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The Late Mamlūk Transition of the 1380s: The View from the North Caucasus

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the transition between the early and late Mamlūk Sultanate in Egypt in the 1380s was partially caused by political developments in the Northwest Caucasus. The transition from “Turkish” to “Circassian” mamlūk dominance was facilitated by the rise of new princely elites in the Northwest Caucasus during the *bulqaq* civil wars in the Ulūs of Jochi (Golden Horde) (1359–1381). These new elites justified their rule through their access to the wider Mediterranean world and its material products. With the end of the *bulqaq*, these princes lost access to the imperial centres of the Ulūs of Jochi, important sources of these prestige goods. In order to maintain their position in the Mediterranean market, they increasingly raided, enslaved and sold other Northwest Caucasians, which led to a rise in the number of Circassian slaves becoming available in Egypt and Italy.



Резюме: В данной статье утверждается, что переход от Раннего к Позднему Мамлюкскому султанату в Египте в 1380-х гг. частично объясняется политическими событиями на Северо-Западном Кавказе. Переходу от господства т.н. тюркских мамлюков к черкесским мамлюкам способствовал подъем новых княжеских элит на Северо-Западном Кавказе во время «Великой замятин» в Золотой Орде. Эти новые элиты оправдывали свое правление доступом к внешнему миру и особенно доступом к материальным богатствам Средиземноморья. Однако, после конца Великой замятни, северокавказские знати постепенно потеряли доступ к золотоордынским имперским центрам, которые являлись важными источниками этих престижных товаров. Чтобы сохранить свои позиции на средиземноморском рынке, северо-западнокавказские князи все чаще совершали набеги на крестьянские общества и другие знати и продавали захваченных рабов. Следовательно увеличилось количество попавших в рабство северокавказцев в восточном Средиземноморье.

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Introduction

The 1380s marks the conventional dividing line between the early and late Mamlūk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria. Seen by contemporaries as a major rupture in Egyptian history, this distinction was attributed to a change in the ethnic composition of the regiments of military slaves (mamlūks)¹ from which senior administrators, amīrs and sultans, were drawn.² Whereas before the 1380s the government of Egypt was dominated by so-called “Turks” (*atrāk*) from the Black Sea steppe regions, after the ascension of Sultan Barqūq (r.785–791 and 792–801/ 1382–1389 and 1390–1399) it became dominated by “Circassians” (*jarākisa*) from the Northwest Caucasus.³ Since David Ayalon’s 1990 article, the Mamlūk Sultanate is generally divided into the “Turkish” and “Circassian” periods, following this contemporary distinction.⁴ To a certain extent, this discourse of rupture masks continuities throughout the Mamlūk Sultanate.⁵ However, the existence of this discourse itself demonstrates the continued significance of the shift from Turkish to Circassian predominance as an object of historical study. Any attempt to determine the reason for this discursive shift must first establish whether any actual demographic shift had occurred. Moreover, the homelands of these Circassian mamlūks in the Northwest Caucasus have been little studied in the context of the history of the Mamlūk Sultanate. Therefore, a study of the political and cultural conceptions that these new Mamlūk rulers carried with them is of critical importance for the history of the wider Mediterranean world.

In this context, Hannah Barker’s recent work is highly significant. She demonstrates that a demographic shift in slave populations did indeed occur in the late-fourteenth-century eastern Mediterranean, affecting both the Mamlūk Sultanate and the Italian

¹In this article, the term “slave” will be defined in the terms used widely in the late medieval eastern Mediterranean as a legal category defined by one’s saleability. By contrast, the term “enslaved” will be used in a broader sense to refer to an exploited social outsider, either intrusively or extrusively “othered”, subjected to actions that reify this outsider position, notably capture, sale, natal alienation, violence or threats thereof, and/ or ritual dishonouring. In general on these definitional categories, see Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), pp. 16–31; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 1–14; Joseph Calder Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 1–35. Individual military slaves will be referred to as mamlūks with a lowercase m, while Mamlūk with an uppercase M will refer to people or concepts associated with the sultanate in Egypt and Syria.

²See for example Ibn Taghribirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, trans. William Popper, *History of Egypt 1382–1469 A.D.* [University of California Publications in Semitic Philology XV], volumes I–VIII (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954–1963), I: 1–7; Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Khiṭaṭ*, trans. Karl Stowasser, *Medieval Egypt: Al-Khiṭaṭ of Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī. Part 1* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), pp. 304–5. For a general overview that closely follows contemporary sources, see David Ayalon, “The Circassians in the Mamlūk Kingdom”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 69/3 (1949): 135–47.

³In general on this ethnic terminology, see Hannah Barker, “What Caused the 14th-Century Tatar-Circassian Shift?”, in *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c.900–1900: Forms of Unfreedom between Christianity and Islam*, ed. Felicia Roşu [Studies in Global Slavery, volume XI] (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 339–63, esp. 340–2; Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 48–53; Jo Van Steenberg, “Nomen est omen: David Ayalon, the Mamluk Sultanate, and the Reign of the Turks”, in *Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule: Political, Social and Cultural Aspects*, ed. Amalia Levanoni [Islamic History and Civilization, volume CLXXXI] (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 119–37, esp. 126–34.

⁴See David Ayalon, “IV. Bahri Mamlūks, Burji Mamlūks: Inadequate Names for the Two Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultanate”, in *idem, Islam and the Abode of War* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1994), pp. 3–53. For an overview of more recent scholarship on this chronological division, see Van Steenberg, “Nomen est omen”; Barker, “Tatar-Circassian Shift”.

⁵Van Steenberg, “Nomen est omen”, *passim*; Amalia Levanoni, “Al-Maqrīzī’s Account of the Transition from Turkish to Circassian Mamluk Sultanate: History in the Service of Faith”, in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c.950–1800)*, ed. Hugh Kennedy [The Medieval Mediterranean, volume XXXI] (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 93–105.

states of Venice and Genoa.⁶ Italian notarial records demonstrate that the population of enslaved Caucasians (Circassians (*cercassi*), Abkhaz and Abaza (*advogasii*), Zichs (*zichi*), Alans (*alani*) and Mingrelians (*mingrelli*)) in Genoa and Venice also rose compared with that of Tatars (*tartari*) in the 1380s–1410s. (Tatars, in this ethnic terminology, are broadly equivalent to the *atrāk* in Mamlūk sources.)⁷ For example, in the 1360s, 90% of the slave population in Genoa was Tatar and only 3% were Caucasians, while by the 1410s the proportion of Tatars had dropped to 24% compared with 41% of the slave population being Caucasian (Figure 1). Within this latter category, 43 out of 60 Caucasian slaves (72%) were classified as Circassian.⁸ This evidence from a different epistemic tradition demonstrates that we are dealing with a genuine demographic change in the population of slaves in the eastern Mediterranean, rather than a discursive “rebranding” or the end-point of a gradual increase in the population of Circassians in Egypt – a demographic change that Barker dubs the “Tatar-Circassian Shift”.⁹ This is confirmed by the differences in ethnic terminology used in Italy and Egypt, since Italian notarial records list more enslaved people from multiple regions of the Northwest Caucasus, not just Circassia. In other words, we are seeing a real phenomenon of increased Northwest Caucasian slave numbers in both Egypt and Italy, not simply a shift in terminology. Rather, as Barker concludes, this shift in the origins of the enslaved must also reflect a change in conditions in the Black Sea region.¹⁰

This gives rise to the main question this article will address: what was the change in conditions in the northeastern Black Sea region that led to this demographic shift? Only parts of this process are currently understood. Barker argues that the end of the *bulqaq* (anarchy) – an intermittent dynastic civil war in the Ulūs of Jochi (known in older literature as the Golden Horde), which lasted from 1359 to 1381 – likely led to a decline in the number of slaves exported from the core steppe lands of the Ulūs.¹¹ However, as Barker notes, this does not explain the replacement of these “Turkish” slaves with Circassians. She suggests, plausibly but without direct evidence, that one

⁶Barker, “Tatar-Circassian Shift”, 345–50.

⁷For the broad equivalence of these terms, see Barker, “Tatar-Circassian Shift”, 341. By contrast, the term *tatar* in Mamlūk sources can designate either (before about 1400) a mamlūk who appeared culturally Mongol, or (after the early fifteenth century) individuals from the Islamising Qipchaq populations of the Ulūs of Jochi. See Koby Yosef, “Cross-Boundary Hatred: (Changing) Attitudes towards Mongol and ‘Christian’ Mamlūks in the Mamluk Sultanate”, in *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History*, ed. Stefan Conermann and Bethany J. Walker [Mamluk Studies, volume XVII] (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2019), pp. 149–214, esp. 173–87.

⁸My thanks go to Hannah Barker for the use of her dataset here.

⁹On the comparison of slaves’ ethnic names to brand names, see Shaun Marmon, “Intersections of Gender, Sex, and Slavery: Female Sexual Slavery”, in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery. Volume 2: AD 500- AD 1420*, ed. Craig Perry, David Eltis, Stanley Engerman, David Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 201–15, esp. 206. For the increase in the number of Circassians as a gradual process, see Levanoni, “Al-Maqrizī’s Account”, 105.

