

Carl F. Petry. *The Mamluk Sultanate: A History*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Pp. xix, 358.

Reviewed by Mustafa Banister, Utah State University

After more than half a century, Mamluk Studies has developed a vast bibliography of studies emanating from a thriving scholarly community. Earlier efforts—even ten years ago—to compile the state of the art of the field were much easier to do. Carl Petry’s concise though nuanced new book, *The Mamluk Sultanate: A History*, stands as the most recent attempt, successfully integrating the last two decades (up to 2021) of contributions. The book draws strength from the author’s keen awareness of important scholarly currents in the field as well as the limitations of the available source material.

Petry’s project is guided by a number of goals: to examine the traits Ibn Khaldūn attributed to the so-called “Dawlat al-Atrāk” (redubbed the “Mamluk Sultanate” by modern scholarship) in the context of the regime to demonstrate evolution in statecraft, structures, and institutions; to take stock of recent humanities and social science scholarship that has reshaped modern understandings of late medieval Syro-Egyptian history; and to highlight the experimental nature of state-building in the period.

The author presents the survey in seven chapters, each one successively adding a unique layer that provides a multidimensional image of the Sultanate overall. The first chapter is a synopsis of political history through the construction of a chronological narrative of the Sultanate from its cultural and political origins in the thirteenth century down to the Ottoman conquest of the early sixteenth. Coverage here prepares the contextual backdrop for the remainder of the book, and includes eras well-known to specialists such as the “tumultuous decade” (1249–60), the “halcyon era” of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s third reign (1310–41), and the Qalawunid princeling era (1341–82). As Petry discusses the reigns of later fifteenth-century sultans such as Shaykh, Barsbāy, and Qāyṭbāy, he revisits the contexts of their ascensions by reintroducing history the reader has just become acquainted with. This provides a great deal of connectivity within the narrative, supplemented by the author’s frequent references to other pertinent passages throughout the book.

The second chapter continues the pursuit of the Sultanate’s post-Mongol heritage and identity by examining processes of training, hierarchies, and the ethos of competition that influenced the military ranks. The chapter is particularly useful for its ruminations on the lived experience and “mindsets” of young slave cadets in Cairo (pp. 60–3) that later cultivated loyalties to each other and competed for power through coups and conspiracies (pp. 76–78). In chapter three,



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Petry argues that the Sultanate, in its interactions with other contemporary polities, above all, valued preserving the status quo. From a global perspective, chapter three examines statecraft and the challenges posed to the regime by Greater Iran (from the Ilkhanids to the Safavids), as well as changing relations with the Ottomans. The chapter also discusses financial and trade relations with Genoa and Venice and struggles with the Portuguese, and concludes with a valuable discussion of interactions within the African continent: Takrur in the west, Abyssinia in the east, and the contemporary polities of the Maghrib.

Chapter four offers a closer look at various vocations available to educated elites in the Sultanate. Officeholders were necessarily functional in several professional callings in the bureaucracy, the civil judiciary, and the world of religious education. Like the second chapter's look into the mindset of slave recruits, the fourth chapter presents readers with a practical look at the perils, nepotism, corruption, and fierce competition facing civilian functionaries who sought promotion in the world of sultans and amirs.

The fifth chapter turns the focus on changes in political economy, a broad field of analysis that has long been an interest of the author. In it, Petry explores evidence of interregional evolution from the perspective of agricultural practices and animal husbandry in Egypt and Syria, as well as methods of land granting and revenue collection in the form of *iqṭā'* distribution and the various cadastral surveys undertaken by the regime and its predecessors (pp. 161–64). The chapter discusses financial problems, the conversion of properties into inalienable *waqfs*, revenue collection through confiscation and extraction (pp. 187–89), and the fluctuation of stipends, prices, taxes, and salaries.

