

Being Persian in Late Mamluk Egypt: The Construction and Significance of Persian Ethnic Identity in the Salons of Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906–922/1501–1516)*

CHRISTIAN MAUDER
University of Bergen

(christian.mauder@uib.no)

Abstract

People identified as Persians constituted one of the most prominent groups of nonlocal inhabitants in Mamluk Egypt, and earlier scholarship has paid considerable attention to Egyptian-Persian relations. Nevertheless, the determining factors that made someone Persian in Mamluk Egyptian contexts remain poorly understood. Accounts of the majālis, or learned salons, convened by the penultimate Mamluk Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906–922/1501–1516) offer a unique opportunity to examine which factors, agents, and motivations were decisive in the construction of what it meant to be Persian during the late Mamluk period. An examination of these sources demonstrates that language, cultural capital, and region of origin were the most important elements in the process of Persian identity construction at al-Ghawrī's court.

The key actors in this process were persons who identified themselves as Persians and sought to make strategic use of the benefits their identity could entail within the patronage context of al-Ghawrī's court. In contrast to what is known about other ethnic identities within the Mamluk Sultanate, neither persons who identified as Persians nor their local interlocutors considered ancestry a defining factor of being Persian.

Introduction

At the beginning of an article entitled “Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt,” published in 1983, Michael Cook asked whether there was something that could be considered an

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Egyptian identity during what he called the medieval period.¹ Cook's approach to this question focused on whether, and to what degree, premodern Egyptian Muslims knew about and identified with the pre-Islamic, in particular Pharaonic, history of the country they inhabited. Although Cook concluded that there was little evidence in favor of the assumption that what premodern Egyptian Muslims knew about Pharaonic times formed a significant part of their identity,² the guiding question of his article still deserves attention. One alternative way to approach it is to ask how the premodern Muslim inhabitants of Egypt constructed the identity of those whom they perceived as others—that is, foreigners or non-Egyptians.

In his article, Cook repeatedly contrasted the Egyptian case with the Iranian one³—a comparison that would probably have made sense also to the inhabitants of Mamluk Egypt, given that they came into direct contact with Iranians often enough. As Carl Petry noted, immigrants to Cairo from Iran and its environs were outnumbered only by those from Syria and Palestine. He argued that “Iranians, in fact, attained a preeminence in the Cairene elite disproportionate to their [. . .] numbers. They remained conscious exponents of the Persian intellectual tradition in Cairo and were respected for this by their contemporaries.”⁴ When first published, Petry's findings were particularly noteworthy because they refuted an earlier view of the Mamluk Sultanate, in general, and Egypt, in particular, as unaffected by political, intellectual, and cultural developments in the Mongol and post-Mongol Iranian lands.⁵

This recognition of the importance of the entanglements between Greater Iran and the Mamluk Sultanate notwithstanding, Mamlukists studying Persian-Mamluk interactions have so far largely focused on military, economic, and diplomatic encounters⁶ or on the

1. M. Cook, “Pharaonic History in Medieval Egypt,” *Studia Islamica* 57 (1983): 67–103, at 67.

2. Cook, “Pharaonic History,” 99–100. See also the older study referenced in Cook's article: U. Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment in Medieval Islamic Egypt,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 43, no. 1 (1980): 55–66.

3. Cook, “Pharaonic History,” 68, 90, 100–101. See also Haarmann, “Regional Sentiment,” 56–57.

4. C. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 61, 67–68.

5. E.g., U. Haarmann, “Miṣr: 5. The Mamlūk Period 1250–1517,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., ed. P. J. Bearman et al., 7:164–177 (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2009), 165.

6. Given the recent boom in the study of Mamluk diplomacy, the following list of relevant studies does not claim to be exhaustive: M. Ağalarlı, “XVI. Yüzyılın Başlarında Safevi Devletiyle Memlûk Devleti Arasında Siyasi İlişkilere Genel Bir Bakış,” *Uşak Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 3, no. 2 (2010): 124–135; R. Amitai, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-İlkhānid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); multiple contributions in R. Amitai, ed., *The Mongols in the Islamic Lands: Studies in the History of the Ilkhanate* (Aldershot, Ashgate Variorum, 2007); R. Amitai, *Holy War and Rapprochement: Studies in the Relations between the Mamluk Sultanate and the Mongol Ilkhanate (1260–1335)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013); A. F. Broadbridge, *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); W. W. Clifford, “Some Observations on the Course of Mamluk-Safavid Relations (1502–1516/908–922): I and II,” *Der Islam* 70 (1993): 245–278; M. Dekkiche, “Le Caire: Carrefour des ambassades; Étude historique et diplomatique de la correspondance échangée entre les sultans mamlouks circassiens et les souverains timourides et turcomans (Qara-Qoyunlu-Qaramanides) au XV^e s. d'après le ms. ar 4440 (BnF, Paris)” (PhD diss., University of Liège, 2011); M. Dekkiche, “New Source, New Debate: Re-evaluation of the Mamluk-Timurid Struggle for Religious Supremacy

presence in Mamluk lands of individual figures, texts, objects, cultural techniques, practices, or bodies of knowledge that were considered Persian in one way or another.⁷ Yet rarely, if at all, have scholars asked what the term “Persian” and its Arabic equivalents, such as *fārisī* or *ʿajamī*, actually meant in Mamluk contexts.⁸

in the Hijaz (Paris, BnF MS ar. 4440),” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 18 (2014–15): 247–272; C. Mauder, “A Severed Head, a Poetry Slam, and a Shiʿī Visiting al-Shāfiʿī’s Tomb: Symbolic and Literary Communication in Mamluk-Safawid Diplomatic Encounters,” in *Studies on the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517): Proceedings of a German-Japanese Workshop Held at Tokyo, November 5–6, 2016*, ed. S. Conermann and T. Miura (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, forthcoming); M. Melvin-Koushki, “The Delicate Art of Aggression: Uzun Hasan’s *Fathnama* to Qaytbay of 1469,” *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 193–214; H. Rabie, “Political Relations Between the Safavids of Persia and the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria in the Early Sixteenth Century,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 15 (1978): 75–81; and most recently the pertinent contributions in F. Bauden and M. Dekkiche, eds., *Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies: Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); R. Amitai and S. Conermann, eds., *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History* (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2019).

7. See, e.g., D. Behrens-Abouseif, “Sultan al-Ghawrī and the Arts,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 6 (2002): 71–94, at 75, 82–83, 85; A. Bodrogligeti, *A Fourteenth Century Turkic Translation of Saʿdī’s “Gulistān”: Sayf-i Sarāyī’s “Gulistān biʿt-turkī”* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); J. Eckmann, “The Mamluk-Kipchak Literature,” *Central Asiatic Journal* 8 (1963): 304–319, at 307–309, 317; K. D’hulster, “Some Notes on Sayf-Sarāyī’s *Gulistān bi t-Türkī*,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras V*, ed. U. Vermeulen and K. D’hulster, 451–70 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007); K. D’hulster, “‘Sitting with Ottomans and Standing with Persians’: The *Šāhnāme-yi Türkī* as a Highlight of Mamluk Court Culture,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras VI*, ed. U. Vermeulen and K. D’hulster, 229–256 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010); B. Flemming, “Šerif, Sultan Ġavrī und die ‚Perser‘,” *Der Islam* 45 (1969): 81–93; Y. Frenkel, *Is there a Mamlūk Culture?* (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2014), 29–30; Y. Frenkel, “The Mamlūk Sultanate and Its Neighbors: Economic, Social and Cultural Entanglements,” in Amitai and Conermann, *Mamluk Sultanate*, 39–60, at 43–45; U. Haarmann, “Yeomanly Arrogance and Righteous Rule: Faḡl Allāh Rūzbihān Khunjī and the Mamluks of Egypt,” in *Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in Honor of Iraj Afshar*, ed. K. Eslami, 109–124 (Princeton, NJ: Zagros, 1998); U. Haarmann, “The Late Triumph of the Persian Bow: Critical Voices on the Mamluk Monopoly on Weaponry,” in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, ed. T. Philipp and U. Haarmann, 174–187 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 183–187; A. Schimmel, “Some Glimpses of the Religious Life in Egypt during the Later Mamluk Period,” *Islamic Studies* 4 (1965): 353–392, at 378.

8. More research has been done on other ethnic identities in the Mamluk Sultanate. See, e.g., S. Conermann, “Volk, Ethnie oder Stamm? Die Kurden aus Mamlukischer Sicht,” in *Mamlukica: Studies on the History and Society of the Mamluk Period*, ed. S. Conermann, 317–57 (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2013); R. Irwin, “How Circassian Were the Circassian Mamluks?,” in Amitai and Conermann, *Mamluk Sultanate*, 109–122; B. Lellouch, “Qu’est-ce qu’un Turc? (Égypte, Syrie, xvi^e siècle),” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2013): 1–20; J. Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks XIII^e–XVI^e siècle: Une expérience du pouvoir dans l’Islam médiéval* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014), 173–203; K. Yosef, *Ethnic Groups, Social Relationships and Dynasty in the Mamluk Sultanate* (Bonn: Annemarie-Schimmel-Kolleg, 2012), especially 3–4; J. van den Bent, “None of the Kings on Earth Is Their Equal in ‘Aṣabiyya: The Mongols in Ibn Khaldūn’s Works,” *Al-Masāq* 28, no. 2 (2016): 171–186; J. van den Bent, “Mongols in Mamluk Eyes: Representing Ethnic Others in the Medieval Middle East” (PhD diss. University of Amsterdam, 2020); K. Yosef, “*Dawlat al-Atrāk* or *Dawlat al-Mamālīk*: Ethnic Origin or Slave Origin as the Defining Characteristic of the Ruling Elite in the Mamlūk Sultanate,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 39 (2012): 387–410; K. Yosef, “Cross-Boundary Hatred: (Changing) Attitudes towards Mongol and ‘Christian’ *Mamlūks* in the Mamluk Sultanate,” in Amitai and Conermann, *Mamluk Sultanate*, 149–214; Frenkel, “Neighbors,” 45–48. On Persia and Persian identities in the early Islamic period, see S. B. Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran: Tradition, Memory, and Conversion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); on how Muslims of the early ‘Abbasid period remembered pre-Islamic Persia and its conquest, see S. Savran, *Arabs and Iranians in the*

