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The Politics of the Mamluk Sultanate: A Review Essay

In the simplest terms, politics is the struggle for power, and in that sense the Mamluk Sultanate was a truly Hobbesian world, in which the price of defeat was a loss not merely of status, influence, and wealth, but very often of life itself. However, we can think of politics more broadly, as the competition for resources (symbolic as well as material) within a society. On the most general level, politics may be defined as the whole body of practices and institutions (whether these are formally constituted or merely implicit and unspoken) through which a society distributes costs and benefits among its members. From that perspective Mamluk politics may seem altogether more rational and serious if hardly less bloody-minded. It is still a matter of power, but power exercised for a purpose. All this is a distinctly old-school way of defining politics, one grounded in the grand theory and model-building which characterized the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s. Even so, there is ample room here for more current ways of thinking about the problem: symbolic action, cultural representation, the encoding of ideology in myth and ritual, linguistic analysis, not to mention post-colonialist self-reflexivity. We need only remember that symbols, myths, and rituals are not autonomous entities operating inside some separate universe; they reflect or embody real acts which have grave material consequences for real people.

Both in Western and Islamic literary traditions, politics forms the oldest and most highly developed subject of the historian's craft. Moreover, the resources available to us for the study of Mamluk political history are unmatched for any other period of Islamic history down to the heyday of the Ottoman Empire. It is thus frustrating to have to admit that our knowledge of this field is at best a patchwork. We possess several outstanding works of scholarship, to be sure, and the massive bibliography on Mamluk studies produced by the University of Chicago's Middle East Documentation Center continues to grow faster than anyone can read it. But what we do *not* have is even more striking.

First of all, there is no modern full-length account in a Western language of the whole Mamluk period, which I would argue stretches from 1238 (the death of the Ayyubid sultan al-Kāmil Muḥammad) down to 1524 (the definitive consolidation of Ottoman rule in Syria and Egypt). The nineteenth-century syntheses of Gustav Weil and (on a distinctly lesser and more derivative level) William Muir hardly rival the achievements of Mommsen, Ranke, Macauley, or Bury, which, however



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antiquated, still have much to teach us.¹ In Arabic, there are of course a number of general histories, pitched at various levels of readership. Almost all of these have been produced by Egyptian scholars, and consequently have a very Egyptian (one might say Cairo-centric) view of things.²

In general, the large volume of Egyptian scholarship on the Mamluks suggests that this period constitutes a persistent and fundamental problem for Egyptian thinkers. Are the Mamluks an integral part of Egypt's historical identity and sense of nationhood, or are they rather (to borrow a phrase from H. A. R. Gibb) a "kernel of derangement"? The Mamluks were foreigners in language and geographical origin, but also the last great independent regime in Egypt before the nineteenth century. They defended Egypt from foreign threats, but they were tyrannical rulers. They were lavish patrons of religion, literature, architecture, and the fine arts, but they were themselves often semi-literate barbarians. Moreover, it is a much-debated question whether all this activity represents cultural efflorescence or stagnation. In modern Egyptian thought, in short, the Mamluks symbolize both power and decline. In view of this profound ambivalence, I would argue that twentieth-century Egyptian historiography on the Mamluk Sultanate merits a study in its own right, in the manner of Werner Ende's *Arabische Nation und islamische Geschichte*.³

Hardly less grave than the lack of a general synthesis is a shortage of monographs on the reigns of individual sultans—the kinds of political biographies that are still produced in droves, even in our post-modernist age, for every European monarch and U.S. president. There are in fact some very good studies in this category, but they cover only a few sultans—seven out of the sixty-one men (and one woman) who held that office. Not all of these people were on the throne long enough to merit a separate study, to be sure, but the disparity in numbers is nonetheless remarkable. The first four decades of Mamluk domination have in fact been studied fairly well, at least by the feeble standards of Islamic historical studies,

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¹There are of course several solid and up-to-date chapters by various authors in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl Petry (Cambridge, 1998). We also have a good concise history of the first Mamluk century by Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: the Early Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1382* (London, 1986). But the gap remains even so.

