

**ROBERT IRWIN**  
LONDON, ENGLAND

## **Under Western Eyes: A History of Mamluk Studies**

The exotic and savage Mamluks, the despotic sultans, their vast and extravagant harems, the political murders, the sanguinary punishments, the mounted skirmishes in the shadow of the pyramids, the moonlight picnics in the City of the Dead, the carnival festivities at the time of the flooding of the Nile, the wild dervish *mawliids* . . . .

Is there not something paradoxical in the fact that the Mamluks owe their survival in modern memory to men (mostly) who were and are for the most part quiet and solitary scholars, much more familiar with the book than the sword? I have not punched anyone since I was a schoolboy. Yet, when, as a research student, I looked for a thesis topic, I was hooked by Steven Runciman's description of the sultan Baybars I. According to the doyen of Crusading history, Baybars "had few of the qualities that won Saladin respect even from his foes. He was cruel, disloyal and treacherous, rough in his manners and harsh in his speech. . . . As a man he was evil, but as a ruler he was among the greatest of his time."<sup>1</sup> (Peter Thorau, of course, has since offered a slightly more benign view.)

Many of those who have studied the Mamluks have not done so out of liking for them. Edward Gibbon, who was a contemporary of the Mamluks (or neo-Mamluks, if you prefer), put the case against them in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-78): "A more unjust and absurd constitution cannot be devised than that which condemns the natives of a country to perpetual servitude under the arbitrary dominion of strangers and slaves. Yet such has been the state of Egypt above five hundred years." Gibbon went on to contrast the "rapine and bloodshed" of the Mamluks with their "discipline and valour."<sup>2</sup>

---

©Middle East Documentation Center. The University of Chicago.

<sup>1</sup>Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, vol. 3, *The Kingdom of Acre and the Later Crusades* (Cambridge, 1955), 348. This work is listed as no. 2158 in the *Chicago Mamluk Studies* bibliography. However, from this point on, since this article ranges so widely over the extensive range of Mamluk studies, references in my notes will usually only be given to works which, for one reason or another, have not been listed in the excellent *Mamluk Studies: A Bibliography of Secondary Source Materials* (Middle East Documentation Center, the University of Chicago, October 1998 and in progress).

<sup>2</sup>Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London, 1912), 6:377-78.

Article: [http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR\\_IV\\_2000-Irwin.pdf](http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MSR_IV_2000-Irwin.pdf)

Full volume: [http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MamlukStudiesReview\\_IV\\_2000.pdf](http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/MamlukStudiesReview_IV_2000.pdf)



©2000 by the author. (Disregard notice of MEDOC copyright.) This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). *Mamluk Studies Review* is an Open Access journal. See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for information.

Constantin-Francois de Chassebouef, comte de Volney (1757-1820), took a similarly bleak view of the Mamluk system as he knew it in his own time: "how numerous must be the abuses of unlimited powers in the great, who are strangers both to forbearance and to pity, in upstarts proud of authority and eager to profit by it, and in subalterns continually aiming at greater power."<sup>3</sup> Volney's writings, his *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie* (1787) and his *Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions* (1791), helped to direct predatory French interests in the direction of Egypt and are part of the background to Bonaparte's expedition there in 1798. Famously (or notoriously, if one happens to be of Edward Said's party) Bonaparte took a team of savants with him. Of course, the past which most attracted these scholars was the Pharaonic one. However, a few interested themselves in the history of the medieval Mamluks, if only for latter-day utilitarian reasons. Jean-Michel Venture de Paradis had helped Volney with his *Voyage en Égypte et Syrie*. Having come across a manuscript of Khalīl al-Zāhirī's *Zubdat Kashf al-Mamālik* in Paris, he went on to produce a stylish, if erratic, translation of it. Venture de Paradis studied the Egypt of Barsbāy and Jaqmaq, the better to understand the same country under Murād and Ibrāhīm Bey, and he subsequently took part in the 1798 expedition to Egypt and took a leading role in the researches of the Institut d'Égypte.<sup>4</sup>

The French who landed in Egypt in 1798 and who went on to invade Palestine were intensely conscious of the fact that Frenchmen had been there before them. The history of the Mamluks was for a long time ancillary to the study of the Crusades and of the fortunes of France in the Levant. In the eighteenth century, religious scholars belonging to the Maurist order had played the leading role in editing documents relating to the history of France and therefore also relating to the history of French Crusades. In the course of the French Revolution, the Maurist Superior-General was guillotined and the order was dissolved. When monarchy was restored the Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres was set up to continue the work of the Maurists. Quatremère and Reinaud, who had oriental interests, were both members of the founding committee of five. They, among other tasks, oversaw the publication of the *Recueil des historiens des croisades*, which, in its volumes devoted to *Historiens orientaux*,<sup>5</sup> offered translated extracts from chronicles by Abū al-Fidā and Abū Shāmāh covering the early years of the

---

<sup>3</sup>Volney cited in Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East* (London, 1980), 85-86.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Gaulmier, ed., *La Zubda Kachf al-Mamālik de Khalīl az-Zāhirī, Traduction inédite de Venture de Paradis* (Beirut, 1950).

<sup>5</sup>Paris, 1872-1906.

Baḥrī Mamluk Sultanate. However, the oriental volumes of the *Recueil* were overwhelmingly weighted to coverage of the edifying career of that chivalrous paladin, Saladin.

Even so, others were editing and sometimes translating texts which had a bearing on Mamluk history, such as Ibn ‘Arabshāh’s *‘Ajā’ib al-Maḡdūr*. Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) was the grandest and most influential orientalist of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before the Revolution he had worked for the Royal Mint and he had strong prejudices about money. It was, I think, because of this that in 1796 he published a translation of al-Maḡrīzī’s *Shudhūr al-‘Uḡud*, since, as Silvestre de Sacy saw it, the fifteenth-century Egyptian historian was an ally in the latter’s argument against contemporary French ministers and bankers, who were so foolish as to believe that there must be a fixed rate of exchange between gold and silver.<sup>6</sup> Silvestre de Sacy (who was a much more polemical orientalist than Saïd has allowed) also took up cudgels against Montesquieu’s account of oriental despotisms and the notion that there were no real property rights under such despotisms. In his exceedingly scholarly polemic, Silvestre de Sacy drew heavily again on al-Maḡrīzī, making much reference this time to the *Khiṭaṭ*.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore the *Chrestomathie de la langue arabe* (1806) included biographical notices of al-Maḡrīzī by al-Sakhāwī and Ibn Taghrībirdī.