The present article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Persian presence in Mamluk Egyptian society, in general, and in Cairo-based late Mamluk court life, in particular. To this end, it elucidates first and foremost how key figures in a late Mamluk court understood and constructed Persian ethnic identity. Behind this question stands a concept of identity that is informed by insights from research on ethnicity in other premodern societies, especially in late antique and medieval Europe. These studies indicate that ethnic identity is not a fixed and naturally given quality but the result of constructive social processes of labeling and negotiation in which both the labeled person or group and others can partake. Such relational processes typically occur when different groups separated by cultural, linguistic, or other boundaries come into contact and interact with each other. In these processes, various agents can attribute different ethnic identities to one and the same person or group in different contexts and at different times. These identities, in turn, can entail a multitude of social, legal, and political consequences, and they should be seen as both situational and strategic.⁹ The social significance of ethnic identities is based on their shared recognition and acceptance as true. As Peter Webb puts it: “Ethnicities must be believed in to become real.”¹⁰

Various factors contribute to the construction of an ethnic identity. In Latin medieval Europe, membership in a group defined through blood ties and shared ancestry (*gens*), legal traditions (*leges*), language (*lingua*), and customs (*mores*) were often seen as characterizing ethnic groups, although European nationalists from the nineteenth century onward typically focused primarily on the aspect of blood ties.¹¹ Another important observation

Islamic Conquest Narrative: Memory and Identity Construction in Islamic Historiography, 750–1050 (London: Routledge, 2018); and on ethnonyms for Persians in non-Persian languages, see O. Kommer, S. Liccardo, and A. Nowak, “Comparative Approaches to Ethnonyms: The Case of the Persians,” *Hungarian Historical Review* 7, no. 1 (2018): 18–56.

9. R. Bartlett, “Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001), 39–56, at 40, 42; T. Reuter, “Whose Race, Whose Ethnicity? Recent Medievalists’ Discussions of Identity,” in *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. J. L. Nelson, 100–108 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 101, 103; J. A. Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 4–6. See also P. Geary, “Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages,” *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 113 (1983): 15–26, at 18, 21; W. Pohl, “Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity,” in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. W. Pohl and H. Reimitz, 17–69 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 21–22; F. Barth, “Introduction,” in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. F. Barth, 9–38 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 9–10, 13–16, 33–34; N. Adlparvar and M. Tadros, “The Evolution of Ethnicity Theory: Intersectionality, Geopolitics and Development,” *IDS Bulletin* 47 (2016): 123–136, at 125–126.

10. P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 11.

11. Bartlett, “Concepts,” 44–54. See also Geary, “Construct,” 17–21; W. Pohl, *Die Völkerwanderung: Eroberung und Integration* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 17–18; W. Pohl, “Introduction: Strategies of Distinction,” in Pohl and Reimitz, *Strategies of Distinction*, 1–15, at 4, 7–9; W. Pohl, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Religion and Empire,” in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300–1100*, ed. W. Pohl, C. Gantner, and R. Payne, 1–23 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 9–10; W. Pohl, “Introduction: Strategies of Identification: A Methodological Profile,” in *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. W. Pohl and G. Heydemann, 1–64 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 3, 6–8, 10; Pohl, “Telling,” 17–19, 22–61.

from the European context is that the attribution of specific ethnic identities is often especially pronounced in the case of high-ranking political actors. As Timothy Reuter put it: “Ethnicity appears to have lit up in the presence of rulers in much the same way as fluorescent clothing does in the presence of street lighting.”¹²

Given that these insights have been obtained through the study of European societies, we cannot tacitly assume that they necessarily apply also to ethnic groups beyond the indistinct borders of Europe. However, Peter Webb’s recent work on Arab ethnicity has demonstrated that theoretical findings derived from the study of European ethnicities can be fruitfully applied to Islamicate contexts.¹³ Moreover, earlier research on the specific case of premodern Persian identity suggests that many of the factors that historians of late antique and medieval Europe have identified as defining ethnic identities also play a role in the Persian case.¹⁴ This is perhaps most obvious for what medieval European sources call *lingua*. In his much noted monograph *Die „Persophonie“: Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens*, Bert G. Fagner argues forcefully for the importance of language as a constitutive factor of Persian identity and a Persian cultural sphere.¹⁵ His point of view is in accord with our knowledge about ethnicity in the greater Mediterranean world more broadly¹⁶ and with the findings of other specialists in premodern Persian history.¹⁷ It thus seems worthwhile to explore whether and to what degree other insights derived from the study of premodern European ethnicities can likewise be applied to the Persian case.

A noteworthy similarity between publications on ethnicity in Europe and those on the Islamicate world is that they often remain on a rather general level and relatively rarely engage with the construction of particular ethnic identities in a specific time and place.¹⁸ In this, they reflect the fact that the construction of specific ethnic identities in premodern societies often evades historical analysis because of a lack of appropriate sources.¹⁹ We are thus fortunate to have at our disposal a set of texts that allows a deeper understanding of the

12. Reuter, “Race,” 103–104. See also Geary, “Construct,” 23–25.

13. Webb, *Imagining*, especially 4, 9–15. For an earlier study likewise arguing for the applicability of findings on ethnicity in Europe to the Islamicate world, see Armstrong, *Nations*, especially 3, and for comparative reflections on ethnicity in Europe and the Islamicate world, see Pohl, “Ethnicity.”

14. See, e.g., Savant, *Muslims*, whose primary theoretical focus, however, is “memory” rather than “ethnicity.”

15. B. G. Fagner, *Die „Persophonie“: Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1999), especially 16–23.

16. E.g., H. Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 41–45.

17. E.g., M. Cooperson, “‘Arabs’ and ‘Iranians’: The Uses of Ethnicity in the Early Abbasid Period,” in *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*, ed. A. Q. Ahmed et al., 364–382 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 368–375, 377, 382; A. Amanat, “Remembering the Persianate,” in *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere*, ed. A. Amanat and A. Ashraf, 15–62 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 32–41. On the connection between language and (ethnic) identity, see in detail M. Bucholtz and K. Hall, “Language and Identity,” in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. A. Duranti, 369–94 (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), especially 371–374.

18. On arguments for the usefulness of broader general approaches, see, e.g., Armstrong, *Nations*, 3–4; and on the need to study ethnicities in a specific time and place, see Webb, *Imagining*, 7.

19. Geary, “Construct,” 21. See also Reuter, “Race,” 101.

construction and the significance of Persian ethnic identity at a late Mamluk court—namely, the literary representations of the *majālis*, or learned salons, convened by the penultimate Mamluk Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 906–922/1501–1516). They repeatedly attest to the prominent roles played by persons, texts, and cultural techniques labeled “Persian” in the life of his court in general, as earlier scholarship has already noted.²⁰ However, the deep insights that these sources offer into late Mamluk processes of constructing, claiming, and affirming ethnic identities have so far largely escaped scholarly attention.

The present article seeks to shed light on these processes within a specific and comparatively well-documented social context. Following a short synopsis of the historical background and the available sources, I aim to answer to the following questions: What made a person Persian in al-Ghawrī’s *majālis*? Who could make someone Persian? And why would one want to be Persian? In particular, the article shows that language, cultural capital, and region of origin were the most important factors in the process of Persian identity construction at this late Mamluk court. The key actors in this process were persons who identified themselves as Persians and sought to make strategic use of the benefits that their identity could entail within the patronage context of al-Ghawrī’s court.²¹

Historical Background and Sources

The late Mamluk Sultan Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (also sometimes erroneously spelled “Qānṣūh al-Ghūrī”) is today best known as the loser of the Battle of Marj Dābiq of 922/1516, in which he met his death after witnessing the invading Ottoman forces rout the Mamluk army north of Aleppo—an event that heralded the complete conquest of the Mamluk realm at the hands of Selīm the Grim one year later. Thanks to the work of Carl Petry, Albrecht Fuess, and others, historians with an interest in the Mamluk Sultanate are today also aware of the innovative means through which al-Ghawrī sought to adjust the political, fiscal, and military structures of the Mamluk Sultanate to address the domestic and transregional challenges of the early tenth/sixteenth century, such as the rise of the Safawids, the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, and the sudden appearance of Portuguese ships in the vicinity of the Arabian Peninsula. In response, al-Ghawrī significantly expanded the number of firearms available to the Mamluk army, experimented with disentangling late Mamluk patterns of landholding from the structure of the military, and established revolving sources of funds reserved for his personal use by manipulating religious endowments, among other actions.²²

20. See, e.g., R. Irwin, “The Political Thinking of the ‘Virtuous Ruler,’ Qansuh al-Ghawri,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2008): 37–49; D’hulster, “‘Sitting’”; Flemming, “Šerif”; B. Flemming, “Aus den Nachtgesprächen Sultan Ğaurīs,” in *Folia rara: Wolfgang Voigt LXV. diem natalem celebranti ab amicis et catalogorum codicum orientalium conscribendorum collegis dedicata*, ed. H. Franke, W. Heissig, and W. Treue, 22–28 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1976); Behrens-Abouseif, “Arts,” 73.

21. On the related topic of Ottoman Turkish elements in the *majālis*, see C. Mauder, “Ottomanization before the Conquest? Mamluk-Ottoman Religious and Cultural Entanglements in the Courtly Salons of Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī and Post-Conquest Gatherings,” in *The Mamluk-Ottoman Transition: Continuity and Change in Egypt and Bilad al-Sham in the Sixteenth Century II*, ed. S. Conermann and G. Şen (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, forthcoming).

