Mamluk Studies

Volume 2

Edited by Stephan Conermann

Editorial Board: Thomas Bauer (Münster, Germany), Albrecht Fuess (Marburg, Germany), Thomas Herzog (Bern, Switzerland), Konrad Hirschler (London, Great Britain), Anna Paulina Lewicka (Warsaw, Poland), Linda Northrup (Toronto, Canada), Jo van Steenbergen (Gent, Belgium)

© V&R unipress GmbH, Göttingen
Winslow Williams Clifford

State formation and the structure of politics in Mamluk Syro-Egypt, 648 – 741 A.H./1250 – 1340 C.E.

Edited by Stephan Conermann

V&R unipress

Bonn University Press
Contents

Preface .................................................. 9

Chapter 1 – Introduction .............................. 13

Chapter 2 – The Problemation of the Early Mamluk State .......... 21
The Microstructure of Social Conflict .......................... 30
The Problem of Middle East State Formation ............... 43
The Nature of the Early Mamluk State ....................... 46
The Problem of Idealized Solidary: ʿUstādh-Mamlūk, Khushdāshiyyah and Jinsiyyah ............... 47
The Structure of Mamluk Politics ............................ 54
Conclusion ............................................... 63

Chapter 3 – The Search for ʿNizām (1249 – 1260/647 – 58) ........ 65
The Legacy of al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb ............................... 66
Shortcomings of Clientelism under Turānshāh and Shajar al-Durr ... 70
Ayybak and Qutuz: The Failure to Establish ʿNizām ............ 74
Conclusion ............................................... 81

Chapter 4 – Baybars and the Foundation of ʿNizām (1260 – 1276/658 – 676) ...................... 83
Baybars and Kurdish clients ..................................... 86
Baybars and khushdāshiyyah ................................... 90
Baybars and non-khushdāshiyyah ............................... 92
ʿNizām: Coercion and Conflict Resolution under Baybars .......... 97
Conflict Resolution: The Cases of Sanjar al-Halabī and Aqūsh al-Burlī .. 101
The Role of Friendship and Kinship ............................ 104
ʿNizām: Punishment and Rehabilitation ........................ 106
Structured Violence ......................................... 109
Conclusion ............................................... 110
Chapter 5 – Challenge and Restoration of Nizām (1277 – 1290/676 – 689).

Al-Saʿīd and the Challenge to Nizām .................................................. 114

Al-Saʿīd and the Limitations of Walaʿ .......... 117

Qalāwūn and the Restoration of Nizām ........................................ 125

Qalāwūn’s Patronage Network .......................................................... 129

Nizām and Conflict Resolution: The Cases of Kunduk and Sunqur al-Ashqar ................................................................. 131

Conclusion ................................................................. 138

Chapter 6 – Nizām and “The Operation of Faction” (1290 – 1309/689 – 709) ................................................................. 143

The Manipulation of Nizām in the Reign of al-Ashraf Khalīl ........ 144

Al-Ashraf Khalīl’s Relations with the Mansūriyyah ......................... 149

The Struggle for Nizām after al-Ashraf Khalīl: The Fitnah of Sanjar al-Shujāʾi ................................................................. 154

Kitbughā and the Restoration of Nizām ........................................... 158

Lājīn and the Manipulation of Nizām ............................................ 162

The Struggle for Nizām in the Aftermath of Lājīn ......................... 167

Nizām under al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and the Problem of Baybars
al-Jāshnakīr ................................................................. 170

Conclusion ................................................................. 175

Chapter 7 – Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and the Rule of Nizām (1309 – 1341/710 – 741) ................................................................. 179

Baybars II al-Jāshnakīr, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and the Politics of Seniority ................................................................. 182

Al-Nāṣir and the Mansūriyyah ...................................................... 189

Punishment and Rehabilitation under al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ........ 190

Al-Nāṣir’s Patronage of the Mansūriyyah ..................................... 197

Al-Nāṣir and the Nāṣirīyyah .......................................................... 200

Conclusion ................................................................. 204

Chapter 8 – Conclusion ................................................................. 207

Appendix I ................................................................. 223

Early Mamluk Rulers ................................................................. 223

Appendix II ................................................................. 225

Careerism in the Early Mamluk State ........................................... 225
Contents

Glossary ........................................... 233
Bibliography ....................................... 235
  Manuscript Primary Sources ................. 235
  Printed Primary Sources ..................... 237
  Select Secondary Sources ................. 241
Preface

