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Stephan Conermann (ed.)

Ubi sumus? Quo vademus?

Mamluk Studies – State of the Art

With numerous figures

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Mamlukology as Historical Anthropology State of the art and future perspectives

The field of Historical Anthropology has much to contribute to the study of Mamluk culture and society, as it offers new and stimulating questions. I see the importance of such new modes of inquiry in their communicability to non-specialists. Mamlukology as Historical Anthropology, therefore, could be more relevant to our contemporary society than traditional approaches have been, and is, moreover, appropriate for trans-cultural studies. In my contribution, I first elucidate more precisely the central concern of Historical Anthropology, highlighting the advantages of such an approach in our research as Mamlukologists. I then discuss one topic that is ideally suited to anthropological inquiry, namely, the body. In presenting the results of research on this topic by Mamlukologists, I propose other potentially rich themes for future research, discussing some of the possible ways to deal with these and similar topics, all the while emphasizing that the historical-anthropological approach is not a methodology, as such. There is a rich and growing literature on the concept of Historical Anthropology.¹ Central to the historical-anthropological approach is the study of human beings in time and space. Turning the focus on the individual, all-too-human issues like the body and senses, sexuality and love, health and illness, youth and old age, birth and death, and the like, come to the fore. The historian is concerned with exploiting the diversity of the different perceptions, conceptions and attitudes of people towards such topics, which result in different forms of behavior and conduct. Taking the body as an example, each individual has his or her own experiences with his or her body and has tried to understand these experiences through interpretations available to him or her. Developing one's own perceptions of the body, consequently, will influence the individual's way of dealing with the body. Based on the fact that reality surrounding human beings is accessible only through interpretations – that each individual creates

¹ Daniel, *Kompendium*; Dressel, *Historische Anthropologie*; Goetz, *Mediävistik*; Le Goff, *Geschichtswissenschaft*; Maurer, *Historische Anthropologie*; Medick, *Quo vadis*; Reinhard, *Lebensformen*; Van Dülmen, *Historische Anthropologie*; Wulf, *Vom Menschen*.

this reality constantly anew through his or her own experiences and interpretations – the focus of historical-anthropological research is subjective. Ideally, the task of the historian is to reveal individual perceptions, emotions and the individual's space for action and negotiation.

When dealing with this task, two important issues arise. The first concerns source material. Which kinds of sources can we use to get to the individuals' ways of dealing with their world? Self-narratives like autobiographies, letters, diaries, travel accounts or testaments seem to be outstanding sources since they allow us the most direct insight into individual perceptions of life and individual modes of living.² Other genres that do not explicitly intend to provide a narrative of the self can and should be used for historical-anthropological questions, as well. This is possible because of our awareness that each text gives, in some way, a testimony of the author's worldview, and it is our duty to try to understand the function of this worldview. From this perspective, we are certainly not lacking in material. The second issue to be considered while trying to reveal individual perceptions and the individual space for action and negotiation is the realization that the subjective modes of thinking and feeling about the body – to continue with this example – are dependent on perceptions of the body discussed by contemporaries in various discourses. Possibilities of behavior are also dependent on their social framework. The individual can express himself only in terms of his own culture and society. We explore further these contexts below. The distinctive feature of historical-anthropological research lies exactly in this contradictory combination of partialization and generalization of the historical view. We understand that individual expressions are not just subjective attitudes towards life, in as much they are only possible, and only understandable, in the process of negotiation with those patterns of thought, worldviews, and forms of comprehension that are available to the individual.

