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Everything is on the Move

The Mamluk Empire as a Node in (Trans-)Regional
Networks

With 19 figures

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Torsten Wollina (Beirut)

News and Rumor – local sources of knowledge about the world

You can believe me,
I'm telling you no lie
it's not long before
he's laying claim
to his proper glory,
his own construction
put up on plain
fact, and launched
on a likely story
to exercise his chins
Rumour is Rumour once again.

(Charles Tomlison)¹

Often enough, historians read their sources to obtain a sense of 'what really happened.' We question the texts in our hands for whether they are right or wrong with regards to depictions of specific events, chronologies of connected events or names of the historical figures involved. Even after the literary turn has gained wide acceptance in the historical sciences, we still cannot let go of 'objective facts' completely. Nor can this article neglect them since it approaches a 'genre' which is defined by the questionable truth of its content and the obscurity of the sources this content originated from. This 'genre' of oral communication is the rumor which constitutes a social practice that can be found in every human society throughout human history. They form a different channel for transmitting information which can supplement or contradict official news and were described as the oldest mass media in the world by one French economist.² As such, they make up an "important element of public discourse."³ This might be even more true for pre-modern societies, where all information contained some degree of uncertainty and the vast majority of communication was in one way or another an oral affair. This particularly holds for societies in the Middle East in which oral transmissions played decisive roles in written correspondence, courtly ceremonies as well as in (religious) sciences. Rumors are said

1 Tomlison 1967, 73 f.

2 See Kapferer 1996, 228.

3 Gelfert, *Coverage-Reliability*, 1.

to affect public debates as well as political decisions up to the highest level of the state. Studies of this phenomenon can help us to better understand how common people – in particular – perceived the society they lived in or the state they were governed by. By analyzing rumors, one can provide tentatively answers to questions such as: How did people learn about the grand mechanisms of politics? Where did they learn about the state of affairs and how they affected their own lives? Still, rumors constitute a field that has so far been neglected in Mamluk Studies. There is not a single study which addresses rumor as a distinctive phenomenon deserving the attention of researchers as such. There are a number of studies from other disciplines which have demonstrated ways in which research on rumors can be made fruitful. The anthropologist Luise White deconstructed stories about vampires from several African countries which earlier generations of anthropologists rejected as hearsay to unearth the underlying connections between the content of these accounts and the specific social contexts in which they were created and spread:

In White's subtle and imaginative analysis the stories turn out to convey very different messages. In Nairobi they are about women defending their rights to live by themselves in their own house. In North Rhodesia they seem to be about colonial labour recruitment, particularly about the ways in which White Fathers tried to maintain their access to cheap labour; but they seem to relate also to colonial measures to contain sleeping sickness.⁴

In one study on court documents from Early Modern England, Adam Fox concentrated on networks of communication and the role patronage, boundaries of proper social conduct, or the relationship between oral, manuscript and other media played in this regard. Fox could prove that common people were quite informed about the state of the nation. They gained most of their knowledge through the "oral exchange born of interpersonal contact" which included rumors shared by professional letter carriers, chapmen or traveling tradespeople in roadside inns or on fairs and markets, and he could show that "it is more certain that most people would have at least a general knowledge of the issues when it came to take sides in conflict."⁵ However, not only common people relied on rumors to understand current events but also rulers suffered from the uncertainties of pre-modern communication channels and founded their decisions on information which was far from complete, or – as Bruce Gibson states with regard to the Roman Empire – "uncertainties and false perceptions could affect even the emperor."⁶

The present article addresses the phenomenon of the rumor in Mamluk so-

4 Geschiere 2002, 499.

5 Fox 1997, 620.

6 Gibson 1998, 126.

ciety. As Fox established for Stuart England, it is safe to assume that in the Mamluk realm as well people could not rely only on official statements, but rather turned to other sources of information to supplement their knowledge about the world. The article starts out with a short definition of rumor in comparison to official news. Following that, I will give a brief summary of how news were delivered by the Mamluk state and at which points rumors might have played a role for the contemporaries, in explaining events taking place both in faraway places and in their immediate vicinity – sometimes even in events that they witnessed themselves. Then, the interrelations between formal and informal communication shall be illustrated by two case studies. Finally, in the conclusion, I will present some suggestions for future research.

The case studies in this article are collected from a text, which differs in important aspects from the mainstream chronicles of that time: The journal of the Damascene court clerk (*šāhid/kātib*) Aḥmad b. Ṭawq (1434–1509) which I have described elsewhere as a diary, is a chronologically arranged text that covers the years 1480 to 1501 and, most importantly, was written on a day-to-day basis.⁷ The entries were written during a time when the author was still under the influence of his recorded events and could not assess which events would become important or not; therefore, he could not afford not to record any information he received through hearsay. As a notary, Ibn Ṭawq himself was an important news source: his position brought him into contact with some of the most influential figures in Damascus as well as with members from most other strata of society. Situated at the intersection between legal and administrative hierarchies, on the one side, and the ‘common man’, on the other side, knowledge about the respective other constituted to a great part his cultural capital. Since he never traveled more than 60 kilometers from Damascus, most of his knowledge about other places depended on what other people told him. At the same time, Ibn Ṭawq’s cultural capital depended on his credibility and thus, on him checking his sources and the truth value of the reports they gave him. The methods he used to establish a true version of events bears strong similarities with the ones developed in the studies of the prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*). Furthermore, the tradition of *ḥadīth* was one way for people who were no full-fledged scholars to gain some prestige in the academic field.⁸ In the two entries in biographical dictionaries dedicated to Ibn Ṭawq, he is indeed remembered as a trustful traditionalist (*muḥaddīth*).⁹ The author’s occupation as a notary and his

7 The manuscript used to be stored in the Syrian national library in Damascus (Ms. 4533). For this article, I relied mostly on the edition prepared by Ġaʿfar al-Muhāġir in four volumes and published by the IFPO in Damascus (2000–2007). See also Wollina 2013; idem, *Zwanzig Jahre Alltag*.

8 Berkey 1992, 28, 200–1.

9 See al-Ġazzī, *al-Kawākib as-sāʿira*, 1:126; Ibn al-ʿImād al-Ḥanbalī, *Šaḍarāt aḍ-ḍaḥab*, 87.

involvement in the tradition of *ḥadīṭ* may both have been motivations for Ibn Ṭawq to diligently distinguish between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ in his journal which was all the more difficult since it did not share the gift of hindsight with other historiographical accounts. Therefore, the journal is an obvious choice as for a starting point for a “historical anthropology of gossip and rumor” of the Mamluk ruled territories which may provide us with “several insights into the nature of [...] social life and political controversy”.¹⁰

What is a rumor?

Charles Tomlison’s poem which was quoted at the beginning of this article, offers a good starting point for a definition of rumor. According to Tomlison, a rumor is “laying claim to [...] his own construction,” meaning that it uses “plain fact” to fabricate “a likely story.” Once such a story is accepted as credible by enough people, the rumor goes around: “Rumour had it and Rumour spread it.”¹¹ The Oxford dictionary uses a more profane language and defines it as “a currently circulating story or report of uncertain or doubtful truth.”¹² It is important to note, that the truth value of such a story is debatable, questionable and doubtful, but not that its content is necessarily untrue. Rumors do not have to be based on a lie and should not be understood as “public error” or “typically untrue information.”¹³ Rather, recent research emphasizes its psychological and communicative aspects. Psychologically speaking, rumors have been described as a response to individual or collective problems or as a communicative defense mechanism. Communicative studies understand them as a way of gaining supplementary information which enables people to make sense of a situation (‘improvised news’) and then, act accordingly.¹⁴ Of course, as any kind of communication, rumors can also be manipulated. As part of a political strategy it may serve to improve or undermine someone’s position in society, either at the expense of the rumor’s victim or through the status generated by knowledge about current events.