Once in a faculty-student seminar in the Department of Oriental Studies at Princeton University half a century ago, I heard a Middle Eastern sociologist remark condescendingly to a Middle Eastern historian—who happened to be my mentor—“You tell us what the texts say and we’ll tell you what they mean.” This comment also echoed a constant theme of departmental graduate advisors who argued that area studies students without a discipline—“conceptual framework” was the term they used—were little more than philologists and translators. Furthermore, it seemed that only the frameworks of the “hard social sciences” of sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics could structure inchoate philology and mindless empiricism. This was my first encounter with a dispute with roots in nineteenth century philosophical-historical polemics that would soon become intertwined with the discourses of “orientalism.” The spirit of this remark, which made such a deep impression on me then, nevertheless still stalks the halls of the American academy long after many of us believed that our field of study had somehow come of age.

Fifteen years later, as a faculty member in the Department of History at the University of Chicago, I first became aware of Winslow Williams Clifford (1954 – 2009; see his obituary in Mamluk Studies Review 13.2, 2009)—known as Wyn to his friends and colleagues—in 1976 when he matriculated into the Department as a student of Byzantine history. I noted his arrival since, as a Byzantinist, he was considered an “exotic,” as non-Americanist, non-Europeanist faculty and students were referred to at that time in the Department. His interest in Islamic history was stimulated in the course of writing his master’s thesis “The Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon” under the supervision of Walter Kaegi on social conditions in Byzantium at the time of the Arab Muslim conquest and when he was admitted to the doctoral program, he decided to shift from one exotic field to another and began to work formally and informally with Halil Inalcık, Stephen Humphreys, Fred Donner, Carl Petry, Bruce Craig, and me. His proposed dissertation topic in 1981, “Byzantines and Fatimids: Imperial Eclipse, 1096 – 1080” was the first explicit indication of that shift.
The appearance of Ralph-Johannes Lilie’s *Byzanz und die Kreuzzfahrer-
staaten: Studien zur Politik des Byzantinischen Reiches gegenüber den Staaten
der Kreuzzfahrer in Syrien und Palästina bis zum Vierten Kreuzzug (1096 – 1204)*
in 1981, of which he had been unaware at the time of his proposal hearing, caused
him to reassess the feasibility of his original topic. He then consulted with Claude
Cahen about the possibility of producing a study on Byzantine relations with the
Anatolian Saljuqs, but the senior scholar dissuaded him from pursuing this
avenue of research. He had already begun to develop and interest in the Mamluk
period as the result of participating in a colloquium on the Mamluk Empire of
Egypt and Syria from Carl Petry, who was visiting Chicago from Northwestern
University, and preparing a paper for me in a seminar on the Safavids, “A
Preliminary Survey of Mamluk-Safavi Relation” that was eventually published in
two parts in volume 70 of *Der Islam* as “Some Observations on the Course of
he radically reformulated his topic as “The Northern Salient: Mamluk Anatolian
Frontier Policy, 1260 – 1461” that somehow morphed over the ensuing decade
into his dissertation “State Formation and the Structure of Politics in Mamluk

It seems fairly clear that between 1983 and 1994, Wyn Clifford read incredibly
broadly and deeply in sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics
especially as these disciplines studied and proposed theories of conflict, ex-
traction and distribution, patronage and clienthood and host of other issues. I
had always realized that he was a phenomenal autodidact—a quality also un-
derscored by some of his undergraduate teachers—and I was very enthusiastic
when he told me of his intention to apply these social science conceptual
frameworks to the analysis of Mamluk politics from the establishment of the
polity to the end of the third reign of al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. The em-
pirical foundations of the study were likewise very sound and the members of his
committee were quite pleased with what appeared to be a highly original con-
tribution to knowledge, unique for its time. Clifford was not a master philologist
and did not pursue the study of language as an end in itself; rather he approached
such study pragmatically and on a need-to-know basis—his success in doing so
is amply and competently reflected in his use of sources in “Some Observations
on the Course of Mamluk-Safavi Relations.” I now am delighted that Bonn
University is publishing his dissertation in its Mamluk Studies series as a part of
Annemarie Schimmel Kolleg for the History and Society of the Mamluk Era,
1250 – 1517 almost twenty years after its completion. My only regret is that he did
not live long enough to experience the reception of his work by a much wider
audience. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that Winslow Clifford has told us both what the texts say as well as what they mean.

