *takhfifah* started to become increasingly popular only after the mid-fifteenth century, as we do not find any mention of a *takhfifah* in al-Maqrizī’s *Khīṭaṭ*, which usually mentions all aspects of contemporary dress.

After the episode with Sultan Barqūq, Ibn Iyās does not mention another public sighting of the *takhfifah ṣaghīrah* until the year 872/1467, when the *atābak* Yalbāy wore one at the gathering of amirs after the death of Sultan Khushqadam (r. 865–72/1461–67).³⁴ After the year 872/1467, the *takhfifah ṣaghīrah* is mentioned on a more regular basis, and by the end of the fifteenth century it seems clearly established that it could be worn by Mamluk amirs at certain public outings, but it was not acceptable to wear it at very official occasions. When Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (r. 901–4/1496–98), son of Sultan Qāyṭbāy (r. 872–901/1468–96), appeared in Muḥarram 902/September 1496 at the Friday prayer with a *takhfifah ṣaghīrah* on his head instead of a *kallawtah* (*kallaftah*), Ibn Iyās disparaged it as a sort of youthful mindlessness. Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was harshly criticized for this by leading amirs.³⁵

On a woodcut that was made by the German pilgrim Arnold von Harff, Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad is depicted with a round turban, which might be identified as the *takhfifah ṣaghīrah*, and no *kallawtah* cap is to be seen. The Mamluk dignitary to

³² Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 4:39–40.

³³ Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, 1:2 :467.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:455.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:339.



his left, called “Thodar” (*dawādār*) by von Harff, seems clearly to wear a *kallawtah* cap with a turban wrapped around it³⁶ (fig. 7). It seems that there were two kinds of the *takhfifah ṣaghīrah*, i.e., the round one (*mudawwarah*) and the smooth one (*mumallasah*).³⁷ Needless to say, these too started to increase in size over time.

At the end of the fifteenth century another type of *takhfifah* increased in popularity among the fashion mavens of the Mamluk military elite, the *takhfifah kabīrah* (the big *takhfifah* turban). This kind of *takhfifah*, worn for special occasions, was the result of the ongoing enlargement of the *takhfifah ṣaghīrah*. The amirs even started to put horns on it. The largest version of this type was called *nāʿūrah* (waterwheel) and the Mamluk sultan wore it as a crown. Apparently it reached very impressive sizes. The Venetian ambassador Domenico Trevisan, who was received by Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906–22/1501–16) in 1512, recalls that the sultan was sitting on his richly-decorated bench (*maṣṭabah*) wearing a great turban (“fez”) with two horns which were the length of half an arm.³⁸

The question remains why the Mamluks would put horns on their turbans after more than 200 years of rule. Ibn Iyās has the following story about the first appearance of the horned *takhfifah kabīrah*: “And in this month [Ṣafar 902/October 1496] the wearing of the *takhāfif* with long horns by the amirs started and they exceeded any boundary. And this incident was commented on by some poets: ‘Our amir told us why he started [wearing it]: ‘I was in the war and Dhū al-Qarnayn was calling me: ‘I am a ram. When the sheep pass me by and try to go out then I push them with my horns.’”³⁹ In another passage of his work Ibn Iyās explains the historical background of the *takhfifah kabīrah* as follows: “It [the *nāʿūrah*] nowadays takes the place of the crown of the kings of Egypt; with it the Turks show their might. It was worn by the Persian kings before.”⁴⁰

If we take a close look at both of these quotations from Ibn Iyās, the reason the Mamluk amirs chose horns as a sign of legitimacy and power becomes quite evident. Dhū al-Qarnayn, the two-horned hero from the Quran (Surah 18:83–98),

³⁶ Arnold von Harff, *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff von Cöln durch Italien, Syrien, Aegypten, Arabien, Aethiopien, Nubien, Palästina, die Türkei, Frankreich und Spanien, wie er sie in den Jahren 1496 bis 1499 vollendet, beschrieben und durch Zeichnungen erläutert hat*, ed. Eberhard von Groote (Hildesheim, 2004), 90. Sometimes this image is incorrectly identified as Sultan Qāytbāy (r. 872–901/1468–96), which is quite impossible as Harff left Cologne in November of 1496 and Qāytbāy had died in August of the same year. Harff even mentions the death of the former sultan (*ibid.*, 87).