¹⁰It should be noted that the presence in Italy and Egypt of enslaved northwest Caucasians, particularly Circassians, was not unprecedented. Notably, both Genoese notarial records from Caffa and mamlūk naming patterns suggest a spike in the numbers of enslaved Circassians from the 1290s to 1310s. The reason for this increase is not currently known, although it might be related to the campaigns of Nogai and his sons in the northwest Caucasus in the latter half of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. See Michel Balard, “Black Sea Slavery in Genoese Notarial Sources, 13th–15th Centuries”, in *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c.900–1900: Forms of Unfreedom between Christianity and Islam*, ed. Felicia Roşu [Studies in Global Slavery, volume XI] (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 19–40, esp. 29; Koby Yosef, “The Names of the Mamlūks: Ethnic Groups and Ethnic Solidarity in the Mamluk Sultanate”, in *Egypt and Syria under Mamluk Rule: Political, Social and Cultural Aspects*, ed. Amalia Levanoni [Islamic History and Civilization, volume CLXXXI] (Leiden: Brill, 2021), pp. 59–112, esp. 89–90; Vladimir Kuznetsov and Iaroslav Lebedynsky, *Les alains: Cavaliers des steppes, seigneurs du Caucase* (Paris: Errance, 2005), pp. 203–5.

¹¹Barker, “Tatar-Circassian Shift”, 350–4; in general, see Marie Favereau, *The Horde: How the Mongols Changed the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), pp. 261–84. For the names of the Ulūs of Jochi, see *ibid.*, 2.



Figure 1. Change in slave numbers in Genoa. Source: Hannah Barker.

factor was Muslim merchants who traded with the Mamlūk Sultanate choosing to use ports along the northeast Caucasian coast in order to avoid export taxes in the Genoese colony of Caffa in the Crimea.¹² Barker also suggests that the invasion of the North Caucasus by Tīmūr Lang (r.771–807/ 1370–1405) in 1395 may have contributed to the increase in the number of Circassians being enslaved. However, this seems less likely, given that Tīmūr’s army campaigned in the central North Caucasus around modern Piatigorsk, Kabardino-Balkaria and Stavropol’, rather than in Circassia itself.¹³ These explanations, moreover, are largely external in nature, rather than taking into account the internal structure of Northwest Caucasian society.

The goal of this article is to complement Barker’s existing explanations for the Tatar-Circassian shift with an analysis of changes in Northwest Caucasian society in the late fourteenth century. Specifically, I shall argue that this rise in the number of Northwest Caucasians being enslaved was primarily caused by the rise of new princely elites in this region. Particularly noteworthy among these elites are those identified with the Principality of Kremukh and the so-called Belorechensk archaeological culture in the lower and middle Transkuban region of modern Krasnodar Krai and Republic of Adygea, both part of the Russian Federation.

The Northwest Caucasus in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

From the point of view of Mediterranean slavery studies, the Black Sea and North Caucasus have remained obscure: in Barker’s succinct formulation, “a black box from which slaves simply appeared to serve the domestic, sexual, and military desires of

¹²Barker, “Tatar-Circassian Shift”, 355–6.

¹³*Ibid.*, 357–9; V.A. Babenko, “Pokhody armii Tamerlana v tsentral’noe predkavkaz’e v 1395–6 gg.”, in *Arkheologicheskoe nasledie Kavkaza: Aktual’nye problemy izhuchenii i sokhraneniia. XXXI Krupnovskie Chteniia*, ed. M.S. Gadzhiev (Makhachkala: Tavraev’, 2020), pp. 301–3.

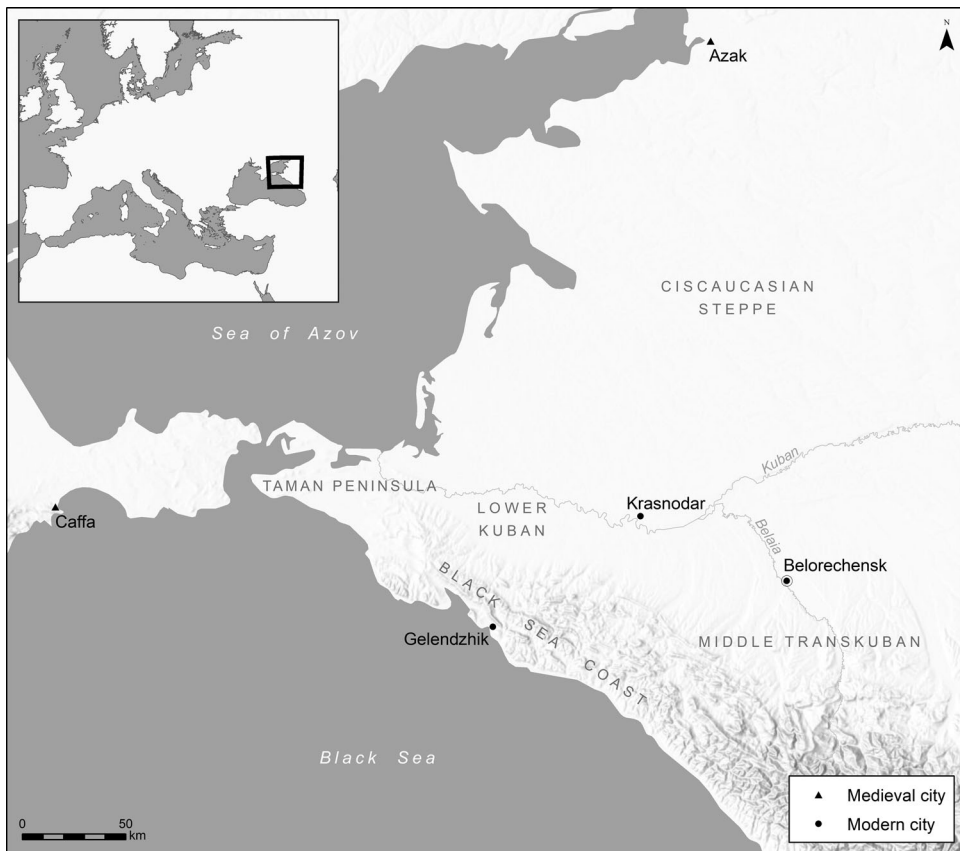


Figure 2. Map of the Northwest Caucasus with regions, sites and settlements mentioned in text. Image credit: Hans Blomme and John Latham-Sprinkle.

Mediterranean masters”.¹⁴ This section will therefore briefly introduce the geography, culture and politics of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Northwest Caucasus (Figure 2).

Geographically the Northwest Caucasus may be divided into five broad regions:

- (a) The Black Sea coast. A narrow strip of land between the Black Sea and the Caucasus mountains, marked by numerous small river valleys.
- (b) The Taman Peninsula. Northwest from the coastal region, at the narrowest point of the Sea of Azov and facing the Crimea across the Kerch Strait, we find the flat Taman Peninsula.
- (c) The Lower Kuban. On the north side of the Taman Peninsula lies the delta of the River Kuban, one of the North Caucasus’s two largest rivers. In the late medieval period, this delta was much more extensive than today, with the river being navigable as far as modern Krasnodar (140km inland), and the land between this point and the sea largely comprising marshes interspersed with small islands.

¹⁴Barker, “Tatar-Circassian Shift”, 339.

- (d) The Ciscausian Steppe. To the north of the River Kuban lay a large expanse of flat steppe grassland, stretching as far as the mouth of the River Don near modern Rostov and the medieval port of Azak (which included the Venetian quarter of Tana).
- (e) The Middle Transkuban. South of the River Kuban and upstream from the Lower Kuban's marshland lay a region of agriculturally productive river valleys, most importantly that of the River Belaia near modern Belorechensk, which stretched into the forested foothills of the Caucasus Mountains.

In the mid-fourteenth century, these regions were generally referred to by outsiders as Circassia. The coastal region was sometimes referred to as Zichia by Latins and Greeks, the boundaries of this region fluctuating over time but sometimes encompassing all of the coast from the Don Delta to the region around modern Sochi. Southeast along the coast lay Abkhazia, with Mingrelia still further south in the western part of modern Georgia.¹⁵ However, both Circassia and Zichia seem to have been exonyms. According to the well-informed Italian traveller Giorgio Interiano (fl.1480s–1500s), who visited the lower Kuban in the late fifteenth century (perhaps in the 1470s), the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus called themselves Adyghe – the endonym of the modern Circassian people.¹⁶ However, this terminological unity cannot be reduced to the existence of a single Adyghe ethnic identity – not least because the Northwest Caucasian aristocracy claimed a different ancestry and identity from the rest of the region's population.¹⁷ This article will therefore use the geographical term “Northwest Caucasian” to cover the societies of the Black Sea coast and the Lower and Middle Kuban, restricting the use of the term “Circassian” to Northwest Caucasians living in societies outside of this region.¹⁸

Unfortunately, writing, while used for religious purposes in the Northwest Caucasus, seems never to have been applied to record administrative, legal or historical records.¹⁹ We are therefore reliant on reports of non-Caucasian travellers and archaeology to reconstruct Northwest Caucasian society in this period. These can then be interpreted with the help of analogic evidence from later ethnographic accounts. Our most significant source for the fifteenth century is Giorgio Interiano, who gives a vivid description, clearly grounded in lengthy personal experience, of the Northwest Caucasian nobility in the late fifteenth century. Interiano describes a stratified society, with “lords and vassals

¹⁵I.A. Druzhinina, “Pogrebali'nye pamiatniki Severo-Vostochnogo Prichernomor'ia i Severnogo Kavkaza XIII-XVIII vv. kak istochnik po istorii adygsikh narodov”, Kandidat nauk Thesis, Institut Arkheologii RAN, 2018, pp. 8–16.

