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A Mamluk Sultan in Genoa

How the *Sīrat Baybars* Shaped the Egyptian Mental Map towards Europe and the Mediterranean

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ABSTRACT The *Sīrat Baybars* represents a very important Arab folktale pretending to describe the life of Mamluk Sultan Baybars (r. 1260-77). While the content varies between fact and fiction, it proved to be highly entertaining and popular among the Egyptian population until the nineteenth century, where we still hear of public recitals. As such it has shaped the image of Europeans and Christians as outer and inner foes of the Muslim realm and as a constant possible threat. The paper focusses especially on the so-called Genoa Episode of the *Sīrat Baybars*, when the sultan is taken as captive to Genoa but rescued by a Muslim alliance. The episode shows how real historical events like the Fatimid attack on Genoa in the tenth century and the Mamluk conquest of Cyprus in the fifteenth merge into later narratives. It also shows how the relationship between Europeans, Christian Dhimmis and Mamluks are interwoven in networks of alliances and deceit. As such, the *Sīrat Baybars* underlines the existing mental map in Egypt and ensures its survival into modern times.

KEYWORDS Mamluk, Sīrat Baybars, Muslims, European, Genoa

Introduction

Although I am a classical historian of the Mamluk sultanate and its political, economic and social entanglements with the broader Mediterranean region, I remain fascinated by the colorful stories of the *Sīrat Baybars*. History can be found embedded here in the story of a popular folk tale from the Mamluk period. A folk tale (*Sīra Shaʿbīya)*, we read in the Encyclopaedia of Islam almost a bit disrespectfully, is the "genre of lengthy Arabic heroic narratives that in western languages are called either 'popular epics' or 'popular romances' (*Volksroman*). These narratives (…) are works of adventure and romance primarily concerned with depicting the personal prowess and military exploits of their heroes. Pseudo-historical in tone and setting, they base many of their central characters on actual historical figures or events" (Heath 2012). [1]

One wonders here about the description of "pseudo-historical," as a folk tale does not have [2]

as its goal to be either "historical" or "pseudo-historical."[1] Its aim is to entertain. Therefore, it describes mighty warriors, beautiful ladies, surprising ruses and so on, as shall be shown. And certainly, one can imagine that using historical names familiar to the audience increases the thrill and the credibility of the story. Moreover, the tales provide hope to specific audiences that their own side will win at the end because they are the good ones. They have won the wars against Mongols and Crusaders and this is how they would like to be remembered. Julien Loiseau has spoken about the *Sīrat Baybars* and its effects on audiences with the ambiguous term "le reve d'un roi" (the dream of/about a king). Baybars is a positive fairytale which becomes true for Muslim audiences right until the beginning of the twentieth century (Loiseau, 2014, 25).

[3] However, a folk tale can also be used to reconstruct the social history of the time it was developed, written down and read publicly. The story can leave a significant impression on the audience and present alleged facts especially when it comes to historical events which are not presented accurately but contain enough historicity that the narrative could ostensibly be true. Yet it is taken as fact by the audience because what is described corresponds to their idea of the world they live in. Anna Akasoy (2017) has called for historians to be more frivolous and listen to contemporary fiction when reconstructing the past. The same might be true for medieval fiction and its role in reconstructing the cultural atmosphere in which people lived during the Mamluk Sultanate. This paper will demonstrate how the *Sīrat Baybars* shaped the image of the Genoese in the Mamluk public and how Franks, in general, were perceived as eternal enemies who play their dirty tricks on honest Muslims all the time.

[4] In order to provide a glimpse of this Mamluk mental map,[2] the *Sīrat Baybars* will first be presented, followed by a sketch of the relationship between the Mamluks and Genoa, before analyzing the central so-called Genoa episode of the *Sīra*. In the meantime, there will be entertaining stories and images which hopefully will, to some extent, reconstruct the atmosphere of the *Sīrat Baybars* created when read to a Mamluk audience.

Medieval and Early Arab Perceptions of Europeans

[5] It would be quite difficult to summarize the entirety of medieval and early Arab perceptions of Europeans. However, some glimpses shall be provided here to allow for contextualization of the *Sīrat Baybars* within the literature and scholarship on the topic. What might generally be said is that we have Arab travel accounts and a view of Europe that is quite often shaped by the perspective on the Mediterranean and Southern Europe, where Arabs settled and reigned until the expulsions following the Reconquista in 1492. These narratives provide a multifaceted view on medieval Europe (König 2015). Fortunately we also have recent scholarship on the image of the Europeans in medieval Arab literature (Hermes 2012).

[6] It is, however, a view that rarely touches the regions of Middle and Northern Europe, the zones where no Convivencia took place, where there was no experience of mixed religious societies as on the shores of the pre-modern Mediterranean. One can hardly imagine that a Muslim traveller like Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1368) would have been allowed to travel to German cities on the Rhine, for example. An idea that a Muslim could go or live there would emerge

1 See for a more detailed discussion on "pseudo-historical" Coleman (2020).

2 As Mamluk Mental Map I would describe here the imagined surroundings the *Sīrat Baybars* creates by describing place names and people which of course have no real relationship with actual maps of the Mediterranean even in Mamluk times.

Figure 1 Source: Sīrat al-malik al-Ẓāhir Baybarṣ, Foto: Fransīs Ginle, Gallica.bnf.fr/ Institut français du Proche-Orient (IFPO)- ANR Littératures populaires du Levant.

very much later. It is on that other side, the regions from which most Crusaders came, where people with no prior contacts with Muslims or Arabs lived. The Syrian soldier and author Usāma ibn Munqidh (d. 1188) describes the Franks as fierce warriors without any moral and religious values. Moreover, these Franks would not mix. "But the Franks (God curse them) are an accursed race that will not be accustomed to anyone not of their own race" (Usāma ibn Munqidh 2008, 142). The victory over the crusaders in 1291 was hailed throughout the Muslim world. The entrance of the Cathedral of Saint-Jean d'Acre was brought to Cairo and built into the Madrasa of Sultan al-Naṣir Muḥammad as a visible sign of the conquest.