John E. Woods

Chicago 2012
Chapter 1 – Introduction

Mamluk studies has emerged over the last half century to become a cutting edge in Middle Eastern historical research. Ironically, despite the accumulation of interest in Mamluk civilization, little meaningful attention has actually been paid to the Mamluks themselves. Certainly their most essential creation and identification as a ruling elite – the Mamluk state – remains a vague, static, and unpersuasive concept in the scholarly literature. The root of this problem lies ultimately in the philosophical distinction drawn by nineteenth century social thinkers between modern society as the result of industrialization and pre-modern society as the product of militarization. Consequently most scholars, perhaps unwittingly, have tended to view the typical Middle East state as functionally military, a war-making apparatus largely devoid of principles of social organization and process. By defining the projection of military power as the fundamental rationale of the state, scholars have effectively reduced the study of the Mamluk state to the study of its own military institution. This has been a false economy, however, for it has merely reinforced the determinist framework of traditional scholarship in which the study of World History since the Middle Ages has been reduced to the question of how Western states developed their competitive edge in national power, then projected it globally. Historians have tended to identify non-Western states, including Islamic ones, in terms of their divergence from the nonnative Western trajectory, often construing such divergence as failure. Thus, while Western states are seen as dynamic, complex and functional, Islamic states are viewed discursively as static, simplistic and unworkable.

To the extent that scholars have contemplated the Mamluk sultanate a state at all, it has been mainly as a state of nature, a reflection of the atavistic tendencies of the Mamluks themselves. Indeed, scholars have liked to invoke the image of random, uncontrollable Mamluk violence as proof of the general incoherence of the Mamluk state and, by extension, its unsuitability for serious study. Of course, the naive characterization of the Mamluk state as a vast military barracks squares nicely with the historicist interpretation of late medieval Syro-Egypt as
yet another expectably dysfunctional non-Western polity, responsive only to the crude militarized discipline of what is sometimes called “Oriental despotism.”

Violence, however, was never the true cement of the early Mamluk state. Yet, by defining the Mamluk state entirely in terms of its externalized military structure, scholars have obfuscated the real internal sociopolitical structures which in fact integrated and sustained the late medieval Syro-Egyptian state, including as a military power. This has all but precluded the development of a political sociology or anthropology of the Mamluks themselves. Analytically, the Mamluk state remains a “black box,” a sociocultural system whose codes and mechanisms of political behavior have gone largely unobserved by scholars because they are thought to be largely unobservable. To most scholars Mamluk social action has seemed to be merely pathological and, therefore, essentially inexplicable. Yet, some explanation is clearly due since scholars have also routinely acknowledged the Mamluk sultanate as the most powerful and unitary of the post-Classical Abbasid states. This raises the central but, as yet, unaddressed paradox of Mamluk history: how could a society in the grip of chronic anarchy have maintained its unity for almost three centuries as the premier central Islamic state of the late medieval period? In particular, were the Mamluk “slave rulers” of late medieval Syro-Egypt themselves enslaved, as many have supposed, to compulsive zero-sum competition?

The purpose of this dissertation is to address this paradox of Mamluk state formation by demonstrating that, like Western states, the late medieval Syro-Egyptian state was in fact a rational sociopolitical structure, not an amorphous polity driven blindly by jungle law. The Mamluks were authentic state builders attempting to preserve rather than destroy internal order. Far from embracing a Hobbesian “war of all against all” the Mamluks cultivated a manageable system of interaction meant precisely to reduce the cost of their internal politics, that is, to inhibit violence and resolve conflict by ensuring a reasonably equitable distribution of resources and rotation of power within the ruling elite. By creating a dialectic between organization and distribution of resources, the Mamluks were, in fact, consciously structuring social power. The capacity of the Mamluk amirs and their retinues to organize themselves efficiently as a credible ruling elite proved the first and most crucial step in the formation of the Classical Mamluk Syro-Egyptian state. This dissertation will analyze this achievement during the early period (1250–1340/648–741) by demonstrating, first, the microsocial processes of interactionism and exchange which largely shaped Mamluk political relations and, second, the macrostructural constraint placed, in turn, on those microprocesses by a belief in moral economy and constitutional order. In this particular regard, the dissertation is also intended as a contribution to the structure-agency controversy which has driven social theory for more than a century.
The key to analyzing early Mamluk state formation lies principally in rationalizing the pattern of social conflict for which the Mamluks have become so notorious and yet so little understood. In this regard, modern social action theory, which seeks to discern just such hidden macrostructures and micro-processes of human agency, provides an indispensable framework for studying the often contradictory relationship of power and values to issues of dominance, submission, dissent and resistance within society. It is important to note in this regard that social theory itself is now undergoing a sea change in its traditional conceptualization of human behavior. Theorists, once obliged to choose between rigid concepts of society as either intrinsically stable or unstable, now recognize that social action is delimited by problems of both, and that it is increasingly unprofitable to dichotomize such action into mutually exclusive doctrines of change vs. system; conflict vs. integration; individual vs. collective; or ideology vs. utility. The reality of human organization, including state formation, lies, then, somewhere between Durkheim’s social facts and Bentham’s maximization of utility. Historical analysis, heading into the next century, must learn to incorporate into its method this search for a practical synthesis of microsocial agency and macrosocial structure – the so-called “micro-macro link.”