To a large part, Ibn Ṭawq’s reputation as notary relied on his knowledge of current events. The uncertainty of the information transmitted through rumors results from the obscurity of (part of) its chain of transmission. This is the major distinction between rumors and official news. Kay Kirchmann describes rumors

10 Both quotes are taken from Kelly 2006, 762.

11 Tomlison, 1967, 73.

12 oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/rumour (07.05.2013).

13 Quotes of Michel de Montaigne and Arindam Chakrabarti respectively, taken from Gelfert, *Coverage-Reliability*, 1–2.

14 See Merten 2009, 20–21; Bruhn, 2004, 26–36.

and news as antipodes of medial information.¹⁵ As a medium, news convinces the believer that they convey the verified truth. This is not to say that official news always speak or know the truth, but that they (implicitly) state that they do. The truth value of news is further supported by the reliance on authorities of knowledge (e.g. eyewitnesses, public figures of good repute, documents) as well as on rituals for delivering information in public. I will address such preferred rituals preferred by the Mamluks in the following section. Rumors, on the other hand, do not have such credentials. They rarely reveal any specific source of information (“I heard...,” “it is said...,” “people say...”); at best they exhibit a friend-to-friend structure of transmission (“I heard from the aunt of my friend...”) which gives them additional credibility without enabling the recipient to countercheck the information.¹⁶ As a medium, rumor is of a purely transitory nature: Any information loses the status of rumor as soon as its truth value has been examined. Henceforth, it is not “of uncertain or doubtful truth” anymore, but is either exposed as a misinformation, a lie or even slander, or it is validated as real news.

Three deductions can be made from this definition. Firstly, the same report can only be considered as rumor or as news, but never be both at the same time. Secondly, the same report may be considered a rumor at one time and news at another. As stated above, a rumor might become news when its content is confirmed. The other way around, official statements may be found out to rely on unconfirmed information, whereas they lose their status as news. For instance, in the year 886 (1481–1482), Ibn Ṭawq relates that a message arrived of a Frankish attack on Beirut. Only a few lines later, however, he corrects himself: “The news about Beirut have turned out not to be true, thank God!”¹⁷ Thirdly, a report may be considered as news by one recipient and as mere rumor by another at the same time, depending on their knowledge of an affair. For these reasons, rumor is a category only applicable from a subjective perspective, since it entails no final statement as to the truth of any given statement. It depends on an individual’s level of knowledge from other sources if a “currently circulating story” is indeed of “uncertain or doubtful truth” to them, to use the vocabulary of the Oxford dictionary. The transitory existence of a rumor can be separated into three phases: its emergence, its dispersion and finally, its demise.¹⁸ The beginning of a rumor is difficult to pinpoint, since researchers usually become aware of it after it has reached the second phase and has become widely known.

15 In the following, I depend on Kirchmann 2004, 74–76.

16 See Bruhn 2004, 17.

17 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 1:63.

18 Bruhn 2004, 22–26.

The reason for its emergence is a problem that we also face everyday. For most of our knowledge, we rely on others:

We all depend, to some degree or another, on our social environment for keeping us abreast with important developments and general knowledge of the changing world around us. [...] Even if we cannot expect completeness from one source of information alone, we may (and do) rely on other sources – formal and informal – to fill us in on any important news we might have missed.¹⁹

Once it is established, a rumor may live on as long as it is still interesting enough for its recipients and its truth value has not been examined. In this phase, the story is changed with every new telling, emphasizing different aspects, leaving out some details and fabricating some others, so that every new version is different from the one before.²⁰ The range of its circulation distinguishes rumors from gossip, which is restricted to a small circle of people, who all know the victim as well as the source of the accusations. Werner Wunderlich defines gossip (German: *Klatsch*) as “an everyday chattering version of the rumor and as a specific type of banal everyday story, usually conveying a negative perspective on [absent] acquaintances or friends.”²¹ Rumor does not rely on such specific social constellations but can also be exchanged among complete strangers who happen to meet by chance.²² Therefore, a rumor can be much more long-living and only comes to an end when it ceases to find people to listen and repeat it. This may happen if everyone who might take an interest in it has heard it, if its truth value has been examined, or if a new rumor supersedes it.²³

The second phase of a rumor’s development has been studied most intensively. Definitions, interpretations and explanations of the how and why of rumor spreading have come from disciplines as diverse as psychology, communication studies, sociology, economy, folklore studies, anthropology, literary studies, information science and mathematics.²⁴ As to be seen in the case study, Ibn Ṭawq’s journal does not provide us with the complete story of any specific rumor from its emergence through its end. However, it offers glimpses of different rumors at different points of their development. The most material can be found on the second phase. While there are also some examples for how and

19 Gelfert, *Coverage-Reliability*, 3.

20 Merten, 2009, 34–38.

21 Wunderlich 2004, 57.

22 Bruhn 2004, 16–17.

23 *Ibid.*, 25 f.

24 A concise overview of the historical development of rumor studies is given in Merten 2009. For contributions from communication studies and economics, see also Bruhn, Wunderlich 2004. For mathematical approaches to the dispersion of rumor, see Osei, Thompson 1977. In literary studies, the works of the Roman historian Tacitus seems to have received special attention to rumors: Gibson 1998; Ries 1969.

when a rumor might have emerged, the end of a rumor is usually neglected by Ibn Ṭawq. In some cases, he states that it had been either confirmed or rejected in a later entry. In general, however, the author just stops to write about it. In the following section, I will present examples for the first two phases. First, however, a quick look at the ways in which official news was transmitted and delivered in the Mamluk Empire is necessary. Only then can we assess the role of rumor in spreading information in this specific historical setting.

Mamluk news and Mamluk rumor

The Mamluks established a number of communication channels with the populace they ruled. They received information about public opinion both directly through petitions and in courts (*mazālim*) as well as indirectly through networks of patronage which were structured around their households. Offices like that of the *muḥtasib* (inspector of public places) also should not be underestimated in this respect.²⁵ More than their predecessors, the Mamluks made the deliverance of information a public matter and thus, even the official news channels relied heavily on oral means of communication. Moreover, the Mamluks employed visual means to communicate with the populace they ruled. Official letters about the installation or the removal of office holders, the introduction of taxes, fixing of prices and other official measures, even about the course of a military conflict were usually read out loud before an audience consisting of members of all social strata. The *mazālim* courts in which the sultan or his appointees decided law cases were also held in public. The reading of a letter or proclamation or the holding of law courts were all meant to show people that the ruler followed his duty to defend his dominion both from external threats by military struggle and from internal threats by commanding right and forbidding wrong. The Mamluks derived part of their legitimacy from the image they created of themselves as tangible rulers. The idea of public display was most prevalent in the investment ceremonies of office holders (*labbasā ḥil'a*), celebrations of religious holidays, and rites of passage in the ruling households or the meals sultan Qāyṭbāy consumed in public.²⁶ They all required an audience to be present, as did the parading through the streets of delinquents or prisoners of war or the public exhibition of heads of slain enemy soldiers or criminals. The rulers' display before and interaction with the populace went the furthest in the processions of sultans, emirs and *'ulamā'*, as well as other social