[7] Robert Irwin has shown that there was a distinction made by Arab authors about Byzantines and Europeans. Byzantines were regarded as reliable and trustworthy, while the Franks were the complete opposite, and a conversion of a Frank to Islam was always considered insincere (Irwin 1989, 229). These topics were based on experiences but also on popular literature, as we will see in the case of the *Sīrat Baybars*.

[8] Similar topics and arguments can be found in later works of Arab scholars as well. In the case of Egypt the impression that Napoleon's army left in 1798 is worth describing. When the French landed in Alexandria, they published a proclamation in Arabic stating that Napoleon was a friend of Muslims, that everybody should pray in freedom, and that the French were enemies of the pope. To this pamphlet the famous scholar al-Jabartī (d. 1825), the main source for the expedition on the Egyptian side, responded saying that Napoleon's attempt to portray himself as a Muslim was completely implausible, as the terrible deeds of the French contradicted this. As far as his enmity towards the Pope was concerned, this only showed that the French were equally enemies of Christians and Muslims and had no religion at all (Al-Jabartī 2000, 33–41). The Europeans were simply not to be trusted. They were saying one thing, but their acts were contradicting them.

The *Sīrat Baybars*

The *Sīrat Baybars* (novel of Baybars) is a popular Mamluk folk tale written by anonymous authors, starring as hero the first great Mamluk Sultan Baybars (r. 1260-1277), who fought successfully against the Mongols and the Crusaders. Besides depicting epic fights against non-Muslim enemies, the *Sīrat Baybars* provides a real kaleidoscope of the contemporary late medieval Egyptian and Syrian societies. It has remained highly popular throughout modern times and is recited until the present day. European visitors of the nineteenth century, such as Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, Edward William Lane, and Johann Gottfried Wetzstein, witnessed the still-popular public recitals of the *Sīrat Baybars* in Damascus and Cairo (Paret 1960). [9]

The popularity of *Sīrat Baybars* has led to many surviving manuscripts and editions. The most recent one is by Georges Bohas and Iyas Hassan, published in eighteen volumes so far in the publication series of the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (Anonym 2003–2022). [10]

Thomas Herzog has identified over fifty manuscripts of the *Sīra*, which vary in length and content. The manuscripts were written down between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, and most of them are dated from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They come mainly from Egypt and Syria and bear witness to the high popularity the epic enjoyed among coffeehouse guests of the Arab world. However, fact and fiction within the storyline is not always strictly discernible (Herzog 2006, 33). Herzog states that although we do not know of an author, the manuscripts mention names of reciters (*ruwāt)* who are connected to the Mamluk period (2006, 40). Herzog argues that the actual authors were certainly persons close to the mamluk educational establishment, as they cite existing works of Mamluk historiography, but they also paid attention to what was read in the streets and combined both. The first written version of the story seems to have emerged by the early sixteenth century. [11]

The popularity of *Sīra* over the following periods is certainly related to the fact that it is highly entertaining and connects with different strata of society. The inclusion of socio-political events made it familiar to local audiences, and the story was fluid as it could be adapted to new story lines and events. [12]

The first part of the *Sīra* until Baybar's ascent to the sultanate is essentially a tale of the lower strata of society, which also constitute the majority of the audiences in the coffeehouses. Their world is depicted with sympathy and full of quotidian anecdotes. The main protagonist here is Baybars' friend *'Uthmān*, the robber with a golden heart. Moreover, Sultan Baybars protects the common people throughout the novel against the abuses of his officials. The space outside the Islamic world is depicted as a region of danger, inhabited by Franks or Mongols who continuously attack or trick the Muslims. Needless to say, they fail, as Baybars and his friends always fight them back in the end. The sea and its waves often serve as a metaphor for danger, as the Christian navies and pirates hail from there. The function of the *Sīra*, according to Herzog, is to "open the window of the mental worlds of the authors, narrators and audience" in order to understand "the imaginary" in it (2006, 1). Read and heard for so long by large audiences in public spaces, it certainly shaped the mental maps of Egyptians and Syrians considerably throughout the centuries. [13]

The duty of all Muslims—that is the message of the *Sīrat*—is to fight these enemies united, regardless of ethnic or sectarian differences. One wonders for example about the positive role the mighty Ismā'īlī warriors play, led by a master of disguise named *Shīḥa*, fighting side by side with Baybars, as the Sunni legal scholars of Mamluk times clearly regarded them as heretics. In the memory of the common people, their religious oddness was apparently of [14]

minor importance compared to their historic role in fighting the Crusaders and the possibility of connecting them with all kinds of (positive) Islamic sorcery (Herzog 2006, 176–81).

[15] The Islamic world is generally depicted as a safe haven against this outer world, but one should beware of the false bottom and the enemies within. The town of Alexandria for example has an underground level composed of tunnels and caves where Baybars is once taken captive in an underground church by his main enemy, the mighty *Jawān*, who is a magician and crypto Christian in the disguise of a Muslim *qāḍī*. One of the reasons for the success of the *Sīrat Baybars* is the central element of prophecy. The wise man *Yūnān* wrote down in a book that the evil *Jawān* will appear and that Baybars and *Shīḥa* had the divine obligation to fight and kill him (Herzog 2006, 54). During these up-and-down struggles between good and evil, it becomes clear that all proponents have access to a spiritual world outside the factual reality and that both spheres intertwine, which makes the *Sīrat Baybars* a kind of a predecessor of modern fantasy genres.

