



David Ayalon, 1914-1998



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On 25 June 1998 Professor David Ayalon, emeritus professor of Islamic history at the Hebrew University, passed away in Jerusalem, after a long illness. David Ayalon is best known for his seminal studies on the nature of military slavery in the medieval Islamic world and the history of the Mamluk Sultanate. At the same time his interests and studies ranged from the beginnings of Islam up to the modern, even contemporary, history of the Middle East. He was also celebrated as a lexicographer: his *Arabic-Hebrew Dictionary of Modern Arabic*, compiled with his friend and colleague Pessah Shinar in 1947, has continued in print for over 50 years and remains a mainstay for the study of Arabic in Israel.

Born David Neustadt in Haifa in 1914, Ayalon (who changed his surname in the late 1940s) spent his childhood in Zikhron Ya'akov and Rosh Pinah. It was in the latter town that he came into extensive contact with local Arab children and his first exposure to the Arabic language. Upon completing his secondary education in Haifa, Ayalon arrived in Jerusalem in 1933 to study at the recently founded Hebrew University. His chosen subjects were Arabic language and literature, Islamic culture, and Jewish history, and he was the first locally-born student in the newly-formed Institute of Oriental Studies (today the Institute of Asian and African Studies). As part of his studies, and encouraged by Prof. S. D. Goitein, Ayalon went off to spend a year at the American University of Beirut. His experiences there became the basis of his first article, "Some Characteristics of Educated Arab Youth," published in Hebrew in *ha-Po'el ha-Tsa'ir* in 1935; in it Ayalon gave a prominent place to the impression made by European fascism on his Lebanese classmates.

Returning to Jerusalem, Ayalon appears to have devoted himself to the Jewish aspect of the medieval Islamic world. In the late 1930s he published in Hebrew two pieces of research in *Zion*: "Notes on the Economic History of the Jews and their Settlement in Egypt in the Middle Ages" (1937) and "On the Office of Nagid in the Middle Ages" (1939). Subsequently, he turned towards Islamic history, and specifically the study of the Mamluk institution, primarily during the time of the Sultanate. Ayalon's studies were disrupted by service in the British army during World War II, but at times during these years (1941-45), he was in circumstances which enabled him to return to his work, at least partially. His doctorate was

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awarded in 1946. Ayalon had reminisced that relations with his supervisor, L. A. Mayer, were on occasion difficult, and at times even strained. There appears to have been fundamental disagreement on the nature of the Mamluk institution. We can be thankful that Ayalon persevered in his way of thinking.

Although he published his first scholarly work in English in 1946 (still under the name Neustadt), Ayalon's main concerns at this time were not academic. In the years just prior to Israel's independence he worked in the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, which in 1948 became the nucleus of the new Foreign Ministry, Ayalon becoming head of research in the Middle East section. It was around this time that he Hebraicized his surname.

In 1950, he was called back to the Hebrew University by Profs. Goitein and Baneth, and invited to establish a new department of Modern Middle Eastern History. The following year he was joined by the Turkologist Uriel Heyd, who had been serving in Israel's embassy in Washington. These two, together with Gabriel Baer who joined them somewhat later, were the pillars of the Department, today known as the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, throughout the 1950s and '60s. Particularly in the first decade, much of Ayalon's teaching load was devoted to modern history: he later joked that he taught the first course in the world on Middle East oil. Ayalon headed the Department until 1956, and from 1953-57 was chairman of the Institute of Asian and African Studies. During these years some of Ayalon's most important studies were published, most importantly, *L'esclavage du mamelouk* (1951), "Studies on the Structure of the Mamlūk Army" (1953-54) and *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamlūk Kingdom* (1956). He then commenced his researches on the later Egyptian historian al-Jabartī, and subsequently on his broader considerations of relations between the peoples of the Eurasian Steppe and the Islamic world. Around 1970, Ayalon embarked on a completely new area of research: the Mongol *Yāsa* (law) and its role in the Mamluk Sultanate. He launched an extensive discussion of the nature of the *Yāsa* and its place among the Mongols, which in many ways radically changed the way students of Mongol history view the *Yāsa*. Ayalon's main conclusion, however, was that the role of the *Yāsa* in the Sultanate was much more limited than had been previously thought by both Mamluk writers and many modern historians.