Silvestre de Sacy seems to have transmitted his enthusiasm for al-Maḡrīzī to his distinguished pupil, Étienne-Marc Quatremère (1782-1857). Quatremère studied and taught Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic, and he also had a strong interest in Coptic and Pharaonic Egyptian. Despite his wide range of interests and publications, he was the first to devote serious and sustained study to the Mamluks. His edition and translation of al-Maḡrīzī’s *Kitāb al-Sulūk* under the title *Histoire des sultans mamlouks de l’Égypte*<sup>8</sup> is an example of text as pretext, being not so much a work of history as of philology. Although al-Maḡrīzī is a useful source for his own lifetime, Quatremère, who was not primarily a historian, chose to translate the *Sulūk* for the early Mamluk period, since obviously the fortunes of Baybars, Qalāwūn and al-Ashraf Khalīl overlapped with those of the Crusaders. (The only reason that Quatremère did not start with al-Maḡrīzī on the Fatimids and Ayyubids was because it was planned that those sections of the *Sulūk* should go in the

<sup>6</sup>Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, *Traité des monnoies musulmanes* (Paris, 1797).

<sup>7</sup>Silvestre de Sacy, “Sur la nature et les révolutions du droit de propriété territoriale en Égypte, depuis la conquête de ce pays par les musulmans jusqu’à l’expédition de François,” part 1, *Mémoires de l’Institut Royal de France, classe d’histoire et de littérature ancienne*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1815), 1-165; part 2, *Mémoires de l’Institut Royal de France, académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1821); part 3, *Mémoires de l’Institut Royal de France, académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, vol. 7 (Paris, 1824), 55-124.

<sup>8</sup>Paris, 1837-45.

*Receuil*, though nothing ever came of this.) Quatremère had inherited his teacher's passion for and mastery of philology and the inordinately lengthy footnotes to *Histoire des sultans mamlouks* are tremendous displays of erudition on the meanings of words for military offices, gypsies, polo balls, wardrobe-masters, heraldry, and much else. Those annotations were later heavily drawn upon by Dozy for his dictionary of post-classical Arabic. They also provided a starting point for later researches into institutions by Gaudefroy-Demombynes and Ayalon. They were industrious giants in those days and among Quatremère's other publications was an edition of Ibn Khaldūn's *Muqaddimah*, *Prolégomènes d'Ibn Khaldoun: texte arabe*.<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, Ibn Khaldūn was to do as much as anyone in shaping western historians' perceptions of the Mamluks.

A student of Quatremère, Gustave Weil (1808-89) was the first scholar to provide a sustained, detailed, and referenced history of the Mamluks. Those were the days when one did not need a historical training to write history and Weil's wide range of publications included a translation of *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah*. His history of the Mamluk period, *Geschichte des Abbasidenchalifats in Egypten*,<sup>10</sup> was a sequel to *Geschichte der Chalifen*,<sup>11</sup> and, like its precursor, it uncritically reproduced the material provided by sources such as al-Suyūṭī and Ibn Iyās.<sup>12</sup> William Muir's *The Mameluke or Slave Dynasty of Egypt 1260-1517*<sup>13</sup> acknowledged a heavy debt to Weil's ferreting among obscure manuscripts on the continent. Apart from Weil, Muir's three main sources were al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and Ibn Iyās. Muir was a devout Christian and, as he made plain in his preface and introduction, the Mamluks' chief importance was as adversaries of the Crusaders, as the Mamluks "were finally able to crush the expiring efforts of that great armament of misguided Christianity." A few exceptional figures apart, Muir was not favorably impressed by the Mamluks: "But the vast majority with an almost incredible indifference to human life, were treacherous and bloodthirsty, and betrayed, especially in the later days of the Dynasty, a diabolic resort to poison and the rack, the lash, the halter and assassination such as makes the blood run cold to think of. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>Paris, 1858. On the life and work of Quatremère, see Johann Fück, *Die arabischen Studien in Europa bis in den Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig, 1955), 152-53.

<sup>10</sup>Stuttgart, 1860-62.

<sup>11</sup>Mannheim, 1846-51.

<sup>12</sup>Fück, *Die arabischen Studien*, 175-76; D.M. Dunlop, "Some Remarks on Weil's History of the Caliphs," in Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, eds., *Historians of the Middle East* (London, 1962), 315-29.

<sup>13</sup>London, 1896.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, xii, 220.

Max van Berchem (1863-1921), a Swiss archaeologist and epigrapher, established and worked on the *Matériaux pour un Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum* from 1903 onwards. This massive collaborative survey was designed to cover the inscriptions of Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Van Berchem's team of collaborators included Sobernheim, Mittwoch, and Herzfeld in Syria and Gaston Wiet in Egypt. Van Berchem treated buildings as historical documents, or rather he actually considered them to be superior to documents as they could be used to check the accuracy of documents.<sup>15</sup> Van Berchem's work (small essays within the *Corpus*) on the names and entitulation featured in such inscriptions prepared the way for later work done by Gaudefroy-Demombynes, Sauvaget, Ayalon, and others on office holding and other institutional aspects of Mamluk society.

They flee from me, that sometime did me seek  
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.  
I have seen them gentle, tame and meek,  
That now are wild. . . .

. . . are the opening lines of a fine erotic poem by Sir Thomas Wyatt (ca. 1503-42). Gaston Wiet, though a French citizen, was directly descended from the Scottish poet. Van Berchem was the major influence on the youthful Gaston Wiet. Wiet was to publish a great deal on a wide range of topics relating to Mamluk history and culture. (Besides his narrative history, *L'Égypte arabe . . . 642-1517* [1937] in G. Hanotaux, *Histoire de la nation égyptienne*, these include a translation from Ibn Iyās, a digest of Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi*, a book on Cairo's mosques, a translation of al-Maqrīzī's *Ighāthah*, extensive work on the same author's *Khiṭaṭ*, a little book on medieval Cairo, a catalogue of the Cairo Museum's holdings of glassware, etc., etc.) Nevertheless, though Wiet wrote frequently and at length on the Mamluks, he was not especially interested in them per se. He was just as interested in modern Egyptian novels, of which he translated several examples. The real focus of his enthusiasm was the city of Cairo, which he lived in and loved and finally departed from with the greatest reluctance.