³⁷ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 15; Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, index, 4:1:142.

³⁸ *Le Voyage d’outremer de Jean Thenaud (Gardien du couvent des Cordeliers d’Angoulême): Suivi de la relation de l’ambassade de Domenico Trevisan auprès du Soudan d’Égypte*, ed. Ch. Schefer (Frankfurt, 1995), 184. (Reprint of Paris, 1884).

³⁹ Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, 3:340.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:332.



is clearly to be identified as Iskandar⁴¹ or Alexander the Great in the Muslim tradition.⁴² Especially through the popular reception of the Alexander romance (*Iskandar Nāmah*) throughout the Muslim world, Alexander became “the model of the Muslim hero, the Iranian knight, through his own merits worthy of acceding to the rank of prophet of the One God.”⁴³

Alexander the Great was clearly seen as the prototype of a Muslim ruler. Therefore, he served as a role model for the Mamluk amirs when they took horns and affixed them on their turbans. Moreover, in the Egyptian context, Alexander the Great enjoys another connection with horns. He is said to have once visited the Oasis of Siwa in Western Egypt, home of a famous oracle in antiquity. Here Alexander was declared son of Zeus-Amun. The god Amun is often depicted as a ram-headed deity. Additional evidence for the fact that the Mamluks wore ram horns is that Ibn Iyās mentions on at least two occasions the word *kabash* (ram) in poems about the *takhfifah kabīrah*.⁴⁴ This argumentation provides us with an insight as to the emotional motivation to choose horns as a sign of power, but let us now have a look at the political side of the emergence of the longhorn *takhfifah kabīrah*.

We have to go back to the historical context of the year 901/1496. Sultan Qāyṭbāy died in Dhū al-Qa‘dah 901/August 1496. His fourteen-year-old son al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ascended the throne and he seemed determined to keep it. He seemed unwilling to stand idly by and wait for one of the powerful old amirs of his father to replace him and become the new sultan as was always the case in the history of Mamluk successions in the fifteenth century. *Al-mulk ‘aqīm* they say.⁴⁵ Regency has no children. Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad tried to change this pattern and wanted to be the exception. We remember that al-Nāṣir Muḥammad appeared one month after the death of his father in Muḥarram of 902/September 1496 at the Friday prayer wearing only a *takhfifah ṣaghīrah* on his head instead of the more official *kallawtah* (*kallaftah*) despite receiving harsh criticism⁴⁶ (fig. 7). Apparently he wanted to introduce a new order by making a clear political statement to the established powerful amirs. Their reaction was soon to follow. One month later in Ṣafar 902/October 1496 the amirs started wearing the *takhāfif* with long

⁴¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Stefan Heidemann for valuable information concerning the Iskandar topic.

⁴² W. Montgomery Watt, “al-Iskandar,” *IE*², 4:127.

⁴³ A. Abel, “Iskandar Nāma,” *IE*², 4:127.

⁴⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā‘i*, 3:340; 4:138.

⁴⁵ Ulrich Haarmann, “Der arabische Osten im späten Mittelalter 1250–1517,” in *Geschichte der arabischen Welt*, ed. idem (Munich, 2001), 229.

⁴⁶ Ibn Iyās, *Badā‘i*, 3:339.



horns.⁴⁷ This gesture indicated that they were the ones entitled to power. They had more established rights than the young sultan, rights to power that went back to Alexander the Great.