²Among many authors, the oeuvre of Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āshūr might be the best place to start, both because of his own training under some of the best Egyptian scholars of the 1930s (e.g., Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Aḥmad Amīn), and because he himself had many students at the University of Cairo who went on to become leading historians in their own right.

³Werner Ende, *Arabische Nation und islamische Geschichte: Die Umayyaden im Urteil arabischer Autoren des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Beirut and Wiesbaden, 1979).



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with solid monographs on Shajar al-Durr, al-Zāhir Baybars, and al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn.⁴ On the other hand, it is hard to explain to colleagues in other fields that we have only one political biography for a figure so formidable as Baybars. For the fourteenth century, Amalia Levanoni has given us an extended interpretive essay on al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.⁵ Finally, three key figures of the Circassian period have drawn serious attention: Barsbāy, Qāytbāy, and Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī.⁶ Everyone would have a favorite candidate for the next such study; mine would be two periods of intense crisis. First, the virtual interregnum—or more precisely, the puppet sultanate—from the death of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (1341) to the seizure of power by Barqūq (1382), an era which comprises both a breakdown of the established political system and the onset of the Black Death. Second, the disastrous reign of al-Nāṣir Faraj (1399–1412), marked by pestilence, currency collapse, constant internecine conflict, and the invasion of Syria by Timur, calls out for sustained attention. Taken together, these two periods represent the hollowing out of the Mamluk monarchy under the later Qalāwūnids and then a bitter struggle (finally successful under al-Mu’ayyad Shaykh) to re-establish royal autocracy. Edward Gibbon famously remarked that history is largely a record of the crimes and follies of mankind; between 1341 and 1412 there is a lot of history.

A research agenda of this sort raises an important general question: does the reign of an individual sultan constitute a meaningful and useful unit of political analysis? Undoubtedly it is a decidedly old-fashioned way of approaching the subject, but that fact does not invalidate political biography. First, the Mamluk Sultanate was in principle, and often in fact, an autocracy; the whole political system was focused on the person of the sultan. If he was as often the captive of his amirs and mamluks as their master, so it is with all autocrats. The way in which a sultan could manipulate, or was manipulated by, the other players in the game tells us a great deal about the internal workings of the Mamluk political system. Second, every sultan had to struggle to secure his throne, whether or not he had a hereditary claim to it. For this reason, a sultan’s reign does not represent

⁴Götz Schregle, *Die Sultanin von Ägypten: Šağarat al-Durr in der arabischen Geschichtsschreibung und Literatur* (Wiesbaden, 1961). Peter Thorau, *Sultan Baibars I. Von Ägypten: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Vorderen Orients im 13. Jahrhundert* (Wiesbaden, 1987); trans. P. M. Holt, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century* (London and New York, 1987). Linda Northrup, *From Slave to Sultan: The Career of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn and the Consolidation of Mamluk Rule in Egypt and Syria (678–689 A.H./1279–1290 A.D.)* (Stuttgart, 1998).

⁵Amalia Levanoni, *A Turning-Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn, 1310–1341* (Leiden, 1995).

⁶Ahmad Darrag, *L’Égypte sous le règne de Barsbay, 825–841/1422–1438* (Damascus, 1961). Carl F. Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamluk Sultans al-Ashraf Qāytbāy and Qanṣūh al-Ghūrī in Egypt* (Seattle, 1993).



an arbitrary chunk of time cut out of a continuum of stable successions to the throne. On the contrary, a reign embodies a real political moment, in that it faithfully mirrors the stress lines and balance of forces at that moment. The exception might be a period already mentioned: the Qalāwūnids after al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, 1341–82, where only two sultans, al-Nāṣir Ḥasan (1347–51, 1354–61) and al-Ashraf Sha‘bān (1363–77), clung to the throne for any length of time, and neither was able to assert control over the political system.