Although Creswell was Wiet's furious enemy and rival, this was not really Wiet's fault, since what Creswell especially hated about Wiet was that the latter was French. Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell (1879-1974) was like Wiet an admiring disciple of Van Berchem. Creswell's *The Muslim Architecture of Egypt*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>On van Berchem, see K. A. C. Creswell, "In Memoriam—Max van Berchem," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1963): 117-18; Solange Ory, "Max van Berchem, Orientaliste," in *D'un Orient l'autre: Les métamorphoses successives des perceptions et connaissances* (Paris, 1991), 2:11-24.

<sup>16</sup>Oxford, 1952-59.

unfortunately goes no further than 1326. Although he planned to cover the last two centuries of Mamluk architecture, he never got to it. Creswell knew no Arabic and he concentrated rather narrowly on dating and surveying the buildings he studied, leaving a mass of theoretical problems to be tackled by later scholars such as Michael Rogers, R. S. Humphreys, and Jonathan Bloom.<sup>17</sup>

The Anglo-French colonial moment in the Near East from ca. 1918 until, perhaps, the 1950s, made it relatively easy for European scholars to study the buildings, archaeological sites, and town plans of the region. Many of the early leading figures in these fields were French. France's historic mission in the Orient drew upon the crusading past to justify its reoccupation of a Syria in which so many Frenchmen had fought and died in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. From 1921 onwards France exercised a Mandate in Syria and set up an antiquities service which oversaw work done on both Muslim and Crusading architecture. Jean Sauvaget (1901-50) was the leading figure. "Beware of Sauvaget!" Creswell once warned Oleg Grabar. It was not just that Sauvaget was French (always a bad sign), but also that Sauvaget had ideas (also always a bad sign). The classic theory of the "Islamic city" was first developed by the French in Algeria, and then exported to Syria—where Sauvaget was its main exponent. Sauvaget was obsessed with the *Nachleben* of Antiquity. He wanted to find Rome in Damascus and in Lattakia and elsewhere. Naturally the main focus of his interest was in Umayyad Syria, but he was more generally interested in the notion of the "Islamic city." In his work on "the silent web of Islamic history," he treated buildings as texts (and really only as texts, for, like Creswell, he had a healthy dislike for art historians). As for texts, Sauvaget (like Claude Cahen a little later) placed great stress on understanding the sources of one's sources, or, to put it another way, it was not enough to parrot the information of late compilers like Ibn al-Athīr or al-Maqrīzī. Sauvaget also did a lot to draw local histories into consideration.

Sauvaget's main work, *Alep: essai sur le développement d'une grande ville syrienne des origines au milieu du xixe siècle*,<sup>18</sup> is the "sad" story of the late antique city's failure to preserve itself from later encroachments and its ultimate breakdown, into quarters based on tribes, crafts, and what have you. Although Aleppo experienced a partial revival in the Mamluk period, this could not be credited to the Mamluks. Rather, both Aleppo and Damascus owed their prosperity to their trade with Venice (as well as, perhaps, the collapse of Genoese trading operations in the Black Sea). Sauvaget was always conscious of the need to place his various urban studies in a broader Mediterranean context. His study of quarters

---

<sup>17</sup>*Studies in Islamic Architecture in Honour of Professor K. A. C. Creswell* (Cairo, 1955); Michael Rogers, "Creswell's Reading and Methods," *Muqarnas* 8 (1991): 45-54.

<sup>18</sup>Paris, 1941.

of Syrian cities led him to present a mosaic view of Islamic cities. He looked in vain for strong cohesive urban institutions. What little unity the Syrian cities possessed depended on the walls, the cathedral mosque, and the central souk.

Sauvaget's *La poste aux chevaux dans l'empire des mamelouks*<sup>19</sup> was a prime example of history with one's boots on and of matching buildings to documents. As Ayalon noted in his encomium of the work and the man, Sauvaget was attracted to the Mamluk period by the comparative wealth of sources which he described as "rich, variegated and dependable of such a kind that no praise of them can be too high." Ayalon commented on this observation of Sauvaget's, remarking that it was "no hyperbole to say that those sources make it possible to write scores, if not hundreds, of works of research of the highest order, on subjects concerning which, when other periods of Islam are in question, only a few sentences can be indited, and that after Herculean scientific labours."<sup>20</sup> (Following this last insight, it seems clear that Ayalon himself and other researchers in the history of Islamic institutions have pitched their research tents in Mamluk pastures because the sources are so rich. However much one might want to know about, say, the Abbasid *barīd* or the Umayyad fisc, it is really only in the Mamluk period that sufficient source material comes easily to hand.)

Maurice Gaudefroy-Demombynes (1862-1957), another of van Berchem's students, spread his researches quite widely (including a translation of a Maghribi version of *The One Thousand and One Nights*), but his main interests were philological and institutional and these preoccupations shaped his *La Syrie à l'époque des mamelouks*,<sup>21</sup> in which he sought to set out the terminology of office holding and the formal functions of those offices as set out in the chancery treatises of the period. It would be left to Ayalon to flesh out Gaudefroy-Demombynes's account by drawing on chronicles and other sources in order to establish the real functions of officers whose formal duties had been set out by al-Qalqashandī and others and then annotated by Gaudefroy-Demombynes.

Early studies tended to be weighted towards the early Mamluk period, because this was when the Mamluks fought the Crusaders. But the gloomy paradox here is that people who studied the Bahrī Mamluk period tended to use chronicles from the Circassian period, because the latter were more compendious. Popper's work in editing and translating the later sections of Ibn Taghrībirdī's *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah*, as well as his *Ḥawādith al-Duhūr* and related publications, ought to have had the effect of directing attention to the Circassian period. But it did not—at first at least. Even though William Popper (1874-1963) published a great deal on the

---

<sup>19</sup>Paris, 1941.

<sup>20</sup>David Ayalon, "On One of the Works of Jean Sauvaget," *Israel Oriental Studies* 1 (1971): 302.

<sup>21</sup>Paris, 1923.

Circassian Mamluks, he was not a pure Mamlukist, for he had other interests and did major work on the Prophet Isaiah.