25 See Stilt 2011.

26 Levanoni 2005, 218.

groups, which were held for various reasons.²⁷ These processions could be read by the audience like a text.²⁸ The size of the procession, the quality of dress, armor and weapons carried, who had the greatest entourage, which groups were allowed to take part, how large was the audience, the general grandeur of the procession – all these aspects were witnessed, interpreted and understood by the contemporaries and they drew their conclusions about the state of affairs. However, the messages conveyed through such public displays could be ambiguous. They could be misinterpreted. Even more so, since the audience was not just watching passively, but might use this opportunity for its own ends:

At times [the people] would salute the riding sultan, and women would utter shrill cries (*zağārīt*). At other times they would consider the procession an appropriate occasion to approach the ruler, express their concerns to him, and ask for redress.²⁹

In an effort to make sense of the event witnessed, people would probably have turned to the person standing next to them, talking among themselves and exchanging ideas about the implications of what had happened. Some explanations were more plausible or their sources more credible than others and whichever found a large number of followers might then spread through the city and beyond, creating a rumor about the state of the Empire or one specific figure of the ruling elite. The process of explaining an event was not only restricted to one's inner circle but was more complex, with the information transcending social boundaries and crossing large distances. People turned to public authority figures for their opinion on a certain matter. Concerning events outside of town, people had to rely on letters or eyewitness accounts from family members, friends, business associates, acquaintances or simply travelers they met by chance in the markets, the mosque or in one of the guest houses in the city. As the processions themselves, these places can be assumed to have been the "gossip factories" or "rumor mills" of the day.³⁰ Since during his writing process Ibn Ṭawq was still under the impression of the experienced events, he offers us unique glimpses into where rumors would evolve because people tried to grasp the meaning of a certain event. Ibn Ṭawq was present at such a public display in 892 (1497 – 1498):

"Shortly before the afternoon prayer I saw a group of travelers (arriving) from Aleppo. Among them were two riders. One was a Mamluk, the other a Turcoman in chains. It was said that the first one was the Mamluk Iyās b. az-Zamān who had traveled to the lands of the Ottomans (*ibn utmān*) but that proved wrong. Then, it was rumored that

27 In Cairo, the most important public festivals were the "procession of the palanquin" (*dawarān al-maḥmil*) and the "plentitude of the Nile" (*wafā' an-nīl*).

28 Shoshan 1993, 75.

29 Ibid.

30 Wunderlich 2004, 62.

he was the governor (*wālī*) of Qīṭnā who had fled to Aleppo and was captured (there). That was assumed because of the chains. Then again, he was said to have been a Mamluk of the sultan.”³¹

In another entry, Ibn Ṭawq describes the arrival of the governor (*kāfil*) of Damascus in the city “without a marching band (...) or riders to protect him, and before only a few people.” Ibn Ṭawq considered this to be a “strange and uncommon” procession (*‘ağīb wa-ğarīb*) which did not comply with “the custom of the governors.”³² As is demonstrated by these examples, the public display of power left plenty of room for interpretation and speculation on the part of spectators and could apparently only be understood by making use of informal communication.

The two accounts of processions presented here might pinpoint the emergence of a rumor. The uncertain identity of the rider in chains made the audience of the spectacle wonder if his capture was an internal Mamluk affair or an external matter. The message in the second example is more obvious. The author was clearly disturbed by the meek display during the governor’s arrival. What did it say about the state of the Empire, if even the supposedly most powerful man of Damascus failed in inspiring awe and authority? If Ibn Ṭawq had difficulties interpreting what he saw with his own eyes, he must have had even greater problems distinguishing between what was authorized news and what was added or left out by his informant(s), since when he was not present at an event, he received information only through secondhand accounts. Among them are all those entries which include the sentence “I did not go to town” (*lam adḥul al-madīna*). Admittedly, a great share of his journal treats events where he was absent (and often states so) as objective facts, often without naming the source. The lists of officials, given at the beginning of every year are perhaps the most visible of such ‘objective’ items. They might be considered as common knowledge that reached the author through his extensive social networks of neighbors, colleagues and other people he regarded reliable, often without giving their names. However, a concern over secondhand accounts is noticeable in Ibn Ṭawq’s journal. A great number of information given to him seems to have been constituted by trusted members of his social environment. His sources were his household and family, colleagues, neighbors, his business partner Zayn ad-Dīn Ḥiḍr, the *ṣayḥ* al-iṣlām Ibn Qāḍī ‘Ağlūn and other members of the author’s study group.³³ In other cases a story is validated by stating that the information had come from a dignitary or a messenger, a decree or an official letter.

If the official channels were ambiguous or silent about important matters,

31 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 2:696.

32 Ibid., *Ta’līq*, 4:1896.

33 For more information about those people, see Wollina, *Zwanzig Jahre Alltag*.

people would turn to other means of receiving information. News from outside Damascus were at the same time highly valued and regarded as problematic. Besides his own network, Ibn Ṭawq had to rely on other sources – he mentions a number traveling scholars, pilgrims, merchants, even artisans and peasants, for some of whom he did not even know the name – whose credibility he could (or would) not vouch for. As the account on the two riders arriving from Aleppo illustrates, some information was not attributable to anyone. Ibn Ṭawq did not treat such accounts as established facts. Instead, he used a variety of terms to make clear that such accounts reached him only through hearsay: “I heard” (*samiʿtu*), “it is said” (*ḍukira, qāla*) or “word in the streets is” (*qāla wa-qāla, min qāʿil bilʿan*). All these terms refer to informal communication, not all of which the author might have been cautious about. If he had doubts that a certain story was fabricated, he usually added “it has not been confirmed” (*lam yaṣiḥḥ*).

One of the most beautiful examples for a rumor is Ibn Ṭawq’s entry for the 5th of Muḥarram 906 (1500) in which he relates a (false) rumor that the sultan had been captured by Bedouins. Its importance can be deduced from the fact that it appears in the text. Moreover, it features two elements which make it interesting and plausible: not only is it a story about the head of the state in faraway Cairo, but it also features the Bedouin which were often under suspicion of revolting against the state and the public order.³⁴ The account is still seen as problematic by the author which is why – most intriguing of all – he tells us in detail where it came from. Ibn Ṭawq heard it from someone who had heard it from yet another person who had “heard the letter read out loud or a report about it.”³⁵ So, even the person who shared the story with the author presented him with at best a secondhand account of the secondhand account of the event itself. However, it seems to give the account some credibility that the transmission chain went back to an official letter. It is not the aim of this article to find proof if such a letter indeed existed, but instead aims at stressing that a person’s presence at the reading of the letter was valued almost as much as their presence at the event itself. This observation also strengthens Konrad Hirschler’s recent argument about the growing importance of writing during the Mamluk period.³⁶

Whereas the two examples in which Ibn Ṭawq was present depict the emergence of a rumor, the story about the sultan’s capture shows in much detail how rumors would spread – or at least would have claimed to have spread. The following two case studies below, in contrast, treat rumor complexes, each

34 For instance a Bedouin was questioned who allegedly was a spy for the Ottoman sultan. Ibn Ṭawq, *Taʿlīq*, 2:529.

35 *Ibid.*, 4:1850.

