

Julien Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks XIIIe-XVIe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2014). Pp. 287 with dénouement, notes, bibliography, and index.

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This is a book on a long moment in the history of the Islamic Near East. It starts with a unique institution, that of slave soldiers recruited to build up the battalions that ruled over Egypt and Syria, and narrates the history of this military aristocracy.

Chapter 1 deals with slavery and trade (“les commerce des hommes”). It opens with a scene from the popular account of the life of Baybars, the de facto founder of the Mamluk Sultanate, moves to the history of slavery in Muslim societies,<sup>1</sup> and then turns to examine the impact of the Mongol advance on the demographic history of the Eurasian Steppe. The diplomatic relations between Cairo and the Qipchaq Khanate (the so-called Golden Horde in the Crimean Peninsula) constitute an important element of this stage of Mamluk history, as do also the role of Genoese and Venetian merchants and vessels in the naval history of the eastern Mediterranean. Human trafficking in that part of the world during those decades was shaped by three elements: exporters, transmitters, and markets. The advance of the Ottomans, both in the Balkans and the Black Sea, considerably affected this commerce in slavery. These are well-known historical episodes, but summarized and presented in a clear and eloquent style.

Chapter 2 opens with a condensed account of the slave markets in Cairo and Damascus and continues with remarks on the relationship between the sultan and the slave dealers. The author rightly mentions that the acquisition of slaves was not restricted to members of the military aristocracy. The price of slave soldiers and the volume of trade in the various slave markets is the next topic that Loiseau endeavours to clarify, reemphasising that they were obtained not only by the sultan but also by military commanders and governors. This element of his work indeed challenges scholars who try to establish the size of the slave population in Mamluk Egypt and Syria. The section on slave soldiers who were handed over as gifts or inherited after their master’s death<sup>2</sup> contributes to the scholarly debate on the social position of the Mamluks and the notion of slavery in the

<sup>1</sup> A tangled topic that still stirs up heated debate. Most recently, see Rick Morris in *The American Thinker* (February 12, 2017); Paul Crookston, *The Corner* in *The Nation Review* (February 15, 2017); Jonathan A. C. Brown in *Muslim Matters* (February 16, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For a theoretical paradigm see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1982).



context of the military aristocracy that governed the Nile Valley and Syria.<sup>3</sup> This discussion is followed by an account of Mamluk houses (families), an institution which actually should be seen as a solidarity group (*khushdashīyah*).<sup>4</sup>

From an account of the nurturing of children who were transported from the “Abode of War” to the “Abode of Islam,” this second chapter moves to the story of the training of the Mamluk novices. The author rightly dwells upon the question of the languages spoken in the barracks of these fresh recruits. He illuminates the linguistic diglossia that characterised the Mamluk mansions, as well as the centrality of fighting games and equitation in the army officers’ lives.<sup>5</sup> The Mamluk military aristocracy reproduced itself through a condensed network of symbolic means.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 3 investigates the structure and history the Mamluk bureaucracy. The history of Mamluk food consumption has attracted the attention of several scholars. Loiseau opens a new angle. He concentrates on the food ration that constituted a share of the payment to the military (*dīnār jayshī*). This leads him logically, at least for those readers familiar with Claude Cahen’s studies, to describe and analyze the Mamluk system of land tenure (*iqṭāʿ*) in the Nile Valley and in the farmed dry-lands of Syria. The next section illuminates the apex of the Mamluk political system, that of the king-sultan. The author emphasizes the relatively high number of those army commanders who ascended to the throne in the citadel. He casts light on regicide and “the Law of the Turks” as criteria to legitimize this highest position.<sup>7</sup> An epilogue that looks into the collective qualities and characteristics of the Mamluks closes this chapter. Its point of departure is Machiavelli’s view regarding the essence of the sultanate as entirely in the hands of soldiers, such that the sons of the old prince are not the heirs, but rather he who is elected to that position by those who have authority.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Parviz Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, 1980), might contribute useful insights to the study of patron-client relations.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Andre Wink, *Al-Hind: the making of the Indo-Islamic world* (Leiden, 1990–2004), vol. 2, *The Slave Kings and the Islamic conquest, 11th–13th centuries, 194–98*; to this add the recent discussion about *ini* and *agha*: Amir Mazor, *The Rise and Fall of a Muslim Regiment: The Mansuriyya in the First Mamluk Sultanates 678/1279–741/1341* (Bonn, 2015), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Housni Alkhateeb Shehada, *Mamluks and Animals: Veterinary Medicine in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> For a theoretical paradigm based primarily on David Ayalon see Robert A. Paul, *Mixed Messages: Cultural and Genetic Inheritance in the Constitution of Human Society* (Chicago, 2015), 224–29.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Winter, “Inter-madhab competition in Mamluk Damascus: al-Tarsusi’s counsel for the Turkish Sultans,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (David Ayalon Memorial Volume) (2001): 195–211.