Hitherto the primary impetus in Mamluk studies had consisted of the amassing, translating, and editing of material bearing on the Mamluks. Israeli scholars pioneered a more interpretative approach. Some particularly bold interpretations of various features of Mamluk society were put forward by A. N. Poliak in his *Feudalism in Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon (1250-1900)*. This short book was one of the most determined, but least successful, attempts to present the Mamluks as chivalrous feudatories. Amirs were "knights," they were "dubbed" by the sultan or his vice-regent and they held "fiefs." Error crowded upon misjudgment in Poliak's dense pages. The sultan was elected by an electoral college.<sup>22</sup> The *al-ajnad al-qarānīs* were Caucasian noblemen who had not yet been dubbed amirs.<sup>23</sup> "The feudal aristocracy" settled their lawsuits according to rules based on the Great *Yāsa* of Chingiz Khan.<sup>24</sup> *Futūwah* was an order of knights devoted to Muḥammad's posterity.<sup>25</sup> The ruler of the Golden Horde was the suzerain of the Mamluk sultan.<sup>26</sup>

Poliak's various articles repeated these errors and disseminated new ones. For example, in an article on the impact of the Mongol *Yāsa* on the Mamluk Sultanate, Poliak suggested that Mongol immigrants to the Mamluk realm enjoyed an especially high status. Also that "knights" who had never been slaves held themselves to be superior to Mamluks. Also that the Mamluks' subjects welcomed the Ottoman invasion, because it meant liberation from the yoke of the *Yāsa* and a return to 'adl.<sup>27</sup> Much of Poliak's work was carefully dismantled by Ayalon, who observed that the "late P. had the genius of putting his finger on crucial problems. His solutions to these problems, however, which were guided more by quick intuition than by thorough and dispassionate examination of the source material, proved to be, unfortunately, too often, wide of the mark."<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere Ayalon, writing about Poliak's erroneous population estimates for the medieval Near East, described him

---

<sup>22</sup>A. N. Poliak, *Feudalism in Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon (1250-1900)* (London, 1939), 1.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 16-17 n.

<sup>27</sup>Poliak, "The Influence of Chingiz Khan's *Yasa* upon the General Organization of the Mamluk State," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1942): 862-76.

<sup>28</sup>David Ayalon, "The Great *Yāsa* of Chingiz Khan: A Re-examination; part C<sub>1</sub>, The Position of the *Yāsa* in the Mamluk Sultanate," *Studia Islamica* 36 (1972): 137.



as "a misguided genius."<sup>29</sup> It is indeed rare to see a work of apparent scholarship become so thoroughly superseded.

Some of Poliak's notions, particularly concerning Middle Eastern feudalism and the size of the population of Egypt and Syria, were uncritically echoed by Ashtor. Eliyahu Strauss, later Eliyahu Ashtor (1914-84), first worked on Mamluk manuscript sources in the Vienna library and, even before he left Austria at the time of the *Anschluss*, he had produced a dissertation on Baybars al-Manṣūrī and Ibn al-Furāt. In early articles on the Arabic historians who wrote in the Mamluk period, he compared their writings unfavorably to Europeans writing in a humanist tradition—such as Suetonius. However, Ashtor's hatred was reserved for the Mamluks themselves—corrupt, backward, violent, parasitic feudatories. I do not know, but I wonder if he thought of the Mamluks as the Nazis of the medieval Near East.

By contrast, Ashtor identified first with the Middle Eastern bourgeoisie who struggled as best they could to get along under the alien oppressors and secondly he sympathized with the European, mostly Venetian, traders who came to do business with the Mamluks. In Ashtor's vision of the social history of the region, there was a "bourgeois moment" around the second half of the eleventh century in such merchant republics as Tyre and Tripoli. Thereafter, however, the region was subjected to increasing militarization. Ashtor's *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages* presented a remarkably consistent picture of Syria and Egypt in this period as prey to the ravages of predatory feudatories and already (but surely prematurely?) part of the Third World. Every earthquake, flood, pestilence, and instance of banditry or unjust taxation was lovingly added to Ashtor's gloomy record. (Inconsistently he also, following Poliak, treated the Baḥrī period as one of demographic growth and monetary stability.) The intervention of the military in industry and commerce stifled technological innovation. Their control of the cities prevented the development of urban autonomy and communal institutions of the "proper" sort that one found in medieval Europe. "The flourishing economy of the Near East had been ruined by the rapacious military, and its great civilizing achievements had been destroyed through inability to adopt new methods of production and new ways of life."<sup>30</sup>

In *Levant Trade in The Later Middle Ages*<sup>31</sup> Ashtor concentrated on the commercial and diplomatic toings and froings between the Mamluk Sultanate and

---

<sup>29</sup>Ayalon, "Regarding Population Estimates in the Countries of Medieval Islam," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 28 (1985): 16.

<sup>30</sup>Eliyahu Ashtor, *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1976), 331.

<sup>31</sup>Princeton, 1983.

the Republic of Venice from the 1340s onwards. The two did not enjoy an easy relationship and recriminations were frequent. What is remarkable about Ashtor's account of the bickering is that in every single case he accepted Venetian complaints about Mamluk monopolies, corruption, etc., etc., while rejecting out of hand Mamluk complaints about Venetian short-changing, piracy, etc., etc. Another obvious criticism that can be made of Ashtor's commercial history is that he grossly underestimated the scale of Genoese trade with the Levant. Although Ashtor was certain that the Mamluk sultans' monopolies were a bad thing, some historians would argue that those monopolies explain the fifteenth-century revival of the sultanate—a revival which was invisible to Ashtor. Ashtor's views about the technological and industrial failure of the Mamluk Sultanate have received some support from the findings of art historians who have worked on glass and metalwork. Certainly it would seem that in the fifteenth century Venice was exporting to Egypt and Syria the sort of high-quality painted and enamelled glass which it had formerly imported from those regions.<sup>32</sup> However, the so-called "Veneto-Saracenic" ware has recently been firmly reascribed to Middle Eastern workshops.<sup>33</sup> But, to come back to *Levant Trade* itself, this and related articles by Ashtor did have the definite merit of stressing the economic importance of such local products as cotton, Syrian silk, sugar, and soap. Some earlier books had treated the sultanate as if it were a mere conduit for silks and spices from further East.