Indeed, it is already possible to distill from current social theory a rational model for conflict-oriented societies such as the Mamluk, one independent of historicist notions of inherent dysfunction. The foundation of this model lies in a systems analysis of political behavior, which demonstrates how a social system manages internal stress through continuous communication and feedback among its members. This constant interlinked flow of action/response/reaction – the feedback loop – creates not a constant but a dynamic equilibrium in society, allowing the political system to persist over time. The early Mamluk state was a sociopolitical system in dynamic equilibrium, though scholars, profoundly misunderstanding its basic structure, have typically characterized it as either anarchic or despotic. The Mamluk state persisted over time as a powerful unitary polity through its ability to anticipate and convert normal social conflict (fitnah) into actions which helped to preserve state structure. Internal stability emerged not from the suppression but rather the toleration and even accommodation of the process of grievance and its redress by elements within the paramilitary ruling elite. Challengers were allowed to dissent publically and to seek change in the dialectic of organization and distribution of resources – the structure of social power – in order to give them an incentive to continue operating within the current state structure. It was the operation of this effective feedback loop which prevented the Mamluk state from fissioning into a pre-state condition during its first century.

Grievance was communicated within the Mamluk ruling elite through
“structured violence.” By structuring violence, that is to say, by symbolizing dissent through displays of limited paramilitary action, both regime and challenger could “negotiate” a settlement of grievance without risking the collapse of the state itself into a spiral of real and probably uncontrollable competitive violence. The negative feedback of structured violence both set the organic limits to social conflict and made possible the conflict resolution upon which Mamluk political culture was based and upon which the early Mamluk state depended for its integrity. By suggesting a certain role complementarity between regime and opposition, moreover, the concept of dynamic equilibrium avoids stigmatizing the feedback loop of internal political change as either anarchy or despotism.

The premium placed by Mamluks on the interaction and exchange of negotiating internal order suggests, furthermore, that sociopolitical equilibrium itself was based less on gratuitous moral appeal to norms of individual loyalty or collective ethnic solidarity than on a pragmatic appeal to individual and, indeed, collective utility. The Mamluk elite possessed a collective appreciation of its moral economy based on equitable access to a hierarchy of rank and privilege founded on seniority. By cultivating this sense of collective pragmatic solidarity, the state possessed a mechanism for minimizing dissension and even fissionist tendencies within the elite, thereby forestalling the devolution of late medieval Syro-Egypt into the pre-state condition of chieftaincy and warlordism.

This sense of moral economy was of course embedded in the “machine” politics of universal patronage practiced by most early Mamluk regimes. Indeed, the late medieval Syro-Egyptian state can be understood as a patronate, a vast clientelistic structure geared primarily toward mediating the reciprocal flow of loyalty and benefit within the ruling elite. Mamluks were integrated into nonascriptive paramilitary clienteles chiefly in terms of dyadic or two-party exchange – service (khidmah) for benefit (ni‘mah). Horizontal or corporate solidarity, rendered by purely moral expressions such as, for instance, fraternity (khushdāshiyyah) or ethnicity (jinsiyyah), existed but largely in a normative sense; in the end they, too, were underpinned by the utility of exchange. The sociopolitical phenomenon of khushdāshiyyah was important, however, as the basis of an age class system, a mechanism by which the Mamluks regulated the distribution and rotation of power on the objective basis of seniority. The natural cycling or Paretoan “circulation” of these horizontal age classes and the continuous vertical exchange of universal patronage created a certain basic equilibrium in the political system. The effective operation of this seniority-based clientage system was equivalent to what the early Mamluks called the constitutional order (nizām) of their state; it was the practical yardstick by which they measured the legitimacy of all regimes (duwal).