36 See Hirschler 2012.

centered on one event or chain of events which were covered by Ibn Ṭawq more extensively than the ones presented so far.

Case Studies

In the following two cases studies I will illustrate how rumors worked as a source of information for common people as well as a significant method influencing decisions on a greater scale. In this effort, I compare Ibn Ṭawq's accounts with what the Damascene historians Muḥammad b. Ṭūlūn (d. 1546) and Aḥmad b. al-Ḥimṣī (d. 1527) had to say about the same events. Both historians compiled their chronicles at a later point and relied on a number of written and oral sources as well as on the gift of hindsight. Writing later, gave them the advantage over Ibn Ṭawq to discover which rumor turned out to be true or false. Hence, they treated the events differently than Ibn Ṭawq – and other contemporaries having experienced these events:

Whereas the historian can respond to such reports by using them (and any other evidence fortuitously available) to write the history of a period, historical persons would sometimes respond to such reports with action. The argument that only the politically unimportant were affected by rumours will not stand; uncertainties and false perceptions could affect even the emperor [...].³⁷

The following case studies are arranged by topic: one deals with the fate of the Ottoman prince Cem between his first flight from Ottoman territories and his second withdrawal to the knights of St. John on Rhodes (1481 – 1482), while the other discusses the expedition against the erstwhile secretary (*dawādār*) of the sultan, Āqbirdī (1499), which was believed by many Damascenes to be a response to renewed Ottoman threat, respectively. These cases offer good entry points for a rumor analysis in the Mamluk Empire. Both focus on chains of events that unfolded far away from Damascus; albeit – as will be shown – they had indirect or even immediate consequences for the city's population. Both cases are concerned with the Ottomans whose rise to hegemony in the region seems to have been acknowledged (and feared) by the contemporary Damascenes. To this attests the high number of reports Ibn Ṭawq provides for the Ottoman Empire – indeed, his coverage on Ottoman affairs outranges that on all other foreign countries combined by far. This might be attributed to the city's location on the route between the Mamluk capital Cairo and the empire's northern border as well as on the overland route from the Ottoman territories to the Ḥiḡāz. Damascus was a major center in both respects, besides being the

37 Gibson 1998, 125 f.

political capital of Bilād aš-Šām. Thus, information about the Ottomans reached the city quite regularly and was regarded as very important both by the Mamluks as well as by other Damascenes. Moreover, these cases created different news situations. The first case is an example of information disparity between the rulers and the ruled. Recently, Ralph Hattox has pointed out to the political dilemma Cem's refuge created for the Mamluks:³⁸ not only might they have restricted him to a leisurely pace in his travels to Cairo, but they also did not advertise his arrival to their subjects. As will be shown, the latter were still quite informed about Cem's approach, but this policy also inspired the spread of rumor about his plans and intentions. In contrast, the second case deals with a situation in which the Mamluk rulers were apparently as badly informed as their subjects. Military conflicts usually cause an increase in demand for reliable information about places far away and, at the same time, cause a decrease in reliable information from these regions, because they disrupt the communication networks established in peaceful times.³⁹ This held true for internal strife as it is for wars between states. After the murder of the ruling sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qāyṭbāy (1498), internal strife broke out between the different factions, supporting or opposing the new sultan Qānṣūh al-Aṣrafī (reg. 1498–1500). This apparently led to a breakdown of long-distance communication as well as of reliable reconnaissance along the northern border, where Āqbirdī's forces had found a last resort. During the stay of Mamluk troops in Damascus, a rumor broke out about an Ottoman invasion force being already on the way. As will be shown, the Mamluk leaders did not discard these stories as rumor, but their decisions were influenced by the imminent danger of a potential Ottoman involvement in the affair. The two case studies below show how great a force rumor could become and that it should not be neglected, if we want to understand how historical events were perceived and conceived of by the people experiencing them.

Case 1: The flight of the Ottoman prince Cem

Following the death of their father Mehmed the conqueror (May 3rd, 1481), Bayezid was faster in securing the throne than his brother Cem. The latter, who was governor of Karaman in Southern Anatolia during the time, chose to challenge him. However, his troops lost the decisive battle at Yenişehir and he had to flee from Ottoman territory, taking refuge with the Mamluks. He then made his way through Bilād aš-Šām to Cairo to plead for the sultan's assistance.

38 Hattox 2002.

39 This seems to be true for wars in general; see Merten 2009, 39; Bruhn 2004, 26–32.

After one or several inconclusive audiences with sultan Qāitbāy, he embarked on the *ḥāğğ*, before attempting to seize power a second time in 1482. Again he failed and sought the help of the knights of St. John on Rhodes, in the end becoming a pawn of several European rulers in their dealings with the Ottomans. Undoubtedly, the fate of the Ottoman prince Cem (*ğumğumah*) can be considered as one of the most intriguing ‘international’ affairs in the 15th-century Mediterranean. Not only has it gained considerable attention by modern as well as contemporary historians, but ordinary people as well seem to have followed Cem’s journeys with keen interest. Informal communication functioned as a substitute channel for information to meet their need.

Ibn Ṭawq’s notes attest to at least a general knowledge of the episode which could be considered as common knowledge among the subjects of the Mamluks. Furthermore, it testifies to rumors Cem’s fate inspired among them in the face of lacking official information. Ibn Ṭawq started taking an interest in the matter quite early, but ceased to write about it once Cem had embarked on his journey to Rhodes. I cannot say whether the fact that he did not follow up this issue was based on the story line vanishing or a lack of interest after Cem’s departure from the Mamluk territory or due to a lack of information. Until that moment, however, Ibn Ṭawq took rather great interest in the fate of the Ottoman prince. First, he mentioned that the death of Sultan Mehmed and Bayezid’s accession became known in Damascus in the same month as they occurred (May 1481).⁴⁰ He is silent on the battle of Yenişehir, but relates that upon Mehmet’s death “ruled his son who was in the city of Tokat (*tūqāt*)”. Ibn Ṭawq returns to the matter of Cem on July 19th telling us that Cem had arrived in Aleppo with a hundred men. There is only one other entry about the Ottoman’s journey to the Mamluk sultan which describes his visit of Ibn Ṭawq’s hometown Ġarūd two months later (September 6th, 1481), when he continued his journey to Cairo.⁴¹ After Cem’s departure, Ibn Ṭawq remains silent about his fate for a couple of months. Then, on the 4th of Dū l-Qa’da 886 (25/12/1481) he mentions “unconfirmed reports” on Cem leaving Egypt in direction of “the land of [Ya’qūb] Ibn Ḥasan”, who was the ruler of the Aqqoyunlū. It was only half a year later (27.7.887/13.8.1482) that Ibn Ṭawq learns that, Cem had mounted his second attempt to wrest for the Ottoman throne. His troops were routed and Ibn Ṭawq continues, “after his second or third capture” he fled to the sea alone, taking a “Frankish ship” to Rhodes.⁴²

As can be seen from this summary, Ibn Ṭawq’s knowledge about the affair was

40 Ibn Ṭawq refers to the Ottoman sultan’s death in two different entries (Rabī II, 4th and 8th).

In the second entry which is quoted here he states that this news had arrived in Damascus already the month before. *Ta’īq*, 1:59, 60.

