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THE SULTAN’S NEW CLOTHES: OTTOMAN–MAMLUK GIFT EXCHANGE IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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Long before the caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786–809) sent Charlemagne (r. 768–814) his famous gift of an elephant named Abu ’l-’Abbás in 802, rare and valuable goods—fine garments and precious stones, slave-girls and stallions, relics and eunuchs—had played an important role in diplomatic relations.1 The artfully chosen gift is an eloquent envoy, capable of imparting a multitude of messages and of engendering diverse and even contradictory sentiments: deference and admonition, allegiance and bravado, submission and disdain. For as long as embassies have visited foreign capitals, gifts have been used to establish and solidify bonds between empires. They also display the magnanimity and fortunes of their givers and compel responses in kind from their recipients.2

The exchange of gifts was a significant aspect of the relations between the burgeoning Ottoman empire and the aging Mamluk state, from the earliest contacts between the two polities in the late fourteenth century until the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517. A period of great flux in the eastern Mediterranean, “the long fifteenth century” witnessed momentous shifts in political and military hegemony, diplomatic and cultural relations, and patterns of trade and migration. The history of the relations between the two empires has been the subject of much scholarship in recent years, revealing the intricacies of a complex bond between two Muslim polities that were continuously engaged in a process of self-definition and legitimization vis-à-vis the other.3 To shed further light on the formation, development, and deterioration of this bond, it is necessary to examine the political and ideological discourses through which it was expressed and that often depended upon the “language” of gifts.

This study addresses the following questions: Did gift exchanges take place between the Ottoman and Mamluk sultans during the fifteenth century? If so, what shape did the flow of gifts take as the century progressed? Did it proceed in fits and starts, abating during periods of conflict and resuming during periods of entente? What kinds of gifts were sent by each side, and what might this suggest about the availability of, and attitudes toward, different kinds of commodities and materials? Finally, what kinds of diplomatic messages can be distilled from the choices of specific gifts on certain occasions?

In order to answer these questions, I have compiled a corpus of data from six late medieval Arabic historical chronicles and one collection of diplomatic correspondence: Ḥawādīth al-duhūr fi madā ’l-‘aṣyām wa ’l-shuhūr4 and al-Nujūm al-zāhira fi mulūk Miṣr wa ’l-Qāhira5 by Ibn Taghribirdi (d. ca. 1470); Nuzhat al-nufūs wa ’l-abdān fi tawārīkh al-zamān6 by Ibn al-Sayrafi (d. 1495); Mufākahat al-khillān fī ḥawādīth al-zamān7 by Ibn Tulun (d. ca. 1546); Mūnṣe’ātū ’s-selātīn8 by Feridun Ahmed Beg (d. 1583); Badā’i’ al-zuhūr fī waqā’ti’ al-duhūr9 by Ibn Iyas (d. 1524); and al-Sulūk li-ma’rifat duwal al-mulūk10 by al-Maqrizi (d. 1442). With the exception of Feridun Ahmed Beg’s collection of Ottoman diplomatic correspondence, the remaining works are chronicles written by scholars in the Mamluk empire.

Taken together, these texts provide a wealth of information about the world of diplomatic courtship—such as the dispatch and reception of envoys, the gifts they bore from their patrons, and the language of official letters—allowing us to reconstruct a history of gift
exchange over an extended period. Our sources make reference to a total of sixty-six encounters between Ottoman and Mamluk envoys and rulers during the period under examination (an average of one every two years). About two-thirds of these references contain explicit mentions of diplomatic gifts, often with accompanying descriptions. On the basis of these descriptions—tantalizingly brief though they often are—it is possible to discern some broad trends of exchange, and to make some observations about the ways in which each empire projected a certain political identity on its sometime ally and rival.

The following pages present the corpus of diplomatic visits assembled from the sources listed above. I have included every mention of a gift, including the few cases where all efforts to decipher the object in question have been in vain. The analysis that follows aims, firstly, to provide a bird’s-eye view of the flow of gifts and diplomatic encounters as the Ottoman–Mamluk political relationship evolved. Secondly, it attempts to isolate patterns of gift giving and evidence pertaining to the availability and popularity of different commodities and materials in the fifteenth century.

THE CORPUS OF DIPLOMATIC VISITS AND GIFT EXCHANGES

Below is a list of all sixty-six diplomatic encounters mentioned in the historical sources surveyed. Proceeding on the assumption that an official envoy would not likely have appeared in a foreign court without a gift—an insult that, if intended, would probably have been remarked upon by contemporary chroniclers—I have also listed every encounter not accompanied by a mention of gifts. Each record in the list contains the names of two rulers, with an arrow indicating the direction in which the letter and/or gift traveled. This is followed by the date of the encounter (or the date of the official letter), and a description of the gift, if one is supplied. The gifts are emphasized in bold type.


4. Bayezid I → Barquq (Dhu 'l-Qa‘da 795 [September 1393]): "News came of the arrival of the envoy of the King of Rum, Abu Yazid ibn ‘Uthman, bringing with him gifts (taqādim) for the sultan. The reason that he came was...to inform the sultan about Timur Lank and to warn him...He also sent a request to the sultan for a skilled doctor (tabīb ḥādhiq) and medicine suitable for his illness (adwiya tuwāfiq maraḍahu), for he was suffering from joint pain (darabān al-mafāṣil). When the sultan read Ibn ‘Uthman’s letter...he appointed [the doctor] al-Rayyis Shams al-Din ibn Saghir to him, and sent two loads of medicines that suited his malady, as well as a grand gift with his envoy."

5. Bayezid I → Barquq (Sha’ban 796 [June 1394]): “Next arrived ambassadors of the Ottoman sultan Yıldırım Bayezid, ruler of Asia Minor (Rūm), stating that he was sending 200,000 dirhams as assistance for al-Zahir, and that he would await the sultan’s reply so that he might act accordingly...Letters of praise and thanks were written to all three rulers, stating the wishes of the sultan.”

6. Bayezid I → Faraj (r. 801–15 [1399–1412]) (15 Dhu ’l-Hijja 803 [27 July 1401]): “And on this day, a large group of envoys arrived from Ibn Yazid [sic] b. Murad b. ‘Uthman, the King of Rum. Their most senior member was one called Amir Ahmad, and he was one of Ibn Yazid’s eminent princes. He was received by the office of the chamberlain...and they lodged him in the home of Amir Qushtamar al-Mansuri, in Bab al-Barqiyya.”