

Mamluk silk production in Egypt and Syria (1250-1400 AD)

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Textiles were ubiquitous in Mamluk society and besides from being part of the royal insignia, they represented the wealth of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250–1517) and reflected social, as well as political status. Silk production was the main agent of all pre-modern economies of regions extending from the Mediterranean to Central Asia and from Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean to the Levant. Although much has been written on Mamluk textiles in general, the study of Mamluk silk production has never been sufficiently addressed through an interdisciplinary approach. As a result, the art historical field remains incomplete in providing a comprehensive study on Mamluk silks in reference not only to available historical sources but also to other fields of study such as archaeology, social history, trade, diplomacy or economy.

My research project is the first study of Mamluk silks based on the analysis of the extant material evidence in reference to primary sources. It will explore and re-evaluate the role and social meaning of silk through an examination of its production, distribution and consumption on different levels within Mamluk society from the mid-13th century until 1400 AD.



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The first stage of my research plan is to put together and to analyse the extant material evidence from various museums and private art collections – including archaeologically excavated silks, silks with Mamluk attributions that display foreign influences, silks produced specifically for the international market or as diplomatic gifts, and comparative pieces made in other regions. The collected material will be further examined in reference to figural representations of illustrated Mamluk manuscripts and of other objects such as Mamluk metalwork and glass. The second stage will involve a thorough study of written secondary and primary sources – including Mamluk chronicles and endowment documents, diplomatic correspondence, marriage contracts, commercial documents and the accounts of Eastern as well as Western travellers, for example.