The uneasy relationship between the two sides was to remain. Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad endured a somewhat difficult reign over the next two years with frequent uprisings against him. He even tried to create a new military basis for his authority by the inauguration of a force of black slaves with firearms to get rid of the old amirs, only they got rid of him first. He was assassinated near Giza on 15 Rabīʿ I 904/31 October 1498. The ensuing power struggle went on among the high-ranking amirs until Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī emerged finally as sultan in 906/1501. With the victory of the old elite their political symbol, the *takhfīfah kabīrah* with long horns, became the official headgear of the sultan and the high-ranking Mamluks. Because of its peculiar shape, the *takhfīfah kabīrah* was nicknamed *nāʿūrah* (waterwheel). According to the Meccan author of the sixteenth century, Qutb al-Dīn al-Nahrawālī (d. 990/1582), one's position in the Mamluk hierarchy was shown by the number of horns one was entitled to wear on his turban. The sultan had six horns, while the high ranking amirs of one hundred (*amīr miʿah wa-muqaddam alf*) wore four horns and the amirs of ten were permitted two horns.⁴⁸ The six-horn version was attested by contemporary European witnesses. In 1512 Jean Thénau, the guardian of the Franciscan monastery of Angoulême, describes the clothing of Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī during an official reception with the following statement: "Sa robe estoit de tafetas jaulne et avoit en sa teste une faciolle de fine toile d'Ynde moult haulte, laquelle faisoit six longues et larges cornes dont deux estoient sur le front, aultres deux à dextre, aultre à senestre."⁴⁹

Fortunately we possess images of the *nāʿūrah* in European paintings. The most spectacular and seemingly the most realistic of these paintings is the so-called *Reception of the Ambassadors* by an anonymous painter, housed in the Louvre in Paris (fig. 8). According to the analysis of Raby, many details, such as the accurate drawing of the Umayyad mosque⁵⁰ and heraldic emblems,⁵¹ give evidence that the artist must have visited Damascus, "taking his view of mosque and bath-house from an upper story of the Venetian *fondaco* which was situated inside the *suq*

⁴⁷ Ibid., 340.

⁴⁸ Al-Nahrawālī (d. 990/1582), *Kitāb al-ʿIlām bi-ʿĀlām Bayt Allāh al-Ḥarām: Geschichte der Stadt Mekka und ihres Tempels*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Leipzig, 1857), 188.

⁴⁹ *Le Voyage d'outremer de Jean Thénau*, 45.

⁵⁰ In 1488 the western minaret of the Umayyad Mosque was built and it appears on the extreme left of the painting.

⁵¹ The emblem depicted in the *Reception* strikingly resembles the emblem of Qāyṭbāy; see Julian Raby, *Venice, Dürer and the Oriental Mode* (London, 1982), 53.



to the south of the Great Mosque.”⁵² Apparently the painting arrived in Venice between 1496, the date high-ranking Mamluk amirs started to wear the *takhfifah kabīrah* with long horns, and 1499, a date when other painters had already started to copy elements from the *Reception*.⁵³

Therefore, the central Mamluk dignitary of the painting, sitting to the right of the city gate on a podium, might be a governor of Damascus, as he was high-ranking enough to wear the *takhfifah kabīrah*. It is quite obvious how this headgear got its nickname “waterwheel” (fig. 8). It seems that the two persons beside him and the gentleman riding on a horse to the left wear as well forms of the *takhfifah*, but without horns.

Another contemporary European image of Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī with the *nā‘ūrāh* on his head seems not as realistic as the reception but it clearly shows the horns (fig. 9). As can easily be guessed this headgear seems to be extremely heavy and was certainly not very comfortable. For example, in 917/1511 Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī suffered from an abscess on his head and therefore he had to wear the light *takhfifah* instead.⁵⁴

We do possess as well a European image of the last Mamluk sultan, Ṭūmān Bāy (r. 922–23/1516–17). Here he does not wear the *takhfifah kabīrah* (fig. 10). But it seems that the origin of this image dates back to the time when Ṭūmān Bāy still held the important office of *dawādār* (“bearer of the inkwell”), as that is how he is named on the drawing. It seems that he wears either a lighter form of the *takhfifah* or, what is more likely, a special form of the *kallawtah*, as since the days of al-Maqrīzī the kerchief was wound around the *kallawtah* caps in order to form bumps (*iwaj*), the so-called Circassian *kallawtah* hats which were introduced by Sultan Barqūq at the end of the fourteenth century.⁵⁵ But as we do not know how realistic this image is in its details, the question of which hat it is exactly is not easy to answer.