The penultimate chapter, six, provides a useful survey of the Sultanate's cultural legacy, taking stock of popular genres of poetry and prose, the role played by elite patronage, and the rapid development of historical writing in the period. The chapter considers the influence of earlier poet-litterateurs, such as al-Ḥarīrī and al-Mutanabbī, on works of the period. The bulk of the chapter, however, is devoted to the booming business of historiography throughout the Cairo Sultanate. Before discussing choice examples among the hundreds of historical works created between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, Petry examines the most influential earlier models for history writing: al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Athīr, and Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī.

Petry devotes the final chapter to new and innovative lines of inquiry pursued by modern scholars. While critical of what can be added to the big picture from isolated sources that produce speculative findings, the author nevertheless praises the ingenuity and creativity of social scientists, archaeologists, and anthropologists in answering difficult questions about the Sultanate's rural history. Petry also considers rarely discussed issues regarding women, drawing on



his own research on crime to discuss gender in narrative construction (pp. 257–58). The chapter moves on to the status of non-Muslim minorities, particularly subjugated and scapegoated Jews and Christians in the Sultanate, and closes with a section on the diverse practices of Sufism in the period with examples of the popular orders and noteworthy practitioners.

In the book's outgoing "Reflections," Petry returns to the question of ongoing change in light of Ibn Khaldūn's "traits" of the Mamluks. Concluding that many sultans were sincere in their commitment to upholding the brand of Islam favored by the mainstream Sunni ulama, the author notes that historians, both medieval and modern, praised the stability that came through the endurance, adaptation, and perseverance of the regime.

One of the more enjoyable prose-writers in premodern Islamicate historiography, Petry writes with a highly efficient style, both precise and not given to wasting words. Among the many enjoyable illustrative elements of the book, alongside its maps, photographs, and excerpts in translation, was the author's decision to bring back one of the former "stars" of his earlier books, the amir Yashbak min Mahdī (d. 885/1480), who plays a helpful role that adds color to some of the patterns and processes outlined in the book. Yashbak serves diversely as exemplar of an amir's swift rise to prominence alongside complicated loyalties (p. 45), as a model of the "mindset" needed to navigate complex political machinations (pp. 77–78), of an amir's bid for independent authority (p. 91), as a restorer of the sultan's order (pp. 98–99, 105), as an intermediary between the Sultanate and tribal leaders (p. 167), and as a skilled "agent of procurement" adept at refilling the sultan's treasury (pp. 188, 194).

Petry's summations and analyses, while scholastically sound, are also socially conscious, approaching material and asking questions in tandem with the concerns that play on the minds of many modern students and researchers. Issues such as race, gender, minority status, and the troubling legacy of slavery—all of which evoke passionate debate and mixed reactions among people—are thoughtfully discussed, ever reflecting the "experimental" nature of the Sultanate itself and how it affected the broader culture and institutions of early modern northeast Africa and southwest Asia.

Due to the complexity of the Syro-Egyptian Sultanate and the immensity of modern scholarship, it is difficult for any such presentation to be truly comprehensive. The *Mamluk Sultanate* nevertheless stands as a useful snapshot of where the field is in 2022, and where it could (or should) be heading next. Any author embarking on such a project must make difficult choices about what to include and highlight, but when it comes to weighing where to assign importance few are better suited to the task than Petry. Indeed, as Frédéric Bauden affectionately observed at last year's honorary symposium celebrating Petry's many years as



a professor and scholar of Middle Eastern history at Northwestern University, “[Carl’s career has] lasted longer than the reign of any of the Mamluk sultans, including the record-breaker al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, who managed to rule for 42 years.”<sup>1</sup> The statement, like the book itself, reflects Petry’s lasting legacy on the field he helped build as one of the “sultans” of the second wave of Mamluk Studies. While one hopes we have much more yet to read from the pen of Carl Petry, this latest round-up of the “Mamluk Sultanate” stands as a confident coda, retrospectively illuminating an industrious career of valuable contributions to what we now know about the Sultanate.

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<sup>1</sup>Evanston, Illinois, 20 May 2022.