¹⁶Giorgio Interiano, *La vita, et sito de Zychi, chiamati Ciarcassi: Historia notabile* (Venice: Aldo Manuzio, 1502), p. 5. For the date and location of Interiano's travels, see S.Kh. Khotko, “Circassian Principalities in the XIV-XV Centuries: Formation and Interrelation with Sub-Ethnic Groups”, *Istoricheskaia i Sotsial'no-obrazovatel'naia Mysl'* 8/2.1 (2016): 46–58, p. 48; V.A. Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, *Sbornik Russkogo Istoricheskogo Obshchestva* 4 (152) (2002): 206–16, p. 208.

¹⁷In general on the construction of ethnic identity in the Northwest Caucasus, see V.A. Shnirel'man, *Byt' alanami: Intellektualy i politika na Severnom Kavkaze v XX veke* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006), pp. 18–35, 418–520.

¹⁸As Robert Irwin has pointed out, “Circassian” mamluks in Egypt appear to have come from a wide variety of linguistic communities, using Qipchaq Turkish as a *lingua franca*. See Robert Irwin, “How Circassian Were the Circassian Mamluks?”, in *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History*, ed. Stefan Conermann and Bethany J. Walker [Mamluk Studies, volume XVII] (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2019), pp. 109–22, esp. 118–19.

¹⁹In general, see A.Iu. Vinogradov, V.V. Ponariadov, and D.V. Kashtanov, “Grecheskii tekst i grecheskoe pis'mo v Kabarde XVI-XIX vekov”, in *Indoevropskoe iazykoznanie i klassicheskaia filologija - XXII. materialy chtenii, posviashchennykh pamiati Professora Iosifa Moiseevicha Tronskogo, 18–20 iunია 2018 g.*, ed. N. Kazanskii (St Petersburg: Nauka, 2018), pp. 310–18.

and serfs, or slaves” (*nobili e vasalli e servi o schiavi*).²⁰ Interiano further comments that the nobility practised levirate marriage – an indication of their exclusive kinship structures. Moreover, princes as a class apparently differentiated themselves from other Northwest Caucasians through an elaborate timocratic system. A prince’s honour largely rested on his ability performatively to redistribute prestige goods, with any fine imported garment being immediately redistributed to a prince’s followers.²¹ However, a prince was seen as being dishonourable if he engaged in any commerce other than selling or distributing spoils. Princes therefore spent a considerable amount of their time hunting, conducting feuds with other nobles, and raiding peasant communities hiding in the Lower Kuban’s marshes. The people who were enslaved in these feuds and raids would then be sold to acquire prestige goods, particularly fine textiles.

It is, of course, potentially risky to rely on an outside source for our description of Northwest Caucasian society, particularly since this area was one that Italian and Mamlūk observers had an interest in portraying as fractious and violent (and its people therefore as enslaveable).²² However, Interiano’s account seems relatively little affected by the discourse of justification of enslavement. Since many of the most important pieces of information occur as small side details on which he does not elaborate (let alone use as overt justifications for enslavement), these cannot be considered a self-serving pattern of representation. Moreover, Interiano’s account depicts slave raiding in broadly negative terms. He describes slave raiders negatively as “stealing the poor peasants” (*insultano i poveri villani*), and does not mention the sale of children by their parents – a common justification for their enslavement.²³ Moreover, several aspects of his account are corroborated by other contemporary written sources. For example, the existence of a defined system of noble classes is corroborated by a notarial record from Tana (the Venetian quarter of Azak) from 1448, which mentions a Circassian woman named Chexum Bicha who carried the title of *uzden*, a social rank that denoted membership of the lower nobility in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁴ The shorter accounts of John de Galifontinibus (fl. 1377–1410) and Giosafat Barbaro (1413–1494) also broadly corroborate that of Interiano, recording respectively a system of many minor princes, and the peripatetic life of those princes and the many raids they conducted.²⁵ This picture of multiple princes willing to launch raids on each other also appears in correspondence between officials in the Genoese Black Sea colonies and the Bank of San Giorgio, dating to

²⁰Interiano, *Historia notabile*, 6.

²¹*Ibid.*, 7–10.

²²In general on these biases, see Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 121–8.

²³My thanks go to Ida Caiazza for her help with the Italian translation here. The term *insultare* in this context means “capture”, but has a negative valence associated with insults against honour, which is why I have chosen to translate this term as “steal”. See Interiano, *Historia notabile*, 7. On the discourse of child sale and its justificatory function, see Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 125–8.

²⁴My thanks go to Hannah Barker for this information. See Notary Pietro Pelacan (1448 May 29) (Cancellaria inferiore, Notai, b.148, N.6, reg. 2, Venice: Archivio di Stato di Venezia), fol. 39r-v.

²⁵John de Galifontinibus, *Libellus de notitia orbis*, ed. Anton Kern, “Der ‘Libellus de notitia orbis’: Iohannes’ III (de Galifontinibus?) O.P. Erzbischofs von Sulthanyeh”, *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 8 (1938): 81–123, pp. 110–12; trans. Lajos Tardy, “The Caucasian Peoples and Their Neighbours in 1404”, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 32/1 (1978): 83–111, pp. 92–3; Giosafat Barbaro, *Viaggi fatti da Venetia, alla Tana, in Persia*, ed. L. Lockhart, R. Morozzo della Rocca, and M.F. Tiepolo, *I viaggi in Persia degli ambasciatori Veneti Barbaro e Contarini* [Il Nuovo Ramusio, volume VII] (Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello stato, 1973), p. 90.

the 1450s–1470s.²⁶ These last sources also confirm the operation of a sizeable slave market at the port of Copa, located 28 miles from the mouth of the Kuban, and regulated like other trades by joint agreement between the town's indigenous prince and Genoese consul.²⁷ Therefore, while Interiano's account should be used with caution, it remains a valuable source on the Northwest Caucasus in the late medieval period.

The details of Interiano's account are broadly similar to those found in descriptions of Northwest Caucasian society in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century ethnographic sources. According to nineteenth-century ethnographic reports of Circassia and comparisons with other parts of the North Caucasus, it seems that the main structuring principle of Northwest Caucasian political thought was socially-constructed kinship – that is to say, kinship as a flexible social and political metaphor, rather than literally reflecting biological common descent.²⁸ Groups that claimed consanguinity could be organised on the basis of either local territory (the *mamlakat*) or political alliance (*tleush*).²⁹ The *tleush*, usually but misleadingly referred to as a clan or tribe in secondary literature, was a rigidly exogamous community made up of several geographically non-contiguous sub-groups. *Tleush* and *mamlakat* might recognise the suzerainty of one or several princes, or might be ruled by councils of elders. While placing a tremendous premium on personal autonomy, discussion and unanimous agreement, these local kinship groups nonetheless had a complex class system, ranging from *thfokotl* (freemen) to various kinds of bonded persons, although the most explicitly enslaved (*pshtil*) were bonded to princes, not to kinship-based groups. Finally, princely families defined themselves through several strategies of differentiation, most notably claims of foreign descent that set them apart in kinship terms from the rest of the Northwest Caucasus population. This claim of foreign origin derived from a core North Caucasian political concept, which I have termed “the power of the foreign”. This was the idea that power derived not from internal sources, but from access to sources of power from the outside world. Critically, the “power of the foreign” could be represented in material terms, with the acquisition, display and redistribution of prestige items serving as signifiers of connection with the spiritually-potent powers of the outside world. In the nineteenth century, princes held a monopoly on foreign trade, particularly in slaves, whom they acquired through

²⁶For example, one letter of 4 March 1475 instructs the consuls of Caffa to induce several princes around the trading port of Copa to attack it. See *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria, vecchia serie*, volumes I–LXXIV (Genoa: Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 1858–1970), VII/2:212; in general on these sources, see E.S. Zevakin and N.A. Penchko, “Ocherki po istorii genuevskikh kolonii na Zapadnom Kavkaze v XIII i XV vv.”, *Istoricheskie Zapiski* 3 (1938): 72–129.

²⁷The existence of this market is attested in the 1449 Statute of Caffa, which also records the joint regulation of trade at Copa. See *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria*, VII/2:671–5. For the location of Copa, see Khotko, “Circassian Principalities”, 48.

²⁸For this principle (as opposed to biological understandings of kinship), see David Murray Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984); David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

²⁹For this section, see James Stanislaus Bell, *Journal of a Residence in Circassia during the Years 1837, 1838 and 1839*, volumes I–II (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), I: 338–9, II: 270; John Latham-Sprinkle, *Political Orders and Transregional Connections in the North Caucasus: The Kingdom of Alania 850–1240* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); M.O. Kosven, *Etnografiia i istoriia Kavkaza: Issledovaniia i materialy* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury, 1961), pp. 20–41; Sh.B. Nogmov, *Istoriia adykheiskogo naroda*, ed. T.Kh. Kumyko (Na'chik: El'brus, 1994 [1861]), pp. 59–62; J.A. Longworth, *A Year among the Circassians*, volumes I–II (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), I: 224–48; F.I. Leontovich, *Adaty kavkazskikh gortsev: Materialy po obychnomu pravu Severnogo i Vostochnogo Kavkaza* (Na'chik: El'-Fa, 2002 [1882]), pp. 182–96; Paul Manning, “Just Like England: On the Liberal Institutions of the Circassians”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51/3 (2009): 590–618.

near-constant raids on neighbouring polities or recalcitrant vassals. Each prince had a band of retainers, known as *uork*, who would assist him in these raids.