22. See especially A. Fuess, “Dreikampf um die Macht zwischen Osmanen, Mamlūken und Safawiden

Concomitantly and, as I argue, complementarily to these innovative steps in the realm of state organization, al-Ghawrī engaged in multiple large-scale projects of patronage. Best known among these is the construction of several buildings, including his lavish funeral complex in the heart of Cairo, which integrated novel architectural elements originating from the Islamicate East into a Mamluk framework of sultanic architecture.²³ Moreover, al-Ghawrī made a name for himself as the sponsor of the first complete versified translation of the Persian verse epos *Shāhnāma* into Turkish, a project to which I will return below.²⁴

Less well known, at least until recently, is al-Ghawrī's practice of convening *majālis* at the Cairo Citadel once to several times a week. At these sessions he discussed scholarly, religious, and at times also political issues with members of the local scholarly establishment, administrative officials, itinerant scholars, litterateurs, envoys, and foreign dignitaries as well as marginal figures such as musicians and jesters. In terms of scholarly disciplines, questions of Islamic law clearly predominated, followed by Quranic exegesis, creedal and rational theology, stories about the prophets before Muḥammad, various forms of poetry and prose literature, prophetic traditions and accounts of the life of the Prophet, non-prophetic history, philosophy, and various other fields of knowledge, including the natural sciences.²⁵

Although references to al-Ghawrī's *majālis* appear in various late Mamluk and post-Mamluk sources,²⁶ most of our data about these events stem from three late Mamluk works

(1500–1517): Warum blieben die Mamlūken auf der Strecke?," in *Die Mamlūken: Studien zu ihrer Geschichte und Kultur; Zum Gedenken an Ulrich Haarmann (1942–1999)*, ed. S. Conermann and A. Pistor-Hatam, 239–250 (Schenefeld: EB-Verlag, 2003); A. Fuess, "Les janissaires, les mamelouks et les armes à feu: Une comparaison des systèmes militaires ottoman et mamelouk à partir du milieu du XV^e siècle," *Turcica* 41 (2009): 209–227; C. Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultans al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy and Qanṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993); C. Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

23. K. A. Alhamzah, *Late Mamluk Patronage: Qansuh al-Ghūrī's Waqfs and His Foundations in Cairo* (Boca Raton, FL: Universal Publishers, 2009); Behrens-Abouseif, "Arts," 79–84.

24. On this translation, see, e.g., Flemming, "Şerif"; D'hulster, "'Sitting'" (with detailed references to earlier studies); A. Zajaczkowski, "Treny filozofów na śmierć Iskendera: Podług mamelucko-tureckiej wersji *Şāh-nāme*," *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 28, no. 2 (1965): 13–57; A. Zajaczkowski, "La plus ancienne traduction turque (en vers) du *Şāh-nāme* de l'État Mamelouk d'Égypte (XV–XVI^e siècles)," *Türk Dili Araştırmaları Yıllığı Belleten* (1966): 51–63; A. Zajaczkowski, "Şeh-Name'nin İlk Türkçe Manzumesinde Atasözleri ve Deylimler (Özet)," in *XI. Türk Dil Kurultayında Okunan Bilimsel Bildiriler 1966*, ed. Türk Dil Kurumu, 1–7 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1968); S. Bağcı, "From Translated Word to Translated Image: The Illustrated *Şehnâme-i Türkî* Copies," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 162–176; N. Atasoy, "Un manuscrit Mamlūk illustré du *Şāhnāma*," *Revue des études islamiques* 37 (1969): 151–58. For editions, see A. Zajaczkowski, ed., *Turecka wersja Şāh-nāme z Egiptu mameluckiego* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawn, 1965); Z. Kültür and L. Beyreli, eds., *Şerîfî Şehnâme Çevirisi* (Ankara: Türk Dil Kurumu, 1999).

25. See, in detail, Mauder, *Salon*, chap. 4.

26. E.g., Kültür and Beyreli, *Şehnâme Çevirisi*, 1990–1992; Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Ibn Iyās al-Ḥanafī, *Die Chronik des Ibn Ijās: Mujallad 5, Min sana 922 ilā sana 928 h. (1516–1522)*, 2nd ed., ed. M. Muṣṭafā (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1961), 89; Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Ḥanbalī, *Durr al-ḥabab fī tārikh a'yān Ḥalab*, ed. M. M. al-Fākhūrī and Y. 'Abbāra (Damascus: Manshūrāt Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 1972–1973), 2(1):48; Muṣṭafā 'Alī, *The Ottoman Gentleman of the Sixteenth Century: Mustafa Ālī's "Meva'idü'n-Nefa'is fī Kava'idü'l-Mecalis"*;

claiming to constitute eyewitness accounts of what was said and done during the meetings.²⁷ Two of these works, *Nafāʾis majālis al-sultāniyya fī ḥaqāʾiq asrār al-Qurʾāniyya* by one Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, known as al-Sharīf, and *al-Kawkab al-durrī fī masāʾil al-Ghawrī* of unknown authorship, have been known to scholarship since the mid-twentieth century and are available in incomplete editions.²⁸ The third, likewise anonymous, account of the *majālis*, *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya fī al-nawādir al-Ghawriyya*, was rediscovered only recently, as announced in the present journal.²⁹ Each of the three sources exhibits a distinct thematic and chronological focus, but their accounts of the *majālis* are remarkably consistent. In the case of *al-Kawkab al-durrī* and *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya*, this consistency is the result of textual interdependence between the two texts, which could share the same (presently unknown) author. *Nafāʾis majālis al-sultāniyya*, however, is not textually related to the other two works and thus represents an independent literary tradition of writing about al-Ghawrī’s *majālis*. The fact that its account of the sultan’s salons nevertheless largely agrees in content, though typically not in wording (beyond five dozen instances), allows the conclusion that both literary traditions about al-Ghawrī’s salons are based on and reflect what took place during these meetings. It is therefore justified to use these texts as historical sources on late Mamluk court culture, including the identities of its participants.³⁰

When relying on the accounts of al-Ghawrī’s *majālis* for historical information, we nevertheless have to bear in mind who wrote them, and for what reasons. The fact that we know almost nothing about the author(s) of the two anonymous works *al-Kawkab al-durrī* and *al-ʿUqūd al-jawhariyya* makes answering these questions particularly difficult, as I show elsewhere.³¹ For the purposes of the present article, we therefore focus on al-Sharīf’s *Nafāʾis majālis al-sultāniyya*, which is also the source that provides the most information on Persian ethnic identity at al-Ghawrī’s court.

Even in al-Sharīf’s case, all that we know about him and his work comes from the text itself, as other Mamluk authors, according to our present knowledge, found neither him

“*Tables of Delicacies Concerning the Rules of Social Gatherings*,” ed. and trans. D. S. Brookes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 2003), 95.

27. On these texts in detail, see Mauder, *Salon*, chap. 3.1.

28. The first publication providing detailed information on the works was M. Awad, “Sultan al-Ghawri: His Place in Literature and Learning (Three Books Written under His Patronage),” in *Actes du XX^e Congrès International des Orientalistes: Bruxelles 5–10. September 1938*, 321–322 (Louvain: Bureaux du Muséon, 1940). The edition of both texts—ʿA. ʿAzzām, ed., *Majālis al-Sultān al-Ghawrī: Ṣafaḥāt min tārikh Miṣr min al-qarn al-ʿāshir al-hijrī* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Lajnat al-Taʿlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1941)—has been reprinted several times. The unicum manuscripts of the texts are MS Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Kütüphanesi, Ahmet III 2680 (*Nafāʾis majālis al-sultāniyya*) and MS Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Kütüphanesi, Ahmet III 1377 (*al-Kawkab al-durrī*). Hereinafter, references to the manuscripts of the two works are preceded by “(MS)” and use the pagination in the manuscripts. Page numbers in the edition are indicated by “(ed. ʿAzzām).” All quotations for which references to both the edition and the manuscripts are given are based on the manuscripts.

29. C. Mauder and C. A. Markiewicz, “A New Source on the Social Gatherings (*majālis*) of the Mamluk Sultan Qānṣawh al-Ghawrī,” *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 24 (2016): 145–148. All quotations from this work refer to the two-volume unicum manuscript MS Istanbul, Süleymaniye Yazma Eser Kütüphanesi, Ayasofya 3312 and 3313.

30. See Mauder, *Salon*, chap. 3.1.5.

31. See Mauder, *Salon*, chaps. 3.1.2 and 3.1.3.

nor his work worthy of mention.³² This might have to do with his origins. Al-Sharīf was an outsider who hailed from the *bilād al-‘ajam* (lands of the Persians).³³ His work reveals that he was literate in Persian, Turkish, and Arabic, although his knowledge of Arabic was somewhat imperfect, if we are to judge from the numerous linguistic peculiarities that *Nafā’is majālis al-sulṭāniyya* exhibits. Learned in Ḥanafī jurisprudence, al-Sharīf seems to have come to Cairo in the period of political instability in Greater Iran that saw the rise to power of the Shī‘ī Safawids, and it seems plausible that his decision to leave his homeland was connected to the political, economic, religious, and social transformations that characterized the turn from the ninth/fifteenth to the tenth/sixteenth century.³⁴ Al-Sharīf moved to Cairo, where he managed to attract the attention of Sultan al-Ghawrī, who made him a member of his *majālis*. According to his work, this step must have taken place in or before Ramaḍān 910/February 1505.³⁵ Over the subsequent months, up to Sha‘bān 911/December 1505,³⁶ al-Sharīf was a regular, and, if we are to trust his text, very active participant in the sultan’s *majālis*, as his work, which is written from a first-person perspective, attributes to him the second-largest number of recorded contributions to the *majālis* discussions. Only the sultan himself is portrayed as engaging more actively in the discussions.

In addition to being a regular member of the sultan’s circle, al-Sharīf also benefited from al-Ghawrī’s patronage by being appointed to the paid position of a Sufi in the latter’s funeral complex.³⁷ Yet al-Sharīf’s position as the ruler’s client, and the benefits that came with it, were highly dependent on the sultan’s favor, as became clear during a series of debates about a question of Quranic exegesis in which al-Sharīf so vehemently defended his opinions against the majority of the participants that tensions grew to the point where the sultan summarily banished all those present, including al-Sharīf, from his presence and temporarily discontinued the holding of *majālis*.³⁸ In reaction to this development,

32. For more on what is known about this text and its author, see Mauder, *Salon*, chap. 3.1.1.

33. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 221; (ed. ‘Azzām) 101. On the translation of ‘ajam as “Persian” in the present context, see below.

34. On the emigration of Iranian Sunnis in the period of the Safawid rise to power, see, e.g., E. Glassen, “Krisenbewusstsein und Heilserwartung in der islamischen Welt zu Beginn der Neuzeit,” in *Die islamische Welt zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Festschrift für Hans Robert Roemer zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. U. Haarmann and P. Bachmann, 167–79 (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1979), 175; B. Flemming, “Turks: Turkish Literature of the Golden Horde and of the Mamlūks,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 10:716–18, at 718; L. Berger, *Gesellschaft und Individuum in Damaskus 1550–1791: Kultur, Recht und Politik in muslimischen Gesellschaften* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2007), 161–63.

35. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 3, 6; (ed. ‘Azzām) 2, 5.

36. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 263; (ed. ‘Azzām) 141.

37. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 115; (ed. ‘Azzām) 36. See also Behrens-Abouseif, “Arts,” 77; Flemming, “Nachtgesprächen,” 24. On al-Ghawrī’s relationship with Sufi communities, see also C. Mauder, “Der Sultan, sein geschwätziger Barbier und die Sufis: Ibn Iyās über den Fall des Kamāl ad-Dīn b. Šams im Kairo des 16. Jahrhunderts,” in *Macht bei Hofe: Narrative Darstellungen in ausgewählten Quellen; Ein interdisziplinärer Reader*, ed. S. Conermann and A. Kollatz, 79–98 (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2020).

38. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 259–68; (ed. ‘Azzām) 135–144. On this debate, see also Mauder, *Salon*, chap. 4.2.2; C. Mauder, “Does a Mamluk Sultan Hold Religious Authority? Quranic Exegesis and Hadith Studies in Late Mamluk Courtly *majālis*,” *Intellectual History of the Islamic World* (forthcoming).

which posed a direct threat to al-Sharīf's newly found influence and livelihood, he presented the ruler with his work *Nafā'is majālis al-sulṭāniyya*, which, after a detailed chronological account of the *majālis* in which al-Sharīf participated in 910–911/1505, ends with a plea for the sultan's forgiveness.³⁹ Whether al-Sharīf succeeded in his attempt to regain the sultan's favor by penning a literary work is unknown, but the information we have about him and his work makes it clear that we have to understand it as part of a strategic effort to regain and maintain sultanic patronage in a time of political turmoil and personal insecurity. We must also bear this fact in mind when we examine how al-Sharīf, as an immigrant from the "lands of the Persians," addresses and portrays Persian ethnicity, especially when we discuss below the question of why one would want to be Persian as a member of al-Ghawrī's court.

Al-Sharīf was certainly not the first person from the Islamicate East who came to Egypt in hope of a better life. Earlier periods of Mamluk history, including especially the eighth/fourteenth century with the long third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (r. 709–741/1310–1341) and the reigns of Barqūq (r. 784–792/1382–1389 and 793–802/1390–1399), likewise saw extensive migration to Cairo by Persians, some of whom attained high office and rank.⁴⁰ Yet al-Sharīf's predecessors often had to face strong anti-Persian stereotypes in Egypt, as Petry and others have shown. Persians were seen as openly or clandestinely siding with religious communities understood to be deviant, including antinomian Sufi groups.⁴¹ Mamluk sultans sometimes even ordered all Persians to leave Cairo under threat of capital punishment, regarding them as possible traitors or supporters of rival foreign powers. In times of crisis, graffiti throughout the city called for the killing of all Persians found therein

39. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 268–70; (ed. 'Azzām) 145–46.

40. On Persians in the Mamluk realm during the eighth/fourteenth century, see, e.g., O. Amir, "Niẓām al-Dīn Yahyā al-Ṭayyārī: An Artist in the Court of the Ilkhans and Mamluks," *Asiatische Studien* 71, no. 4 (2018): 1075–1091; E. I. Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), especially 112–136; U. Haarmann, "Arabic in Speech, Turkish in Lineage: Mamluks and Their Sons in the Intellectual Life of Fourteenth-Century Egypt and Syria," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 33, no. 1 (1988): 81–114, at 92; C. Juvin, "A Mamluk Qur'ānic Ḡuz' and Its Connection with Amīr 'Abd al-Qādir al-Ġazā'irī," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 10 (2019): 105–135, at 111, 115–116; A. Levanoni, "A Supplementary Source for the Study of Mamluk Social History: The *Taqārīz*," *Arabica* 60 (2013): 146–177, at 170–173, 175; M. Melvin-Koushki, "How to Rule the World: Occult-Scientific Manuals of the Early Modern Persian Cosmopolis," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 11 (2018): 140–154, at 150; M. Melvin-Koushki, "In Defense of Geomancy: Šaraf al-Dīn Yazdī Rebutts Ibn Ḥaldūn's Critique of the Occult Sciences," *Arabica* 64 (2017): 346–403, passim; M. Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One: The Mathematicalization of the Occult Sciences in the High Persianate Tradition," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 5 (2017): 127–199, at 131–132; M. Melvin-Koushki, "Imperial Talismanic Love: Ibn Turka's *Debate of Feast and Fight* (1426) as Philosophical Romance and Lettrist Mirror for Timurid Princes," *Der Islam* 96, no. 1 (2019): 42–86, passim; J. van Steenbergen, "The Amir Yalbughā al-Khāṣṣakī, the Qalāwūnid Sultanate, and the Cultural Matrix of Mamlūk Society: A Reassessment of Mamlūk Politics in the 1360s," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131, no. 3 (2011): 423–443, at 440; Yosef, "Hatred," 179–180. For a particularly well-documented case from the early ninth/fifteenth century, see C. Petry, "'Travel Patterns of Medieval Notables in the Near East' Reconsidered: Contrasting Trajectories, Interconnected Networks," in *Everything Is on the Move: The Mamluk Empire as a Node in (Trans-)Regional Networks*, ed. S. Conermann, 165–179 (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2014), 170–173. For the broader context, Petry's early groundbreaking study, *Civilian Elite*, especially 61–68, is still of fundamental importance.

41. For a reflection of this view in the *majālis* accounts, see *al-'Uqūd*, 2: fol. 46v.

in the name of Islam. Locals particularly disliked those Persians who had managed to enter the highest echelons of the Mamluk ruling apparatus.⁴² Against this background, the case of Persians at al-Ghawrī's court is particularly noteworthy, as it seems to point to markedly different and, as far as we can say, less hostile ways in which Mamluk Egyptians and their Persian interlocutors perceived and interacted with each other.

Who Could Make Someone Persian?

On the basis of the three *majālis* accounts, we can identify three key factors in the construction of Persian ethnic identity in al-Ghawrī's *majālis*: first, proficiency in the Persian language; second, mastery of knowledge as well cultural techniques understood to be Persian; and third, a Persian place of origin that was indicated, among other things, through proper names.

To members of al-Ghawrī's court, being Persian meant first and foremost that one could speak Persian. To be sure, Persians were not the only ones who knew this language. For example, Sultan al-Ghawrī himself claimed to have a good command of Persian, among other languages such as Arabic, Turkish, and Circassian.⁴³ The fact that the corpus of poetry attributed to the sultan includes some Persian verses lends credibility to this claim.⁴⁴ Yet what distinguished Persian native speakers from others was their higher level of language proficiency, including a broader vocabulary that outshone even that of the sultan, who had to accept the superior knowledge of native speakers, although a source from his court credits him with knowing Persian better than a Persian.⁴⁵ A case in point is a situation described in al-Sharīf's *Nafā'is majālis al-sultāniyya* at which a sweetmeat made of flour and honey known as *fālūdaj* in Arabic was served. Interested in improving his Persian vocabulary, the sultan asked al-Sharīf, the first person-narrator of the work who, as we have seen, hailed from the "lands of the Persians," what the dish was called in Persian. The latter told him that its Persian name was *pālūda*.⁴⁶

That al-Sharīf was of Persian-speaking background is confirmed not only by his knowledge of the niceties of Persian vocabulary but also by the abovementioned linguistic

42. C. Petry, *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society: Narratives from Cairo and Damascus under the Mamluks* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2012), 260–262. See also Petry, "Travel Patterns," 173–74; L. Fernandes, "Mamluk Politics and Education: The Evidence from Two Fourteenth Century Waqfiyya," *Annales islamologiques* 23 (1987): 87–98, at 96.

43. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 257; (ed. 'Azzām) 132–133.

44. E.g., M. Yalçın, ed. and trans., *The Dîvân of Qânsûh al-Ghûrî: Kansu Gavri Divanı* (Istanbul: Bay, 2002), 76–78. On the poems attributed to the sultan, with references to earlier studies, see C. Mauder, "Legitimizing Sultanic Rule in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian: Late Mamluk Rulers as Authors of Religious Poetry," in *Rulers as Authors in the Islamic World: Knowledge, Authority and Legitimacy*, ed. M. Fierro, S. Brentjes, and T. Seidensticker (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

45. Flemming, "Šerīf," 84; D'hulster, "Sitting," 249.

46. A "kind of sweet beverage made of water, flour and honey (according to others, a mixture of grated apples with sugar and cardamoms)"; F. Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary: Including the Arabic Words and Phrases to Be Met with in Persian Literature*, 3rd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), 233. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 253; (ed. 'Azzām) 131. See also Flemming, "Nachtgesprächen," 25.

peculiarities in his work, which, while not in line with the rules of Classical Arabic, are perfectly understandable from a native speaker of Persian who had learned Arabic as a second language. Even the title of the work, *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya fī ḥaqāʾiq asrār al-Qurʾāniyya* instead of *Nafāʾis al-majālis al-sulṭāniyya fī ḥaqāʾiq al-asrār al-Qurʾāniyya*, indicates a less than perfect command of Classical Arabic. It seems possible that the author considered the first two words of both parts of the title to be connected not through an Arabic *iḍāfa* or genitive construction, which would have required the second element to be in the *status determinativus*, but rather by means of a Persian *eżāfe* as *nafāʾis-i majālis* and *ḥaqāʾiq-i asrār*.⁴⁷ Further examples of the same feature can be found throughout the text.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the author does not consistently feminize adjectives referring to things in the plural,⁴⁹ uses unidiomatic phrases that seem to constitute largely verbatim translations of Persian expressions,⁵⁰ and employs Persian words in otherwise Arabic passages for no apparent reason.⁵¹ Taken together, these observations strongly suggest that al-Sharīf’s Arabic was heavily influenced by his native Persian. These particularities of his Arabic, however, apparently did not diminish al-Sharīf’s standing in the sultan’s salons, where he was valued for his Persian language skills, which formed part of his identity.