After a dreary account of opportunities missed and obvious subjects ignored, it is a relief to turn to the formal institutions which provided the enduring framework of Mamluk rule—the army, the *iqṭā’*, the civil bureaucracy, and the religious establishment, along with the fiscal and charitable (*waqf*) resources which made the whole thing possible. In this arena we have a great deal. Here I need not refer to work published before 1990, some of it of genuinely classic stature, since I have reviewed it in *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*.⁷ But even with all that has been done there are major gaps, along with a curious lack of integration. We are pretty well off if we want to know the names of specific taxes, how they were assessed and allocated, the distribution of *iqṭā’*s in fourteenth-century Egypt, the general organization of the royal mamluk corps in the army, who the bureaucrats were in fifteenth-century Egypt and how they were recruited.⁸ It is true that of the administrative structures and personnel of Syria we know far less, indeed almost nothing. (This will be an oft-repeated *Leitmotif* in this article.) In spite of this generally positive assessment, if we want to pick up a single book that will tell us how the Mamluk state worked and how it imposed its will on its subjects, then we will have a hard time of it. Even on the core institution of the regime, there is no single study entitled “The Mamluk Army” that brings together the whole thing—the several mamluk corps, the *ḥalqah*, auxiliary forces, the command structure, etc.—or tells how this complex military system changed over the 267 years of Mamluk history.⁹

Apart from a lack of integrated syntheses on the state, the army, and the fiscal

⁷R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, rev. ed. (Princeton, 1991), Ch. 7, “The Fiscal Administration of the Mamluk Empire.”

⁸To the studies reviewed in *Islamic History*, Ch. 7, at least two major titles should be added: Sato Tsugitaka, *State and Rural Society in Medieval Islam: Sultans, Muqta’s and Fallāḥūn* (Leiden, 1997); and Bernadette Martel-Thoumian, *Les civils et l’administration dans l’état militaire mamluk (IXe/XVe siècle)* (Damascus, 1991).

⁹The great student of the Mamluk army was of course the late David Ayalon, whose voluminous writings continue to demand close study. On the other hand, Ayalon was such a dominating figure that few other scholars ventured into this critically important field. For the current state of the field during the last decades of Mamluk rule, see Carl F. Petry, “The Military Institution and Innovation in the Late Mamluk Period,” in *Cambridge History of Egypt*, 1:462–89.



administration, there are vast gaps in the literature. Most critically, far more has been written about Egypt than about Syria, even though Syria was an integral and very distinctive part of the empire, and even though Mamluk Syria is exceptionally well documented by the standards of medieval Islamic history. (We will return to this point further on.) A second gap is, to put it baldly, the fourteenth century. The fifteenth century has received far more lavish attention, even though we might suppose that this latter period would make little sense without a real understanding of the earlier one. For Mamluk institutions, in short, we have a vast jigsaw puzzle, where a few scattered sections have been assembled and thousands of pieces (though many are missing) are strewn on the worktable. The sort of work needed to put all this together is far from what the current *Zeitgeist* regards as cutting-edge, but until it is done any effort to pursue more innovative ways of decoding the Mamluk state will only be word games with (at most) a certain heuristic value.

If the study of political actors and administrative institutions reflects a nineteenth-century frame of mind, then social history as now practiced has its roots in the social sciences of the 1950s to 1970s. Certainly that is true for the field of Mamluk studies, where Ira Lapidus' *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* still provides the dominant paradigm.¹⁰ By now Lapidus' work has been subjected to a fair amount of criticism—not least of all by Lapidus himself—for its overly rigid adherence to the functionalist sociology of Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils. It must be said, however, that his work was an astonishingly effective synthesis for its time, and it continues to provide a useful point of departure for analyzing the interactions between local and imperial power.