Ashtor's findings were much criticized in his lifetime and subsequently. Several scholars were unhappy with his handling of data and his fondness for tables of prices and salaries in which the unlike tended to be bundled in with the like. As we shall see, Jean-Claude Garcin was critical of Ashtor's view of Mamluks as agents of stagnation. Janet Abu-Lughod has had similar doubts about Mamluk monopolies causing technological stagnation. As she put it, Ashtor consistently "blames the victim."<sup>34</sup> Abu-Lughod and other economic historians have preferred to stress such factors as the cumulative impact of Venetian commercial aggression, the Black Death, and Tīmūr's invasion of the Near East. Moreover, though Ashtor blamed the Mamluk sultans, especially Barsbāy, for the extinction of the Kārimī corporation of spice merchants, Gaston Wiet's listing of known Kārimīs showed

<sup>32</sup>On this, see Rachel Ward, ed., *Gilded and Enamelled Glass from the Middle East* (London, 1998).

<sup>33</sup>Rachel Ward, Susan la Niece, Duncan Hook, and Raymond White, "Veneto-Saracenic' Metalwork: An Analysis of the Bowls and Incense Burners in the British Museum," in Duncan R. Hook and David R. M. Gaimster, eds., *Trade and Discovery: The Scientific Study of Artefacts from Post-Mediaeval Europe and Beyond*, Occasional Paper 109 (London, 1995), 235-58.

<sup>34</sup>Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (Oxford, 1989), 233.

that they were still trading in the fifteenth century. These and other criticisms notwithstanding, Ashtor was a considerable figure, not just in Mamluk studies, but also as an authority on the history of the Jews under Islam.

Ashtor's reputation in the field has, I guess, only been surpassed by that of another Israeli, the late, great David Ayalon (1914-1998).<sup>35</sup> Ayalon's earliest work was an important and still constantly used Arabic-Hebrew dictionary. In his later years he became fascinated by the history of terminology for eunuchs in the medieval Islamic lands. In the years between the dictionary and the eunuchs, however (from the 1950s onwards), he devoted himself obsessively to the military caste of the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria. He put the Mamluks on the historians' map. He has done more than anyone else to explain how the system worked and to demolish outdated misconceptions. From the beginning of his researches, Ayalon was aware of Ibn Khaldūn's view of the Mamluks and regarded it as cogent. While Ayalon was working on his doctorate, he had come across a key passage in the *Kitāb al-'Ibar*, in which Ibn Khaldūn discussed Turks and the mamluk institution. Ibn Khaldūn regarded the mamluk institution as a very good thing indeed: "This status of slavery is indeed a blessing . . . from Divine Providence. They embrace Islam with the determination of true believers, while yet retaining their nomadic virtues, which are undefiled by vile nature, unmixed with the filth of lustful pleasures, unmarred by the habits of civilizations, with their youthful strength unshattered by excess of luxury."<sup>36</sup> Time and again Ayalon returned to these Khaldunian themes: the resort to the import of mamluks as the salvation of Islam and most specifically the salvation of Egypt and Syria from the Mongols and Crusaders, the mamluks' retention of nomadic virtues, most notably that of *'iṣābah*, which in a mamluk context was replaced by the artificial bonding of *khushdashīyah*, and, finally, the effectiveness of the Mamluk system in breaking free from the otherwise doomed cycle of dynastic decay which Ibn Khaldūn had perceived as operating everywhere else in Islamic history.

Ayalon, impressed by Ibn Khaldūn, took a much more favorable view of the military elite than most of his precursors and contemporaries, but still not all that favorable. Although Ayalon agreed with Ashtor on very little, he did agree that their military and conservative cast of mind militated against innovation. This particularly comes out in *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom: A Challenge to a Mediaeval Society*.<sup>37</sup> This book has had a massive influence on

---

<sup>35</sup>On the life and works of Ayalon, see Reuven Amitai, "David Ayalon, 1914-1998," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 1-12.

<sup>36</sup>Quoted in David Ayalon, "Mamlukiyyāt: (B) Ibn Khaldūn's view of the Mamlūk Phenomenon," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 2 (1980): 345.

<sup>37</sup>London, 1956.

historians working within and beyond the field—in shaping an image of hidebound chivalrous Mamluks doomed by new technology. But it is not his best work and recent studies by Carl Petry and Shai Har-El have chipped away at some of Ayalon's arguments. Har-El, in particular, has taken a more positive view of the Mamluks and their military response to the Ottomans. He argues that their main problem was lack of such resources as wood, iron, etc. Neither Petry nor Har-El seem to think that Mamluk defeat at the hands of the Ottomans was a foregone conclusion.

Ayalon's "Aspects of the Mamluk Phenomenon," published in *Der Islam* in 1977, stressed the essential continuity between the Ayyubid and Mamluk regimes, whereas the drift of R. S. Humphreys's "The Emergence of the Mamluk Army," which appeared in *Studia Islamica* in the same year, was to argue for distinct changes—for reforms taking place early on in the reign of Baybars. Ayalon was to reply to Humphreys in an article in the *Revue des études islamiques* in 1981. The heart of their disagreement concerned the specific problem of the continuity of the *ḥalqah* in any but a merely verbal form. There was also the issue of the chronology of the establishment of a three-tier officer class. Ayalon's arguments for continuity were detailed and ingenious and it is certainly true that if, say, Baybars carried out a sweeping program of reform, there is little direct evidence for it. Even so, I believe that Humphreys has carried the day, particularly on the decline of the *ḥalqah* from an Ayyubid elite force to a poorly rewarded kind of auxiliary arm of the Mamluk army.

In 1968 Ayalon published an article on "The Muslim City and the Mamluk Military Aristocracy." Although it was published the year after Lapidus's *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, Ayalon's article had presumably been in press too long to take account of Lapidus's arguments. Certainly its conclusions were very different from those of Lapidus (to which we shall come). Ayalon placed heavy emphasis on the alienness and social isolation of the mamluks. The mamluks, immured in the Citadel, were more or less immune from contaminating and weakening contact with Cairo's citizens. Only in one very striking way did they involve themselves in the life of the city and that was in the endowment of mosques, madrasahs and *khānqāhs*. And here again Ayalon drew attention to Ibn Khaldūn's reflections on the matter. Ibn Khaldūn was inclined to see the buildings as the outcome of the amirs' desire to protect their wealth and to ensure its transmission to their descendants by creating *waqfs*. Having emphasized the isolation of the military from the civil, Ayalon did go on to note that Syria seemed to be different, but he left the matter there. He was never so interested in Syria as in Egypt, a bias which, to some extent, unbalances his presentation of the *ḥalqah* elsewhere. (While on the subject of the relative importance of Egypt and Syria, Garcin has argued, rightly I think, that whereas Syria was hardly more than

Egypt's protective glacis in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, thereafter its economic and political importance increases vastly.<sup>38</sup> It is an argument which fits smoothly with Sauvaget's findings about the revival of Damascus and Aleppo in the later Middle Ages.)