41 *Ibid.*, 69, 78.

42 *Ibid.*, 103, 172.

patchy and – at least in one instance – unfounded. Cem did not leave Egypt in direction of Iraq and Iran, but was undertaking the pilgrimage at the time.⁴³ This strongly backs Hattox's assertion that the Mamluks found themselves in a predicament situation by Cem's arrival and were anything but eager to advertise their controversial guest. Indeed, most information about the Ottoman pretender did not reach Ibn ʿAwwām through official channels but from other sources. Besides this unconfirmed report, he learned of Cem's arrival in Aleppo through talk on the street and about his visit to Ğarūd Ibn ʿAwwām learned via hearsay, since it happened "in my absence". Two questions arise from these observations: Firstly, were the unconfirmed reports about Cem's departure for the east really unfounded or did a plan exist to go to the Aqqoyunlū, although it is not mentioned in other sources? And secondly, does this uncertain – and in the end false – report invalidate the other reports reaching Ibn ʿAwwām through the grapevine, as well? For the first question, there is no definite answer. However, is it not possible that Cem had the inclination to apply for the Aqqoyunlū's aid after being turned down by the Mamluks? After his second failed attempt to defeat Bayezid, Cem had planned to go to Iran before turning westwards after all.⁴⁴ It is probable that this plan had already presented itself as an alternative during Cem's stay in Cairo. In any case, this must have been a logical conclusion for most of his contemporaries. After all, the Aqqoyunlū were the remaining major Muslim power in the region.

The second question can be addressed more thoroughly than the first one, since there are a number of sources which allow us to validate or invalidate Ibn ʿAwwām's other reports. In this effort, I rely to a great part on Hattox's article and will comment on his chronology of events. As mentioned earlier, Ibn ʿAwwām learned about the death of Mehmet II rather early. It can be assumed that this news arrived in Damascus through official channels, since the predicament of Cem's flight had not presented itself, yet. However – as I have indicated earlier – such news did often not explain the situation at large. One point in case is that it is unclear to whom Ibn ʿAwwām refers as the sultan's son in Tokat. At the time, Tokat belonged to the *elayet* of Sivas, over which Bayezid held the governorship.⁴⁵ Although Ottoman sources position him in Amasya, the capital city of this *elayet*, it is not improbable that Bayezid resided there when his father died.⁴⁶ However, Ibn ʿAwwām attributes the governorship of Tokat to Cem: "[Cem] entered the *ḥāğib*'s bath house in Şālīḥiyya in my presence, and I was told that he used to

43 Cem left Cairo for the Ḥiğāz around the end of November 1481 and returned in February of March 1482; see Hattox 2002, 183 f.

44 Inalcık 1960, 529.

45 Hattox 2002, 179.

46 Ibid.

be governor of Tokat.”⁴⁷ Ibn Ṭūlūn points out that this information was hearsay; but did Damascenes believe that Cem had indeed held the Ottoman throne and was only later dethroned by its brother? Having been an acknowledged Ottoman sultan even for a short while, would have improved Cem’s standing considerably. Whether Ibn Ṭawq shared this belief, I cannot say, albeit both he and Ibn Ṭūlūn frequently refer to Cem as “Cem Sultan” or “Sultan Cem”.⁴⁸

Ibn Ṭawq’s knowledge about the situation increased once Cem had crossed into Syria. His dating of Cem’s waypoints is corroborated by Ibn Iyās and by the Ottoman *Vaki’at-i Sultan Cem* which was written by one of Cem’s close companions.⁴⁹ The former states that Cem’s arrival in Mamluk lands was unknown in Cairo before July 28th, 1481⁵⁰ while the former dates the prince’s arrival in Aleppo on July 19th, the same day on which Ibn Ṭawq mentions it. But how could these news have reached Damascus on the same day and took several days to get there from Aleppo? A possible explanation might be that the Mamluks restricted Cem at a leisurely pace since he had reached their territory and – at the same time – informed the governor and Aleppo notables of his approach, whence the word spread throughout their personal networks and beyond, until it reached Ibn Ṭawq on the same day as Cem arrived in Aleppo. Hence, the same persons who rejected to give any public statements about the affair, did not restrict themselves from communicating it to their peers informally. The second waypoint Ibn Ṭawq mentions was the backwater village of Ğarūd which was part of the administrative district he calls Bilād al-Ğubba, which he visited almost every year as a tax collector.⁵¹ This account underlines Hattox’s assessment of Cem’s tarrying progress to Cairo: “Everywhere he went the local officials greeted him warmly and honored him in various ceremonies.”⁵² If this was true for Ğarūd, it went also for a number of other villages west of it, since Ibn Ṭawq mentions explicitly that Cem was not bound from Damascus directly, but from the direction of the Beqaa valley. It seems that the Mamluks did not only keep Cem in a leisurely pace but also provided detours to slow him down.

However, Ibn Ṭawq’s dating is debatable in this case. According to him, Cem’s

47 Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*, 1:43.

48 Only Ibn Ṭūlūn’s first entry on the matter seems that the author was confused about Cem’s status as well as about his lineage: “On Friday the 22nd [of Jum. I 886] the amir Muḥammad Jam known as ğumğumah, son of sultan Murād b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Uṯmān, the brother of Abū Yazīd (Bayezid), the erstwhile sultan of Rūm for his father [was sultan before him], after the death of his father in this year he was ousted by his brother and entered Aleppo with 100 people and asked the sultan al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy for refuge. [...]” Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*, 1:43.

49 Hattox 2002, 188.

50 Ibid., 180 f.

51 See Wollina, *Zwanzig Jahre Alltag*, 155.

52 Hattox 2002, 182.

entourage arrived in Ġarūd at the beginning of September 1481. At first sight, this date seems false. Cem had arrived in Damascus not before August 21st and stayed until the 28th, before continuing his journey, reaching Jerusalem on September 7th (Raġab 13th 886).⁵³ Furthermore, Ġarūd was not situated on the road between Damascus and Jerusalem, but about 50 kilometers north-east of the former. Although Ibn Ṭawq mentions Cem's visit to Ġarūd on Raġab 12th (Sept. 6th) – one mere day before he allegedly arrived at Jerusalem – one should not reject his report. As his journal proves, he had business contacts and family ties there, which provided him with an intimate knowledge of the village.⁵⁴ Ibn Ṭawq begins the relevant entry by stating that “the Ottoman Cem (*jumjumah*), who came to this country fleeing from his brother, arrived at Ġarūd in our absence.”⁵⁵ After being greeted by the people and the soldiers, he remained there for two days “in a *qasr*” before continuing his journey. The important point here is that these events transpired in the author's absence. Ibn Ṭawq had left the village on Raġab 7th after having worked on the yearly allotment of the land tax since the 22nd of Ġumādā II (apparently unaware of Cem's arrival).⁵⁶ Also, the lack of entries on Raġab 2nd till 4th indicate that he had work elsewhere in the area where he did not take his writing materials.⁵⁷ Cem's two-day stay in Ġarūd could have fallen into one of these time spans, either between the 2nd and the 4th (August 29th-31st) or from the 7th (Sept. 1st) onwards. If Cem's entourage had left on Raġab 9th by the latest, they would have had only four days to reach Jerusalem, but more than three weeks to reach Cairo according to Ibn Iyās.⁵⁸ While the former was rather a short time to travel this distance, the latter was very probable.