Garcin's great study of Qūṣ might point us in a different direction—viz., a narrowly focused study of a single locality that takes our eyes off Cairo, and allows us to ask just what made this place different from that one.¹¹ It perhaps reflects the realities of our field that Garcin's *magnum opus* is now almost thirty years old and has had only one real successor, Anne-Marie Eddé, *La principauté ayyoubide d'Alep*.¹² The chronological scopes of the two works are very different, of course, since Garcin covers the whole medieval period down to the end of Mamluk rule, while Eddé's equally monumental tome deals only with eight decades. Moreover, Eddé exploits a far richer fund of resources (including the city of Aleppo itself) than Garcin had at his disposal for the remote reaches of Upper Egypt. Finally, they reflect quite distinct concepts of historical method and presentation, with Garcin generating broad conceptual structures in order to make sense of his sparse materials, and Eddé sticking close to her carefully sifted and

¹⁰Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1967; reprinted without notes, Cambridge and New York, 1984).

¹¹Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale: Qūṣ* (Cairo, 1976).

¹²Anne-Marie Eddé, *La principauté ayyoubide d'Alep (579/1183–658/1260)* (Stuttgart, 1999).



meticulously presented evidence. Still, both suggest how much can be learned from a detailed regional study, where the grid is sufficiently fine to allow us to capture the detail and specificity of local realities. Obviously other places demand attention of this kind: certainly Damascus and the other major towns in the interior of Syria, but also Egypt's Mediterranean ports, Damietta and Alexandria, and perhaps, if the sources permit, Asyūt or Minya in Middle Egypt.

Certainly the most traditional area of historical study, yet even now one of the most revealing, is that of the relations between the Mamluk Sultanate and the outside world. The Mamluk Sultanate sought out and found many allies—the Golden Horde, the Kingdom of Aragon, even Byzantium; even so, it regarded itself—quite correctly—as perpetually threatened by the enemies that surrounded it. The Mamluks, with their powerful albeit unruly army, their famously durable and stable borders, and their self-consciously conservative ideology, became the very model of a fortress state.¹³ As such they were also the antithesis of their expansion-minded Mongol and post-Mongol neighbors to the east and (after the consolidation of Ottoman power under Mehmet II) north.

Research on this subject area has benefited from the survival of a good deal of direct documentary evidence, for the most part in European archives (Barcelona, Florence, Venice, and even the Vatican), in Arabic as well as in European languages. Though there is a vast amount still to do, this material has attracted the attention of estimable scholars since the nineteenth century. Among recent publications, those of Peter M. Holt on Mamluk-Crusader relations stand out.¹⁴ As things now stand, we have a number of solid studies on the late thirteenth century, as well as for the last decades of Mamluk rule—both periods of sustained conflict and crisis for the Mamluk regime.¹⁵ Even for these two periods, of course, no one could say that all the key issues have been settled. But for the intervening two centuries the

¹³These points are more fully explored in my "Ayyubids, Mamluks, and the Latin East in the Thirteenth Century," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 2 (1998): 1–17.

¹⁴E.g., Peter M. Holt, *Early Mamluk Diplomacy (1260–1290): Treaties of Baybars and Qalawun with Christian Rulers* (Leiden, 1995).

¹⁵It is impossible to review the enormous literature on the late thirteenth-century Crusades here. On the struggle against the Mongols down to 1281, see Reuven Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260–1281* (Cambridge, 1995), and of course Thorau, *Lion of Egypt*. (The three decades down to the last Mongol incursion in 1309 still await detailed study.) On the late fifteenth century—a period in which three very different threats (Shah Ismā'īl and the Safavids, the Ottomans, and the Portuguese in the Red Sea) suddenly burst onto the scene—see Carl F. Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamluk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (Albany, NY, 1994). The later chapters of John E. Woods, *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Confederation, Empire* (first ed., Minneapolis, 1976; revised ed., Salt Lake City, 1999) are highly important for this subject. On the first Ottoman-Mamluk confrontation, see Shai Har-El, *Struggle for Domination in the Middle East: The Ottoman-Mamluk War, 1485–1491* (Leiden, 1995).



publications are extremely spotty and tend to be oriented toward particular crises (e.g., the sacking of Alexandria in 1365, the Cyprus expeditions of al-Ashraf Barsbāy, and the invasion of Timur), with little effort to place these crises within a framework of long-term problems and policies. Perhaps Setton's astonishingly old-fashioned and yet deeply impressive *Papacy and the Levant* gives us the nearest thing we have to a general interpretation—though of course Setton knew no Arabic and made no serious effort to include Mamluk views and understandings.¹⁶

With this brief review of existing categories of research on the Mamluk Empire, I would like to turn to some possible new directions. Here I have four particularly in mind.