Ayalon had rightly stressed the urban nature of Mamluk power. Ashtor had asked himself why Middle Eastern cities were not successful in developing durable autonomous institutions. Both these matters were taken up in Ira Marvin Lapidus's *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*.<sup>39</sup> Unlike most of its precursors and some of its successors in Mamluk studies, Lapidus's book was problem-oriented and it addressed a wider audience than just Mamlukists. The Syrian cities of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries were special cases of the perceived problem of the "Islamic city"—a problem which had attracted not only Sauvaget, but also Massignon and others earlier in the century. The "Islamic city" notoriously failed to preserve such features as the agora, the theaters, and the wide straight streets which had distinguished its antique precursor. Not only this but the "Islamic City" failed to grow up into something like a European city and free itself from feudal control. Lapidus's version of how the Mamluks existed in the city contrasted quite strongly with that of Ayalon. Whereas Ayalon effectively imprisoned the military in the Citadel, Lapidus showed them intervening in every aspect of urban life. In large measure, the Mamluks oversaw the provisioning of the cities. More generally, they acted as mediators between town and countryside. And "the mamluk household was a means of transforming public into private powers and state authority into personal authority."<sup>40</sup> Mamluks were commercial entrepreneurs and the bourgeois who competed against them did so at a disadvantage. At another level the Mamluks opened their purses to such ruffian rabble as the *ḥarāfīsh*.

It was not only the *ḥarāfīsh* who were prepared to sell themselves for Mamluk *dīnārs*. The ulama did the same and much of *Muslim Cities* is devoted to this *trahison des clercs*. The book is above all a study in the power of patronage. The Mamluks, acting out of individual and corporate self-interest, set up *waqfs* for mosques, madrasahs, *khānqāhs* and similar institutions and the civilian elite competed for stipends at these places. Having sold themselves in this manner, the ulama then served as go-betweens or mediators between the military and the urban masses. Everybody lived cheek-by-jowl in these cities and, outside the army and palace, there was little in the way of formal hierarchy. Civic affairs were managed by means which were effective though informal, without recourse

---

<sup>38</sup>Garcin, "Pour un recours à l'histoire de l'espace vécu dans l'étude de l'Égypte Arabe," *Annales-Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 35 (1980): 436-51.

<sup>39</sup>Cambridge, MA, 1967.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 48-50.

to chambers of aldermen or guilds. *Muslim Cities* has been widely and rightly praised.

At the same time, it attracted criticism and debate. Lapidus had studied the Mamluk city rather than the Muslim city. As a heuristic device, Lapidus had constructed a Weberian "ideal type" of Islamic city in order to compare it with the European city. But one might as well compare the cities Lapidus had studied with Samarkand, Tabriz, and Fez in the same period, for there were many significant dissimilarities. It was not even clear to what extent Lapidus's insights applied to Egyptian cities. He had sometimes had recourse to Egyptian data, but he did not come up with Egyptian conclusions. He had, on the whole, taken a synchronic approach to the subject, which meant that the book failed to register distinctly the impact on the Syrian cities of the Black Death or of the expansion of Venetian trade.

Lapidus (and others after him, including R. S. Humphreys) stressed the overwhelming role of Mamluk patronage. But it is natural for cultural historians to go looking for a role for the bourgeoisie here. (After all, most historians these days have bourgeois origins and therefore there is perhaps a certain *parti pris*.) Oleg Grabar has argued that what little evidence we have suggests that the bourgeois were the chief patrons of the illustrated *Maqāmāts* which are such a feature of the age. Less plausibly, Grabar has assigned a role for the bourgeois in the construction of the Sultan Ḥasan Mosque. How, he asked, did such a very weak ruler as al-Nāṣir Ḥasan find the resources to build the greatest madrasah in Cairo? Grabar suggested that the grand bourgeoisie was the real builders. The Mamluks were in shaky control whereas the urban bourgeoisie "had considerable financial and bureaucratic power within the state." (It is not an argument which has much in the way of evidence to recommend it.) Once built, the Sultan Ḥasan Mosque became a monument for popular piety and a focus for legend.<sup>41</sup>

In 1974 at the request of MESA, Albert Hourani prepared a report on "The Present State of Islamic and Middle Eastern Historiography." Hourani's *tour d'horizon* is full of interest, but I restrict myself here to what he said about Mamluk studies: "for the Mamluks of Egypt even the basic institution, the military society, has not yet been studied, although Ayalon has laid very solid foundations and Darrag has studied one reign in depth."<sup>42</sup> Hourani based himself on the *Gunpowder* monograph plus "Studies in the Structure of the Mamluk Army" and I rather feel he underestimated the scope of Ayalon's publications. Additionally,

---

<sup>41</sup>Oleg Grabar in J. R. Hayes, ed., *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 108.

<sup>42</sup>Albert Hourani, "The Present State of Islamic and Middle Eastern Historiography," reprinted in idem, *Europe and the Middle East*, 176.

Lapidus's *Muslim Cities* was referred to by Hourani in the context of urban studies and the study of ideal types in Islamic culture.

Well, that was how it looked in 1974. By then however important works on source criticism had already appeared, of which Hourani had taken no account: Donald Little's *An Introduction to Mamluk Historiography*<sup>43</sup> and Ulrich Haarmann's *Quellenstudien zur frühen Mamlukenzeit*.<sup>44</sup> Of course, a good deal of work on identifying, editing, and translating thirteenth-century sources had already been done by Claude Cahen. Cahen indeed criticized Little's sampling method and the conclusions which Little derived from it regarding the alleged dependence of Yunīnī on al-Jazarī.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, quite how complex the relationship was between the two historians has been brought out by more recent research by Li Guo. But Little's research led him on to wider issues than source dependence. His investigation of the varying accounts of the career of Qarāsunqur, the Mamluk defector to the Mongols, led him on to investigate other connections between the Mongols and the Mamluks. Little's book was downbeat about history writing in the Mamluk period. We have copious chronicles, but they are carelessly put together, they plagiarize one another, and most of the time they are frankly dull.