[16] It is, therefore, remarkable to what a great extent the Christian Franks are still described in the *Sīra* as an eternal threat to the Muslim realm at a time—especially after the mid-fifteenth century—when the actual military threat had diminished after the Ottoman conquest of Cyprus in the 1570s. Still, the image of the hostile crusader lived on in the memory of the local Egyptians and Syrians, and it was then certainly strengthened after Napoleon launched his expedition against Egypt in 1798 and the following period of French and British colonialism. However, the main Frankish villain of the *Sīra* was Genoa, and this shall be looked at now in more detail.

Genoa

[17] One can only speculate why Genoa has become so prominent in the *Sīrat Baybars*, as Venice and Venetians were more prominent in the everyday life of the Mamluk sultanate. However, the Venetians were less aggressive towards the Mamluks and sometimes even acted as their allies.

[18] Genoa already existed during the Roman Empire and subsequently fell under the control of the Goths, the Lombards, and the Frankish Empire. It was known for building ships and being a commercial hub. This hub was then attacked and pillaged by a Fatimid fleet in 935 CE. The Fatimid Caliphate, which was then based in Mahdia in today's Tunisia (as the conquest of Egypt would not come until 969 CE), had initiated a series of attacks on the Ligurian coast in 934/35 CE. According to the Ismāʿīlī historian Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn (d. 1468), who drew on earlier Fatimid writings, Genoa had been well-fortified in the tenth century and the city had rich merchandise like linen and raw silk. The commander of the fleet, by the name of Yaʿqūb ibn Isḥāq al-Tamīmī, had overcome the fortifications and not only plundered the city but also captured many ships and slaves, which he brought back to Mahdia, where the successful return of the fleet was celebrated by the population. The Fatimid Caliph al-Qāʾim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 934–946 CE) rejoiced and each of the soldiers received rich rewards (Picard 2015, 178; Kedar 1997, 2:608). The sacking of Genoa is mentioned by Christian sources as well and it is perceived as a disruptive moment for the city before it recovered and made a return on the political scene when it was granted full legal recognition in 958 CE by the Italian King Berengar II (r. 950–961), a date which is seen as decisive for the creation of the Republic of Genoa (Epstein 1996, 14–15).

[19] By the thirteenth century, closer to the historical setting of the *Sīrat Baybars*, Genoa was

firmly established in the Eastern Mediterranean. It had helped the Byzantine Palaiologan dynasty to regain Constantinople in 1261, thereby ending the Latin Empire, which had been under heavy Venetian influence. Genoa as an ally of the renewed Byzantine Empire was therefore granted trade privileges and encouraged to establish trading bases in the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean (Feldbauer and Morrissey 2004, 39). Genoese merchants traded through Caffa in the Crimea, especially slaves. Female slaves were destined for the domestic market, and male slaves were usually sent as military slaves to the Mamluk Empire despite the papal ban (Verlinden 1991, 66). According to Dols (1979, 60), it is highly probable that it was a Genoese slave ship that brought the Black Death to Egypt in 1347, as the Genoese were the main maritime slave traders at that time, and the classic account of al-Maqrīzī (1934–1973, 2/3:776) tells that the plague entered Alexandria on a slave ship.

[20] Genoa was active as well in the spice trade but had a serious geographical disadvantage in this respect compared to Venice, as Venice had the monopoly on the important German market, whereas Genoa had to cope with the challenge of neighbouring Mediterranean cities like Aigues-Mortes or Marseille regarding the French market (Fuess 2001, 406, 407, 413).

[21] Overall, Genoese trade in the Mediterranean functioned more on an individual level compared to Venice. As a result, Genoese merchants and sailors resorted quite often to acts of piracy at the Mamluk shores if these acts seemed to be more lucrative than pure trading.[3] From the Mamluk viewpoint, the Genoese were the less reliable trading partners because individual Genoese merchants did not always feel bound by mutual trading agreements.

[22] Crucial for the development of the relationship between the Mamluk Sultanate and the Italian seafaring nations was the role of the Kingdom of Cyprus. In the years of the Papal trade boycott after the Fall of Acre in 1291, Cyprus had served as a hub for trade to the levant and smuggling was frequent. The Genoese apparently disliked the Cypriots and pretended to be on the side of the pope. For example in the height of the papal ban on trade in 1317, Arab travellers reported in Tripoli that they had been on board a ship when the Genoese captured it and beheaded all Cypriots on board under the accusation that they had allegedly circumvented the prohibition of the pope, "the caliph of the franks," to trade with the Mamluk infidels (Ibn Abī l-Faḍā'il 1973, 2–3 in Arabic; 51 in German).

[23] However, after the 1350s, the ban became less and less observed and trade returned directly to Alexandria and other Mamluk cities, to the detriment of the Cypriot King Peter I of Lusignan (r. 1358–1369). He gathered help in European countries from 1362 to 1365 in order to gain support for the liberation of the Holy land, but instead he used the fleet to the surprise of the participating Italian seafaring nations to attack Alexandria. The assault took place in October of 1365 and the Frankish army remained there, raiding the city for several days until the main Mamluk army approached from Cairo (Al-Maqrīzī 1934–1973, 3/1:105-108; Edbury 1991, 166; van Steenbergen 2003, 123–37). The attack lasted only a few days, but it made a remarkable impression on contemporary Mamluk authors (Al-Nuwayrī al-Iskandarānī 1968, 137).