Given that North Caucasian society underwent major peasant revolts in the eighteenth century and the disruptions of imperial conquest in the nineteenth century, it is fair to ask how far back in time we can project this later evidence.³⁰ However, there are good reasons to think that the basic structure of Northwest Caucasian society in the fifteenth century was broadly similar to that of later centuries. First, the basic model of mobile princes, their power defined by access to the outside world and ruling with a greater or lesser degree of authority over local kinship-based communities, seems to have been very common in North Caucasian history. Notably, we can find this model of political organisation in fourteenth- to eighteenth-century Dagestan and the tenth- and eleventh-century central-north Caucasian Kingdom of Alania.³¹ This power structure is also recorded in Circassia itself in the 1666 account of the Ottoman traveller, Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682).³² Moreover, as we have seen, certain key terminology related to this class system, such as *uzden*, can be traced back as far as the fifteenth century. Finally, there is the fact that not only broad themes, but also small incidental details of our fifteenth-century accounts are also found in later ethnographic evidence. For example, a number of small details in John de Galifontinibus's account – such as the centrality of salt to the economy of the highlanders and the presence of sacred trees that are considered places of sanctuary – tally with later descriptions of the Northwest Caucasus, and so seem to reflect either personal experience or fairly reliable information from travellers.³³ It therefore seems fairly likely that other such incidental details in accounts from this period, like the existence of peripatetic princes, also reflect the broad realities of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Critically, all of our textual and ethnographic evidence points towards slave raiding as being a critical component of these princes' lifestyles, with the goal of acquiring textiles and other prestige imports. Given the large numbers of Northwest Caucasians known to have been enslaved in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – as most recently confirmed by Barker's work – it seems highly likely that we can connect this class of peripatetic, raiding princes with the Northwest Caucasian slave trade.

We may ask, however, when this political system came into being. While there are some scattered references to princes in the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the powers and activities of these princes are not clear.³⁴ In this context, archaeology can

³⁰See Georgi Derlugian, "The Forgotten Complexities of the North Caucasus Jihad", in *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area*, ed. Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann (Berlin: W. Hopf Verlag, 2007), pp. 77–87; Michael Khodarkovsky, *Bitter Choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 18–20.

³¹Latham-Sprinkle, *Political Orders*; Iu.M. Kobishchanov, *Poliud'e: Iavlennie otechestvennoi i vseмирnoi istorii tsivilizatsii* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1995), pp. 193–202.

³²Murat Yaşar, "Evliya Çelebi in the Circassian Lands", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 67/1 (2014): 75–96.

³³John de Galifontinibus, *Libellus de notitia orbis*, ed. Kern, 110–12; trans. Tardy, 92–3. For the centrality of salt to the highland economy in the nineteenth century, see I.M. Shamanov, "Skotovodstvo i khozistvennyi byt Karachaevtsev v XIX- nachale XX v.", *Kavkazskii Etnograficheskii Sbornik* 5 (1972): 67–92, p. 79. For the importance of sacred trees in the seventeenth century, see Yaşar, "Evliya Çelebi", 84–6.

³⁴Specifically, a Kasog prince named Rededia, mentioned in 1022, and a Circassian prince named Buqan mentioned in 1238. See *Povest' vremennykh let*, ed. Postoiannaia istoriko-arkheograficheskaia kommissiia Akademii Nauk SSSR, in *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei: T.1. Lavrent'evskaia letopis'*, volumes I–III (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1926), l:146–7; Fażl Allāh Rashid al-Din Ṭabīb, *Jāmi' al-tawārikh*, trans. W. M. Thackston, *Jami'u't-tawarikh*:

play an important role in expanding our understanding of social change in the Northwest Caucasus, and its links to the slave trade.

The Archaeology of Power in the Northwest Caucasus in the Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries

While not as well-studied as other areas of the North Caucasus, several hundred burials in dozens of cemeteries dating to the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries have been excavated.³⁵ The quality of these excavations, their publication and their interpretation varies widely, although some excellent synoptic works have appeared in recent years.³⁶ In line with the norms of late Soviet and post-Soviet archaeology, this work particularly focusses on identifying the ancestors of modern ethnic groups, following a culture-historical methodology, which are generally seen as stable and objectively identifiable through material culture.³⁷ Despite the problems with this methodology – notably, an assumption that changes in burial ritual are normally sparked by ethnic movements and developments – a great deal of valuable analysis has been conducted, and a number of important conclusions about the development of Northwest Caucasian societies have been established.

Prior to the thirteenth century, the Northwest Caucasus was marked by a great diversity of burial rituals. Burials are known in stone cists, wooden chambers, log coffins and without any underground structures, both with and without a kurgan (burial mound); in addition, cremation burials in stone cists or ceramic urns are common, unlike in all other parts of the North Caucasus.³⁸ While rich burials with imported grave goods are known at some sites, such as Tsemdolina on the northern Black Sea coast, Eastern Mediterranean metalwork, glass and textiles are rare before the fourteenth century.³⁹ However, during the course of this century, there was a marked process of homogenisation throughout the Northwest Caucasus. By the fifteenth century, a rite of inhumation under a kurgan with grave goods, frequently including rich Italian, Syro-Egyptian, Aegean and Crimean imports, was used all across the region. Regardless of whether one interprets this process in ethnic or cultural-religious terms, it marks a striking

Compendium of Chronicles (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 1998), p. 325.

³⁵Druzhinina, "Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki", 3–7.

³⁶Key works include V.P. Levasheva, "Belorechskie kurgany", *Arkheologicheskii Sbornik* 22/3 (1953): 163–213; O.V. Miloradovich, "Kabardinskie kurgany XIV–XVI vv.", *Sovetskaiia Arkheologiia* 20 (1954): 343–56; I.A. Druzhinina, V.N. Chkaidze, and E.I. Narozhnyi, *Srednevekovye kochevniki v Vostochnom Priazov'e* (Armavir: Tsentral'no-arkheologicheskii issledovaniia Armavirskoi gosudarstvennoi pedagogicheskoi akademii, 2011); Druzhinina, "Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki"; E.A. Armarchuk, "Severo-Vostochnoe Prichernomor'e XI–XIV vekov: Traditsionnye cherty i pribnesennnye 'stepnye' elementy kul'tury", in *Kavkaz v sisteme kul'turnykh svyazei Evrazii v drevnosti i srednevekov'e. XXX "Krupnovskie Chteniia"*, ed. U.Iu. Kochkarov (Karachaevo-Cherkesskii gosudarstvennyi universitet im. U.D. Alieva, 2018), pp. 391–3.

³⁷In general, see Murtazali Gadjiiev, Philip L. Kohl, and Rabadan G. Magomedov, "Mythologising the Remote Past for Political Purposes in the North Caucasus", in *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area*, ed. Bruce Grant and Lale Yaşın-Heckmann (Berlin: W. Hopf Verlag, 2007), pp. 119–38; Latham-Sprinkle, *Political Orders*; Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 489–90.

³⁸This section draws mainly from Druzhinina, "Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki", 256–320.

³⁹For grave goods at Tsemdolina, see E.A. Armarchuk and A.V. Dmitriev, *Tsemdolinskii kurganno-gruntovyi mogil'nik* (Moscow: Nestor-Istoriia, 2014), pp. 15–51. For a preliminary chronology of the import of Levantine metalwork into the Northwest Caucasus, see M.G. Kramarovskii, "Serebro Levanta i khudozhestvennyi metall Severnogo Prichernomor'ia XIII–XV vekov (po materialam Kryma i Kavkaza)", in *Khudozhestvennye pamiatniki i problemy kul'tury vostoka*, ed. V.G. Lukonin (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennyi Ermitazh, 1985), pp. 152–80, esp. 173–4.

departure from past norms in the Northwest Caucasus, and clearly demonstrates a drawing together of cultural practices across the entire region.

It is generally agreed by specialists that one of the reasons for this homogenisation was the forcible incorporation of the Northwest Caucasus into the Ulūs of Jochi, following the invasions of Mongol armies in 1238–1240.⁴⁰ From the very beginning of systematised archaeological excavations in the Northwest Caucasus in the late nineteenth century, the widespread influence of West Eurasian (“Golden Horde”) styles on Northwest Caucasian material culture has been recognised. Items either produced in styles influenced by those of the Ulūs of Jochi or directly imported from its core territories in the Crimea and along the Volga and Don include coins, sabres, decorative metalwork, glazed ceramics and earrings.⁴¹ Given that the oldest coins of the Ulūs of Jochi found in the Northwest Caucasus were minted during the reigns of Khans Toqta (r.1291–1312) and Öz Beg (r.1313–1341), it seems that these contacts between the Northwest Caucasus and the core lands of the Ulūs intensified during the first half of the fourteenth century, although it would apparently take a few decades for these to reach their peak.⁴² This allowed access not only to prestige goods produced in the core lands of the Ulūs of Jochi, but also to imported goods from across the eastern Mediterranean.