Social conflict was closely intertwined, of course, in the dialectic of organization and distribution of resources represented by nizām. Conflict, it must be
realized, was a purposeful and even constructive element of Mamluk socio-political culture; such negative feedback allowed the ruling elite to determine and adapt power relationships internally within a state lacking formal political institutions or authority structures. Most social conflict within the ruling elite broke out in response to a breakdown in the proper operation of “machine” patronage; even those amirs who manipulated these situations for personal gain were careful to do so under the guise of restoring nizām. For although the Mamluk umarāʾ were basically risk-averse, they were prepared to act collectively in defense of what they believed to be their common patrimonial rights (ḥuqūq, sing. haqq) when they felt (or could be persuaded) that they were threatened. In this sense, social conflict was an organic remedy to perceived threat to the moral economy of the elite as a whole. This collective sense of moral economy, guaranteed by the operation of nizām, acted on the Mamluks as a macrostructural constraint, legitimating certain issues in the structuring of social power while limiting the degree and form of conflict over them.

For dissent within the ruling Mamluk elite was normally effected not through uncontrolled mass violence but rather the agonistics or ritual display of staged rebellions and pantomime warfare – the political theatre of structured violence. Dissidents who ignored these limitations and engaged in non-consensual violence or who pushed fitnah to the brink of genuine internal warfare were themselves often liquidated, sometimes by their own fraternal associates or khushdāshiyyah. By the same token, those in authority felt constrained, too, in their application of violence. Indeed, rulers who relied arbitrarily on coercive force (sayf) to impose their own political will were reviled by the elite as a whole. Tyranny was a weakness, ironically, not a strength in the formation of the early Mamluk state. Sultans, successful ones anyway, did not operate as Oriental despots. Rather they, along with other responsible patron-leaders among the umarāʾ, acted as “gatekeepers,” empowered to use limited coercive measures only to preserve the proper organization and distribution of resources represented by notions of haqq and nizām. Those who overstepped their constitutional mandate were normally brought down efficiently through the relatively bloodless pronunciamiento, i.e., the collective withdrawal of support by the paramilitary elite, rather than the destructive and uncertain process of real civil war.

This natural aversion to unconstrained violence was complemented in the Mamluk political system by the desire to rehabilitate dissidents and restore them as acceptable role partners. There were few “unpersons” in the early Mamluk state. Most participants in the structured conflict of fitnah suffered little, by and large, except temporary sanction on status and wealth; even rebellious patron-leaders were rarely punished intentionally with death. Detention and confiscation were preferred as standard mechanisms of social control precisely
because they were revocable; they allowed a regime to counter a challenge without having to destroy the challengers themselves and, thus, provoke more serious unrestrained violence. The degree and manner in which dissidents broke the political rules ultimately determined the way in which they were punished, if at all. Concepts of forgiveness (‘afū) and reconciliation (sulḥ) were crucial to the proper functioning of niẓām, as crucial as the concept of benefit (ni‘mah).

The principles and codes of sociopolitical behavior which characterized Mamluk elite culture can be seen as early as the reign of the first real ruler of Mamluk Syro-Egypt, al-Malik al-Zāhir Baybars (1260 – 1277/658 – 676). Though scholars have long acknowledged Baybars as the “founder” of the Mamluk sultanate, they have not explained satisfactorily that foundation, affecting to see in his achievement only the perfection of despotic practices. Baybars in fact based the Mamluk state on principles of constitutional order or niẓām. Conscious of the failure of his predecessors to structure social power effectively during the 1250’s, Baybars realized that neither arbitrary force nor patronage were likely to lead to a stable consensus for his sultanate among the ethnically and regionally diverse Syro-Egyptian paramilitary elite. His solution was “machine” politics, to embed his authority in a widespread and reasonably equitable system of state patronage based on the principle of seniority. In addition to the practices of mass patronage, Baybars also practiced techniques of conflict resolution, negotiating with important aggrieved patron-leaders in order to terminate their ritualized disorders (fitan) before they reached the tipping point into real civil war. Most offenders experienced only the limited methods of social control – detention and confiscation; only against small, isolated challengers, whose treatment were unlikely to offend the collective sensibilities of the elite as a whole, was Baybars tempted to be repressive.

The subsequent longevity and relative harmony of the reigns of Baybars’ two most important successors, Qalāwūn, and Qalāwūn’s son, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, were based largely on adherence to this pattern of constitutional order or niẓām. Kitbughā, too, showed great skill for a time in restoring the niẓām of the state in the aftermath of al-Ashraf Khalīl’s messy overthrow through the restoration of equitable patronage and techniques of conflict resolution. Though others of Baybars’ successors did not fully replicate his principles of rulership, the Mamluk elite itself continued to uphold Baybars’ legacy. Attempted deviations from niẓām by rulers were almost universally opposed and punished by an elite increasingly conscious of its patrimonial rights or moral economy. Even the 1290’s and early 1300’s, often considered the hightide of Mamluk anarchy in the early period, witnessed a continuing commitment by the Mamluk umara’ to the preservation of constitutional practices based on techniques of patronage, structured violence and conflict resolution. Rulers who were seen to deviate from these key principles of niẓām – al-Ashraf Khalīl, Lājin, Baybars al-Jāsh-
nakīr, finally even Kitbughā – all succumbed ultimately to their perceived failure at gatekeeping.