During the fifties and sixties, Ayalon maintained an avid interest in sports, serving for many years as the head of the committee for sports at the Hebrew University. He himself was a sprinter of no mean distinction and up to the mid-sixties was faculty champion at the University in short distant running. In 1966 he married Miriam Rosen, now professor of Islamic art and archeology at the Hebrew University.



In the 1960s and '70s the Department of Modern Middle Eastern History expanded greatly (changing its name in the process). Many of Ayalon's students from the fifties to seventies completed doctorates in Jerusalem and abroad, and went on to become the pillars of the various departments of Middle Eastern studies and Arabic language and literature in Israeli universities. Ayalon's lectures and seminars had a profound effect on two generations of Israeli students of Islamic history, and not just those who wrote dissertations with him or specialized in medieval history. His influence went well beyond academia. It would be safe to say that hundreds of graduates who have served in public service, journalism and education in Israel saw him as their *ustādh*, and this sense of devotion was not limited only to Jewish Israelis.¹

Ayalon's works can be divided up into several broad categories. First are those studies dealing with the institutions of the Mamluk Sultanate, primarily military slavery and its interaction with the state. In an indirect way, Ayalon was writing the social history of the Mamluk elite. Many of these studies were of a highly technical nature, while others painted a broader canvas. Secondly, he devoted himself to the history of the development of military slavery in Islamic society, and the crucial role it played for some 1000 years. Related to this were his considerations on the encounter between the Muslim peoples and those of the Inner Asian steppe. This was expressed in a scheme of three stages: (1) Mamluks (from the ninth century onward); (2) Turkish tribes under the Seljuqs (from the eleventh century); and (3) the Mongols (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). Ayalon was adamant in expressing his view that this centuries-long encounter provides the context, and at times the well-spring, for much of Islamic history and culture. A further area of his investigations was the *Yāsa*, of which mention has been made.

Ayalon's basic method was shaped by his philological training and early work as a lexicographer. He placed great importance on the investigation of terminology as it was understood by contemporaries. His extensive reading in the sources enabled him to gather disparate evidence, discerning phenomena and patterns in the morass of details. His greatness as a scholar lay in his ability to see beyond the particulars, to which he paid a great deal of attention, and to look at the larger picture. This double nature of his scholarship is found in both his technical studies and his more interpretive essays. Without disparaging the need to look at the trees, Ayalon was also able to see the forest.

In recognition of the importance of his studies as well as his role as an educator, Ayalon was awarded in 1972 the Israel Prize, the highest civilian award

¹See Aḥmad Ghaban, "Al-Mustashriq al-Kabīr Dāfīd Ayalūn," *Kull al-'Arab* (Nazereth), 31 July 1998.



in the State of Israel. He retired in 1983 and some two years later was presented with a jubilee volume (*Studies in Islamic History and Civilization*, ed. Moshe Sharon) in honor of his seventieth birthday. He was a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, an honorary member of the Middle East Medievalists from its inception in 1990, and, in 1997, he was made an honorary foreign member of the American Historical Association.

During his retirement, Ayalon continued his research, which resulted in the writing of *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study of Power Relationships* (which will shortly be published by Magnes Press). This book was the culmination of his concern, lasting over two decades, with eunuchs and their role in Mamluk military society and Islamic society as a whole, a preoccupation fueled by an on-going polemic with another scholar. This study shows the breadth and depth of his reading in the Arabic sources and the wide horizon of his historical gaze.

Ayalon at times could wage a polemic without restraint and did not always brook dissent from his views. But he was ever generous with his time with colleagues and young scholars, and forever loyal to, and solicitous of, his students and friends. He combined a superb knowledge of Arabic, historical insight, and great learning with wit and a down-to-earth demeanor. He will be greatly missed in the Israeli Arabist and historical community, and among a wide circle of scholars around the world.



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