[24] It needed special envoys from Venice and Genoa to the Mamluks to reallow trade in the ravaged town. After the murder of Peter I of Lusignan by unhappy nobles, Genoa used the subsequent troubles to conquer the trading hub of Famagusta in 1373 (Epstein 1996, 236). Genoa then made Famagusta its regional base for trade and pirate activities (Archivio di Stato

3 For a discussion on the connection between trade, privateering, and piracy in the Eastern Mediterranean in the fourteenth and fifteenth century with a special stress on the Catalan situation, see Coulon (2004, 201–13).

Venice 1375-77, no. 35, 3r-f). They thought that their retreat in Cyprus could protect them and was sufficient against the Mamluks. In 1403 a Genoese fleet initiated a naval expedition against the Mamluk coast taking Famagusta as the starting point. However Jean II le Meingre, the Governor of Genoa, who was at that time under French occupation, was surprised to find the coastal towns of the Levant prepared for battle. He discovered the explanation for this when he captured a Venetian ship near Beirut, whose captain confessed to having received orders to warn the Mamluks (Lalande 1985, 23, 233–34, 244–45; Lalande 1988, 112). The Genoese troops could not hold Beirut but had enough time to loot it thoroughly (Ṣāliḥ ibn Yaḥyā 1969, 32–34). This expedition presented the last large-scale aggressions of a Genoese fleet against the Mamluk Empire, but Genoese corsairs, Catalan privateers, and Cypriot pirates continued to harass Mamluk shores in large numbers and at several occasions (Fuess 2005).

[25] As many of these buccaneers operated from Cyprus, Sultan Barsbāy (r. 1422–1438) equipped three fleets in the summers of 1424, 1425, and 1426 to get rid of the nuisance. During these Mamluk expeditions the Genoese had apparently opted for helpful neutrality. In 1426, King Janus (r. 1398–1432) was finally captured by Mamluk forces and his palace burned down. After having officially recognized the overlordship of the Mamluk sultan and agreeing to pay a yearly tribute, the sultan allowed Janus to depart from Cairo for Cyprus in May of 1427 (Al-Maqrīzī 1934–1973, 4/2:722; Ṣāliḥ ibn Yaḥyā 1969, 250–51; Makhairas 1932, 672–96).

[26] Thereafter the Genoese Black Sea strongholds came under increasing pressure by the emerging Ottomans after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The Ottomans pushed hard on the Genoese until Caffa fell in 1475. Famagusta's loss preceded in the year 1464, when it had to surrender to a combined army of Cypriot-Mamluk troops.[4] With the loss of the Black Sea slave trade and the fall of Famagusta, Genoa's influence in the Eastern Mediterranean had almost vanished by the end of the fifteenth century, but it is interesting to see how its presence in the *Sīrat Baybars* remained strong.

The Actual Sultan Baybars

[27] The hero of the novel is the historic Mamluk Sultan Baybars, who ruled in the second half of the thirteenth century and is considered to be the real founder of the Mamluk Sultanate. His physical appearance is described as "a tall man with [a] broad chest and shoulders, slim legs, a powerful voice, swarthy skin, and blue eyes" (Thorau 2021). His actual biography can be summarized as follows: He was born around 1227 as *Qipçāq-Turk* in the Southern Russian steppe and arrived as a slave at the age of fourteen in the Mamluk Empire, where he was bought by the Amīr Aydakīn al-Bunduqdār in Ḥamā. The Ayyūbid Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ (1240–49) imprisoned Amīr Aydakīn in 1246 and Baybars was incorporated into the Sultan's *baḥrī* regiment. Baybars's abilities were quickly noted, and he rose through the ranks until he was appointed by the Sultan as a leading *amīr* to the office of *jamdār* (i.e., keeper of the sultan's wardrobe).

[28] His role became increasingly important as he took part as an army commander in the victories against the French King Louis IX (r. 1226–70) in the delta in 1249 and against the Mongols at ʿAyn Jālūt in 1260.[5] Thereafter, he was involved in the murder of Sultan Quṭuz (r. 1259–60); some sources say he killed him personally, and was declared sultan himself. He

4 On the Mamluks and Cyprus, see Fuess (2005).

5 For more on this battle, see e.g. *The battle of Ayn Jalut: a paradigmatic historical event in Mamluk historical narratives* (Levanoni 2014) and Uyar (2012).

then ruled from 1260 to 1277. He continued the successful policy of conquering regions at the Syro-Palestinian coast still held by the crusaders and defended the realm against the Mongols. Moreover, he is known for having undertaken many important reforms and introduced the Abbasid caliphate to Cairo in 1261, after the Mongols had conquered Baghdad in 1258. When he died, he left to his successors a powerful and well-organized sultanate (Thorau 2021). His emblematic sign, the lion, used to be very present afterwards in the Mamluk realm.

Sultan Baybars of the *Sīrat*

[29] Given his powerful biography, it is no wonder that Baybars should emerge as the hero of a popular folk tale. The Baybars of the *Sīrat Baybars* is then understandably a larger-than-life character with a mysterious origin. He enters the story as Maḥmūd, a sick slave who is bought in Bursa by a slave merchant of Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ. The slave merchant recognizes all the characteristics in Maḥmūd, which Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ had seen in a prophecy about the coming saviour of the Muslims. Maḥmūd's illness is then cured by holy men, among them Aḥmad al-Badawī, in Damascus. It is interesting to note that while sick, he was guarded by a lion on the way to Damascus. He is then adopted by a rich lady who gives him the name *Baybars* after her own son. He then sets off to Cairo and enters the service of al-Ṣāliḥ. It is then revealed that he never was meant to be a slave and was born a Muslim, hence his name Maḥmūd. He was in reality the son of the King of Khurāsān, but his brothers tricked him and he was sold into slavery. Once in Cairo he and his companion ʿUthmān experience many adventures within the Cairo underworld and with sorcerers. He succeeds in all his adventures until he is sent as an *amīr* to Alexandria, where he is abducted to Genoa and freed by a large Muslim force. Back from Genoa, al-Ṣāliḥ offers him to be his successor, but Baybars declines several times to become sultan until the death of Quṭuz. Sultan Baybars then excels in all matters of the state although he is constantly tricked and deceived by his enemies, yet wins all his fights with the help of his friends (Herzog 2006, 861-905). Towards the end of the story his archenemy Jawān is cruelly executed in Cairo. Baybars retires from power but is poisoned in Damascus by his successor Qalāwūn (Herzog 2006, 62).