To conclude the discussion about the *takhfifah kabīrah*, perhaps a voice from the common people from the year 914/1508 should be heard, which is reported by Ibn Iyās. The common people commented on the exclusive headgear of high-ranking Mamluks like this: “Every ram is wearing wool and also horns, and what horns! And I am happy to be in peace, without wool, without horns.”⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid., 55.

⁵³ Ibid., 62. During recent restorations, however, the date 1511 was discovered on the painting, but this must not necessarily be the actual date of the drawing; see Denise Howard, “Venise et les Mamlouks,” in *Venise et l’Orient, 828–1797* (Paris, 2006), 84.

⁵⁴ Ibn Iyās, *Badā‘i*, 4:212.

⁵⁵ Al-Maqrīzī, *Khitaṭ*, 3:328.

⁵⁶ Ibn Iyās, *Badā‘i*, 4:138.



HEADGEAR OF AMIRS: Many kinds of headgear that the Mamluk amirs were entitled to wear have already been dealt with in the context of the caps and turbans of the sultans. The *sharbūsh* was apparently worn by amirs as well until it was abandoned by the Circassian Mamluks altogether. The early Mamluk sultans would ceremoniously bestow a *sharbūsh* upon amirs.⁵⁷ Circassian sultans would instead put an expensive *kallawtah* on the heads of their amirs to show their gratitude.⁵⁸ The *kallawtah* cap represents the constant factor in Mamluk headgear, although it changed color and size and a kerchief was wrapped around it during Mamluk times. It remains the only headgear which was worn by Mamluk officials throughout the more than 250 years of Mamluk rule in Egypt and Syria. Other headgear like the *takhfifah ṣaghīrah* or the *takhfifah kabīrah* with horns were latecomers compared to the *kallawtah*.

Another headgear that apparently gained popularity in the fifteenth century among ordinary Mamluks was the so-called *tāqīyah*, which was a cylindrical hat with a flat top. It used to be made in several sizes and colors and was one-sixth of an ell high. At the beginning of the fifteenth century it grew taller until it reached two-thirds of an ell and the upper part took the shape of a small dome. In this form it then became well known as the so-called “Circassian.” At the end of the fifteenth century it was manufactured in a two-colored version. The lower part was apparently green and the upper part black.⁵⁹ In this form it appears in the *Reception* painting in the Louvre, where it is worn by the Mamluks standing on the porch (fig. 8).

During the late Circassian period the so-called *zamṭ* hat witnessed a breakthrough in Mamluk fashion. Originally it seems that it had been a headgear of the lower classes.⁶⁰ Then the Mamluks adopted it and made it exclusively theirs. In the year 840/1436 Sultan Barsbāy (r. 825–41/1422–38) forbade every *fallāh* (peasant) and every slave from wearing the red *zamṭ*.⁶¹ But this decree apparently did not guarantee the necessary exclusivity for the Mamluks with respect to the red *zamṭ*. Therefore Mamluks rode through Cairo in 868/1464 beating everyone not entitled to wear the red *zamṭ*, especially eunuchs and servants.⁶² Finally it became such a common and distinctive marker for an ordinary Mamluk soldier that the Ottomans pursued everyone wearing a red *zamṭ* on his head when they conquered Cairo, rightly thinking that only members of the Mamluk military elite would

⁵⁷ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 27; Dozy, *Vêtements*, 200; al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 3:328.

⁵⁸ Diem, *Ehrendes Kleid*, 13.

⁵⁹ Al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭaṭ*, 3:343; Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 31.

⁶⁰ Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 32.

⁶¹ Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, 2:172.