This interpretation is borne out by the extraordinary finds from the most famous medieval cemetery in the Northwest Caucasus – the Belorechensk kurgans. Located around the eponymous modern small town on the border between Krasnodar Krai and the Republic of Adygea, 84 kurgans in three groups were excavated by the Russian archaeologist Nikolai Veselovskii between 1896 and 1907.⁴³ Veselovskii, one of the leading lights of turn-of-the-century Russian archaeology and the discoverer of the world-famous Chalcolithic Maikop kurgans, was scrupulous in his record-keeping and publication of finds, although unfortunately almost all of the human remains from the Belorechensk kurgans have been lost. As a result, no radiocarbon dates have ever been produced for this cemetery. However, more than a century of study of grave

⁴⁰Druzhinina, “Pogrebāl'nye pamiatniki”, 402–7; Armarchuk, “Severo-Vostochnoe Prichernomore'e”, 313; M.V. Gorelik, “Cherkesy- Cherkasy (arkheologicheskie svidetel'stva)”, in *Materialy po izucheniiu istoriko-kul'turnogo nasledii Severnogo Kavkaza. Vyp. VIII: Krupnovskie Chteniia 1971–2006*, ed. A.B. Belinskii (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2008), pp. 739–40. For the initial Mongol campaigns in the Caucasus, see John Latham-Sprinkle, “The Mongol Conquest of Caucasia”, in *The Mongol World*, ed. Michael Hope and Timothy May (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 213–26.

⁴¹V.N. Chkaidze and I.A. Druzhinina, “O tak nazyvaemykh kazozhskoi, belorechenskoi i starokabardinskoi ‘arkheologicheskikh kul'turakh’”, in *Kavkaz v sisteme kul'turnykh svyazei Evrazii v drevnosti i srednevekov'e. XXX ‘Krupnovskie Chteniia’*, ed. U.Iu. Kochkarov (Karachaevskaia: Karachaevo-Cherkesskii gosudarstvennyi universitet im. U.D. Alieva, 2018), pp. 507–9; A.V. Pachkalov, “Nakhodki monet XIII–XV vv. v Krasnodarskom Krae”, in *Chetvertaia kubanskaia arkheologicheskaia konferentsiia: tezisy i doklady*, ed. I.I. Marchenko (Krasnodar: Simvolika, 2005), pp. 202–5; V.A. Tarabanov, “Sabliia- osnovnoi vid vooruzheniia plemen Severo-Zapadnogo Kavkaza v periode srednevekov'ia”, in *Materialy po izucheniiu istoriko-kul'turnogo nasledii Severnogo Kavkaza. Vyp. VIII: Krupnovskie Chteniia 1971–2006*, ed. A.B. Belinskii (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2008), p. 592; M.G. Kramarovskii, *Chelovek srednevekovoi ulitsy: Zolotaia Orda, Vizantiia, Italiia* (St. Petersburg: Evraziia, 2012), pp. 332–4; M.G. Kramarovskii, “Tri gruppy polivnoi keramiki XIII–XIV vv. iz Severnogo Prichernomor'ia”, in *Vizantiia i vizantiiskie traditsii*, ed. V.N. Zalesskaia (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennyi Ermitazh, 1996), pp. 97–111; Druzhinina, “Pogrebāl'nye pamiatniki”, 231–4.

⁴²Pachkalov, “Nakhodki monet”, 205; E.Iu. Goncharov, L.I. Krasil'nikova, and I.A. Kozmirchuk, “Monetnye nakhodki s poseleniia i mogil'nika Psebepe-3”, in *Kavkaz v sisteme kul'turnykh svyazei Evrazii v drevnosti i srednevekov'e. XXX ‘Krupnovskie Chteniia’*, ed. U.Iu. Kochkarov (Karachaevskaia: Karachaevo-Cherkesskii gosudarstvennyi universitet im. U.D. Alieva, 2018), pp. 432–3.

⁴³*Otchet Imperatorskoi Arkheologicheskoi Kommissii [hereafter OAK] za 1896 god* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia glavnago upravleniia udelov, 1898), pp. 2–56; *OAK 1897* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia glavnago upravleniia udelov, 1900), pp. 17–20; *OAK 1906* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia glavnago upravleniia udelov, 1909), pp. 95–103; *OAK 1907* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia glavnago upravleniia udelov, 1910), pp. 85–8; summary of excavations in Levasheva, “Belorechenskii kurgany”, 165–6.

goods from the Belorechensk kurgans have allowed a fairly precise dating of the cemetery's operation, which appears to have lasted from about 1350–1500.⁴⁴

From the point of view of the Northwest Caucasus's connections with the wider Mediterranean world, it is particularly significant that these studies have determined that practically every find from the site was imported. Finds included Venetian and Syrian glassware; Chinese and Byzantine silk; coins of the khans of the Ulūs of Jochi; engraved Italian gold dishes; gold and silver belt sets from Asia Minor, southern Europe and Crimea; a flanged mace from Egypt; silverware from Italy, the Levant, Byzantium and Anatolia; tall Mongol-style female headdresses; and glazed pottery from Crimea or Byzantium.⁴⁵ The burial types themselves, including burial in log chambers and in one case in a copper coffin, were reminiscent of styles from the steppe lands of the Ulūs of Jochi.⁴⁶ While the burials at Belorechensk were exceptional in their wealth, they were not unique, with comparable kurgan cemeteries marked by their imported finds known at Maikop, Abinskaia, Andriukovskaia, Akhmetovskaia, Vozdvizhenskaia, Gubskaia, Kostromskaia, Kuzhorskaia, Tulskaia, Khanskaia, Tsarskaia, Kazazovo, Psekupskaia, Borisovskii, Ubinsk and others – sites that extend all the way from the Middle Kuban to the river's mouth, in addition to the coastal region around the modern port of Gelendzhik.⁴⁷ In addition, some comparable unprovenanced imported prestige objects have been found.⁴⁸ Belorechensk thus serves as the type-site for a proposed “Belorechensk Culture”, the existence of which remains debated by Russian archaeologists. Most arguments in this debate turn on the definition of an archaeological culture and whether a type of burial ritual defined by the presence of imported goods can serve as its definitional signifier.⁴⁹ For simplicity's sake, I shall continue to use the term “Belorechensk Culture” in this article as a shorthand for this kinds of kurgan burial with rich imported goods, without taking a position in this taxonomic debate. In any event, it is generally accepted that the Belorechensk Culture kurgans represent the burials of an elite class of Northwest Caucasians who appropriated the styles of the Ulūs of Jochi.⁵⁰

Two burials at Belorechensk give us an exceptional insight into this process of appropriation. Confusingly, both are referred to in the literature as Kurgan 1, being the first kurgan in each of the publications of Veselovskii's excavations in 1896 and 1897.⁵¹ They will be referred to here as K1 (1896) and K1 (1897). Of these two rich burials, K1 (1897) is probably

⁴⁴For lower and upper dates, see Druzhinina, “Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki”, 182; M.G. Kramarovskii and A.N. Tepliakova, “Zapad i vostok po materialam ital'ianskogo tekstilia belorechenskogo mogil'nika (Severnyi Kavkaz, XIV-XV vv.)”, in *Vizantiia v kontekste mirovoi kul'tury: Materialy konferentsii, posviashchennoi pamiatii Alisy Vladimirovny Bank (1906–1984)*, ed. V.N. Zaleskaia (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 2010), pp. 461–8, esp. 468.

⁴⁵Druzhinina, “Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki”, 123–8, 206–7, 244–5, 248–52; Levasheva, “Belorechenskie kurgany”, 170–4, 186–207, 209–10; I.N. Kuzina, “Stekliannye dekantery na pamiatnikakh Vostochnoi Evropy”, in *Ot Rusi do Kitaia: iz novykh arkhologicheskikh issledovaniĭ: K iubileiu Iu.Iu. Morgunova*, ed. V.Iu. Koval' (Moscow: IA RAN, 2017), pp. 101–9; Pachalov, “Nakhodki monet”, 203; Kramarovskii and Tepliakova, “Zapad i vostok”; Kramarovskii, *Chelovek srednevekovoi ulitsy*, 146–62; Kramarovskii, “Serebro Levanta”, 152–80.

⁴⁶V.B. Vinogradov, E.I. Narozhnyi, and F.B. Narozhnaia, “O lokalizatsii 'oblasti Kremukh' i o Belorechenskikh kurganakh”, in *Materialy i issledovaniia po arkhologii Kubani vyp. 1*, ed. I.I. Marchenko (Krasnodar: Kraibiblikolektor, 2001), pp. 124–35; Druzhinina, “Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki”, 124.

⁴⁷Druzhinina, “Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki”, 23, 295–7, 301–2; V.A. Fomenko, “O roli belorechenskoi arkhologicheskoi kul'tury v etnogeneze naseleniia Tsentral'nogo Kavkaza”, *Obshchestvo: Filosofii, Istoriia, Kul'tura* 3 (2018): 40–3.

⁴⁸Kramarovskii, *Chelovek srednevekovoi ulitsy*, 146–62, 304–20.

⁴⁹Chkaidze and Druzhinina, “Arkhologicheskikh kul'turakh”; cf. Fomenko, “Belorechenskoi arkhologicheskoi kul'tury”.

⁵⁰Levasheva, “Belorechenskie kurgany”, 207–13; Druzhinina, “Pogrebal'nye pamiatniki”, 127–8; Kramarovskii, *Chelovek srednevekovoi ulitsy*, 332–4.