The way in which the Mamluks structured their social power can be seen mainly through the microsociology of symbolic interactionism and exchange, though the operation of these microprocesses was affected in turn by legitimating macrosocial considerations of moral economy and constitutional order. This reduced the cost of internal politics and discouraged fissionist tendencies within the Mamluk ruling elite which might have returned late medieval Syro-Egypt to a pre-state condition. Like many polities in the modern developing world, the early Mamluk state was a “soft state” where, in the absence of formal regulatory institutions, both social indiscipline and mass corruption, in the form of patronage, were exploited to help preserve state structure. Whether medieval or modern, the process of state formation seems to generate similar structural profiles. The origins of the modern Egyptian state, for instance, have often been apprehended in the sociopolitical changes of the late eighteenth/twelfth and early nineteenth/thirteenth centuries, for which the career of Muhammad Ali is often the shorthand. Yet, the structure of social power in modern post-Nasserist Egypt bears many similarities to the much earlier Classical Mamluk Syro-Egyptian state: the central importance of a ruling paramilitary elite and what is called its “embourgeoisement” as the main support of internal political stability; the co-existence of charismatic patrimonial tendencies with constitutional ones; self-imposed limitations on the use of coercion by the ruler; the toleration of limited political opposition; the lack of strong political institutions as bases of power; the inability of powerful patron-leaders to mobilize the elite for political operations perceived as having little legitimacy; the displacement of normative, ideological credentials of loyalty for ones based on clientelistic and kinship relations; the mediation of political competition through internal negotiation; the use of patronage and corruption as mechanisms of social control; even the extension of clientage relations downward as a link between the elite and the masses. In seeking the basic structural antecedents of the modern Egyptian state, then, one must look beyond the early nineteenth/thirteenth century, back to the foundations of the early Mamluk state in the late thirteenth/seventh and early fourteenth/eighth centuries.
“To the (Mamluk) historian, the (political) procedure was probably obvious, but not to us.”

Sir John Glubb, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Story of the Mamlukes*

“The ‘disorder’ of a jungle becomes a scientific order to the properly equipped biologist.”


Once viewed as little more than a post-colonial contrivance, the modern Arab state has finally begun to elicit attention as an authentic institution. To promote this organic notion certain scholars have recently begun to theorize about a macrostructure of the Arab state. The hallmark of this new thinking has been to deconstruct unflattering notions about Middle Eastern politics derived from nineteenth century Orientalist perspectives said to question the stability, rationality and integrity of indigenous sociopolitical structures.¹

Implicit in this search for a theory of the modern Arab state is of course a search for the historic origin of state formation in the Islamic Middle East generally, though few theorists have as yet called for a serious integration of historical analysis into the study of the Arab state.² Issues of state formation have been subsumed largely by social history, which has sought to champion the study of marginal social groups by minimizing the importance of ruling elites. E. Picard, for instance, has criticized the study of modern Arab military elites as reductionist.³ J. Tucker has gone so far as to suggest that the study of such elites

---

ultimately reveals little about the historic structure of Middle Eastern states; she
seems especially perturbed by the close association of Egyptian history with the
study of its own ruling military elites.4

Yet, as C. Enloe has observed, the study of state formation in the modern
developing world has already begun to gravitate away from the notion of the
nation-state and back toward the state itself, that is to say, toward the assumption
that polities with coherent political structures can function in the absence of
popular participation or even support. As a result, the core element of these
statist polities – the military bureaucrat – has reemerged as an important ele-
ment of social analysis. From an historical perspective Enloe has concluded that
the study of these statist groups can now be considered “most fruitful,” since
many of these polities have evolved over centuries and preserved both institu-
tional and attitudinal legacies from pre-colonial state systems.5