As mentioned earlier, modern sociological and historical research supports the idea that language is a crucial element in the construction of identity. The same view was also voiced in al-Ghawrī’s salons. In a discussion about proper behavior in the presence of rulers, one of the *majālis* attendees narrated an anecdote about how the famous philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) had insulted the Ḥamdānid ruler Sayf al-Dawla (r. 333–356/945–967) by claiming a seat above that of the ruler in the latter’s *majlis*. When Sayf al-Dawla’s retainers thereupon planned to kill al-Fārābī and discussed their scheme in his presence in Persian (*al-lisān al-ʿajamī*), al-Fārābī interrupted them in the same language and told them to wait until the *majlis* had ended. In the ensuing debates, the philosopher bested all the assembled scholars, thus proving himself worthy of the place he had claimed at the outset and averting the retainers’ punishment.⁵² After narrating this story, *Nafāʾis majālis al-sulṭāniyya* credits al-Ghawrī with making the following comment about it: “The only thing that saved al-Fārābī from being killed at Sayf al-Dawla’s [court] was the Persian language. Therefore, it is said: ‘A human being’s language (*lisān*) is [his] second self.’”⁵³ It is difficult to imagine a more clear-cut statement about the relationship between language and identity as understood by members of al-Ghawrī’s court.

47. My thanks to Thomas Bauer (Münster) for pointing this out to me. We do not know whether al-Sharīf sought to allude with this title to the anthology *Majālis al-nafāʾis* by Mīr ʿAlī Shīr Nawāʾī (d. 906/1501), on which see, e.g., C. G. Lingwood, *Politics, Poetry, and Sufism in Medieval Iran: New Perspectives on Jāmī’s “Salāmān va Absāl”* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 32–33.

48. On this point, see also ʿAzzām, *Majālis*, 49; D’hulster, “‘Sitting,’” 239.

49. E.g., al-Sharīf, *Nafāʾis*, (MS) 4, 157.

50. See, e.g., the editor’s comments on al-Sharīf, *Nafāʾis*, (MS) 157; (ed. ʿAzzām) 60; (MS) 165; (ed. ʿAzzām) 61; (MS) 174; (ed. ʿAzzām) 68; (MS) 194; (ed. ʿAzzām) 80.

51. E.g., al-Sharīf, *Nafāʾis*, (MS) 247, 273; (ed. ʿAzzām) 126, 141.

52. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʾis*, (MS) 252; (ed. ʿAzzām) 129.

53. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʾis*, (MS) 253; (ed. ʿAzzām) 129.

The ambiguous phrase *al-lisān al-‘ajamī*, which repeatedly appears in the *majālis* accounts and literally means “the non-Arabic language,” typically denotes what is understood in English as “Persian,” a point that becomes clear in a *majālis* debate about the language skills of the Prophet Muḥammad, as narrated in *Nafā’is majālis al-sultāniyya*.⁵⁴ When the first-person narrator—possibly in an attempt to boost the prestige of his mother tongue—affirmed that the Prophet had known ‘*ajamī*, al-Ghawrī objected and stated that one had to differentiate between the two meanings of ‘*ajamī*: it could denote either the Persian (*fārisī*) language or any language spoken by non-Arabs, such as Turks or Indians. Relevant in the present case was the former meaning, and one had to acknowledge that there was no clear evidence that the Prophet ever spoke Persian.⁵⁵ In addition to shedding light on the connection between prophetic history and linguistic identity, this passage also exemplifies the common trait of the sources on al-Ghawrī’s *majālis* to refer to the Persian language as *fārisī* only when necessary for reasons of clarity or disambiguation; otherwise, the term ‘*ajamī* predominates. The latter is also clearly the more important term to denote Persian ethnic identity, whereas *fārisī* is used primarily as a linguistic label.⁵⁶

Yet although the Prophet apparently did not know Persian in the sense of *fārisī*, as a language of literary and religious significance it did enjoy a special status among the members of al-Ghawrī’s court. It was exalted above all other languages except Arabic in that, according to the Ḥanafī legal school, it was permissible to perform one’s ritual prayers in either Persian or Arabic, as confirmed in the course of one of the many legal discussions during the *majālis*.⁵⁷ Moreover, right after his account of the debate about the Prophet’s language skills, al-Sharīf added the following aphorism he attributed to al-Ṣāḥib Ibn ‘Abbād (d. 385/995): “Arabic is eloquence (*faṣāḥa*), Persian is gracefulness (*malāḥa*), Turkish is rulership (*siyāsa*), and the rest is filth (*najāsa*)”⁵⁸—a noteworthy statement from a man whose patron confidently identified as a Circassian native speaker. It clearly underscores the prestige associated with Persian at the late Mamluk court.

This attribution of special qualities to the Persian language leads us to the second key factor defining Persian ethnic identity in the *majālis* texts: the mastery of knowledge and cultural techniques—that is, cultural capital—that were understood as specifically Persian.⁵⁹

54. For another interpretation of the term ‘*ajam* as meaning both Persians and Turcomans from Greater Iran in the present context, see Flemming, “Šerīf,” 84; Behrens-Abouseif, “Arts,” 73.

55. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 81–82. On this passage, see also Flemming, “Nachtgesprächen,” 25.

56. On *fārisī* and ‘*ajamī*, see also, e.g., T. E. Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur’an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 73; Savant, *Muslims*, 9, 148.

57. *Al-Kawkab*, (MS) 11–12; (ed. ‘Azzām) 10–11. On this Ḥanafī position, see Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur’an*, 1–2, 53–63, 66–73, 92–93, 103–119, 122–23, 162–163, 288–290, 476–478. On the dissenting opinion of the other schools of law, see Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur’an*, 72–80, 104, 123–126.

58. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 82. On this passage, see also Flemming, “Nachtgesprächen,” 25. I have not been able to locate this saying in any of Ibn ‘Abbād’s available writings. On the negative connotations of Persian in Arabic literature, see Zadeh, *Vernacular Qur’an*, 74–76.

59. On this type of cultural capital as typically Persian, see also, e.g., L. Richter-Bernburg, “Linguistic Shu’ūbiya and Early Neo-Persian Prose,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94, no. 1 (1974): 55–64, at 59–60; Amanat, “Remembering the Persianate,” 29–32.

Persians were expected to be well versed in the history of the pre-Islamic Iranian kings and the political wisdom associated with them. Throughout his account of the *majālis*, al-Sharīf showcases his familiarity with the deeds and sayings of the Iranian kings Anūshīrwān, Shāpūr, Ardashīr, and the wise *wazīr* Buzurgmihr. Often these figures were used to communicate mirrors-for-princes material. For example, Ardashīr was quoted with the famous maxim of Persian political thought that religion (*dīn*) and kingship (*mulk*) were twins,⁶⁰ while King Anūshīrwān was credited with the aphorism that it was better to treat one's subjects well than it was to command many soldiers.⁶¹ Although little of this material was connected to traditions perceived as genuinely Islamic, *majālis* participants sometimes discussed connections between Quranic visions of history and the Persian pre-Islamic past, for example, when they debated the relationship between the prophet Noah and Gayūmarth, the first human being according to the Avesta.⁶²

Material about ancient Iran, its kings, and its mythology was presented in the *majālis* almost exclusively by those identified as Persians. The only clear exception is Sultan al-Ghawrī himself, who, despite his Circassian origins, is portrayed as highly knowledgeable in ancient Iranian lore. This applies especially to everything related to the Persian *Shāhnāma*, of which al-Ghawrī, as we recall, commissioned a Turkish translation. In the accounts of his *majālis*, and especially those of a session held in celebration of the completion of the translation,⁶³ al-Ghawrī is credited with quoting at length anecdotes about the original context of the *Shāhnāma* and about its author's patron, Maḥmūd of Ghazna (r. 388–421/998–1030). Of particular interest here is a story about the stinginess of Maḥmūd's reward for Firdawsī for his composition of the *Shāhnāma* and the latter's retribution in the form of satiric verses inserted into the work.⁶⁴ Although this anecdote is widely attested in different versions in Persian literature,⁶⁵ its inclusion in an Arabic work from the Mamluk period is noteworthy. What is more, the rather simple Arabic in which the anecdote is narrated and its close similarity to the Persian version included in Aḥmad b. 'Umar al-Samarqandī's (d. after 556/1161) collection of anecdotes, *Chahār maqāla*,⁶⁶ suggests that we are most likely dealing here with an ad hoc translation or a paraphrasing re-narration of an originally

60. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 164.

61. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 243; (ed. 'Azzām) 122. For further examples from this work, see al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 4, 21, 33, 49, 51–52, 61, 66–67, 84, 92, 105, 133, 140, 142–143, 146–147, 155–156, 159, 161–162, 170–171, 183, 212–213, 227–228, 235–237, 247; (ed. 'Azzām) 2, 23, 58, 65–66, 74, 107–109, 114–115, 126; and for examples from the other *majālis* accounts, see *al-Kawkab*, (MS) 4–6, 189–190; (ed. 'Azzām) 2–4, 62–63; *al-'Uqūd*, 1: fol. 86r–86v; 2: fols. 10r, 16r, 38v. See also Irwin, "Thinking," 43–46. On the engagement of the *majālis* participants with historical material in general, see C. Mauder, "And They Read in That Night Books of History': Consuming, Discussing, and Producing Texts about the Past in al-Ghawrī's *majālis* as Social Practices," in *New Readings in Arabic Historiography from Late Medieval Egypt and Syria*, ed. J. van Steenberg (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

62. *Al-Kawkab*, (ed. 'Azzām) 90.

63. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 195–199; (ed. 'Azzām) 81–84.

64. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 195–196; (ed. 'Azzām) 81–82.

65. See, in detail, A. Khāṭibī, *Āyā Firdawsī Maḥmūd-i Ghaznavī rā hajv guft? Hajv'nāmah-i mansūb bih Firdawsī: Bar'rasī-yi taḥlīlī, taḥḥīḥ-i intiqādī, va sharḥ-i bayt'hā* (Tehran: Pardīs-i Dānish, 2016).

66. Aḥmad b. 'Umar b. 'Alī al-Samarqandī, *Chahār maqāla*, ed. M. Muḥammad (Leiden: Brill, 1910), 48–51.

Persian anecdote in an Arabic-speaking context. As we have seen, al-Ghawrī's court society included individuals who had the necessary language skills to produce such translations and re-narrations.