The Shadow Play Evidence

[30] Before turning now to the actual Genoa episode of the *Sīra* it seems worthwhile to draw attention to figures belonging to an Egyptian shadow play called "The Lighthouse of Alexandria" which was bought by Paul Kahle, a German Orientalist, in 1907 in Cairo from the shadow player Ḥasan al-Kashshāsh. Some of the figures are mediaeval and some are modern (Kahle 1930, 1) (see fig. 2 and fig. 3).

[31] The play of al-Kashshāsh apparently modernized older tales and added some new figures with canons, as can be seen in the figure of the lighthouse, but Kahle (1930, 16–17) identifies that in the centre of the story is Alexandria, which is attacked by Christian Franks. In this version the Egyptians must gather to build a new fleet, which then destroys the enemy.

[32] However, one could see in these stories and the figures two clues which might bind the figures of the shadow play to the *Sirat Baybars* and maybe even the Genoa episode. The first clue is that the name of the victorious new ship in the shadow play is the *ghurāb al-manṣūr* (the victorious raven) [@(1930, 17). This name is firstly a play on words, as *ghurāb* is also an Arabic name for a large medieval vessel, but secondly it is also the name Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ gives

Figure 2 Mamluk Ship, shadow play fourteenth century. Courtesy: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin/ Preußischer Kulturbesitz / Museum für islamische Kunst. Source: Kahle (1930, fig. 1).

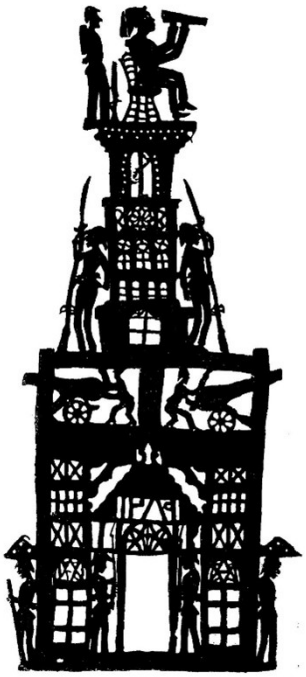

Figure 3 Lighthouse of Alexandria, 1872. Source: Kahle (1930, 2).

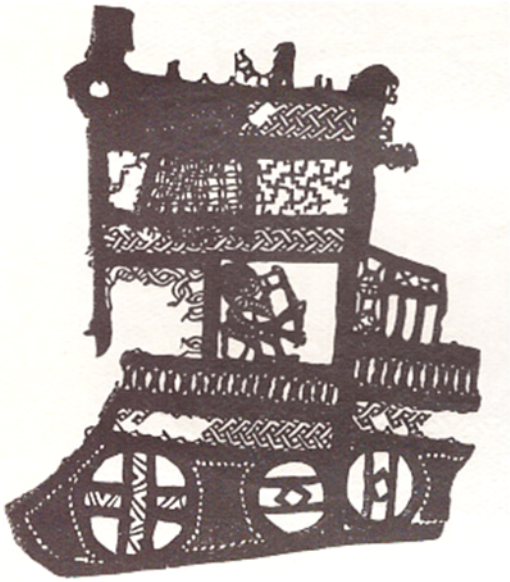

Figure 4 The Buqja (diamond): Emblem of the Jamdār (master of the robes). Source: Paul Kahle, Leuchtturm von Alexandria, Fig. 4.

to the main ship of the Muslims in the fight in Genoa: "It is victorious," he said, and he named it "the victorious raven" (Herzog 2006, 116).

The second clue can be found on some of some of the old figures of the shadow play, which [33] can be dated through their imagery and the use of a Mamluk emblem to the Mamluk period itself, according to Kahle (1930, 10). On the ships, the emblem of the *jamdār* (master of the robes), the so-called *buqja* (diamond), is clearly recognizable. We know as well that in reality Baybars was appointed as *amīr jamdār* by Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ and that in the Genoa story line, Baybars is still *amīr* and will be rescued by the Sultan, so we might speculate that the *buqja* emblem on the ship alludes to the *Sīrat Baybars* (see fig. 4 and fig. 5).

The Genoa Episode[6]

Now coming to the actual Genoa episode of the *Sīrat Baybars*, a brief summary shall explain [34] the events of the abduction and rescue of Baybars. It starts with the pilgrimage of Maryam, the daughter of King Ḥannā of Genoa, to Jerusalem. During her pilgrimage, she falls in love with Maʿrūf, a leader of the Ismāʿīlīs, converts to Islam, and marries Maʿrūf. This makes her father furious, and he asks the mighty Christian trickster Jawān, who lives under the disguise of a Muslim judge in the Mamluk Sultanate, for help. Jawān arranges for Maryam to be abducted to Genoa, where she refuses to renounce Islam, so she is put in jail, where she is soon joined by her new husband, who was looking for her but is now locked up as well (Herzog 2006, 872–73). Still, this seems insufficient for the wrath of the Genoese king. Subsequently, Baybars is asked to go to Alexandria to investigate the mysterious abduction of children and the theft of money.

