CHAPTER 12

Mamluk and Mongol Peripheral Politics: Asserting Sovereignty in the Middle East’s ‘Kurdish Zone’ (1260–1330)

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Scholars of the medieval Islamic world, as well as those who focus exclusively on the history of the Kurds, have paid scant attention to the impact of border geo-political transformation in the fourteenth century on both the ethnic and ethno-territorial identity of the Kurdish people.1 It is the contention of this article that this omission is a grave error, and that the emergence of military and political rivalries between the Mamluks of Egypt and the Ilkhanids of Iran over the Middle East’s ‘Kurdish zone’ constitute a key historical moment in the formation of the Kurdish identity.2 In historical terms, conceptions of Kurdish territoriality most certainly pre-date the fourteenth century; nevertheless, faced with the overawing power of the Mongol war machine and in order to offset their military inferiority outside Egypt and Syria, the Mamluks adopted a relatively novel set of strategies and policies towards the Kurdish populated highlands of western Asia. These policies in turn had a significant impact on Kurdish ‘ethnicity,’ not only raising its political significance but also territorializing it.3

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1 Two exceptions can be noted, the works of Ismet Cherif Vanly, “Le déplacement du pays Kurde,” and of Vladimir Minorsky, “Kurds and Kurdistan.”

2 It is worth noting that, although it does not focus specifically on the Kurdish aspects of the issue, Amitai’s work on the Mamluk–Ilkhanid confrontation sheds light on many questions that underlie the present article and provides its historical framework. See, for example, Amitai-Preiss, Mongols and Mamluks.

3 Here, ‘ethnicity’ means a process that binds individuals together and separates them from the rest of the society according to their alleged belonging to an ethnic group. This phenomenon has been successfully described and analysed by Fredrik Barth as resulting from the constitution of ethnic boundaries created by the manipulation of cultural traits by individuals, groups and states. Martiniello, L’ethnicité dans les sciences sociales contemporaines; Barth, Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. On the medieval Kurds, see James, “Arab Ethnonyms (ʿAjam, ‘Arab, badū and Turk . . .).”
We will commence our study on the Kurds in this period by examining the formation of notions of a ‘Kurdish zone’ in the centuries preceding the emergence of the Mongol and Mamluk polities, highlighting the often problematic nature of relations between the Kurdish tribes and imperial powers. This study will continue by investigating the ways in which both empires sought to project their power into the mountainous domains of the Kurds. In particular, it will look at the ways in which the Mamluk failure to transform their essentially defensive victories over the Mongols in Syria into offensive military successes prompted Cairo to adopt a novel set of political practices on the Mesopotamian frontier. These practices entailed the co-option rather than domination of Kurdish groups resident in this region. The study will conclude by discussing some of the broader implications of these policies on the evolution of the Kurdish community. Arabic and Persian sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth century (chronicles, geographic encyclopaedias, biographical dictionaries) will provide most of the material that supports our demonstration.

The Evolution of a ‘Kurdish Zone’: A Lawless Zone?

Medieval Arabic and Persian sources state that the main Kurdish groups lived anywhere between the Fars region in the east, and the Syrian Jazira in the west, and from Georgia in the north, to Khuzistan in the south.⁴ These same sources also noted that the Kurds inhabited a multitude of environments from warm steppe-like deserts to high snow-capped mountains. However, after an overall survey of the sources between the eighth and the fourteenth centuries, the image that emerges is that of an agro-pastoral population essentially residing in mountainous zones.⁵ Indeed, pre-Mamluk sources used a number of designations to describe the tribal⁶ lands of the Kurds, including *Bilād al-Akrād, Zūzān*

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⁴ Minorsky, “Kurds and Kurdistan.”
⁵ James, “Une ethnographie succincte.”
⁶ This article does not intend to address in details the question of tribal organization of the Kurds. The notion of tribe as the notions of *qabila, ashīra or khayl* in Arabic and Persian is a very fuzzy concept which usually refers to originally non-urban societies whose members share one or several putative common ancestors. This familial representation partially defines the social and political organization of said groups. The remote nature of the Kurdish territory allowed the formation of many of these tribal societies. That is why we are referring here to a tribal Kurdish territory although we do not consider the tribal organization as being the exclusive social and political inscription of local populations. See James, *Les Kurdes dans l’Orient mamelouk et mongol de 1250 à 1340*, 187–333.