⁶² Mayer, *Mamluk Costume*, 32.



wear such a headgear.⁶³ We are quite well informed about what the red *zamṭ* looked like. We have the eyewitness account of Dietrich von Schachten, a German traveller who journeyed to the Near East in 1491. He described it as red with finger-long tufts and with kerchiefs wrapped around them. Apparently he liked the arrangement, as he calls it beautiful. Then he states that no heathen [Arab] was allowed to wear it, but only a Mamluk.⁶⁴

Another German visitor, Arnold von Harff, provides us with a good picture of the red *zamṭ* (fig. 11). Most people on the right-hand side of the Louvre *Reception* seem to wear it and fortunately we even have a surviving *zamṭ* hat in the Coptic Museum in Cairo (figs. 8 and 12).

CONCLUSION

Fashion is a social marker and headgear, with its very prominent position on the human body, even more so. Nevertheless, the present contribution has shown that even in a medieval society like Mamluk Egypt and Syria fashion set its own trends. New colors, new sizes, new shapes became en vogue, older styles had to go. When the Mamluk military upper class began to wear the red *zamṭ*, for example, the peasants and servants were forced to give up their headgear. A general trend that can be noted is the tendency to enlarge the size of the latest models almost to the point of being unwearable. When the maximum size is reached, then one starts with a new model all over again. This happened with the *takhfīfah*, which started off as the “lighter one” until someone put horns on it and transformed it into an immense “waterwheel.” Putting on a distinctive hat could also be a clear political statement in Mamluk times, as could be seen during the struggle of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad with his opponents among the established amirs.

After the Ottoman conquest it was apparently difficult for the Mamluks to give up their specific dress and with it most of their former exclusive social status. After learning of the death of the Ottoman sultan Selīm in 926/1520, the Ottoman governor of Damascus, al-Ghazālī, a former Mamluk, revolted immediately. “And then the governor entered the Citadel and the Circassian dress appeared once again: the *takhfīfāt* and *kallawtāt*. The wearing of Ottoman turbans and kaftans was abolished,” reports the contemporary author Ibn Ṭūlūn.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the time of the old hats was definitely over, and the revolt was crushed only three months after it started in Ṣafar 927/February 1521. The bare heads of al-Ghazālī and his companions were cut off and sent to Istanbul⁶⁶ (fig. 13).

⁶³ Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ* 5:150.

⁶⁴ Reinhold Röhrich and Heinrich Meissner, *Deutsche Pilgerreisen nach dem heiligen Lande* (Berlin, 1880), 191.

⁶⁵ Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 953/1546), *Mufākahat al-Khillān fī Hawādith al-Zamān*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Cairo, 1964), 124.

⁶⁶ Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ*, 5:382.



LIST OF FIGURES:

Figure 1. Syrian Christians (von den Syrern, die sich auch Christen nennen)
Reproduced by permission from Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Die Reise ins heilige Land: Ein Reisebericht aus dem Jahre 1483, Mit 15 Holzschnitten, 2 Faltkarten und 6 Textseiten in Faksimilie*, ed. Elisabeth Geck (Wiesbaden: G. Pressler, 1961), 29.

Figure 2. Miniature in the manuscript of Rashīd al-Dīn's "Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh" in Edinburgh University Library representing Maḥmūd of Ghaznah donning a *khil'ah* sent by the caliph al-Qāhir in A.D. 1000. Reproduced by permission from Edinburgh University, Special Collections Department. Photo from: N. A. Stillman, "Khil'a," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 5: Plate I.

Figure 3. North Iraq, ca. 1218–19: Ruler wearing a *qabā' turkī* with *ṭirāz* bands. On his head is a *sharbūsh*. His attendants also wear Turkish costumes. Most wear the cap known as *kallawtah*. From the frontispiece of the "Kitāb al-Aghānī" (Millet Kütüphanesi [Istanbul] MS Feyzullah Efendi 1566, fol. 1b). Photo from: Y. K. Stillman, "Libās," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 5: Plate XLI. (The ruler is generally identified with Badr al-Dīn Lu'lu', Atabeg of Mosul, who died in 657/1259. See Carole Hillenbrand, review of *Badr al-Din Lu'lu': Atabeg of Mosul, 1211–1259*, by Douglas Patton, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24, no. 2 [1997]: 266.)