Baybars checks the underground level of Alexandria, which is constituted of tunnels and [35] caves and other hidden places. He discovers a room where Christian generals gather. He tries to

6 In the following, I use Thomas Herzog's (2006, 68–122) translation of the Genoa Episode based on a manuscript of the *Sīra* which Edward William Lane (1801–1876) bought in Cairo.

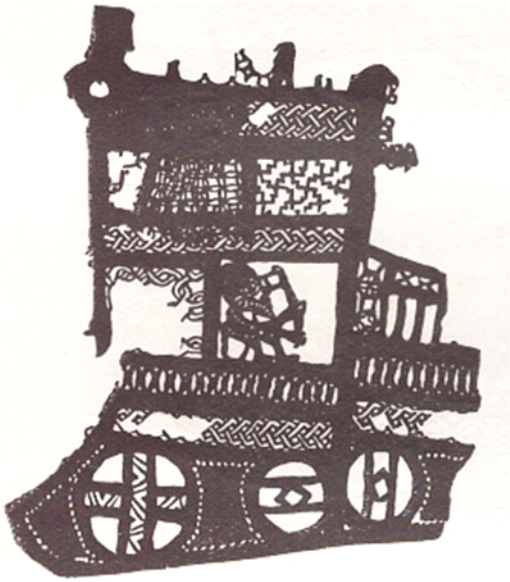

Figure 5 AMIR ARGHŪN AL-'ALĀ'Ī (D. 748/1347–48). Glass Globe, https://meoc.hypotheses.org/tag/jamdar

get hold of Jawān but is struck down by sorcery and drugs. Baybars makes it clear to his enemy that he would never leave Islam. Jawān then says to him "Baybars I have seen you (in the prophecy) as king and sultan and laying waste to the countries of Christianity and converting them to Islam. Therefore, I had to trick you and make you my prisoner" (Herzog 2006, 73). The Franks then bring Baybars to Genoa in a fruit box. When Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ becomes aware of Baybar's abduction, he starts the preparation to equip a fleet and goes to Genoa.

Meanwhile, in Genoa, Baybars encounters the Muslim trickster hero by the name of [36]
Shīḥa,who had disguised himself as Janwīd, the son of the Genoese king Ḥannā. In doing so Shīḥa can bring Baybars to the rooms of the King's son and plot how to escape (Herzog 2006, 76). In order to divert King Ḥannā, Janwīd/Shīḥa has apparently arranged for someone who looks like Baybars to be tortured while keeping the real Baybars safe (Herzog 2006, 107).

When Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ arrives in front of Genoa, fighting starts on land and at sea. During the [37]
fighting, the commander of the Genoese converts to Islam and changes side, but still the fight is heavy and long. Suddenly, a great canon boat appears and destroys all the Christian vessels. The sultan rejoices but does not understand what has happened. Then the commander of the vessel arrives and introduces himself as Abū Bakr from the Maghreb (Herzog 2006, 110).

Abū Bakr explains that he was fighting the Catalans and building this new boat, the Raven, [38]
when he received a mysterious order to sail to Genoa to fight the infidels side by side with the Sultan. For this favour he would be declared Sultan of the Sea. That is why he had come with the "victorious raven" (Herzog 2006, 115–16).

However, even after the help of the Maghrebinians, land fighting continues, so Abū Bakr is [39]
sent to the Ismāʿīlīs in Northern Syria to gather troops there. At first, they refuse, but then Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ appears to them in a dream, and they agree to board the ships and go to Genoa (Herzog 2006, 117). When the Ismāʿīlīs arrive in Genoa, they recognize the trickster Shīḥa as their new leader. Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ then forges an alliance between Baybars, Shīḥa, and Abu Bakr.

Afterward, the troops storm Genoa, take King Ḥannā as prisoner, but leave Maryam, the [40]

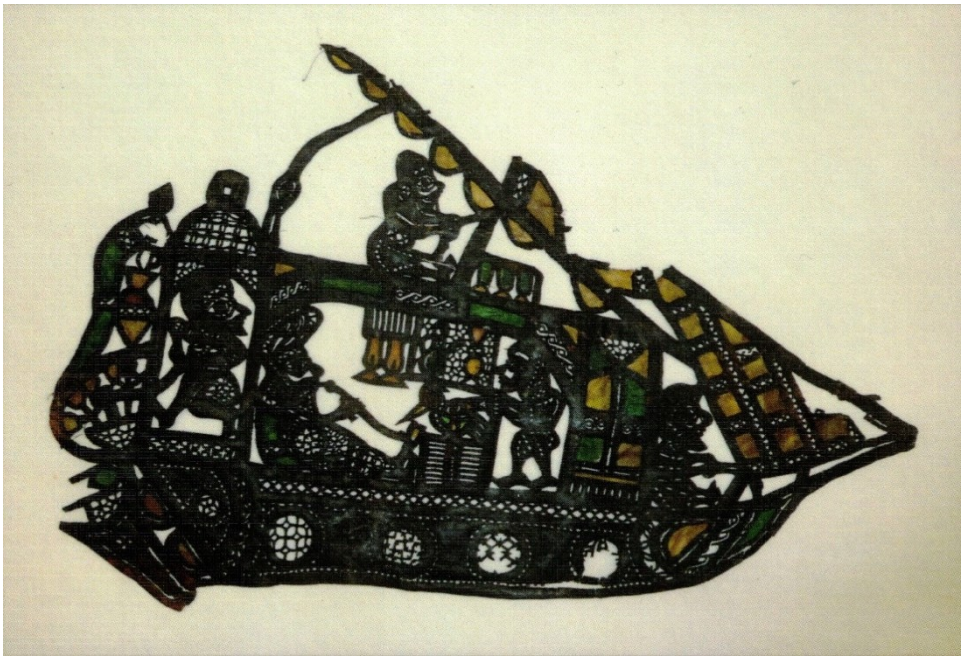

Figure 6 Baybars smoking Shisha on his way home from Genoa? Source: Kahle (1930), Fig. 7. (Courtesy: Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, Universität zu Köln).