First, I mention yet again an old enthusiasm of my own, Mamluk Syria. For this period, Syria is typically treated either as *une Égypte manquée* or as merely a turbulent frontier zone, important chiefly for the battles against invaders or revolts against the sultans which occurred there. But it is clear enough that Syria has its own social traditions and structures (a point made quite clearly by Lapidus in *Muslim Cities in Later Middle Ages*, where he posits Damascus and Aleppo as the normative cases of urban society, while Cairo is described as socially amorphous due to domination by the palace and military elite). It is likewise apparent, though no one has ever tried to explore the issue systematically, that the Mamluk armies in Syria were not mirror images of the Egyptian army. On the contrary, apart from a few royal Mamluk contingents sent out from Cairo for garrison duty in the major towns, Syrian forces seem to exhibit distinctive recruitment patterns and systems of pay, as well as an officer corps whose origins and career paths were not at all like those of their Egyptian counterparts. The Syrian fiscal system was unquestionably a world of its own—a point which should be intuitively obvious given the stark absence of the Nile. Finally, we can witness a continuing vitality of religious and intellectual life in Damascus down to the late fourteenth century. Though many Syrian scholars, as Carl Petry has demonstrated,¹⁷ moved to Cairo to make their careers there, names like Ibn Taymīyah, al-Jazarī, al-Dhahabī, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, al-Şafadī, and Ibn Kathīr are enough to demonstrate the international stature that Damascus retained throughout the first century of Mamluk rule.

As a second priority, I would argue that we need to develop studies that focus on specific and carefully delimited groups, locales, etc., rather than broad and often quite general categories. For example, everyone talks about the crucial role of the Mamluk household. True enough, but who has tried to reconstruct such a household? (Actually, Jane Hathaway has done precisely this for the Qazdaghli

¹⁶Kenneth M. Setton, *The Papacy and the Levant*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia, 1976–84). (Only vols. 1–2 are directly relevant to this article.)

¹⁷Carl. F. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1981).



faction in eighteenth-century Egypt. For the "classic" Mamluk period, however, there is nothing of the kind.)¹⁸ For a few amirs, at least, we should be able to extract enough material from the biographical compilations of al-Şafadī, Ibn Taghrībirdī, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, al-Sakhāwī, and many others to develop at least a detailed sketch of the households and factions that they recruited and maintained. For the Mamluk period above all others, we should expect prosopography to be one of our most widely utilized approaches. It is not merely a matter of lending individuality and nuance to dry abstractions; well-designed microstudies of this sort commonly lead to new understandings even of broad social and political processes in very fundamental ways.

A third area of emphasis would aim at identifying the structures and long-term continuities that underlie the ebb and flow of events. In particular, far more needs to be done on what we might call the Mamluk-Ottoman continuum. The bulk of scholarship on the transition from Mamluk to Ottoman rule has tended to focus on the changes brought about by the Ottoman conquest. This frame of mind is nicely captured in Peter M. Holt's pioneering synthesis on Ottoman rule in Arab lands, *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, 1516–1922*, and it continues in more narrowly focused monographs like Doris Behrens-Abouseif's *Egypt's Adjustment to Ottoman Rule*.¹⁹ It is undeniable that the violent shock of 1516–17 and the years immediately following brought massive and abrupt changes in many sectors of Egyptian and (so we suppose) Syrian life, and Egypt's abrupt fall from imperial metropolis to subject province had a profound impact on that country on many levels. Even so, much could be gained by a simple exercise in reperiodization: instead of working within the traditional Cairo-centered parameters of 1382–1516, 1517–1700, and 1700–98, we might try defining two broader periods, the first beginning around 1450 and going down to roughly 1600, the second bracketing the two centuries from 1600 to 1800. At first glance, this revised periodization seems to privilege the Ottoman Empire, since it marks the "classical" era from the ascension of Mehmet II to the political and fiscal crisis after the death of Kanuni Suleyman,

¹⁸Jane Hathaway, *The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt: The Rise of the Qazdaghlis* (Cambridge, 1996).