The participants of the *majālis* seemed to take it almost for granted that Persians were familiar with the glorious history of Iranian kings and therefore did not refer explicitly to this important element of Persian identity. What they did address directly, however, was Persian proficiency in a second field of knowledge and cultural techniques: the creative interplay of learning and entertainment typical of the *majālis* of Persian rulers of their day. As previous scholarship has already noted, Persian court culture was an important point of reference for al-Ghawrī and those around him in their efforts to stage a court life on par with that of their Islamicate neighbors.⁶⁷ Therefore, information on how past and present Persian rulers held court was highly valued in the *majālis*. Note, for example, the following instance, in which al-Ghawrī asked al-Sharīf to compare his experiences in Cairo to other *majālis* he had attended: "Question: Our Lord the Sultan said: 'You have attended the *majālis* of the Persian sultans (*salāṭīn al-ʿajam*) and you have seen our *majālis*.' Answer: 'Yes, but before long the former became irksome to me, because they indulged themselves all day in wine and music.'"⁶⁸

Although al-Sharīf here cast the *majālis* of the Persian rulers in an unfavorable light, much of what happened in them set a pattern for the *majālis* in the Mamluk capital. Learned discussions that had taken place in front of the Timurids of Herat⁶⁹ or the rulers of Tabrīz⁷⁰ or Shirvān⁷¹ were taken as models, continued, and at times quoted at the Cairo Citadel. When al-Ghawrī, for example, asked where the *nisba* "al-Shāfiʿī" came from, al-Sharīf replied with reference to the Timurid ruler Shahrukh (r. 807–850/1405–1447): "Sultan Shahrukh asked the very same question in Persian." He then narrated the anecdote about al-Shāfiʿī's alleged eponymous intercession (*shafāʿa*) that had been told to Shahrukh.⁷²

Moreover, participants shared highlights of Persian literature, including texts such as Saʿdī's (d. 691/1292) *Gulistān*.⁷³ Pride of place was accorded to Persian poetry by the contemporary Timurid Sultan Ḥusayn Bayqarā (r. 875–912/1470–1506), whom the Persian participants in al-Ghawrī's *majālis* presented as a praiseworthy model of educated rulership.⁷⁴

67. Irwin, "Thinking," 40–41. For the broader context, see also D. Behrens-Abouseif, "The Citadel of Cairo: Stage for Mamluk Ceremonial," *Annales islamologiques* 24 (1989): 25–79, at 30; H. T. Norris, "Aspects of the Influence of Nesimi's Hurufi Verse, and His Martyrdom, in the Arab East between the 16th and 18th Centuries," in *Synchrétismes et hérésies dans l'Orient seldjoukide et ottoman (XIV^e–XVIII^e siècle): Actes du colloque du Collège de France, octobre 2001*, ed. G. Veinstein, 163–82 (Paris: Peeters, 2005), 163–164.

68. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 224; (ed. ʿAzzām) 105.

69. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 13–14; (ed. ʿAzzām) 12–13.

70. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 174–175; (ed. ʿAzzām) 68–70.

71. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 17–18; (ed. ʿAzzām) 17; *al-Kawkab*, (MS) 302; (ed. ʿAzzām) 87.

72. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 13–14; (ed. ʿAzzām) 12–13.

73. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 204–205; (ed. ʿAzzām) 89. See also (MS) 145–46; (ed. ʿAzzām) 56. On the reception of the *Gulistān* in the Mamluk Sultanate, see also D'hulster, "Notes" (with references to earlier studies); Bodrogligeti, *Translation*.

74. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 152–153, 258; (ed. ʿAzzām) 134. See also *al-Uqūd*, 2: fol. 38r–38v; Flemming,

That the classics of Persian poetry likewise enjoyed popularity at al-Ghawrī's court is confirmed by the poems attributed to the sultan, which include intertextual references to works by luminaries such as Niẓāmī (d. before 613/1217) and Ḥāfiẓ (d. 792/1390).⁷⁵

The third decisive factor in the construction of Persian identity in the *majālis* was a person's place of origin. Members of al-Ghawrī's circle perceived the non-Mamluk, Muslim-ruled world as consisting of multiple sultanates that in turn formed overarching regions such as the Maghrib, Anatolia (*bilād al-Rūm*), Yemen, and the lands of the Persians (*bilād al-ʿajam*).⁷⁶ The latter encompassed, among others, the territories ruled by the Timurid Shahrukh⁷⁷ and the Qarā Qoyunlu Muẓaffar al-Dīn Jahānshāh b. Yūsuf (r. 841–872/1438–1467).⁷⁸

At least one member of the *majālis* indicated his region of origin by stating simply that he had been born in the *bilād al-ʿajam*,⁷⁹ but in most cases we must rely on onomastic evidence as a prime indicator. This is hardly surprising, since participants in the *majālis* typically communicated important aspects of their personal identities through their names, including ancestry, place of residence, legal allegiance, and ethnic origin.⁸⁰ Although no *majālis* participant appears in the available accounts with an unambiguous *nisba* such as “al-ʿAjami” or even “al-Fārisī,” some names clearly point to Persian origins. An example is a certain Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dihdār, who attended at least one of the sultan's meetings in Shawwāl 910/March 1505. His *laqab* “Ghiyāth al-Dīn” is rather unusual within a Mamluk context and immediately raises the question of his provenance. “Dihdār,” meaning “village headman”⁸¹ in Persian, in turn clearly points to a Persian background, as does the distinctive Persian form of the writing of the name in the unicum manuscript of *Nafāʿis majālis al-sulṭāniyya*, where the *hāʾ* remains unconnected to the second *dāl*.

We are fortunate to have access to additional information about the origins of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dihdār in the array of biographical writings that circulates under the name of Mīr ʿAlī Shīr Nawāʿī (d. 906/1501). These texts include information about a man of exactly the same name who hailed from Azerbaijan, was knowledgeable about the Quran and Persian poetry, and served in Khurāsān as a boon companion of the Timurid Ḥusayn Bayqarā.⁸² Given the exact match in name, period, and social context, it seems highly plausible that the Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dihdār known from the Timurid biographical tradition is the same as the

“Nachtgesprächen,” 25; R. Irwin, *Night and Horses and the Desert: The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (London: Penguin, 2000), 441; Irwin, “Thinking,” 40–41.

75. Yalçın, *Dîvân*, 129, 133. See also Flemming, “Nachtgesprächen,” 23.

76. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 221, 232; (ed. ʿAzzām) 101, 113. For the Mamluk view of the Islamicate world according to diplomatic sources, see also M. Dekkiche, “Diplomatics, or Another Way to See the World,” in Bauden and Dekkiche, *Mamluk Cairo*, 185–213; on the lands of the Persians, see Yosef, “Hatred,” 178–179.

77. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 13; (ed. ʿAzzām) 13.

78. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 221; (ed. ʿAzzām) 101–102.

79. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 221, 223–24; (ed. ʿAzzām) 101, 104–105.

80. On names and ethnic identity, see Pohl, “Distinction,” 10.

81. H. F. J. Junker and B. Alavi, *Persisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 9th ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 335.

82. Mīr ʿAlī Shīr Nawāʿī, *Majālis al-nafāʿis*, ed. ʿA. A. Ḥikmat (Tehran: Chāpkhāna-yi Bānk-i Millī Irān, 1945), 99; S. Niyāz Kirmānī, *Ḥāfiẓ-shināsī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Pāzanj, 1987), 7:51–52.

one mentioned by al-Sharīf in *Nafā'is majālis al-sulṭāniyya*. If this identification is correct, we may furthermore assume that Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dihdār's relocation to Cairo reflected his search for a new patron in the wake of the disintegration of the Timurid realm and the rise of the Shī'ī Safawids, which, as mentioned earlier, is known to have driven many learned Sunnis out of Greater Iran and into neighboring regions, including the Mamluk Sultanate. In his new social environment at the Mamluk court, his name clearly identified him as a Persian in the sense of someone who came from a Persian place of origin.

The important role of territorial factors in the construction of Persian identity in Mamluk Cairo is not entirely surprising, given that earlier scholarship about what it meant to be Persian in premodern Islamicate societies has already pointed to the significance of such factors. In his now classic study on the social history of the *shu'ūbiyya* movement under the early 'Abbasids, Roy P. Mottahedeh speaks of the "territorial understanding of peoplehood among the non-Arabs"⁸³ in general, and among Persians in particular.⁸⁴ Similarly, Ahmad Ashraf notes, concerning the identity of Iranians during the Islamicate middle period, that it "was largely drawn from their territorial ties. They were identified, for the most part, with their places of birth or residence."⁸⁵ It appears that these observations about the prominent role of regional parameters apply not only to the Persian-speakers of Iran, but also to those who came to Egypt.⁸⁶

A factor notably absent in our sources from the construction of the Persian ethnic identity of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dihdār and others who shared the same background is ancestry. This finding stands in contrast to both the medieval European situation and what we know about the construction of other ethnic identities at al-Ghawrī's court, such as the Circassian one, which was explicitly defined in terms of lineage (*aşl*) and offspring (*nasl*).⁸⁷ However, to the *majālis* participants, it seemed to be rather unimportant who a Persian's forefathers had been.⁸⁸ Indeed, Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad al-Ḥusaynī, who appears in his *Nafā'is majālis al-sulṭāniyya* almost as the spokesperson of the Persian members of al-Ghawrī's salon, was in terms of his lineage labeled a *sharīf*, or descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad, and thus was

83. R. P. Mottahedeh, "The Shu'ūbiyah Controversy and the Social History of Early Islamic Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7 (1976): 161–182, at 171.

84. See, in detail, Mottahedeh, "Controversy," 167–173, 181.

85. A. Ashraf, "Iranian Identity III: Medieval Islamic Period," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online ed., ed. E. Yarshater (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iranian-identity-iii-medieval-islamic-period>, last updated March 30, 2012). On the importance of regional origin for Persian identity, see also Fragner, „*Persophonie*“, 11–16, 20–21.

86. On the relationship between geographical origin and ethnic identity in general, see, e.g., Geary, "Construct," 18–19, 23; Pohl, "Identification," 16–17.

87. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'is*, (MS) 200; (ed. 'Azzām) 85.

88. This finding stands in contrast to the general importance of genealogy in Islamicate societies. See, e.g., S. B. Savant and H. de Felipe, "Introduction," in *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past*, ed. S. B. Savant and H. de Felipe, 1–7 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1–4; Cooperson, "Arabs," 369–370, 372, 375–376, 382. On different versions of the genealogy of the Persians in Islamicate learning, see S. B. Savant, "Genealogy and Ethnogenesis in al-Mas'udi's *Muruj al-dhahab*," in Savant and de Felipe, *Genealogy and Knowledge*, 115–129; S. B. Savant, "Isaac as the Persians' Ishmael: Pride and the Pre-Islamic Past in Ninth and Tenth-Century Islam," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 2 (2006): 5–25; Savant, *Muslims*, 31–60.

understood to be of at least partly Arab ancestry. According to *Nafāʿis majālis al-sultāniyya*, his status as a *sharīf* was at times a mixed blessing for al-Ḥusaynī, as it prevented him from traveling through territories inhabited by Kurdish tribes. Allegedly, these tribesmen were in the habit of killing *sharīfs* passing through their lands in order to use their remains for religious practices.⁸⁹ Moreover, Sultan al-Ghawrī stipulated that in accordance with Islamic law, al-Ḥusaynī as a *sharīf* was not allowed to accept alms (*ṣadaqa*).⁹⁰ These negative implications notwithstanding, the finding that al-Sharīf could be a Persian and a *sharīf* at the same time accords with the theoretical insight mentioned earlier—that a person can hold multiple ethnic identities in different contexts.

This relative lack of interest in ancestral origins might also explain why the term *jins* (pl. *ajnās*) that features very prominently in other Mamluk sources that address issues of ethnicity does not hold an important place in the *majālis* accounts as far as the construction of Persian identity is concerned. Josephine van den Bent's groundbreaking work on Mongol ethnicity has shown that Mamluk authors could use the term *jins* to refer to subgroups within a certain ethnic group, although the meaning of the term clearly went beyond that of *aṣl*.⁹¹ On the basis of van den Bent's findings, one may conclude that *jins* could refer both to larger ethnic groups such as the Turks or the Mongols and to smaller units within these groups that were seen as sharing a common ancestry. At least to the authors of the accounts of al-Ghawrī's *majālis*, such ancestral subdivisions or *ajnās* among the Persians seem to have been of little interest, and they hence did not use the technical term *jins* to discuss them. This fact lends further credibility to the interpretation that ancestry was not a prime factor in the construction of Persian ethnicity at al-Ghawrī's court.

Who Could Make Someone a Persian?

Now that we have examined the decisive factors in the construction of Persian ethnic identity in al-Ghawrī's *majālis*, we must ask who could label someone a Persian. Put differently, how can we describe the interplay between self-labeling and the influence of others when it comes to the construction of Persian identity in al-Ghawrī's *majālis*?⁹²

One might expect that, being foreigners from a distant land, people identified or identifying as Persians would inhabit a marginal social position that would prevent them from constructing and affirming their own ethnic identity. As a result, Persians would be subject to heteronomous labeling processes they could not control.

As it turns out, however, nothing could be further from the truth, according to the picture painted by the sources on al-Ghawrī's *majālis*. The Persians of high standing who participated in al-Ghawrī's meetings appear in these texts as confidently defining, affirming, enacting, and, when necessary, defending their identity with regard to all three of the

89. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 203–204; (ed. ʿAzzām) 88. On al-Sharīf's lineage, see also ʿAzzām, *Majālis*, 48. Yosef, "Hatred," 179, shows that persons of Mongol descent were labeled "Persians" in Mamluk sources.

90. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʿis*, (MS) 217; (ed. ʿAzzām) 98.

91. Van den Bent, "Mongols," 30–31. See also Yosef, "Hatred," 174; Yosef, "Dawlat al-Atrāk," 394–395. On *jins* in the broader context of the theory of ethnicity, see Pohl, "Ethnicity," 12.

92. On the importance of this question in the study of Islamicate ethnicities, see Webb, *Imagining*, 14–15.

previously identified key factors. In the area of Persian language proficiency, they not only feature as natural experts on Persian vocabulary and literature, as seen earlier, but also define and uphold the cultural significance of their native language. Note the following case, in which al-Sharīf confidently underlines the status of Persian as a royal language on par with the Turkish dialects spoken by members of the Mamluk military elite: “The kings of Persia (*mulūk al-Fars*) spoke Turkish (*al-turkī*) on days of war, Pahlavi (*al-fahlawī*) when commanding and forbidding, and Persian (*al-fārisī*) when partying and socializing.”⁹³ Although our sources do not contain any evidence of Persians belittling the special status of Arabic as the language of the Quran, there can be no doubt that, as speakers of a prestigious language, this group of foreign participants forcefully asserted and defined their place in the sultan’s *majālis*.

The situation is similar for the second factor, mastery of knowledge and cultural techniques viewed as Persian. The Persian participants identified in our sources appear as vigorous advocates of their native tradition of political thought and rulership. Its emblematic figures, such as King Anūshīrwān, received ample praise, to the point that it was accepted as common knowledge that he would not receive punishment in the hereafter, although he had led the life of a polytheist (*mushrik*).⁹⁴

These displays of respect for the Persian royal tradition could reach levels at which they annoyed local Mamluk interlocutors, who were at times weary of the constant comparisons between their own achievements and those of the famous rulers of Greater Iran, both ancient and contemporaneous. In *al-Kawkab al-durrī*, we read the following anecdote about al-Ghawrī’s predecessor, Sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf Barsbāy (r. 825–841/1422–1438):

It has been narrated about a descendant of the Mamluk slave soldiers (*shakhṣ min awlād al-nās*) that he traveled during his [Barsbāy’s] time to Herat. When he returned to Egypt, he mentioned every day the greatness of Shāhrukh and [the Persians’] numbers and possessions. News [about him] then reached the sultan. He summoned [the man] and said: “O so-and-so, if you mention again this story about the lands of the Persians and their kingdom, I will cut [your] tongue off. Have you come here from the land of the Persians only to strike fear among my army?”⁹⁵

Notwithstanding this cautionary anecdote, which seems to have been narrated by a learned Egyptian, the Persian members of al-Ghawrī’s salons could generally expect a favorable reception for the distinct knowledge and cultural techniques associated with their origin. Moreover, they apparently enjoyed a kind of quasi-monopoly over these forms of cultural capital, given that the only person not clearly identified as a Persian in our sources who regularly expounded Persian historical and political narratives was Sultan al-Ghawrī himself—a fact that underscores the high social status attributed to Persians.

93. Al-Sharīf, *Nafāʾis*, (MS) 258–259; (ed. ‘Azzām) 134. On this passage, see also Flemming, “Nachtgesprächen,” 25, who interprets *fahlawī* as “dialect, vernacular.”

94. *Al-Kawkab*, (MS) 90.

95. *Al-‘Uqūd*, 2: fol. 50r.

With regard to their home region, our sources document a similar level of commitment to and pride in their origins among the Persian members of the *majālis*. They saw their place of origin as a decisive element of their identity, and they defended it vehemently against anyone who tried to belittle it. This was obvious in a debate during the *majālis* in which a person of apparently local Egyptian background argued that all legal transactions, including marriages, that had been contracted in the territories of Persian rulers were void, as the latter had not been invested by the ‘Abbasid caliphs of Cairo. The implications of this view were far-reaching, since it entailed that all children born in Persian lands were illegitimate. The Persians’ reaction to the claim was severe. One of the Persian participants even openly challenged the legitimacy of the ‘Abbasids by referring to a *ḥadīth* according to which the caliphate would last only thirty years after the Prophet’s death.⁹⁶

Taken together, our sources clearly depict the Persian participants in al-Ghawrī’s *majālis* as an ethnic group whose members, rather than being subjected to processes of heteronomous labeling, confidently exercised agency in their affirmation of their own identity with reference to its three constitutive factors of language, cultural capital, and region of origin.⁹⁷ However, these affirmations did not necessarily take place against the background of positive evaluations of the Persian lands and their inhabitants, as the debate about the legitimacy of Persia-born children shows. Why, then, were members of al-Ghawrī’s *majālis* so eager to label themselves as Persians?

Why Would One Want to Be Persian?

Given that recent research on processes of ethnic labeling tells us that ethnic identities are both situational and strategic,⁹⁸ any explanation that locates the reason for the Persians’ affirming their identity in al-Ghawrī’s *majālis* simply in their “being Persian” appears overly simplistic. Instead, we have to ask what meanings Persian ethnic identity carried in the social context of al-Ghawrī’s salons, with regard to both late Mamluk Cairo in general and the sultan’s court in particular.

As discussed above, earlier periods of Mamluk history had seen the spread of strong anti-Persian stereotypes and even episodes of government-supported violence against Persians. Compared to that earlier situation, al-Ghawrī’s court must have seemed a safe haven to Persians who came to Cairo in the early tenth/sixteenth century. Several contemporaneous historiographers noted the sultan’s unusual inclination toward men from the Islamic East. The chronicler Ibn Iyās (d. after 928/1522), for example, writes that al-Ghawrī “was favorably disposed toward (*yamīl ilā*) the sons of the Persians.”⁹⁹

96. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā’is*, (MS) 220–225; (ed. ‘Azzām) 100–107. On the context, see also Irwin, “Thinking,” 46–47; Mauder, *Salon*, chap. 6.2.3. Other demonstrations of esteem for the Persian lands could be less confrontational, as when the *majālis* participants agreed that the Persian ant (*al-naml al-fārisī*) was the strongest animal on earth as it could lift items sixty times its own weight; see *al-Kawkab*, (MS) 61.

97. On agency in the claiming of ethnic identities, see Pohl, “Identification,” 12.

98. In this context, see also Geary, “Construct,” 25, on the idea that ethnic identities are expressed for specific reasons.