King's daughter, in Genoa. When Genoa is conquered, some inhabitants are slaughtered while others convert to Islam, but unfortunately the evil Jawān manges to escape (Herzog 2006, 118).

The Muslims plunder Genoa and go back home. The Ismāʿīlīs return to their Syrian homeland, and the Ayyubid forces go back to Alexandria. After three days, the Ayyubids then leave to Cairo: "There the whole army gathered and paraded in triumph through the city, until they arrived at the citadel. Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ slept the whole night until dawn, then he sat on the throne, assembled the army and gave out honorary clothes as presents. After this had happened, Baybars swore an oath of alliance to his king and the king wrote for Baybars a letter of investiture for the sultanate" (Herzog 2006, 119). [41]

Much later, when Baybars is already Sultan, we hear again of Maʿrūf the Ismāʿīlī. He is rescued from Catalan captivity and meets his son ʿArnūs, whom Maryam had secretly given birth to before being captured and brought to Genoa. Father and son go to Genoa to rescue Maryam (Herzog 2006, 883) (see fig. 6). [42]

Thoughts about the Genoa Episode of the *Sīrat Baybars* in Respect to Historical Events

Overall, it seems that the *Sīrat Baybars* overwhelmingly mixes fact and fiction. It is foremost a tale meant to entertain and to showcase the superiority of one's own group, i.e., the medieval and early modern Muslim population of Egypt and Syria. The same holds true for the Genoa episode. [43]

According to Thomas Herzog, its literal function is to bridge the story line and explain the evolution of the hero of the novel. For Baybars, the Genoa-episode marks the turning point between his early life, adulthood with his friends in the streets of Cairo, and his ascension in [44]

the ranks of the Mamluks to his later life, where he is clearly established as a mighty warrior and sultan (Herzog 2006, 120–22).

[45] But why did Genoa get that key role and suffer a literary assault which never happened in a history in Baybar's time nor the whole Mamluk time? Maybe Genoa serves here as a place which merges several historical events. First, the sacking of Genoa by the Fatimids in 935 CE: This conquest was, as we have explained already, still very present with Ismāʿīlī historians in the Yemen, such as the fifteenth-century author Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn. However, reports are to be found in historical works by non-Ismāʿīlī authors as well, such as Ibn al-Athīr (d. 1233) and the Syrian al-Dhahabī (d. 1348), who provide detailed accounts of the sacking and the thousands of slaves sold into captivity in the aftermath (Kedar 1997, 605–16). This story was narrated among generations of historians across different parts of the Muslim world, making it likely that it found its way to ordinary storytellers in Mamluk times.

[46] Since Genoa was quite far away, a successful attack on this important Italian sea-fearing nation was too good to be left out of the *Sīrat Baybars*. It could also explain why the Ismāʿīlī troops helped in conquering Genoa in the *Sīra*, as the Ismāʿīlī Fatimids had already done so in real history back in the year 935 CE. Notably, it also tells that Maghrebis under the command of Captain Abū Bakr constitute the third pillar of the troops who attack Genoa in the *Sīra*. The Fatimid forces had a vital Maghrebi element, and the Mamluks relied on Maghrebi naval expertise for the naval transport of their army.

[47] Now while this argument could help to explain why Genoa was chosen as a location, it might be worthwhile to look for an event in Mamluk history that could provide an actual background of the storyline.

[48] The most likely event concerning a successful naval raid of the Mamluks can be seen in the three attacks on Cyprus from the years 1424 to 1426 under Sultan Barsbāy (r. 1422–1438). Of course, there is a striking resemblance of the two sultans' names, but the story of the conquest of Cyprus is a great Mamluk triumph and a story of revenge between Alexandria and Nicosia.

[49] In 1365, the Cypriot King Peter of Lusignan plundered Alexandria, and Cypriot pirates were a constant nuisance for Mamluk trade in the following decades. Finally, the Mamluks carried out three naval expeditions under Sultan Barsbāy between 1424 and 1426 against the island of Cyprus, culminating in the complete defeat of Cypriot forces in 1426. King Janus (r. 1398–1432) was captured and his palace burned down (Makhairas 1932, 672–91; Ṣāliḥ ibn Yaḥyā 1969, 250–51). The Mamluk expeditionary force departed Cyprus at the end of July 1426 and returned to Egypt, where the ships had to be divided among several harbors because no single port in Egypt was large enough for such a huge fleet (Ṣāliḥ ibn Yaḥyā 1969, 251).

[50] In Cairo, a triumphal march took place on the fourteenth of August, during which the Cypriot King Janus was paraded in chains on a mule, as remembered by the eyewitness Ṣāliḥ ibn Yaḥyā (1969, 251–52). He was also impressed by the displayed military might of the Mamluks.

[51] After negotiations, Sultan Barsbāy ordered Janus to pay a ransom of 200,000 *dīnār* and an additional 5.000 dīnār for the holy cities Mecca and Medina. Finally, after officially recognizing the overlord ship of the Mamluk sultan, Janus was allowed to return to Cyprus in May 1427 (Darrāj 1961, 259). Besides the ransom, the local Egyptian economy benefited significantly from the plundered goods and the sale of over 1,000 enslaved Cypriots in Cairo (Ibn Taghrībirdī 1929–1972, 14:281; 1954–1960, 18:28).