This project of Historical Anthropology incorporates earlier, and more mature, research approaches, such as the history of daily life and the history of mentalities.³ Because Historical Anthropology focuses on the plurality of human behavior, it excludes a uniform idea of man. It is rather the ambiguity and inconsistency of human behavior in the complexity of its cultural and social contexts that becomes evident through this approach. This fact alone makes Historical Anthropology especially relevant for our own society, putting into perspective our own conceptions and perceptions. Everyone today is able to establish a personal reference to such topics as the body, love or illness, and this communicability to non-specialists is of particular importance to me. The

2 Von Krusenstjern, *Selbstzeugnisse*; Wollina, (in this volume).

3 Dinzelbacher, *Mentalitätsgeschichte*; Goetz, *Vorstellungsgeschichte*; Kortüm, *Menschen*; Laak, *Alltagsgeschichte*.

historical view on such topics teaches us to be more aware about our own constructions of the world. At this point, it seems especially important to me that we as Mamlukologists also take up such research questions, because in this way we may be able to more effectively deconstruct the picture of an alleged uniform and foreign Islamic culture. I will now discuss the pioneering and future potential of Mamlukology as Historical Anthropology, taking up the body as a topic for examination. In fact, Historical Anthropology has only been used in very few cases as a methodological frame of reference, not only for Mamluk studies, but also for Islamic studies more generally.⁴ Without a doubt, the human body constitutes one central topic of historical-anthropological research. Publications about this topic in the framework of European History are abundant.⁵

As Mamlukologists, we would like to understand how different people within Mamluk society perceived their bodies. Did some of them experience their body as a burden that one would try to ignore and get rid of as soon as possible? Would one rather try to mask one's own corporality or, on the contrary, try to accentuate it? Which forms would people use for highlighting their corporality? How far into the Mamluk texts can we read any consciousness of the body? How was the body discussed and represented? Were bodies flagellated, castigated or mutilated? Which meanings were then ascribed to such acts? Which bodies or parts of the body, on the other hand, were trimmed, well-kept and looked after? Which aspects were important, and what kind of effort was given to such activities? What about the militarily trained body? Did different body ideals exist? Which bodies were considered as beautiful, and which were perceived as repellent? How far could individuals express their feelings through the body? How was, for example, pride or dignity displayed? Who would feel shame because of his or her body, when and for what reasons? How could pain be expressed? Were there any bodily social markers? What happened with the body, according to the Mamluk imagination, in the grave; during and after the resurrection? What do we know about forms of veneration, where individual bodies or body-parts played a role? What would this imply, and how was it interpreted? Which body gestures were described, and which functions were ascribed to them?

It seems to be of fundamental importance that we pose and follow such questions if we want to take the historical-anthropological approach seriously, trying to understand the variances amongst human beings, their feelings, and spaces of action and negotiation. Until recently, such research that engages with the human body in its comprehensive dimensions of subjective feelings, ex-

4 Conermann, Hees, *Kulturwissenschaft*; Bauer, *Ambiguität*.

5 Bynum, *Körper*; Tanner, *Körpererfahrung*; Duden, *Body history*; Van Dülmen, *Körper-Geschichten*; Frei Gerlach, *Körperkonzepte*; Labouvie, *Leiblichkeit*; Le Goff, *Truog Geschichte des Körpers*; Lorenz, *Leibhaftige Vergangenheit*; Porter, *History*.

pressions, and experiences, while at the same time connecting these to different kinds of perceptions and constructions of the body available in Mamluk society, has yet to be explored by scholars. In the frame of Islamic studies, we can find some research on religious and philosophical perceptions of the human body, but none of these studies focuses on specific Mamluk texts.⁶ From Denis Gril's study on the body of the Prophet in the stimulating volume *Le corps et le sacré en Orient musulman*, for example,⁷ we learn how important it can be to distinguish between the different Arabic notions for the body, namely *jism*, *jasad* and *badan*. One question worth asking is how these notions developed in Mamluk times. The outstanding symbolism of the Prophet's body is also the focus of an interesting article by Brannon Wheeler.⁸ How were such issues discussed by Mamluk authors? Prominent among the above-mentioned studies are those about mystic attitudes towards the body. Can we describe any specific Mamluk ideas and practices in the field of Sufi studies? It is astonishing that there are no monograph-length studies on the philosophical-theological discussions about the relationship between body and soul. Intimately connected to the understandings of the body are the topics of gender, sexuality and love. These topics have been dealt with in the framework of the pre-modern history of the Muslim world. Relevant monographs and edited volumes on these topics do exist, but they are not dedicated specifically to the Mamluk period.⁹ Concerning the methodological approach, we should highlight the considerations made by Thomas Bauer about love poetry and the history of mentalities. His approach to Arabic poetry attests to the importance of literary texts, and especially of poetry as a source for historical-anthropological research that is, of course, also available for the Mamluk period. Concerning the topic of love, Robert Irwin and Everett Rowson have dealt with similar texts from the Mamluk period.¹⁰