⁵¹OAK 1896, 16–20; OAK 1897, 17–19.

the earlier, with Inga Druzhinina having dated it through its grave goods to approximately 1340–1375.⁵² It contained two silver bowls, a silver ladle, two belt sets – one silver and one gold, the latter originating from Western Europe –, a knife, a sabre, archery equipment and spear, iron rings, an iron axe and buckles. Most unusually, the deceased was buried in a copper coffin covered in brocade inside a high wooden crypt – a sign according to the Northwest Caucasian Nart epics of an individual’s extremely high status.⁵³ The date of K1 (1896) is less firmly established, although an analysis of a gold belt set in the burial by Mark Kramarovskii suggested parallels with Venetian artistic depictions of a belt from a 1443 altar icon by Antonio Vivarini (fl. 1440–1480), and the decoration of a late fourteenth- to early fifteenth-century bucket from the former Shchukin collection.⁵⁴ Kramarovskii therefore preliminarily dates this burial to the turn of the fifteenth century.⁵⁵ The finds in this grave, which was covered by a half-dome of bricks, also included a blue-glaze ceramic dish, a golden cup, a silver dish, buttons and plaques, silver buckles, an iron knife and sabre, a glass vessel with an Arabic inscription, and a poorly preserved kaftan. Most notably, the young man in this grave was buried with an ornate gold belt set and a golden hat finial with holes for three feathers, the significance of which will be outlined below.⁵⁶

These two graves are united by their clear links with the wider world of the steppes, and specifically the military hierarchy of the Ulūs of Jochi. The construction of K1 (1897) was extremely unusual for the North Caucasus, with its double construction and the placement of some items in a separate cache within the burial mound being strongly reminiscent of burials in the southern Urals. Druzhinina therefore suggests that this individual may have spent considerable time in the Ulūs of Jochi, rising to a high rank in its military-administrative hierarchy.⁵⁷ In the case of K1 (1896), the buried individual claimed even closer ties to the Horde’s hierarchy. The three-feathered golden hat finial mentioned above is an exceptionally unusual find, which, taken together with the presentation belt set, designates this individual as a senior military leader within the Ulūs of Jochi – in all likelihood, a *noyon* commander of a *tümen* corps of 10,000.⁵⁸

In closing this section, we must strike a note of caution regarding the interpretation of these finds, which in the Russian archaeological literature are often interpreted straightforwardly as reflecting the actual socio-economic position of the deceased during their lifetime. However, our most detailed ethnographic informant on the fifteenth-century Northwest Caucasus, Giorgio Interiano, complicates this interpretation in his account of funerary customs.⁵⁹ He notes that the burial ritual was not directly a reflection of the status of the buried individuals, but rather that of the mourners who came to visit them after their death. Interiano tells us that the dead persons would have their internal organs removed, then be set up on a bed where mourners could visit them. The height of the kurgan under which the deceased was buried reflected the number of mourners. Moreover, these

⁵²Druzhinina, “Pogrebal’nye pamiatniki”, 309.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 181–4, 307–9; Kramarovskii, “Serebro Levanta”, 160–1.

⁵⁴Kramarovskii, “Serebro Levanta”, 160, 164–8.

⁵⁵*Idem*, *Chelovek srednevekovoi ulitsy*, 332–4.

⁵⁶OAK 1896, 16–20; Druzhinina, “Pogrebal’nye pamiatniki”, 318.

⁵⁷Druzhinina, “Pogrebal’nye pamiatniki”, 308–11.

⁵⁸M.G. Kramarovskii, “Belorechenskii mogil’nik i vopros o kul’ture provintsii Kremuk”, in *Ermitazhnye chteniia pamiati B.B. Piotrovskogo (14.II.1908– 15.X.1990): Tezisy dokladov*, ed. M.B. Piotrovskii (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo Gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha, 2002), pp. 51–4.

⁵⁹Interiano, *Historia notabile*, 12–13.

mourners would bring with them rich grave goods, including silver bowls, bows and textiles, which would then be buried with the deceased. In this case, therefore, we have direct evidence of the widely observed archaeological dictum that grave goods do not necessarily represent the personal possessions of the deceased, but rather the wider community's idealised representation of their position in life.⁶⁰ Given the fact that Interiano's account states that almost all rich goods would be immediately redistributed, with the exception of weapons, horses and shoes – an observation also found in nineteenth-century Ossetian ethnography – it seems likely that many, if not most, of the grave goods found at Belorechensk culture sites were gifts given by mourners.⁶¹ This fact was recognised as long ago as 1953, when Varvara Levasheva plausibly speculated that only grave goods that are found in the position where they would normally be worn on the body – that is to say, which formed part of the deceased's costume at the time of burial – were actually personal property.⁶² However, this insight's full implications have not yet been fully realised.

In this vein, we can also reasonably ask whether the individuals in K1 (1896) and K1 (1897) actually held the high status in the hierarchy of the Ulūs of Jochi that has been attributed to them. Given the extreme rarity of the gold presentation belt worn by the young man in K1 (1896) – an item that could not be gifted to others, according to nineteenth-century ethnography – it seems more than likely that this was indeed his personal property. Therefore, this individual probably did hold a high position in the hierarchy of the Ulūs of Jochi. By contrast, the position of the individual in K1 (1897) is less certain. However, it is clear that while he might not necessarily have been a high-ranking Ulūs official, he was certainly *represented* as one.

This point may be expanded out to the Belorechensk kurgans in general, and indeed to the entire Belorechensk culture. While the rich imported goods that are characteristic of this archaeological culture might not have been the direct personal property of the deceased, they do indicate that the styles of the Ulūs of Jochi were considered to be highly prestigious. These goods communicated the status not only of the deceased, but also of the mourners that gifted them. Rather than necessarily showing concentrations of wealth, these burial sites show the social and political pre-eminence of the communities to which these cemeteries belonged. Most importantly, they show the presence of a wider elite culture across the entire Middle and Lower Kuban, in which access to the power of the Ulūs of Jochi was critical to demonstrating social position. Moreover, the sheer number of imported items that were buried implies a highly competitive social environment, in which grand demonstrations of wealth were necessary both to maintain the deceased's family position, and for mourners to show off their own access to the outside world.⁶³ It is in this context that we can finally start to understand the significance of the 1380s for the Tatar-Circassian shift.

⁶⁰See S.N. Savenko, *Kharakteristika sotsial'nogo razvitiia alanskogo obshchestva Severnogo Kavkaza po materialam katakombnykh mogil'nikov X-XII vv. n.e.* (Piatigorsk: Piatigorskii kraevedskii muzei, 2017), pp. 93–6; Erik G. Johannesson, "Echoes in Eternity: Social Memory and Mortuary Stone Monuments in Bronze-Iron Age Mongolia", in *Fitful Histories and Unruly Publics: Rethinking Temporality and Community in Eurasian Archaeology*, ed. Kathryn O. Weber, Emma Hite, Lori Khatchadourian, and Adam T. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 80–99.

⁶¹Interiano, *Historia notabile*, 9–10; A.R. Chochiev, *Ocherki istorii sotsial'noi kul'tury Osetin: Traditsii kochevnichestva i osedlosti v sotsial'noi kul'ture Osetin* (Tskhinvali: Osetin, 1985), p. 36.

⁶²Levasheva, "Belorechenskie kurgany", 186.

⁶³For the use of elaborate grave goods as a sign of status competition, see Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 340–1; M.E. Mamiev, *Alanskoe pravoslavie: istoriia i traditsiia* (Moscow: SEM, 2014), pp. 138–9.

The Principality of Kremukh, the End of the *bulqaq*, and the Tatar-Circassian Shift

Who, we may ask, were the people buried at Belorechensk, who held such high status in the highly competitive social environment of the late fourteenth century? Despite some disagreements, it is now widely accepted that the Belorechensk region can be identified with the principality of Kremukh, one of several Northwest Caucasian princedoms recorded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶⁴ On both the 1459 Fra Mauro and 1548 Gastaldo maps, this principality is located between the Caucasus Mountains and River Kuban, some way inland, a location broadly corresponding with the Middle Transkuban.⁶⁵ This tallies with our information from Giosafat Barbaro, a Venetian merchant and diplomat who lived in Tana between 1436 and 1452, and our principal source of information on Kremukh. Although in all likelihood he never visited Kremukh, his 1487 account of his travels provides a brief description of it, likely gathered from merchants.⁶⁶ Barbaro describes Kremukh as lying three days inland from the coast in a fertile, forested region producing bread, cattle and honey.⁶⁷ He describes Kremukh as being ruled by a lord (*signor*) named Biberdi, meaning “given by God”. He apparently succeeded his father, Kertibey, whose name meant “true lord”, and he was able to raise a force of 2,000 cavalry. As Vladimir Kuznetsov notes, these facts imply the operation of a dynastic principle and vassalage, a system broadly comparable to later ethnographic accounts of Northwest Caucasian princes.⁶⁸ In another point closely comparable to later accounts, Barbaro notes that the “princes of this region” (*li principali di questa regione*) lived a peripatetic lifestyle, particularly robbing caravans that passed from place to place. A later passage in Barbaro’s work mentions that in 1486, according to a Dominican friar named Vincentio, the people of Kremukh defeated a Muslim raid against North Caucasian Christians.⁶⁹ From this, Kuznetsov infers that the people of Kremukh were likely themselves Christian.⁷⁰ This continued prominence of the Principality of Kremukh is also echoed by Interiano, who briefly mentions Kremukh as the largest settlement in Circassia, with an advantageous location in a small inland valley.⁷¹

There are thus several points of comparison between archaeological sites around Belorechensk and Kremukh. These are their similar location; their famous wealth; the significance of Christianity, with a small church having been discovered at Belorechensk in 1869; and the continuation of links with western Europe into the last decades of the fifteenth century, confirmed by the relatively late date of much of the Italian metalwork and textiles buried in the Belorechensk kurgans.⁷² It thus seems fairly certain that the

⁶⁴Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, 208–10; Kramarovskii, *Chelovek srednevekovoi ulitsy*, 332–4; Khotko, “Circassian Principalities”, 49; cf. Vinogradov, Narozhnyi, and Narozhnaia, “Oblasti Kremukh”.