Figures 4 and 5. Inner medallions of the Baptistère de Saint Louis representing Sultan Baybars. From: Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "The Baptistère de Saint Louis: A Reinterpretation," *Islamic Art* 3 (1989): 13. (The Baptistère is in the possession of the Louvre in Paris.)

Figure 6. Mamluk wearing the *kallawtah* hunting a wild animal (*furūsiyah* manuscript, British Library MS Or. Add. 18866). Photo from: Ibn Iyās, *Alltagsnotizen eines ägyptischen Bürgers*, trans. Annemarie Schimmel (Stuttgart: Edition Erdmann, 1985), 74.

Figure 7. Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad on his throne. Reproduced by permission from Arnold von Harff, *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff von Cöln durch Italien, Syrien, Aegypten, Arabien, Aethiopien, Nubien, Palästina, die Türkei, Frankreich und Spanien, wie er sie in den Jahren 1496 bis 1499 vollendet, beschrieben und durch Zeichnungen erläutert hat*, ed. Eberhard von Groote (Hildesheim: Olms, 2004), 90.



Figure 8. *Reception of the Ambassadors*. Anonymous. Courtesy of the Louvre, Paris.

Figure 9. Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī with the *nā'ūrah*. Jean Jacques Boissard, *Abbildungen der Türckischen Kayser und Persischen Fürsten/so wol auch anderer Helden und Heldinnen: von dem Osman/biß auf den andern Mahomet; Auß den Metallen/in welchen sie abgebildet/genommen/und in gegenwertige Kupffer gebracht. Wie dann auch vorher eines jeden wandel kürztlich mit Versen Beschrieben Durch Georg Greblinger alias Seladon von Regenspurg*, (Franckfurt, 1648), figure 20: Sultan Cansaves Gavris. Latin inscription reads: “Of what use is it that you bound Egypt to Syria, when the jealous destiny refuses to recognize you as sultan? Be aware that Achomenos [Shah Ismā'il?] defends the endangered frontiers, when Selymus will have taken your properties.” (There exists as well an edition from 1596 [Frankfurt], but the images are not as well preserved.)

Figure 10. Ṭümān Bāy. Boissard, *Abbildungen der Türckischen Kayser*, figure 21: Tomanbais VLV Duveidar. Latin inscription reads: “The affairs of Egypt are in doubt. Leave the scepter, which you cannot hold with a broken neck [Ṭümān Bāy was hanged]. The affairs of the Circassians are of utmost importance for the faithful. You deserve great praise, even though destiny was against you.”

Figure 11. Red *zamṭ*. Reproduced by permission from Arnold von Harff, *Pilgerfahrt*, 104.

Figure 12. *Zamṭ*. Courtesy of the Coptic Museum. Photo from: L. A. Mayer, *Mamluk Costume* (Geneva, 1952), XI/2.

Figure 13. Ottomans besieging the Mamluks in Damascus. “Selīm-nāma,” ca. 1521–24, Istanbul Topkapi Sarayi Museum MS H. 15978, fol. 235r. Photo from: Julian Raby, *Venice, Dürer and the Oriental Mode* (London: Sotheby Publications, 1982), 50. (The difference in the style of headgear between Ottomans and Mamluks can clearly be noticed.)





Fig. 1. Syrian Christians



Fig. 2. Maḥmūd of Ghaznah donning a *khil'ah*



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Fig. 3. Ruler wearing a *qabā' turkī* with *ṭirāz* bands



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Fig. 4. Inner medallion of the Baptistère de Saint Louis



Fig. 5. Inner medallion of the Baptistère de Saint Louis



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Fig. 6. Mamluk wearing the *kallawtah*





Fig. 7. Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad on his throne



Fig. 8. Reception of the Ambassadors



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Fig. 9. Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī with the *nā'ūrah*



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Fig. 10. Tūmān Bāy



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Fig. 11. Red *zamṭ*



Fig. 12. *Zamṭ*



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Fig. 13. Ottomans besieging the Mamluks in Damascus



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