In relation to these studies are works dealing with the history of women concerning issues of gender, sexuality, and love. One must keep in mind that even in this cluster of topics that receive attention in Islamic studies, as far as Mamluk studies are concerned, an academic lacunae exists. In this case, because of the available research on earlier as well as on later periods, one could imagine a future undertaking that might investigate specific Mamluk perceptions of love, as compared to other periods. Questions about the human body lead us to the

6 Bedhioufi, *Corps*; Chebel, *Corps*; Katz, *Body*; Khoury, *Body*; Kugle, *Sufis*; Mayeur-Jaouen, Heyberger, *Corps*.

7 Gril, *Corps*.

8 Wheeler, *Gift*.

9 Al-Sayyid-Marsot, *Society*; Musallam, *Sex*; Bouhdiba, *Sexuality*; Malti-Douglas, *Woman's*; Marmon, *Eunuchs*; Wright, Rowson, *Homoeroticism*; Bauer, *Liebe*; El-Rouayheb, *Homosexuality*; Babayan, Najmabadi, *Sexualities*.

10 Irwin, *Alī al-Baghdādī*; Rowson, *Homoerotic*, 158 – 191.

topics of health and illness. When and for what reasons did an individual feel ill? How did one express such feelings? Which possibilities were open for the individual to regain health? How were disabilities perceived? Which bodies were considered healthy? The works of Michael Dols on the Black Death, but even more specifically on the topic of madness, are outstanding examples of research dealing with this array of questions, but again, the Mamluk period receives no attention in his research.¹¹

One Mamlukological study of particular value as an example of the possibilities for an historical-anthropological approach to questions of health and illness can be seen in an article by Fedwa Malti-Douglas on the cultural meanings of blindness.¹² She works with a highly methodological consciousness, combining ideas from the history of mentalities with the structuralistic approach taken from literary study. Referring to research done in European history, she also dares to make some trans-cultural comparisons. Her main source is the biographical lexicon on blind people written by al-Şafadī, but she combines her findings from this text with others, like lexicography, dream literature, Quranic commentaries, literary works, proverbs and jokes. By analyzing the Arabic vocabulary, she points out that blindness was conceived of as a disability, but it was not associated with darkness, as in Western medieval texts. Blindness was described as a bodily deficit, but, unlike European sources, this deficit was not given any spiritual meaning. Taking examples from the biographies, she tries to draw conclusions concerning the daily life of blind individuals, and she shows that one important aspect that was represented in the biographies was the possible mobility for a blind person through the help of a guide. This aspect depicted blind people on the one hand as dependent, while on the other hand, integrated into society. Blindness was not darkness, but seeing with foreign eyes. One further aspect of daily life that appeared in the biographies was the discussion of eating with the blind. This was perceived as a difficult task, but can be interpreted as an integrative, socially important action. Malti-Douglas underlines the central meaning of corporality that nurtures Mamluk perceptions of blindness. Neither ruler nor prophet could be imagined with a defected body, and blindness would make the body defected. Their authority was gained from a “whole” body. Blind people, in the Mamluk texts, were thought of in connection with women. They were, in a similar way, conceived as being bodily defected, but at the same time a natural part of society. As a compensation for the loss of sight, blind people in the Western Middle Ages gained spiritual vision. Such an idea was explicitly disclaimed by Muslim authors. In the Mamluk world of perceptions, blind people were compensated with extra sexuality, and this was another