Once Cem had left the region of Damascus due south, Ibn Ṭawq had not much to say about him apart from the rumor mentioned above. It riddles me that Ibn Ṭawq also neglected Cem's second visit to Damascus. Cem seems to have travelled much faster this time. According to Ibn Ṭulūn, he arrived in Damascus already on Muḥarram 18th, 887 (March 9th, 1482), despite his return from the *ḥaġġ* to Cairo in the same month.⁵⁹ Although this time Ibn Ṭawq was neither out

53 Ibid., 182.

54 Wollina 2013, 343; idem, *Zwanzig Jahre Alltag*, 48.

55 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 1:78.

56 There is no entry for Raġab 7th. In the one for the 8th, Ibn Ṭawq describes the way his party took back to Damascus, arriving there during the morning hours. Since he could not write while riding or walking, I presume that the arrival occurred on the 8th, while their departure happened on the 7th. Ibid., 77.

57 Ibid., 76 f.

58 Hattox 2002, 182. Ibn Ṭawq says nothing of Jerusalem, but refers only to Cairo as Cem's destination.

59 Ibn Ṭulūn, *Mufākahat*, 1:53; Hattox 2002, 184, 187.

of town nor sick, I could not find any word on Cem's presence.⁶⁰ The last report on Cem again is about events in the north. It concludes the Mamluk period of his travels and is the most detailed account Ibn Ṭawq writes about him:

The Ottoman Cem was captured by his brother's troops and all his companions were slain; he was captured for the second or third time and he alone fled to the sea. He asked Frankish ships for help in exchange for all the property in his possession. They brought him to Rhodes and he appealed to the lord of the island to help him.⁶¹

It is unclear whence Ibn Ṭawq received this information, but it underlines a current in his reporting on the affairs of Cem. Ibn Ṭawq's depiction of the events can be separated into two parts which correlate directly with the geographical reach of his information networks. While Cem was traveling through northern and central Bilād aš-Šām, Ibn Ṭawq kept track of at least some of the events. One must however point out the fact that it seems to have been more difficult or less desirable for him to obtain information, as soon as the Ottoman moved further south. Within a certain geographical reach, informal communication was sufficient in providing him with quite reliable information despite a lack of official news during that time. Once the original source was beyond that reach, the trustworthiness of the information usually diminished rapidly. The events surrounding Cem's wrest for the Ottoman throne and his subsequent flight caused curiosity among the inhabitants of the Mamluk realm far beyond the scholarly circles and were a rich source of hearsay and rumor. Regardless of their respective truth value, all these accounts attest to how people tried to stay abreast with current events and managed to stay informed in the face of lacking official statements. They also show lines of inquiry for contrafactual approaches to Mamluk history. What if Cem had gone to Iran instead of Rhodes or travelled there directly from Egypt? Would the Aqqoyunlū have provided him greater assistance than the Mamluks?

The Ottoman Empire continued to occupy the attention of contemporary Damascenes after Cem's departure from the Mamluk realm. If they knew how far this episode had tainted Ottoman-Mamluk relations, Mamluks soon found out that the Ottomans were not to be meddled with, when the first Ottoman-Mamluk war broke out in 1485 which ended six years later. Although this war ended inconclusive on the battlefield, its economic consequences affected the Mamluks much more severely and prepared the final Ottoman victory over them some thirty years later. However, since the scope of this article does not allow for a concise analysis of events surpassing six years and since some serious studies have been devoted to this war, I have chosen to address the question of rumor in

60 For Muḥarram 887, see Ibn Ṭawq, *Taʿlīq*, 1:123–139.

61 *Ibid.*, 172.

war times with regard to a different instance of Ottoman-Mamluk rivalry which may be not so widely recognized in the second case study: the crisis that ensued following the murder of Qāitbāy's son an-Nāṣir Muḥammad in 904/1498 – 1499.

Case study 2: A cold war in 904?

Long after Cem's dispossession by European monarchs and even his death, he still played a role in Ottoman-Mamluk diplomatics and stirred rumors among Damascenes, as is testified by Ibn Ṭūlūn even in Raġab 904 (Febr.-March 1499).⁶² On the 17th (Febr. 28th) Damascus was in turmoil because of rumors that Bayezid intended to move against the Mamluks again. Ibn Ṭūlūn states that Bayezid had been incited by the murder of the Mamluk sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qāitbāy (in 1498), demanding disclosure of the perpetrators and even planning to seize the Mamluk throne. The reason for Bayezid's involvement in seemingly internal Mamluk affairs was – as Ibn Ṭūlūn had heard (*qīla*) – “that he was related to him by marriage and wanted his daughter to marry him, [or] it was said, to the daughter of his brother Cem who had been in Egypt for two years.” However, Ibn Ṭūlūn concludes his entry by deeming the story not reliable: “I do not believe this rumor (*ṣuyūʿ*) to be true – there is no power but in God!” So why did Ibn Ṭūlūn decide to write all this several decades after the events transpired and with the gift of hindsight?

What Ibn Ṭūlūn refutes as a rumor and beats down to only one account, appears in Ibn Ṭawq's text as one of the major political concerns for Damascenes in 904. Rumor of a new invasion by the Ottomans persisted throughout the first half of the year and were so pervasive that they forced the Mamluk *amīrs* to react. Ibn Ṭawq however does not establish any connection between the Ottoman advance and the Mamluk succession of rule. The news of an-Nāṣir Muḥammad's murder on the 4th of Rabīʿ I (20/10/1498) had reached Damascus at the end of the same month.⁶³ Only more than a month later, Ibn Ṭawq spoke of an Ottoman attack “coming both on land and over sea.”⁶⁴ These reports coincide with the arrival of the first troops from Egypt pouring into Damascus over the following month (7 Ğumādā I – 6 Ğumādā II/21. 12. 1498 – 19. 1. 1499).⁶⁵ This seemed as if these troops brought with them the information that they were going to fight the Ottomans. They stayed in Damascus for more than one and half months (until 27 Raġab), frightening the people by drinking in public, harassing men and women

62 For this episode, see Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat*, 1:211.

63 Ibid., 205 (date of murder); Ibn Ṭawq, *Taʿīq*, 4:1664.

64 Ibid., 1673.

65 Ibid., 1673, 1675, 1677–80, 1682.

alike, rioting and robbing.⁶⁶ Finally, the army amassed in Damascus on Rağab 7th, but it took until the end of this month for all troops to depart.⁶⁷