99. Ibn Iyās, *Chronik*, 88.

In his biographical dictionary, Muḥammad Ibn al-Hanbalī (d. 971/1563) writes at length about al-Ghawrī's closeness to an unnamed Persian confidant who allegedly inspired in him love for the Persian ruler Shāh Ismā'īl.¹⁰⁰ Other aspects of al-Ghawrī's interest in all things Persian, such as his sponsoring of the translation of the *Shāhnāma* or his writing of Persian verses, were noted above. We also know that al-Ghawrī was the only Mamluk ruler to have himself referred to with the Persian title "king of kings," or *shāhanshāh*,¹⁰¹ and described as "exercising the rule of Kisrā" in panegyric and epistolary sources.¹⁰² It is thus not surprising that Robert Irwin concludes that al-Ghawrī was "famous [. . .] for the favor he showed to Persian and Persian-speaking religious figures and literati,"¹⁰³ while Doris Behrens-Abouseif notes that "[o]ne of the features of al-Ghawrī's court life was his predilection for the *a'jām*, who were numerous in his entourage."¹⁰⁴ While al-Ghawrī's interest in Persian culture and its bearers is certainly not unprecedented among Mamluk rulers, the extent to which it resulted in actual patronage projects, the attention it received among contemporaneous historiographers, and the fact that it translated into the sultan himself actively composing Persian poetry make it particularly noteworthy.

Moreover, the sultan seems to have regarded the ancient "mythological" Persians and their culture as portrayed, for example, in the *Shāhnāma* as closely connected to the living and breathing Persians of his own time.¹⁰⁵ Although the latter were, of course, not identical to the former, it appears that the ruler perceived the Persians of his time as cultural heirs of and natural experts on their famed forefathers of old. Hence they were also well qualified to support and orchestrate his efforts to present himself as the *shāhanshāh* of his time.

Given the sultan's interests in Persian culture and in the ethnic groups perceived as its representatives, it is not surprising that Persians would migrate to Cairo and seek patronage at al-Ghawrī's court, especially in light of the political turmoil infesting their home region. For at least some of them, the sultan's fondness for Persian literature and learning gave rise to benefits in the form of profitable assignments and positions. The sultan not only rewarded the translator of the Persian *Shāhnāma* generously upon completion of the work but also appointed him in 908/1503 to the lucrative post of *shaykh* and *mudarris* of Ḥanafī jurisprudence in the Mosque of Mu'ayyad Shaykh.¹⁰⁶ Al-Sharīf, the Persian author of *Nafā'is majālis al-sulṭāniyya*, received a paid position as a Sufī in the sultan's funeral complex, as we have seen. In addition, he was later able to negotiate a significant pay raise during one of

100. Ibn al-Ḥanbalī, *Durr*, ii.1, 48–49.

101. B. Qurqūt, *al-Wathā'iḳ al-'arabiyya fī Dār al-Maḥfūzāt bi-madīnat Dūbrūfnīk* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lā li-l-Thaqāfa, 2008), 135.

102. *Al-Uqūd*, 2: fol. 107r.

103. Irwin, "Thinking," 39.

104. Behrens-Abouseif, "Arts," 73. See also D'hulster, "Sitting," passim; Y. Frenkel, "The Mamluks among the Nations: A Medieval Sultanate in Its Global Context," in Conermann, *Everything Is on the Move*, 61–79, at 69; Alhamzah, *Patronage*, 38; E. Geoffroy, *Le Soufisme en Égypte et en Syrie sous les derniers Mamelouks et les premiers Ottomans: Orientations spirituelles et enjeux culturels* (Damascus: Institut français de Damas, 1995), 214; Flemming, "Šerif," 82–84; Flemming, "Nachtgesprächen," 24.

105. On this typical perception of ethnic identities as stable across time, see also Pohl, "Identification," 5.

106. Flemming, "Šerif," 87, 89–90; Flemming, "Nachtgesprächen," 24. See also D'hulster, "Sitting," 238–239.

the *majālis* meetings by threatening to leave Cairo sooner than originally planned to go on the pilgrimage.¹⁰⁷

These two examples stand out for their particularly detailed level of documentation in our sources, but the evidence from the historiographical literature indicates that they formed part of a larger pattern of patronage that al-Ghawrī was willing to provide to well-lettered Persians who came to his court. Hence, it is understandable why, in al-Ghawrī's presence, Persian identity "lit up [. . .] in much the same way as fluorescent clothing does in the presence of street lighting,"¹⁰⁸ to recall Reuter's formulation. For Persians, highlighting their ethnic identity when interacting with the sultan was a wise choice, as they could be optimistic that it would be to their advantage economically and in terms of social status—even within the otherwise sometimes hostile climate of Mamluk Cairo.

Taking this line of argumentation one step further, we may also assume that the sultan's interests and the cultural climate at his court constituted an important reason individuals such as al-Sharīf or the abovementioned Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dihdār chose to focus in their self-representation on their ethnic identity rather than other characteristics that might have qualified them as potential recipients of patronage in other social contexts. Ghiyāth al-Dīn Dihdār, for example, was, as mentioned above, a noted scholar of the Quranic sciences, yet this expertise seems to have played no discernible role in his status as a participant in the sultan's *majālis*, possibly because in the competitive world of patronage in late Mamluk Cairo, Quranic learning was in much greater supply than were the forms of cultural capital associated with Persian ethnicity. Similarly, neither al-Sharīf's work nor his contributions to the sultan's *majālis* were, as far as we can discern, primarily intended to underline his Ḥanafī legal learning or his prophetic lineage—both of which were likewise potentially valuable on the patronage market. Instead, he foregrounded his Persian background and the skills that were seen as connected to it. We can thus conclude that for Persians at al-Ghawrī's court, such as al-Sharīf and Ghiyāth al-Dīn, emphasizing their Persian ethnic identity was a strategic decision not only in the sense that they undertook it at all but also in the degree that they chose to highlight this aspect of their identity and the cultural capital that came with it relative to other qualities and abilities they possessed. This finding suggests that when studying ethnic identities in Mamluk society, scholars should not focus exclusively on the ways in which they were constructed and performed but also analyze how, when, and why ethnicity came to the fore in relation to other, intersecting aspects of personal and collective identity.¹⁰⁹

With regard to the sultan, it stands to reason that, in acting as a patron to Persian scholars and littérateurs, al-Ghawrī did not just follow his personal whims, or at least did not do so exclusively. As demonstrated in detail elsewhere, Sultan al-Ghawrī and those around him were very much aware that early tenth/sixteenth-century Mamluk sultan rule was undergoing a manifest crisis caused by both domestic factors, such as the

107. Al-Sharīf, *Nafā'īs*, (MS) 205–206; (ed. 'Azzām) 90–91.

108. Reuter, "Race," 103–104.

109. For the insight that ethnicity can hardly ever be studied on its own, see also Pohl, "Ethnicity," 12; Pohl, "Identification," 26, 50; Adlparvar and Tadros, "Evolution," 128, 133.

pronounced contraction of the Mamluk economy and the extended succession conflicts preceding al-Ghawrī's investiture, and transregional developments, such as the rise of the rival Safawids and Ottomans, who combined far-reaching claims to legitimate leadership with military successes and a lively court culture.¹¹⁰ Against this background, al-Ghawrī and the members of his court sought to demonstrate that despite all their internal problems, the Mamluks were still a power to be reckoned with, particularly in terms of cultural patronage. Projects such as the translation of the *Shāhnāma* and the cultivation of a circle of learned foreigners well versed in Persian court culture constituted promising strategies to attain this goal, especially since these endeavors would be more readily understandable to the Mamluks' transregional interlocutors and competitors than would more distinctly Mamluk cultural undertakings.¹¹¹ We can thus interpret the flocking of Persians who openly performed their ethnic identity to al-Ghawrī's court as a mutually beneficial situation in which al-Ghawrī gained cultural prestige through the Persians' presence and activities while the latter benefited from the sultan's generosity.

Conclusion

As Ulrich Haarmann noted many years ago, a "cosmopolitan atmosphere"¹¹² and an "intercultural perspective"¹¹³ were important features of late Mamluk court culture. But even in this cosmopolitan atmosphere, ethnic identities did matter, as the case of the Persian participants in the *majālis* of Sultan al-Ghawrī exemplifies. Language, cultural capital, and place of origin—but, remarkably, not ancestry—were important factors in the construction of their identity. Persians themselves used these criteria to confidently affirm their identity, which could provide them with a number of social and economic benefits under al-Ghawrī's rule. For the sultan, the presence of Persians at his court was an important aspect of his politically inspired program of cultural patronage.

Further research may shed light on how these results relate to the construction of ethnic identities in other Islamicate social contexts. Studies of court culture seem to be a particularly promising starting point in this regard, as ethnic identities are known to have been of special importance in the elite circles of premodern societies. It seems promising to examine, inter alia, how Egyptian and Syrian identities were constructed and performed in Mamluk courtly circles, where men born within the sultanate necessarily had to interact with people whose origins lay elsewhere. Future research will also have to ask whether language, cultural capital, and place of origin were constitutive of these and other identities in diverse Islamicate contexts, or whether other factors, such as ancestry, legal traditions, or religious loyalties, played more important roles.

110. See Mauder, *Salon*, chap. 6.1.

111. For a similar interpretation, see Behrens-Abouseif, "Arts," 84–86; C. Markiewicz, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam: Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 109–110.

112. Haarmann, "Miṣr," 175. See also D'hulster, "'Sitting,'" 229; Markiewicz, *Crisis*, 108.

113. Haarmann, "Arabic in Speech," 85.

Another worthwhile next step in light of the current state of research about Mamluk society would be to compare the ways in which Persian identity was constructed and performed with the construction and performance of other ethnic identities that have already received scholarly attention, such as the Mongol, Turkish, and Kurdish ones. Preliminary findings suggest that the means and strategies through which these identities were claimed and perceived differed in each specific case, with variance in, for example, the importance attributed to common ancestry or the significance of internal divisions within ethnic groups. Thus, instead of studying “ethnicity” in Mamluk society in general, scholars should adopt an approach that analyzes specific “ethnicities” individually in a given time and space and then use their findings to develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of Mamluk society.¹¹⁴ It is clear, however, that within the field of Mamluk history and beyond, the question of how premodern inhabitants of the Islamicate world constructed and affirmed their respective identities remains as relevant today as it was more than thirty-five years ago when Michael Cook posed it.

114. On this need to study each case of the construction of ethnic identity separately, see also Cooperson, “Arabs,” 383.

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