I should like to linger on Ulrich Haarmann, whose *Quellenstudien* and whose articles—on the literarization of history writing, on the appearance of Turco-Mongol folklore in chronicles, on the culture of the amirs and of the *awlād al-nās*, and on Pharaonic elements in Egyptian culture—I personally have found the most stimulating things to have been produced in the field. (It is not easy for me to be stimulated in German, as the stimulation has to be mediated by a dictionary, even so . . .) I believe that Haarmann's ideas on the literarization of chronicle-writing have influenced everyone who has since written on the historiography of the age. Even more important, his work on the libraries of the great amirs and on the civilian career-patterns of the *awlād al-nās* has permitted a more nuanced view of the ruling elite and softened the stark contrast between the Men of the Sword and the Men of the Pen. Haarmann's researches into the literary attainments of the Mamluks and their children have been given further support in work done by, among others, Barbara Flemming and Jonathan Berkey. Haarmann's work on source criticism was taken further by his own students, Samira Kortantamer, Barbara Langner, and Barbara Schäfer among them.

The beginning of the 1980s was when Mamluk studies really took off—and when non-Mamlukists started to take an interest. As William Muir had observed almost a hundred years earlier, the prolonged Mamluk domination of Egypt "must

---

<sup>43</sup>Wiesbaden, 1970.

<sup>44</sup>Freiburg im Breisgau, 1969.

<sup>45</sup>In a review published by Cahen in *JESHO* 15 (1972): 223-25.

still remain one of the strange and undecipherable phenomena in that land of many mysteries.<sup>46</sup> In the 1980s several scholars tried their hand at cracking the mystery. In *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*,<sup>47</sup> Patricia Crone, having argued that the mamluks were a distinctively Islamic phenomenon, went on to ask why this was the case. Her (somewhat moralistic) conclusion was that the mamluks were the product of the failure of the Islamic *ummah* to arrange its affairs according to the ideal program of the shari‘ah. The mamluks were a kind of punishment for political sin. In the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn had argued that Muslims had failed to follow the shari‘ah perfectly and their political regimes thereby become prey to cyclical decline and fall. The influence of Ibn Khaldūn pervades *Slaves on Horses*. Crone was trying to explain the general phenomenon of the slave soldiers throughout Islamic history. However, she did note the special features of the Mamluk regime in Egypt and Syria. She took the (surely exaggerated) view that the Egyptian Mamluk system only worked when there was an external threat; otherwise it degenerated into a civil war. The Mamluks were predatory shepherds. (The shepherd image comes, I think, from Ottoman political theory.) Finally Crone stressed the comfortable symbiosis between Mamluks and ulama and how the Mamluks were seen by their subjects as the providential protagonists of the jihad—again very Khaldunian.

Daniel Pipes’ *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System*<sup>48</sup> appeared just a year later. Pipes’ view of the problem was similar, though different. Mamluks and other marginal troops rushed in to fill a politico-military vacuum, that vacuum having been created by the withdrawal from public affairs of other Muslims. The withdrawal from public affairs of these *fainéant* Muslims was the product of their disillusion at their failure to implement the Islamicate ideal. As the use of “Islamicate” indicates, Pipes was somewhat influenced by Marshall Hodgson. Ibn Khaldūn’s influence is equally evident, but, whereas Ibn Khaldūn had argued that renewed imports of mamluks served to infuse the ruling regime with fresh nomadic vigor, Pipes argued that it was because of the unreliability of such troops that they kept having to be replaced. The notion of Mamluks as a punishment for perceived failure to live up to Islamic ideals is a curious one. Papal and Imperial theorists in Christendom also had unreal and idealistic notions of government—and most Christians probably did not care about those ideals nor did they wish to be involved in politics. But only the medieval German *ministeriales* look anything like mamluks.

---

<sup>46</sup>Muir, *The Mameluke or Slave Dynasty*, 221.

<sup>47</sup>Cambridge, 1980.

<sup>48</sup>New Haven, 1981.



Garcin took a particularly critical view of Pipes' ideas (and come to that, of Ashtor's as well) concerning the Mamluks as a response to failure of civil society and as agents of a technical and cultural "blockage" in the Middle East. He was sceptical too about Crone's condemnatory view that the mamluk institution "bespeaks a moral gap of such dimensions that within the great civilizations it has been found only in one."<sup>49</sup> Garcin was disinclined to indict the Mamluks as agents of "blockage." Instead he adduced such factors as demographic decline and lack of resources. He also gave consideration to the possible role of the Bedouin in the "blockage." Garcin's contrasting perspective derived from his previous research on Upper Egypt and his *magnum opus*, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale: Qūṣ*.<sup>50</sup> The latter is a grand work in the *Annales* tradition, an *oeuvre de longue haleine*, which drew on a remarkably wide range of sources and which gave full weight to topographic, demographic, economic, tribal, and even folkloric matters. Garcin viewed the politics of the Cairo Citadel from the perspective of the provinces. As an *Annales* historian, he paid far more attention to long-term trends, demographic factors, and shifts in trade routes than he did to personalities and dramatic incidents. Like the citizens of medieval Qūṣ (I guess) he was inclined to see the Bedouin as more of a problem than the Mamluks, though, of course, the Bedouin were also integral to the economy of the region. It seems likely that al-Suyūṭī played a larger role than Ibn Khaldūn in forming Garcin's idea of the Mamluks.

As already noted, the early 1980s were the time when Mamluk studies really accelerated. The Washington exhibition of Mamluk art in 1981 provided some of the stimulus for this lift-off. Esin Atıl produced an admirable catalogue for the exhibition —admirable, that is, except for the title: *Renaissance of Islam*. The notion that one is dealing with a "rebirth" in this context is quite strange. True, it is possible to find antiquarian features, or backward-looking references, in certain Mamluk buildings and artifacts. (For example, Jonathan Bloom has shown how the Mosque of Baybars harks back to that of the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh, while Bernard O'Kane has argued that some Mamluk buildings were built in conscious emulation of Abbasid precursors.) In general, however, it is striking how Mamluk art broke with past precedents and even with the immediate precedent of Ayyubid art. Thus it is usually easy to distinguish Mamluk metalwork from Ayyubid metalwork. In architecture, to take another example, Mamluk patrons eschewed the Ayyubid preference for the free-standing mosque. The carving up of

---

<sup>49</sup>Garcin, "The Mamluk Military System and the Blocking of Medieval Moslem Society," in Jean Baechler, John A. Hall, and Michael Mann, eds., *Europe and the Rise of Capitalism* (Oxford, 1988), 113-30.