Enloe’s observations resonate with important current thinking on the mod-
ern Arab state. H. Sharabi’s theory of “neopatriarchy”, for instance, accepts the
deep and increasingly unbridgeable divide between nation and state in Arab
society. Since the 1960’s the petty bourgeoisie have become opposed to what
Sharabi calls the “modern sultanate”. The withering of genuine, ideology-driven
multi party politics has led to “a sliding-back to new forms of the petty sultanate
based, as in the past, on unrestricted personal power, but rendered virtually
impregnable … by the modern apparatus of control now available to the state.”
The failure of “modern etatist sultanism” to make effective use of its control over
industry, finance and social services has led to the impoverishment and alien-
ation of the masses.6

Yet, what are the statist origins of Sharabi’s “modern sultanate”? On the one
hand, political scientists, who have traditionally endorsed the importance of
paramilitary ruling elites in the formation of modern developing states, have had
little to say about the historic origins of such groups and their social structures;7

4 Judith E. Tucker, “Taming the West: Trends in the Writing of Modern Arab Social History in
Anglophone Academia,” in Theory, Politics and the Arab World: Critical Responses, ed. His-
ham Sharabi (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 204 – 05.
5 Cynthia H. Enloe, “Ethnicity in the Evolution of Asia’s Armed Bureaucracies,” in Ethnicity and
the Military in Asia, ed. DeWitt C. Ellinwood and Cynthia H. Enloe (New Brunswick and
(London: F. Cass, 1972); Rene Lemarchand, “African Armies in Historical and Contemporary
Perspectives: The Search for Connections,” Journal of Political and Military Sociology 4
6 Hisham Sharabi, Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society (New York and
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 59 – 60. This separation of nation from state can be
seen in the analysis of the modern Iranian state as well, see Said Amir Arjomand, The Turban
for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1988), 198.
7 Amos Perlmutter, The Military and Politics in Modern Times (New Haven and London: Yale
this has of course been the case especially concerning Middle Eastern states.⁸ On the other hand, social historians, attempting to reify marginalized social groups, have overlooked the fact that marginalization is an issue which also affects elites. How such elites resolve issues of domination, submission, inequality, dissent, resistance and solidarity among themselves in the process of state formation are essentially unknown, at least historically speaking. The failure of political scientists and social historians alike to provide a political sociology or anthropology of such historic paramilitary ruling elites in the Middle East constrains

any meaningful analysis of the modern Arab state itself. Indeed, the late M. Janowitz, a leading sociologist of military institutions, singled out Middle East scholarship for particular criticism in this regard:

Scholarship on Muslim military institutions has been mainly descriptive … Analytical and comparative studies have not been pursued with vigor or intensity since the intellectual ferment of comparative history and comparative sociology has been slow to manifest itself for this area, at least slower than for other areas of the world.

One exception which Janowitz noted with some approval was the work of E. Be’eri, whose massive comparative sociology of the modern Arab officer corps remains a valuable introduction to the subject. Yet, typically, one issue with which Be’eri also struggled was the historic origin of the armed bureaucrat. The

---


11 Be’eri, Army Officers in Arab Politics and Society.
problem was complicated by his own insistence that the modern Middle Eastern officer “is a new social type, a member of a new social group” and that, anyway, the concept of officer corps is “a product of the nineteenth century”. However, using as a framework the influential theoretical study of the political scientist S. Huntington on the civil-military relationship, Be’eri believed that he saw “important precedents” for the modern Arab state in late medieval Mamluk Syria-Egypt. The Mamluks, Be’eri decided, fit pretty well Huntington’s criteria for a professional officer corps, and he concluded:

The influence of previous patterns and relationships is always the source of conscious or unconscious imitation … knowledge of it (the Mamluk elite) is essential for understanding the social grouping and development of the contemporary Arab army officer corps.12

Be’eri, however, did not himself attempt to articulate a political sociology of the Mamluks, deferring apparently to his colleague, D. Ayalon, the founder of modern Mamluk studies. Yet, Ayalon as early as 1953 seems to have attempted to close off discussion on the usefulness of just such inquiry into the structure and dynamic of sociopolitics in the Syro-Egyptian Mamluk state:

… coalitions and combinations of forces, of which Mamluk historiography records many instances … were generally of the most temporary nature, and the stability of each sultan’s rule was to a large extent dependent on his ability to take full advantage of the rivalry among the various units. A detailed presentation of the vast material supplied on this type by Mamluk sources is of no special interest.13

Mamluk specialists have since raised little objection to Ayalon’s judgment.14 Yet, Ayalon’s treatment of Mamluk sociopolitics clearly falls into the category specifically criticized by Janowitz as merely “descriptive.”15 To be fair, however, few scholars have displayed much sensitivity toward an analytical approach to the study of pre-modern Middle Eastern elites.16 Certainly what little analysis that