⁶⁵Khotko, “Circassian Principalities”, 49; Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, 209.

⁶⁶For the sources of Barbaro’s information, see Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, 207.

⁶⁷Barbaro, *Viaggi in Persia*, 90.

⁶⁸Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, 208.

⁶⁹Barbaro, *Viaggi in Persia*, 158–9.

⁷⁰Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, 207.

⁷¹Interiano, *Historia notabile*, 5.

⁷²On the Belorechensk church, see Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, 211–15; Kh.I. Kuchuk-Ioannesova, “Armianskaia nadpis’ XII stoletia”, in *Materialy po arkheologii Kavkaza. Vyp. III*, ed. P.S. Uvarova (Moscow: A.I. Mamontov, 1893), pp. 106–9. For late fifteenth-century Italian metalwork and textiles from the Belorechensk kurgans, see Kramarovskii, “Serebro Levanta”, 157–60; Kramarovskii and Tepliakova, “Zapad i vostok”, 463–8.

principality of Kremukh can be identified with the Belorechensk region, allowing us to compare Barbaro's account with the archaeological finds from there.⁷³

Further archaeological work allows us plausibly to historicise the elites of the Principality of Kremukh buried at Belorechensk. Kramarovskii has suggested that the individual buried in K1 (1896) with the regalia of an Ulūs official had served in the forces of Mamai, the senior *beg* and power behind the throne of several khans during the *bulqaq* civil war.⁷⁴ While we need not interpret this grave so literally, we can at least say that the person buried there was represented by his community as being a senior Ulūs commander. One might make the same comment about the individual buried in K1 (1897), whose burial can be more firmly dated to the third quarter of the fourteenth century.

This particular emphasis on connection with the hierarchy of the Ulūs of Jochi in the mid- to late fourteenth century can be explained with the use of another source: coins. Aleksandr Pachkalov has noted in his specialist numismatic study that a disproportionately large number of coins dating to the period of the *bulqaq* have been found in the Northwest Caucasus.⁷⁵ This includes a very large hoard of 1665 silver coins minted between 710/ 1310–11 and 769/ 1369–70 found at Varennikovskaia in the Lower Kuban, and another of 299 coins minted between 710/ 1310–11 and 761/ 1359–60. The relatively very large numbers of coins in these hoards and the fact that the newest coins in them were minted during the *bulqaq*, providing a *terminus post quem* for their deposition, suggests that these were payments made and then hidden during the *bulqaq* years. Particularly in the case of the former hoard and also individual coin finds in burials, Pachkalov notes that the majority of these coins were minted in the Crimea and Don rather than the Lower Volga; that is to say, in Mamai's powerbase.⁷⁶ The same pattern of coins from the 1360s minted in the Crimea and Lower Don has also been found at the recently-excavated cemetery and settlement of Psebeys-3 in the Lower Kuban.⁷⁷ However, it is particularly notable that, after the end of the *bulqaq* and with the ascension of Khan Toqtamish (r.1381–1399), the number of coin finds in the Northwest Caucasus dramatically decreases, despite the fact that Toqtamish issued large numbers of coins during his currency reforms.⁷⁸ Whereas several hundred coins of Mamai's puppet Khan 'Abdallāh (r.763–771/ 1361–70) are known, including 22 from graves, settlements and loose finds, only seven coins of Toqtamish are known from the entire Northwest Caucasus.⁷⁹ It therefore seems that, while the period of the *bulqaq* saw a major intensification of links between the imperial centres of the Ulūs of

⁷³Some authors go further than this: Kramarovskii suggests that the individual buried in K1 (1896) might be the Prince Kertibey mentioned by Barbaro, while Khotko suggests that the Principality of Kremukh may be identified with the Temirgoy principality mentioned in Ottoman sources of the sixteenth century. While the latter suggestion is plausible, it is sufficiently speculative as to lie beyond the scope of this article. However, given the almost certain identification of Prince Kertibey with the Amir Kurtūbay who travelled to Egypt in the late 1420s and whose daughter married the future Sultan Jaqmaq, Kramarovskii's identification of Kertibey with the individual buried in K1 (1896) is almost certainly incorrect. See Kramarovskii, "Belorechenskii mogil'nik", 52; Khotko, "Circassian Principalities", 49; Julien Loiseau, "Soldiers [sic] Diaspora or Cairene Nobility? The Circassians in the Mamluk Sultanate", in *Union in Separation: Diasporic Groups and Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean (1100–1800)*, ed. Georg Christ, Franz-Julius Morche, Roberto Zaugg, Wolfgang Kaiser, Stefan Burkhardt, and Alexander D. Beihammer (Rome: Viella, 2015), pp. 207–17, esp. 212.

⁷⁴Kramarovskii, "Belorechenskii mogil'nik", 52.

⁷⁵Pachkalov, "Nakhodki monet", 205.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 204–5.

⁷⁷Goncharov, Krasil'nikova, and Kozmirchuk, "Monetnye nakhodki", 433–5.

⁷⁸See Favereau, *Horde*, 282.

⁷⁹Pachkalov, "Nakhodki monet", 202–4; Goncharov, Krasil'nikova, and Kozmirchuk, "Monetnye nakhodki", 433.

Jochi, including greater transfers of movable wealth and the apparent appointment of Northwest Caucasians to senior official positions, this process diminished with the ascension of the new khan and the end of major disorders within the Ulūs of Jochi.

It is in this context that we can finally return to the slave trade. As Hannah Barker has argued, the period of the *bulqaq* saw a major increase in the number of “Tatar” slaves captured and exported from the core steppe lands of the Ulūs of Jochi.⁸⁰ Genoese slave registers and mamlūk onomastics suggest that this period also saw a moderate rise in the numbers of Circassians who were enslaved.⁸¹ At the same time, we can now show that Northwest Caucasian elites became much more closely tied into the imperial centres of the Ulūs of Jochi, particularly that of Mamai. It is too much to directly connect these processes; however, they all undoubtedly had a single cause – the military conflicts of the *bulqaq* civil war. These, on the one hand, increased the Horde’s leaders’ need for soldiers and, on the other, led to an increase in inter-communal violence and destitution. However, with the ascension of Toqtamish in 1381 and the re-establishment of peace, the number of Tatar slaves being exported decreased. Moreover, the growing and more overt Islamisation of the Qipchaq population of the Ulūs of Jochi may also have led to fewer of its people being considered “enslaveable”.⁸² However, neither of these factors reduced overall demand for slaves in the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, in the Northwest Caucasus, new elites that had emerged during the *bulqaq* period faced intense status competition, their retainers looking to their princes for the foreign prestige goods that betokened their lords’ ongoing access to the outside world and the continued justification of their elevated status.

In this context, we can suggest that Northwest Caucasian princes, already accustomed to slave raiding from the days of the Ulūs’ civil war, turned on targets closer to home. These princes and their bands of retainers began more intensively to hunt and enslave the Northwest Caucasian peasantry. In addition, it seems highly likely that the intense status competition we see reflected in rich burials also boiled over into feuds and violence between princes themselves. The peasants and members of princely retinues thus taken could then be sold to merchant intermediaries and thereby enter the Mediterranean slave market. Barbaro’s mention of raids carried out by the peripatetic princes of Kremukh undoubtedly represents a contemporary attestation of this process.⁸³ The fruits of these princes’ labours – the foreign prestige goods that they acquired from the urban centres of the Ulūs of Jochi – were buried with them and those they mourned. This, I argue, was the genesis of the Belorechensk culture, and marked an intensification of the system of mobile princely retinues conducting feuds, hunts and slave raids, as described by Interiano, Evliya Çelebi and nineteenth-century observers.

This link between the riches of the Belorechensk culture and the slave trade has previously been suggested by Levasheva, Kuznetsov and Druzhinina.⁸⁴ It is, of course, not possible to directly prove that any given object in Belorechensk culture burials was acquired through the slave trade. However, considerable circumstantial evidence

⁸⁰Barker, “Tatar-Circassian Shift”, 350–4.

⁸¹For mamlūk onomastics, see Yosef, “Names of the *Mamlūks*”, 59–112.

⁸²Yosef, “Cross-Boundary Hatred”, 183–4.

⁸³Barbaro, *Viaggi in Persia*, 90.