¹⁹P. M. Holt, *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, 1516–1922: A Political History* (Ithaca, NY, 1967). In Arabic, see Abdul Karim Rafeq, *Bilād al-Shām wa-Miṣr min al-Fatḥ al-‘Uthmānī ilā Ḥamlat Nābūliyūn Būnabart*, 2nd ed. (Damascus, 1968). Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Egypt's Adjustment to Ottoman Rule: Institutions, Waqf, and Architecture in Cairo, 16th and 17th Centuries* (Leiden, 1994). There is not a great deal on early Ottoman Egypt or Syria; the eighteenth century has attracted far more attention. For Syria, see Muhammad Adnan Bakhit, *The Ottoman Province of Damascus in the Sixteenth Century* (Beirut, 1982); and (very tightly focused) Amnon Cohen and Bernard Lewis, *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century* (Princeton, 1978), and A. Cohen, *Economic Life in Ottoman Jerusalem* (Cambridge, 1989).



and then the era of “decline” down to the deposition of Selim III in 1807. But in fact it represents a far more inclusive and comparative approach. The first segment (1450–1600) covers several broad trends within the political order of the Mediterranean Basin and the Middle East: (1) the expansion and consolidation of the Ottoman state; (2) the last efflorescence and rapid dissolution both of the Mamluk Sultanate and of a post-Mongol political order in Iran and Mesopotamia that reached back to the mid-fourteenth century; (3) the transformation of the Safavids from a chiliastic movement based on the Turkoman tribes of eastern Anatolia and Azerbaijan to a relatively centralized Iranian empire; (4) in a remarkable synchrony with the Ottomans, the rise of a worldwide Spanish (one might better say Castilian) empire. This redefining of the historical process within which the later Mamluk Sultanate endured and then succumbed should encourage scholars to trace as precisely as possible the continuities and changes in every aspect of life in Egypt and Syria—military and administrative institutions, the recruitment of elites, the character and role of local leadership, agriculture and pastoralism, commerce and manufacturing, etc. The point, in a nutshell, is that Ottomanists must become Mamlukists. Any scholar who wants to take the sixteenth century seriously must also take the fifteenth century seriously. The earthquake of 1516–17 did not leave a *tabula rasa* for the new masters of the old Mamluk realm.

The second segment (1600–1800) takes us beyond the chronological limits of this paper. However, we ought to note that it too is a highly useful way of grouping together long-term trends across a broad area: (1) the “restructuring” (to choose a neutral term) of the Spanish and Ottoman Empires; (2) the apogee of Safavid power in Iran (down to 1666) and then that country’s descent into a time of troubles; (3) the emergence of the Dutch, French, and English as the major European actors in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. For Mamluk specialists, of course, these two centuries have a particular interest because they witnessed the emergence, and ultimately the political domination, of a neo-Mamluk order in Egypt. The neo-Mamluk system of Ottoman Egypt is certainly not a simple revival of the classical (though ever-changing) Mamluk order of 1250–1517, but it is quite unintelligible without it.

This leads us to the fourth area in which I hope to encourage research: the place of the Mamluk Sultanate within the whole *dār al-islām*: Africa, the western Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean basin, Iraq-Iran and the Turco-Mongol world generally (which in this period of course includes much of North India). As much as the Mamluk elite itself might have wished it, their empire was not walled off from the outside world, and indeed every aspect of Mamluk life and politics was inextricably tied to that world. At first glance, at least, the lack of studies aimed at situating the Mamluks within their broader environment is not only regrettable but rather puzzling. That is all the more so because we now have many of the elements