11 Dols, *Black Death*; Idem, *Majnūn*.

12 Malti-Douglas, *Mentalités*.

point that connected them to women. On the contrary, in the West, blindness was associated with castration. Blindness in the West was seen as a punishment for sexual transgressions. Mamluk texts also depicted blindness as a punishment, but in the context of religious transgression. Fedwa Malti-Douglas also discusses the meaning of blind people engaged in recitation, especially as Qur'an reciters, that points to the importance of the oral transmission of texts. She is well aware of the fact that she cannot show any development or changes of these perceptions in order to discuss how far they were specifically Mamluk. Her study is of course only a first step that captivates through its complexity. Since historical-anthropological questions have been posed so rarely, I think it is a clever way to proceed in such a synchronic fashion, concentrating on the Mamluk period, but taking into consideration as many literary genres as possible in order to explore a topic like blindness. As a future perspective, it would be of course reasonable to extend the comparison to other periods of the pre-modern Muslim world, since this will be the only way to understand the specific possibilities for a blind person in Mamluk society. Apart from this, we can of course find out more about blind individuals and blindness during the Mamluk period. For example, Malti-Douglas does use the biographical lexicon on blind people composed by al-Şafadī, and all the examples she provides discuss persons from pre-Mamluk times. They belong, of course, to the Mamluk world of images of blindness, but what about contemporary individuals? She also mentions that the majority of al-Şafadī's blind persons became blind only in their old age, but she excludes this aspect completely from her discussion. Of course, we can use additional genres to find out more about this topic. Malti-Douglas, for example, did not touch upon medical or juridical literature, or poetry. However, this example shows us how interesting such questions can be, and how rich our material is.

Dealing with such topics surrounding issues of health and illness, of course, brings into focus the role of medicine in Mamluk culture and society. The social history of medicine is a very interesting subject, and research related to this subject matter is needed in order to contextualize individual perceptions of health and illness, and more generally of the body. Some researchers have been exploring these issues specifically for the Mamluk period; one thinks, in this line, of the work of Linda Northrup on the history and function of Qalawun's great hospital; Paulina Lewicka's engagement with the figure of the Jewish doctor; and Leigh Chipman's study on the professional world of a Mamluk pharmacist.¹³ One topic that is always of special interest for historians of daily life is food and eating. This topic manifests itself in connection with blind people as a social issue, since food played a major role in Mamluk perceptions of health

13 Chipman, *Pharmacy*; Behrens-Abouseif, *Fatḥ Allāh*; Lewicka, (in this volume); Northrup, *Qalāwūn's Patronage*.

and illness. Food and eating have so many layers of meaning, making it a fascinating topic. An extensive list of studies related to the culture of eating for the pre-modern Muslim world already exists. While they have produced many interesting results, they lack any specific focus on the Mamluk period.¹⁴ One exception is the monograph by Paulina Lewicka on food and foodways of medieval Cairenes. Her focus is on the Mamluk period, showing how a new culinary culture developed during this period.¹⁵ At one point, she discusses the etiquette for sharing the table, where she uses texts on table manners, including Mamluk works.¹⁶ And, like Fedwa Malti-Douglas, she refers to existing research on Western medieval texts, making trans-cultural comparative remarks possible. She points to the importance of religious prescriptions concerning table manners in Arabic-Islamic texts, underlining the perceptions that surround the relationship between host and guest. In comparison to Western texts, she tries to show that Arabic-Islamic table manners were much more concerned with respect towards the co-eaters. She highlights the importance of tradition with regard to the Arabic-Islamic table manners, concluding from this fact that they did not take over the role of courtly trendsetter, as was the case in Europe. Amalia Levanoni deals with food and food preparation, specifically in Mamluk times, in order to understand its social and political implications.¹⁷ She discusses the distinguishing feature of possessing one's own kitchen and cooking utensils, as well as the special role of meat and sugar consumption as an indicator of wealth, which on special occasions was shared with the poor in order to illustrate and legitimize wealth and power. Like Lewicka, Levanoni discusses table manners, and comes to the same conclusion (even though referring to specific Mamluk customs) that in the Mamluk Empire it was not the court that set the model. Rather, the scholarly elite used table manners in order to distinguish themselves not only from the poor masses, but also from the ruling Mamluk military elite. Such approaches are interesting, and we can imagine many more questions about food and eating.