[52] For fifteenth-century contemporaries who witnessed the parade and the following tributes coming from Cyprus, this must have been a magnificent moment representing the might of

the Mamluks. Therefore, this capture of a Cypriot king as revenge for the attack on Alexandria might have inspired the historical event behind the Genoa episode in the *Sīrat Baybars*. In this context, it is also interesting to note that the Mamluk historian Ibn Iyās (d. 1524) refers to Janus, King of Cyprus, as Jāwān ibn Ṣāḥib Qubrus (Ibn Iyās 2010, 5:2:143). The Cypriot King Janus bears, therefore, the same name as the archvillain of the *Sīrat Baybars*. Another point hinting to Cyprus could be the name Ḥanna of the King of Genoa, as Janus is the Greek form of Ḥanna (Johannes) or John (Herzog 2006, 226). Towards the end of the *Sīra*, we hear that the new sultan Khalīl ibn Qalāwūn struggles with Ṭajirīn, King of Cyprus. Khalīl is abducted to Cyprus but saved by the King's daughter, who converts to Islam. Both flee the Island, but Khalīl comes back with an army and the Island surrenders and the inhabitants become Muslim (Herzog 2006, 905). This somehow mirrors the Genoa episode and shares many similar elements, indicating a clear connection between Cyprus and Genoa in the *Sīrat Baybars*.

[53] Another historical episode which cemented the bad reputation of the Genoese with the Mamluk public is constituted by the abovementioned attack of the Genoese fleet under the command of the French Governor of the Genoa Boucicaut (Jean II le Meingre) in 1403. Boucicaut had planned to attack several Mamluk cities along the coast, dreaming of a veritable new crusade. However, the Venetian resistance and their help for the Mamluks meant that he could only loot the coast before returning home. Since Genoa initiated this attack from their stronghold of Famagusta on Cyprus, which they had taken from the Cypriots in 1374, an attack on Cyprus was always a possible attack on Genoese Famagusta. In 1464, the Mamluks then helped their tributary state, i.e., the Kingdom of Cyprus, to capture Famagusta from the Genoese after a considerable siege. This presents another explanation for the Genoese-Mamluk-Cypriote triangle in the *Sīrat Baybars* (Hill 2010, 3:563; Ibn Taghrībirdī 1929–1972, 16:285).

[54] It is clear the *Sīrat Baybars* does not represent historical facts and mixes events and time periods, as the story was changed and altered since the time of its creation until the twentieth century. Therefore, some technical aspects entered the story which have no connection to the time of Sultan Baybars in the late thirteenth century. The main description of the Genoa episode speaks about how "the victorious raven" was equipped by two mighty canons named "*al-hawayī*" (the windy one) and "*al-majnūnī*" (the crazy one), which had devastating effects on their enemies (Herzog 2006, 115).

[55] Without pushing analogies too far, I find it remarkable that during the civil war of 1497 between the fraction of Āqbardī the *Great-Dawadar* against Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad II (1496–98), an Italian canon caster by the name of Domenico (*Duminīkū*) played a considerable role. The troops of Āqbardī came from Syria and besieged the citadel. The canon caster started to cast a large canon, which was called the Crazy One (*al-majnūna*). This canon bombarded the mosque of Sultan Ḥasan and killed three mamluks, which left their comrades shaken. Still, according to Ibn Iyās, Domenico could not manage to forge sufficient canons, so the troops of Āqbardī lost the fight and Domenico his life (Ibn Iyās 2010, 5:3:366–76).

Conclusion

[56] What now to make of the Mamluk Sultan in Genoa? We can deduce from everything which was said that we have a mixture of events before us which are used to make the dramaturgy more complex and fascinating. It is difficult to put an exact timeframe on the story, as we do

not really know when it was written or when alterations took place within the Mamluk era or later. Still, we know that the *Sīrat Baybars* was read at public places in the Mamluk Empire and the Ottoman period. Therefore, it shaped the idea of the Egyptian and Syrian population towards Europe and Frankish Christianity.

[57] The Europeans could not be trusted. They were a source of constant danger, and the danger usually came from the sea. The most dangerous of them were the kings of Genoa and Cyprus. However, the mighty Muslim army, composed of Mamluks, Ismāʿīlīs, and Maghrebenians, was capable of conquering even the capitals of the Genoese and the Cypriots. However, the Mamluk coastal towns within the Empire were also dangerous places, as we have seen. Alexandria had an underground where Christians and magicians could gather. Therefore, Muslims had to be vigilant everywhere. However, Alexandria and the Mamluks could not be saved, as they were finally conquered by the Muslim Ottomans and not the Christian Franks.

[58] Still, for the Egyptians, the Genoese continued to be the main villains of the sea through the stories of the *Sīrat Baybars*, although their actual political role had already vanished in the Eastern Mediterranean after the end of the fifteenth century. When Alexandria was attacked again by European powers, it was first by the French in 1798 and then by the British in 1882. In both cases there was no Baybars who would come to the rescue, which also explains why the stories of the *Sīrat Baybars* did not make it into modernity, and why the mental map of Egyptians and Syrians had to be re-shaped. New villains took the place of the old ones.

[59] Overall, one can say that the *Sīra* still influences the view on Europe and Europeans in the broader Mediterranean as tricksters with double standards. Many of these concepts did re-emerge during colonialism and were re-enforced by colonial behavior, but the initial grounding of the pre-judices seems to date from earlier periods and were transmitted as well through popular folk tales. A comparison of the *Sīrat* with European works on Muslims might therefore enhance our knowledge of medieval patterns of mutual perceptions and the entangled history of religions.

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