15 Ayalon, “Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army (1),” 205, speaks himself in terms of the value of the “description of political strife” as “one of the pivotal points of Mamluk historiography.”
16 Some exceptions are: Richard W. Bulliett, Patricians of Nishapur: A Study in Medieval Islamic Social History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); Roy Mottahedeh, Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Ira M. Lapidus, Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge: Harvard Uni-
has occurred has failed as yet to shed much light on the Mamluk case.\textsuperscript{17} This has not inhibited some, however, from trying to treat the \textit{mamlûk} phenomenon authoritatively; E. Gellner has even adduced a \textit{mamlûk} typology, his so-called “\textit{mamluk} solution,” to the problem of tribalism and state formation in the pre-modern Middle East. Though his notions are stimulating it is premature to evaluate a system without understanding much about its actual internal historical structure and dynamic.\textsuperscript{18}

Of the Mamluks themselves we continue on the whole to embrace a highly negative stereotype, though one carefully fabricated over many centuries. The Mamluk elite has been heir to an historic, especially anti-Turkish sentiment in Egypt and elsewhere in the central Islamic lands stretching back at least to the early tenth/fourth century.\textsuperscript{19} This negative sentiment was impressed on Western consciousness particularly in the aftermath of Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion and occupation of Syro-Egypt. Directory France, to whom the Mamluk elite appeared as little more than a local chapter of the \textit{ancien regime}, viewed the Mamluks as violent, unprincipled and ultimately incapable of enlightened rule, though their negative perspective was undoubtedly coloured by Mamluk resistance to expanded French commercial activity in the Levant.\textsuperscript{20}

The Mamluk stereotype, unfortunately, has changed little since the end of the eighteenth/twelfth century. Gamal Abdel Nasser, who himself finished off the vestigial Mamluk state in 1952, revived for modern mass consumption the hysterical vilification of the Mamluks. In his main revolutionary text, 	extit{Falsafat al-thawrah}, Nasser denounced the Mamluks as wild, predatory beasts gratifying their rapacious whims in a senseless orgy of destruction and mayhem. They were culpable, he charged, of nothing less than the systemic social, political, economic and even moral devolution of Egypt.\textsuperscript{21} Though few are prepared to embrace such extreme Nasserite views any longer, modern scholarship has been unable to resist altogether the continuing gratuitous appeal of the negative Mamluk image.

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
R. Hinnebusch, for instance, in his recent assessment of modern Syrian politics believes that the Syrian military, whatever its faults, at least possesses the singular virtue of not being “simply some new Mamluk class.”

Clearly the prejudicial Mamluk stereotype has been not only a useable but even welcome rhetorical device, serving colonialists and anti-colonialists, foreign scholars and indigenous politicians alike. As a consequence of this historic objection to Mamluks, we have come to derive an equally negative image of the Classical Mamluk state (1250 – 1517/648 – 922) itself. Scholars remain largely satisfied with the concept of the late medieval Syro-Egyptian state as an amorphous polity where the natural tide of anarchy could be contained only periodically by the imposition of raw Oriental despotism; driving this chaos, it is felt, was the gratuitous violence practiced by alien militarists steeped in the atavistic traditions of the Eurasian steppe.

Yet, such casual appeal to the blind inner compulsions of men driven by jungle law seems *prima facie* much too simplistic an evaluation of the Mamluk state. Indeed, scholars in other historical fields have already rejected such uncritical, stock interpretations. Asian historians, for instance, have begun to illuminate the once dark structural corners of social action among Far Eastern military ruling elites by appealing to a “new logic” for interpreting seemingly wanton violence and disorder. In so doing, they have helped to make their respective periods more intelligible as a whole. In the study of Muromachi Japan, itself coeval with Mamluk Syro-Egypt, J. W. Hall, has concluded:

> We have come a long way toward a better understanding of the politics of the Muromachi period. What was once a barely credible history of erratic and arbitrary acts by power-hungry rulers or of unprincipled treachery by ‘turncoat’ vassals now takes on new logic and meaning when interpreted in terms of conflicting power structures and clashing political interests at the national and local levels. Above all, we are brought to a realization that the Muromachi bakufu did not exist in a vacuum.

The modern Chinese historian, H. Ch’i, has remarked similarly about late Imperial China:

> We will demonstrate that politics in the 1916–28 period is not nearly as hopelessly confusing as has been generally assumed. The militarists were quite shrewd and calculating, and they followed rules in dealing with each other. Once their rules and norms are deciphered, it is easier to comprehend their political behavior.

---