of a general framework for such comparative and trans-regional research. The Mediterranean world has of course been very widely studied for more than a century by a cohort of outstanding scholars, and though the Mamluks are ordinarily marginalized in this work (usually being portrayed merely as the conduit for the spices of Asia), we nevertheless know a great deal about their interactions with that region. There is also a good deal of work on the Indian Ocean, though most of this refers to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, a richly documented and remarkably detailed general synthesis is now available in the three volumes of André Wink, *Al-Hind: the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, which take us to the end of the fifteenth century. (Two further volumes are projected, which will reach the mid-eighteenth century.)²⁰ It is true that the Mamluks never attempted to project power beyond the Red Sea, but of course their international commerce, which was a critical part of their revenues, was generated from within this world, and Mamluk merchants were an integral part of it.

When we turn to Africa, we find markedly less to work with. Even North Africa is mostly neglected by Mamluk specialists, in spite of the important commercial and religious connections stretching from al-Andalus to Cairo and beyond, and in spite of the considerable number of North African expatriates (Ibn Khaldūn was not alone) who took up residence in Egypt. Of Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa—an important zone of Islamic commercial, religious, and cultural expansion—we know far less than we should; there has been good work on Nubia and the western Sahel, but apart from the exceptional case of Musa Mansa there has been little effort to connect it with Egypt. On the east, we still find a sort of Chinese wall between the Mamluk and Turco-Iranian worlds, running southward from the middle Euphrates through the Syrian Desert. The failure of Mamluk specialists to include Iraq and Iran within their purview is partly a matter of language, since that requires a thorough command not only of Mamluk Arabic with all its oddities, but also of the formidable rhetoric of Timurid Persian, and various sorts of Turkish. For the most part, however, it is a matter of *taqlīd*, of just sticking to the topics and approaches laid down by our academic ancestors.

I would be the first to admit that the areas I have suggested for research do not include some important current approaches to historical analysis—e.g., those that focus on issues like gender, discourse analysis, or the construction of communal identity. I certainly do not decry the value of such work or doubt the possibilities of doing it successfully. Women, to give an obvious example, are far more visible in Mamluk-period sources than in those from earlier periods, and gender historians should therefore find much with which to work. But lacking as we do a well-

²⁰André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, 3 vols. (in progress) (Leiden, 1991–2004).



developed scholarly literature in so many traditional core subjects—those that constitute the who, what, where, when, and how of Mamluk history—the discussion of these innovative topics and approaches will inevitably rest on frail foundations. In any case, I hope that theory-driven investigation will add to our perspectives on Mamluk history, and not displace the sort of work-still-undone that I have discussed above. I say this knowing that historians are anarchists at heart and prefer not to work according to the agendas and dictates that anyone else may lay down.

I have so far spoken as if scholarship on the Mamluk Sultanate were a world unto itself, as if we could pursue it without reference to the larger structures of contemporary academic life within which we must work. But of course that is the opposite of reality. Like our colleagues in every other field of historical research, we face very serious constraints on our capacity to conduct research, and far more importantly, on our capacity to publish it in appropriate and accessible forms. In the United States, at least, the day of the specialist-audience research monograph is rapidly coming to an end. University presses have lost their subsidies, and university libraries, also facing sharply reduced acquisitions budgets and escalating prices, can no longer afford to purchase the books that the presses publish. No acquisitions editor can contemplate (if she means to keep her job) the prospects of a monograph, however brilliant, that will sell only 500 copies. Given the size of the Mamluk studies field (and even of Islamic history more generally), 500 copies might well seem quite an ambitious target.

Especially for our more intricate scholarly projects, therefore, we need to explore actively the possibilities presented by emerging technologies such as on-line publication. Technically this is perfectly possible, as it offers many advantages for revision and updating, and on-line materials can easily be converted into CD-ROMs or (my preference) the more stable and flexible printed volume. The real issues are the same as those that bedevil the presses: gatekeeping and quality control, editorial oversight, copyright, and distribution. Whatever research we conduct, however probing our analyses, it will all come to nothing until we have decided how to share what we have learned.