Chapter 4 opens with a section on mature Mamluks who changed sides, due to defection, capture, or other causes. Its central pillar is Bourdieu's *habitus*. Mamluk costumes and heraldry have attracted the attention of several fine scholars. Loiseau's clear summary of the state of the art is a useful introduction to a colorful topic. He illuminates the importance of animals as symbols of power among the Mamluk military aristocracy.<sup>8</sup> The next section delves into sport and horsemanship.

The wars between the Mongols and the Mamluk Sultanate, as well as the diplomatic liaison between their khanates (*ulus*), have been the subject of several studies. Loiseau vividly illuminates this chapter in the history of the Near East. His point of departure is a condensed story of the life and death of Baybars, the true founder of the Mamluk regime.<sup>9</sup> Next he deals with the Mongol tribes that migrated to the lands governed by the Mamluks and analyzes their impact on gender perceptions and social taste. Looking into the question of socio-political solidarity the author inspects the recruitment of slave-soldiers and emigration to the land of the sultanate. This is accompanied by in-depth study of the Circassians. It seems useful to mention that Qāniṣav (Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī), the last Mamluk sultan, helped disseminate the idea that the Mamluks of Egypt had originated from an Arab tribe that had migrated to the Caucasian mountains. This was a key element of his ideology. He claimed that he should be recognized as the caliph of the Muslims and the commander of the believers.

"The Domicile of the Emirs" is the title of the fifth chapter of the book under review. This title notwithstanding, it is not limited to the architecture of the palaces, a topic that occupied Loiseau in an earlier book, but deals primarily with the political, social, and financial dimensions of the Mamluk houses. Those who are familiar with Ottoman studies know that this subject is well researched by historians of Ottoman Egypt. Loiseau describes the urban landscape and the salient visibility of religious institutions that were constructed by military commanders to whom the treasury allocated parcels of farming lands and serfs. The first part of this chapter describes the officers' housing during the years of economic growth, which were ended by the brutal impact of the Black Death. The second part turns to the military society at the foot of the citadels.

<sup>8</sup> Although the visualization of them was prohibited at a certain moment. Y. Frenkel, "Animals and Otherness in Mamluk Egypt and Syria," in *Animals and Otherness in the Middle Ages: Perspectives across Disciplines*, ed. Francisco de Asís García García, Mónica Ann Walker Vadillo, and María Victoria Chico Picazabar (Oxford, 2013), 49–62.

<sup>9</sup> Denise Aigle, *The Mongol Empire between Myth and Reality: Studies in Anthropological History* (Leiden, 2014); and the recent study by Reuven Amitai, "Echoes of the Eurasian Steppe in the Daily Culture of Mamluk Military Society," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 26, no. 1 (2016): 261–70.



Readers of Mamluk chronicles and biographies are well aware of the relocation, often wanton, of army officers and governors who were accompanied by their soldiers. This transition affected the urban history of Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, and other cities of the sultanate. Then the author discusses the question of particular Mamluk architecture.<sup>10</sup>

Chapter 6, “The Settlement of the Mamluks,” opens with an account of nine generations of Manjak’s family. The founding father of this lineage was an army commander in the battalions of the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. His offspring lived in Ottoman Damascus. The next section concentrates on the religious practices of the Mamluks, who were born in the Abode of War and were converted by their Muslim masters upon their arrival in the Abode of Islam. Their financial contributions, their support of Islamic institutions, and the numerous constructions that were built by them are clear evidence of their religious commitments. Loiseau first examines the popular aspects of Mamluk religiosity. He looks into pilgrimage reports and into their communication with Sufis, who were not always welcomed by the religious establishment. Rightly, he dwells in great detail on the numerous mausoleums that are still visible in Egypt and Syria. These constructions were supported by pious endowments. As their number increased, so the volume of fertile lands that were administrated by the army bureau decreased. The author should be acclaimed for not turning a blind eye to the role played by the wives, mothers, and concubines of the Mamluk elite. This leads him to describe the families and progeny of army officers.

In conclusion, the book reviewed here is a good introduction to the Mamluk phenomenon. It clearly presents the major aspects of this exceptional institution. The reader gains a useful familiarity with the primary narrative sources of this era, as well as with the major secondary literature. For the political and military history of this unique regime students should consult other works.

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<sup>10</sup> This issue was addressed by Nimrod Luz, *The Mamluk City in the Middle East: History, Culture, and the Urban Landscape* (Cambridge, 2014).