Around this time, Ibn Ṭawq becomes more specific in his assessment of the Ottoman threat: among other stories about the size of the enemy forces, the Ottoman sultan was said to have sent six hundred ships. Furthermore, the fighting on the border had already ensued with dead on both sides and forces of the Aleppinian governor were already in retreat.⁶⁸ Only six days later it was corroborated by a letter from the said governor that the Ottomans were indeed on the border.⁶⁹ Only in the second half of Šawwāl did the tension in Damascus ease. The army returned from the front and new rumors spread that the Ottomans had not attacked and instead had conquered Rhodes.⁷⁰ However, apart from Ibn Ṭūlūn's rumor story any information on a military conflict with the Ottomans is absent from all other historiographical accounts of the year 904. Indeed, the army had not marched into Damascus as a response to a threat by the Ottomans, but as an expedition force to crush the combined forces of the amir Āqbirdī and the Turkmen leader 'Alī Dawla (usually called 'Alā' Dawla) in the north of Syria. In the previous year, Āqbirdī had laid siege to Damascus without success and finally had to withdraw, due to the approach of an Egyptian army.⁷¹ He withdrew to 'Ayntāb (Ġumādā I, 903), attacking and pillaging other Syrian cities along his way.⁷² The sultan's army followed him and defeated his troops, killing one of 'Alī Dawla's sons and capturing another. The arrival of the culprits' cut-off heads in Cairo was celebrated for seven days.⁷³ This victory was apparently decisive enough to make the rebels offer a truce early in 904, but after Qānšūh had become sultan, his first decision was to wage war on them again and the army left Cairo in Ġumādā I. In order to strengthen their position, Āqbirdī and 'Alī Dawla moved to besiege Aleppo before the Egyptian reinforcements arrived.⁷⁴ Ibn al-Ḥimṣī as well mentions the army's long halt at Damascus, while – at the same time – urgent reports arrived on the siege of Aleppo.⁷⁵ According to him, the fighting ceased only in Dū l-Qa'da after the leaders of the enemy forces were killed.⁷⁶

66 There are numerous reports on their misdeeds during that period; *ibid.*, 1683 – 1685, 1687 – 1689, 1692, 1699.

67 *Ibid.*, 1693, 1699.

68 *Ibid.*, 1699.

69 *Ibid.*, 1701.

70 *Ibid.*, 1722.

71 See Toru 2006, 176 f.

72 Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādīt*, pp. 319 f.

73 *Ibid.*, 329 f.

74 *Ibid.*, 338, 348, 349 f.

75 *Ibid.*, 351.

76 *Ibid.*, 359 f.

Although Ibn Ṭūlūn negates any Ottoman involvement as rumor and Ibn al-Ḥimṣī is silent about them altogether, Ibn Ṭawq's version should not be discarded lightly. Why did the Mamluk army sojourn in Damascus in the face of a major threat to Aleppo? Why did the Mamluks hesitate to bring their major force down on their enemies? Was it the threat of Ottoman troops seizing the moment to attack Syria again? The Mamluks had learned to fear their northern neighbor during the first Mamluk-Ottoman war (1485 – 1491). It is my assumption that they tried everything not to provoke them again by marching into the territory of 'Alī Dawla who was an albeit, – “rather fickle and half-hearted” – Ottoman ally and it turned out only later that in this instance “he did not collude with the Ottomans against them”.⁷⁷ Ibn Ṭawq was not as involved with the military decision makers as the two historians who moved in the vicinity of the sultan's court (Ibn al-Ḥimṣī stayed in Cairo at the time as the deputy of the Šāfiī chief *qādi*).⁷⁸ Still, his journal testifies to the anxiety with which the Mamluks responded to the (perceived?) threat. At the same time as the main army tarried in Damascus, the Mamluks had sent envoys north to receive information about the Ottomans' intentions and to avoid a military conflict.⁷⁹ When some Ottoman pilgrims arrived in Damascus, Ibn Ṭawq tells us that virtually everyone rushed to question them for any substantial information on the situation.⁸⁰ Furthermore, after rumor spread about an attack on the seashore, the Mamluks moved troops to the Beqaa valley and the governor of Damascus traveled to Beirut to inspect fortifications (*burğ*), on which the construction had begun earlier. In parallel, the city's garrison was also increased, so that the city's population suffered heavily from the resulting costs.⁸¹

From the historical perspective, it becomes clear that the Ottomans probably had no intention to fight the Mamluks at that point since they were involved in a war of their own. From January 1499 until 1502, they fought Venice for hegemony in the Eastern Mediterranean. From a contemporary perspective, however, things were not so clear-cut. The Ottomans were indeed mobilizing their armies and they must have been anxious as well when the Mamluks brought theirs close to their common border. Both sides treaded with great care not to begin an unwanted war. Since memories of the last war were very much alive, Damascenes were wary of any Ottoman military operations near the borders. As the letter from the governor of Aleppo illustrates, even the Mamluks officers shared this sentiment. The danger posed by the Ottoman navy should be seen in the same

77 Venzke 2000, 431 f.

78 Behrens-Abouseif 2004, 280.

79 An emissary returned to Damascus on Rağab 1st and left for Cairo on the 18th; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 4:1691, 1697.

80 *Ibid.*, 1708.

81 *Ibid.*, 1712, 1714, 1716, 1735.

light. Of course, Ibn Ṭawq's assessment of the size of the Ottoman fleet was greatly exaggerated; but the increased sightings of warships before the Syrian coast showed their vulnerability. Since Rhodes was allied with Venice during this war, even Ibn Ṭawq's report on a successful Ottoman attack on the island (which did not occur) would have made sense.⁸² It did not come to a second Mamluk-Ottoman war in 904. However, as has been demonstrated, rumors of it were not just believed by the Mamluks' subjects, but could gain power to influence the decisions of the state itself.

Conclusions

Rumors are a subject which is elusive as well as a powerful tool. If we want to understand the history of the Mamluks on its own terms, we should not neglect the roles rumor played in disseminating information, stabilizing or destabilizing networks or even in the creation of the historiographical or literary sources on which much of our research relies. The case studies presented here did illustrate how much people relied on informal communication for their knowledge on the greater world and to which extent rumor might have influenced the course of history. It should not be neglected in the “turn from a synchronic, normative, macro-sociological structure perspective to a diachronic, materialistic, micro-social, and post-structural view of Mamluk society” which has been witnessed in the last twenty years.⁸³

On the remaining pages, I will point out how rumor studies can add new perspectives to a number of research areas. First, it should be the subject of historical-anthropological studies concerned with “the study of human beings in time and space.”⁸⁴ If we want to understand how individuals in Mamluk society saw the world they lived in, we should accept that rumor was a big part of it. Regardless if someone believed it to be true or knew it to be false, everyone had to position themselves to it. Studying rumors and people's reactions to them would add to the histories of mentalities and of emotions. One topic that comes to mind are the plague waves and other recurrent epidemics hitting Syria and Egypt from the middle of the 14th century onwards. As the folklorist Sona Rosa Burstein has demonstrated, rumors are closely linked to prejudice and the scapegoating of minorities:

It happens so easily, so quickly – the ungenerous remark based on an old prejudice or a current jealousy, the repetition of a half-understood remark or action, the critical

82 Brummett 1993, 518.

83 Herzog 2013, 137.

84 Hees 2013, 119.

opinion repeated as fact, the starting on their way of the rumour and the whispering campaign. Thus swiftly does new folklore grow, drawing new life from old belief.⁸⁵

Studies of rumors might help to unearth such attitudes among 15th century Damascenes with regard to their Christian, Jewish, Samaritan or Šīfīte neighbors, to foreigners from Christian or Muslim lands, to ethnic groups such as Kurds or Turkmens, to rural communities of peasants or Bedouins – and to the Mamluks themselves. They tell us about people’s ideas of justice, of good social conduct, of gender relations, and the distinction between public, semi-public and domestic spaces in Mamluk society. Of course, this touches also upon the question of privacy.⁸⁶ Rumor studies might also be incorporated into the history of space, of news networks, the history of knowledge or social history in general. Where were rumors shared? How far were rumors circulating? Who took part in this process? How were gossip and rumor used for one’s own social advancement? In Ibn Ṭawq’s case, the rumors and the sources they relied on offer glimpses to a different side of the networks and social circles in which he was moving. They insinuated a much greater involvement with people from other social strata than the *‘ulamā’* who usually take the center stage in his journal.