⁸⁴Levasheva, “Belorechenskii kurgany”, 210–12; Kuznetsov, “Zabytyi Kremukh”, 210–11; Druzhinina, “Pogrebal’nye pamiatniki”, 319.

suggests that we can link the acquisition of these prestige goods with the slave trade. To start with, there is the correspondence between the appearance of large amounts of Italian, Levantine and west Eurasian metalwork and the rise in the number of Circassian slaves in Italy and Egypt, as recorded by Barker's statistics. Indeed, this theory even seems to explain the curious uptick in the number of Caucasian slaves in Genoa and (especially) Venice in the 1450s. This coincides with an apparent increase in imports of Italian metalwork and textiles in the second half of the fifteenth century, judging by finds from Belorechensk and other cemeteries in the middle and lower Kuban.⁸⁵ Moreover, while they are not as detailed as Interiano's later account, two European travel accounts of the first decades of the fifteenth century speak not only of Circassian participation in the slave trade in the abstract, but of direct sales of enslaved people to merchants from outside the Caucasus. Writing in about 1427, Johannes Schiltberger (1380–c.1440), a Bavarian knight captured first by the Ottomans and then by Timur's armies, commented that the Circassians sold both their own children and those they captured from others to the "pagans" (presumably, the nomads of the Ulūs of Jochi).⁸⁶ A more detailed account is contained in the 1404 *Libellus de notitia orbis* of Johannes de Galifontinibus. This is a brief account of the various peoples of Asia and Africa based on information the archbishop had gathered during his more than 20 years of service in Armenia and Iran.⁸⁷ In this context, it is notable that he describes the slave trade being conducted directly on the coast: "They are big rogues and thieves; one village attacks the other in the open, kidnapping boys and men ... and at the seaside they sell the captives to the slave-dealers promptly".⁸⁸ More indirect evidence is provided by mentions of the slave market in the trading town of Copa on the Kuban in the 1449 Statute of Caffa.⁸⁹ The most explicit evidence for this trade comes from Interiano, who states that enslaved peasants were bartered for fine *boccasini* fabric.⁹⁰ This was also the preferred mode of payment for the annual tribute (*exenia*) paid by the Genoese consul in Copa to its Circassian prince.⁹¹ It therefore seems very likely that this was the origin of the fine textiles, as well as the jewellery and metalwork that we associate with the Belorechensk culture. This is confirmed both by the centrality of movable prestige goods to Northwestern Caucasian culture in Interiano's account, and also by the seventeenth-century account of Evliya Çelebi, which records the trading of slaves for cloth and metalwork along the northeast Black Sea coast.⁹²

Barker argues that the increase in the numbers of enslaved Northwest Caucasians being transported to Italy in the 1380s may have been fairly modest; however, our less

⁸⁵Cf. Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 141–8; Kramarovskii, "Serebro Levanta", 157–60; Kramarovskii and Tepliakova, "Zapad i vostok", 463–8.

⁸⁶Johannes Schiltberger, *Reisebuch*, trans. J. Buchan Telfer, *The Bondage and Travels of Johannes Schiltberger, a Native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 1396–1427* [The Islamic World in Foreign Travel Accounts, volume XXXVIII] (Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science, 1995), p. 50.

⁸⁷For Johannes de Galifontinibus's biography, see John de Galifontinibus, *Libellus de notitia orbis*, ed. Kern, 82–93; trans. Tardy, 83–7. For the sources of his information on the Northwest Caucasus, see above.

⁸⁸*Sunt maximi latrones et fures et de una villa exeunt ad aliam publice et violenter rapiunt filios et homines alterius ville ... et statim vendunt mercatoribus in maritimis*. John de Galifontinibus, *Libellus de notitia orbis*, ed. Kern, 110–11; trans. Tardy, 92–3.

⁸⁹See *Atti della Società Ligure*, VII/2:671–5, and above.

⁹⁰Interiano, *Historia notabile*, 7.

⁹¹*Atti della Società Ligure*, VII/2:673.

⁹²Evliya Çelebi, *Seyāhatnāme*, trans. Joseph von Hammer, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia and Africa in the Seventeenth Century*, volumes I–II (London: William Nicol, 1850), II:55–6.

complete chronicle and onomastic evidence from Egypt suggests a considerable increase in the number of Caucasians, and specifically Circassians, who were enslaved there.⁹³ Moreover, the fact that that this occurred at a time when the overall number of slaves shipped from the Black Sea was declining meant that this increase had a disproportionate impact. We can conclude that just as Sultan Barqūq ascended the throne in Egypt and began to reconnect with his family in the Northwest Caucasus, a larger number of enslaved Circassians were becoming available for purchase as mamlūks.⁹⁴ As Barqūq's own life history showed, the enslavement and sale of Northwest Caucasians was hardly unprecedented. Yet this particular increase in the numbers of slaves, triggered by princely status competition in the Northwest Caucasus, would go on to have dramatic consequences. The tradition of purchasing specifically Circassian mamlūks and designating some of them as members of an elite class would continue for the remainder of the Mamlūk Sultanate, and even after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt.⁹⁵

In this context, one may ask whether the increasing homogenisation of Northwest Caucasian culture in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries provided a stronger basis for the formation of a Circassian group identity among enslaved mamlūks in Egypt and Syria. Future research may re-examine whether Sultan Barqūq's increased purchases of Circassian mamlūks simply reflected an increase in the supply of Northwest Caucasian slaves, or whether this was indeed the deliberate policy that al-Maqrīzī claimed.⁹⁶ As this and other recent work on the Tatar-Circassian shift has suggested, just because Barqūq's contemporaries emphasised his favouring of Circassian mamlūks for polemic and factional purposes, did not necessarily mean that this favour was not real.

Conclusion

This article has suggested that the transition from the predominance of "Turkish" to "Circassian" mamlūks in the 1380s–1410s was enabled by greater imports of enslaved Northwest Caucasians to the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt and Italy. This increase in the number of Northwest Caucasians being enslaved was the consequence of the rise of a new, status-insecure princely elite in the region. This group justified their princely rank through claims of foreign descent, which set them apart from the rest of the Northwest Caucasian population. This claim of special access to the wider Mediterranean and west Eurasian world was demonstrated through their access to prestige imports, notably textiles and fine metalwork, which could then be redistributed to their retainers, allies and peers. However, in the aftermath of the *bulqaq* civil war in the Ulūs of Jochi and the re-establishment of a single Jochid khanate under Toqtamish, these new elites lost some of their access to the markets of the Ulūs' territories and the redistributive mechanisms of the khanal court. In response, these new elites intensified their slave raids and princely feuds within the Northwest Caucasus itself, perhaps also using this opportunity to exert dominance

⁹³Barker, "Tatar-Circassian Shift", 350–1; Yosef, "Names of the Mamlūks", 98–103.

⁹⁴For Barqūq's family background, see Ibn Taghribirdi, *Al-Nujūm*, I: 2–5; Anne Broadbridge, "Sending Home for Mom and Dad: The Extended Family Impulse in Mamluk Politics", *Mamluk Studies Review* 15 (2011): 1–18, pp. 10–13.

⁹⁵For the Ottoman period, see Jane Hathaway, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1800* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2008), especially pp. 3–4, 51–2.

⁹⁶For current statements on this debate, see Levanoni, "Al-Maqrīzī's Account", 105; Sami G. Massoud, "Al-Maqrīzī as a Historian of the Reign of Barqūq", *Mamluk Studies Review* 7/2 (2003): 119–36; Yosef, "Names of the Mamlūks", 98–103.

over kin-based communities and other princes who did not recognise their rights to tribute or pasture. In archaeological terms, this period of intensive competition between new elites gave rise to the Belorechensk culture and its rich burial grounds. This intensification of slave raiding gave rise to a sufficiently sizeable increase in exports of enslaved Northwest Caucasians to allow Circassian Mamlūk sultans from Barqūq onwards to form a new elite of their own. Future research may shed light on the interconnection between these new Northwest Caucasian and Egyptian elites, and on how political conceptions of kinship and the “power of the foreign” may have affected the worldview and actions of the latter.

The case of the Tatar-Circassian shift demonstrates, first and foremost, that the Northwest Caucasus was not an isolated “black box”, separated from the currents of wider Mediterranean history. Not only was access to the wider Mediterranean and west Eurasian world critical to its elites’ political conceptions, but the political conceptions and rivalries of Northwest Caucasian elites could also have surprising effects on political events far from the banks of the Kuban.

However, we should resist the temptation to valorise this interconnection. Not only did the vast majority of those enslaved and transported from their home communities not rise to power as Barqūq did, instead enduring a life of isolation and abuse (particularly in the case of enslaved women and girls), but also we should be wary of implying that a successful rise to the top of the Mamlūk hierarchy made enslavement “worth it”. In resisting this temptation, we are not simply reflecting modern egalitarianism, but rather are following our sources. For the princely elites of the Northwest Caucasus were far from its only political actors, and it appears that their worldview did not go unchallenged. In Interiano’s account, we get a slight hint of this political alternative. He mentions that, while nobles generally refused to build fortifications as these would be seen as impugning their honour, some peasant communities used ancient fortifications to defend themselves from princely raids.⁹⁷ In this, we see not only a rejection of the political values of the princely elite, but also their material expression. Therefore, future archaeological research may shed light on this other side of Northwest Caucasian society, those who not only did not buy into the princely value system, with its exaltation of interconnection and reliance on enslavement, but actively resisted it.

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⁹⁷Interiano, *Historia notabile*, 12.

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