Concluding with a final example, questions about the body also lead us to topics connected to the stages of life – like childhood and old age – marked by physical changes of the body. Several publications have explored the issue of childhood, most of them dealing with Muslim history more generally, approaching the topic from different vantage points.¹⁸ From my perspective, a

14 Van Gelder, *Dishes*; Gyselen, *Banquets*; Heine, *Weinstudien*; Heine, *Kulinarische Studien*; Marin, Waines, *Alimentación*; Rosenthal, *Herb*; Waines, *Caliph's Kitchen*; Zubaida, Tapper, *Culinary Cultures*.

15 Lewicka, *Food*.

16 Lewicka, *Food*, 387–454; Idem, *Shared Meal*.

17 Levanoni, *Food*.

18 Adamek, *Kleinkind*; Giladi, *Children*; Giladi, *Infants*; Glander, *Oriental Child*.

major problem arises when such a topic is discussed as "Islamic," without further clarifying time or space. Furthermore, the uncritical use of texts of various genres without consideration of their function or contexts of production compromises the results of such studies. This predicament stems from the scarcity of published research to which scholars can refer. One way out of this dilemma is to study one very specific text, like the mamlukological study by Thomas Bauer on the Kindertotenlieder by Ibn Nubātah.¹⁹ He elucidates, in a very sensitive way, the emotional effect of a mourning poet on the premature death of his own child. The way the poet talks about his child reveals his perceptions of childhood, but also those of the intended audience in a more general meaning. The poem attests to the intimate relationship between fathers and their children. Once more, we see the special relevance of poetry for historical-anthropological questions.

In my own research, I try to approach the topic "youth", concentrating on one specific genre, namely Quranic commentaries, including those from the Mamluk period.²⁰ In this way I am able to demonstrate that the authors perceived the notion of *shabāb* as the ultimate phase in life, when one is in command of his full manly strength, with a fully developed beard until the age of forty. In our contemporary perceptions, on the contrary, we understand the notion "youth" to refer to a phase of change, marked by puberty. We typically mean by this the age between roughly 15 and 24. This example indicates how different our own perceptions can be, and how easy it is to misinterpret texts when using our own frameworks. We need to study very carefully the concepts behind words, the history of notions. This can be one starting point for historical-anthropological research. On the other hand, I see the importance that one should try to combine as many different textual genres in order to be able to illuminate as many aspects of a given topic as possible. The problem lies, of course, in the fact that each genre is governed by its own rules, and many of them are deeply intertwined with their own traditions. In this early stage, it seems crucial to me to concentrate on one specific time, like the Mamluk period, in order to be able to contextualize the particular texts. In my current research on the history of old age in Mamluk times, I try to appropriate this approach. I first compare the perceptions of old age in medical, religious and literary texts. Parallel to these more general perceptions, I try to understand individual possibilities of behavior in old age in connection with illness, piety, office and dignity, using biographical information about contemporaries. The historical-anthropological approach, used in this manner, is uniquely suited to combining research on the framework imposed by cultural conceptions with individual experiences and individual negotiations

19 Bauer, *Communication*.

20 Hees, *Kraft*.

with those conceptions. Mamlukology can only be enriched through such an understanding of the individual as (s)he perceives his/her own culture.

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