Second, rumor studies might also prove fruitful for the economic history of the Mamluks. Boaz Shoshan has pointed out that grain suppliers “benefited from spreading false rumors about difficulties in the shipping of grain from Upper Egypt” to raise their prices.⁸⁷ In the year 899 (1493 – 1494), Ibn Ṭawq suspected that the meat price had increased because the governor collected an extra tax from the butchers.⁸⁸ These correlations should be analyzed for the changes in value of the circulating gold, silver and copper coins and the acceptance of new coinage. Third, rumors are a phenomenon of popular culture, not the least because they build on or might be turned into popular epics whose readings often drew a large audience. In this context, some of the sources Thomas Herzog suggests for further studies on culture should be taken into account for rumor studies: treatises on economic, religious or political matters may contain (normative) references to consequences of and advice how to prevent or to handle hearsay, *fatwā* collections should provide a sufficient number of ‘test cases’. Furthermore, common attitudes toward rumors might be derived from a creative reading of the different genres of poetry, prose as well as from collections of jokes and proverbs (*amṭāl*).⁸⁹ Following Michael Chamberlain’s call to “exploit in a new way those written materials that were preserved in large

85 Burstein 1959, 380.

86 Alshech 2004.

87 Shoshan 1980, 469.

88 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 3:1297.

89 See Herzog 2013, 135.

numbers” might be applied also in this case to unearth new findings about Mamuk society.⁹⁰

In this context, a reassessment of the information provided by historiographical sources seems promising. I assume that rumors found their way only sporadically into the writings of the scholars, for they collided with the historians’ methods and ideals of establishing a true version of history. More importantly, the published works were usually edited with hindsight at a later point. Rumors would often be eradicated from the published works or be inserted as a literary device in order to explain the unfolding of certain events.⁹¹ In Ibn Ṭūlūn’s chronicle this seems to be the case. As shown at the beginning of the second case study, he summarized the reason for tension in Damascus which turned out to be unfounded in the end in one entry and presented it as a false story from the start. An in-depth study of the way he and other Mamluk historians applied rumors in their works would lead to their appreciation as literature.⁹²

Finally, I want to link rumor studies to the issues addressed at the conference “Everything is on the Move” held in Bonn in December 2012, which forms the basis of this volume. The conference’s aim was to challenge “the narrowness of culture-specific histories” by taking recourse to the concepts of network theory and global history.⁹³ Ibn Ṭawq’s reports are not restricted to the Mamluk Empire, but reach out to the territories of the Ottomans, the Aqqoyunlū, Rhodes or even Andalusia.⁹⁴ Although these are outranged in number by reports on his immediate *Lebenswelt*, the few reports about faraway places attest to his involvement in trans-regional networks and to an interest about other places. This was not so much determined by political borders but rather by the geographical distance of a certain place from and its connectedness to Damascus as well as by the problem posed by foreign languages. While his reports on other parts of the Mamluk Empire usually sound more certain, he also tries to make sense of reports coming from the Ottoman Empire: “in these days it is said that there has been an earthquake (*ḥasaf*) in three or five cities or villages in the territory of the Ottomans. May God forgive and make it well and prevent us from (our) indifference!”⁹⁵

90 Chamberlain 1994, 3.

91 Rumor as a literary technique has been extensively studied with regard to the roman historian Tacitus; see Hausmann 2009; Gibson 1998; Ries 1969.

92 For other literary techniques and plot devices, see Hirschler 2006.

93 Conermann., in this volume.

94 Ibn Ṭawq mentions the conquest of Andalusia by “the unbelievers (*kuḫfār*) when the Christian servant of a group of andalucian *‘ulamā’* which had fled to Damascus was forced to convert to Islam. Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 2:1092.

95 Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq* I, p. 46.

Furthermore, the recourse to news or rumor in Ibn Ṭawq's journal directly correlates with the density and range of his ego-network(s). Judging from the quantity of his reports, the major part of these networks were concentrated in Bilād aš-Šām, obviously with Damascus at the center. However, neither was it completely constricted to this area nor to the urban centers of the region. Regardless of their range, rumors were also distributed through (loose) networks which were apparently not confined within political or administrative borders. Ibn Ṭawq received information not only from his Muslim compatriots of the Mamluk Empire but also from Ottoman and Venetian or local Christian and Jewish sources, not only from city dwellers but also from the rural population.⁹⁶

Henning Sievert has pointed out that it is “moments of crisis that allow us to uncover the dynamics at work.”⁹⁷ Along these lines, I would say that rumors also help us to uncover dynamics in Mamluk society. I would argue that Ibn Ṭawq took recourse to a rumor usually as a result of a crisis (gap, shortage) in (more reliable) coverage. This was the case for events that occurred faraway, but applies for some events in Damascus as well, as the following example illustrates. After the Mamluks started a massacre among the followers of the popular Sufi *ṣayḥ* “Mubārak b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥabašī ad-Dimašqī al-Qābūnī” in Ramaḍān 899 (July 1494), Damascus was experiencing a warlike situation for a couple of days.⁹⁸ As the *ṣayḥ* himself could not be found anywhere, rumors spread throughout the city and the Mamluks acted accordingly. The situation escalated quickly over the course of only three days. First, the governor assumed that Mubārak was hiding at the house of the Šāfiʿite chief *qāḍī* Ibn al-Farfūr or the *ṣayḥ al-islām* Ibn Qāḍī ‘Aḡlūn. Then, the Mamluks indiscriminately attacked everyone wearing *mīzar* turbans, both in the city and in surrounding villages. Finally, when it became obvious that Mubārak had left Damascus, they feared that he would return leading an army of peasants, Bedouins and bandits against them. Ibn Ṭawq describes in detail that the whole city was in unrest and even the markets were closed, although nobody knew what was going on. The Mamluks wore full armor and even the amirs seemed fickle.⁹⁹ The effect of misinformation and rumor in this incident was so overwhelming that Ibn Ṭawq could only explain it in religious categories: “Satan commands his armies of devils, jinn and humans.”¹⁰⁰

96 For instance, he mentions that information about the Ottoman attack which began the first Mamluk-Ottoman war through “letters from the Venetians to the Venetians in Damascus“. *Ibid.*, p. 490.

97 Sievert, in this volume.

98 For the full name, see Ibn al-Ḥimšī, *ḥawādiṭ*, p. 252, footnote 1. For descriptions of the event, see *ibid.*, pp. 252–256; Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufaḥahat* I, p.158; Ibn Ṭawq, *Taʿīq* III, pp. 1287–1292.

99 *Ibid.*, p. 1289 f.

100 *Ibid.*, p. 1289.

Perhaps the events presented and the decisions the Mamluks and others made as a response did not make a difference to history in the long run. However, if we understand history as the present of a different generation, the study of rumors offers new and different paths to a (cultural) history of the Mamluks.

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