<sup>50</sup>Paris, 1976.

art history on dynastic lines may be questionable, but in the particular case of the Mamluks it may be justified, because the patronage and taste of the court and those in the immediate service of the court seem to dominate the work produced.

Atıl's catalogue was not the only fruit of the Washington exhibition. There was also a concurrent conference, the first conference ever to be devoted to the specific topic of the Mamluks. Its proceedings were published as a special issue of *Muqarnas*.<sup>51</sup> The *Muqarnas* papers were topped and tailed by the broad-sweep papers of Grabar and Lapidus. The former reflected on the cohesiveness of Mamluk art, while the latter's manifesto urged historians of Mamluk art to snatch leaves from Michael Baxandall's certainly quite wonderful *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*.<sup>52</sup> As Lapidus noted, Baxandall's was "an approach to art history that seeks out the mentality and culture of peoples from a study of their art." It drew on a remarkably wide range of sources, including dance manuals and treatises on barrel-gauging, in an attempt to establish how fifteenth-century Italians looked at paintings, how they verbalized their responses, and the mechanics of how artists actually set about their work. It is an inspiring book, but, alas, I do not think that it has yet inspired anyone working on the arts under the Mamluks.

My own view is that art history and socio-political history are false friends, in the sense that they have not yet given each other much assistance. Take the Saint Louis Baptistery, which, with its wealth of iconographic detail including heraldry, should be easy to date. In a meticulous yet probably mistaken study, David Storm Rice assigned the Baptistery to the patronage of the amir Salār, ca. 1290-1310. Rice's dating has recently been hesitantly accepted by Bloom and Blair and they argue that it could not have been made for the open market. However, Elfriede R. Knauer contends that the Baptistery was made in the reign of Baybars, and so does Doris Behrens-Abouseif, although she adduces different arguments for this dating. However, Rachel Ward is about to demonstrate (I think) that it was made late in the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad for the European export market. Arguments about the date and provenance of the Baptistery and other objects rely in part on blazons. In Rice's time the way Mamluk heraldry worked was poorly understood. Since then, thanks to articles by Michael Meinecke and Estelle Whelan, we now have a much better notion of how Mamluk heraldry worked.

To take another example, Mamluk carpets are among the most controversial objects in the field of Islamic art. These exquisite textiles seem to have no real precursors in medieval Egyptian art and there is hardly any textual evidence. There is no consensus about where the carpets were made, when they were made, or why they were made. Although many scholars believe that they were woven in

---

<sup>51</sup>Vol. 2 (1984).

<sup>52</sup>Oxford, 1972.

Cairo under the patronage of the Mamluk sultans, others have argued that these carpets may have been produced in North Africa, Syria, or Anatolia. Some believe that production started in the late fifteenth century (and hence the appearance of Qāyṭbāy's blazon on one of them), but others argue that they only begin to be produced after 1517. They may have been produced for the Mamluk court; then again it is possible that they were chiefly exported to the west. The significance of the elaborate octagonal design is inevitably also controversial. The carpets were manufactured while the chroniclers' backs were turned and out of sight of the eyes of European visitors.

There are exceptions to the lack of success in matching objects to documents—Nasser Rabbat's recent monograph on the Citadel makes exemplary use of both documentary and non-documentary sources. In general, Mamluk architectural history is relatively well mapped. In Cairo, this has been the work first of Creswell and his student Christel Kessler and more recently the work of Michael Meinecke (d. 1995), as well as the work on domestic architecture by Garcin, Jacques Revault, and Bernard Maury. Consequently, Cairo is the most thoroughly studied of all Muslim cities. Jerusalem has also benefited from a meticulous survey by Michael Burgoyne and historical research by Donald Richards. Yet, despite their work and despite the work of Donald Little on the Ḥaram documents, it is curious and even a little dispiriting to consider how many gaps there are in the record of Mamluk Jerusalem. More theoretical and evaluative approaches to Mamluk architecture have tended to stress the importance of procession and ceremony, of boastfulness and statements of legitimation through the prosecution of the jihad in determining the forms of the grand Mamluk foundations. This sort of approach parallels work being done on Fatimid architecture and ceremonial. Examples for the Mamluk period include articles by Humphreys, Bernard O'Kane, and Doris Behrens-Abouseif. The scale of the Sultan Ḥasan Mosque and its possible models have attracted much attention (from Rogers, O'Kane, and others)—as has the financing of its building. Did "the inheritance effect," a hypothetical consequence of the Black Death, fund this massive architectural project? And, to look at another aspect of funding, did the building mania of al-Nāṣir Ḥasan and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad before him seriously contribute to the decline of the Mamluk Sultanate?

Mamluk madrasahs have inevitably attracted a lot of attention. There were after all so many of them. Some have followed Ibn Khaldūn in stressing the patronage of such institutions as a way for amirs to protect their incomes in the guise of *waqf*. However, Robert Hillenbrand's observation that the Ayyubids and Mamluks were, like the Pharaohs, obsessed with death is a fruitful one.<sup>53</sup> With this

---

<sup>53</sup>Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: Form, Function and Meaning* (Edinburgh, 1994),

death-consciousness in mind, Hillenbrand has presented madrasahs as primarily ways of “laundering” mausolea. That is to say the endowment of a religious college legitimized the placing of the patron’s tomb within a religious enclosure. While on the subject of the purpose of madrasahs, there has also of course been debate on the importance or not of the teaching carried out in these institutions. It is possible to view the curriculum of the madrasah as a way of promoting and controlling Sunni orthodoxy and, also, as perhaps offering training of a sort to Arabs, some of whom would later enter state service. However, Michael Chamberlain in particular has argued that the madrasahs were primarily ways of managing property and money, and that teaching was carried out everywhere and anywhere, informally, without significantly depending on structured madrasah courses. It is possible that each madrasah will have to be studied on an individual basis, for some performed quite unexpected functions. Berkey noted that al-Ghawrī’s “madrasah” had no teaching facilities at all and Hillenbrand has pointed out that the Mosque-Madrasah of Qarāsunqur was used by *barīd* couriers as a hostel en route to and from Syria.

Another major area of interest has been the role of immigrant craftsmen and the imitation of foreign models in both the architecture and the arts of the Mamluks. There are occasions when it would make more sense to reclassify “Mamluk art” as Saljuq, or Mosuli, or Ilkhanid, or Qaraqoyunlu art. Creswell, in particular, was fond of explaining developments in Egyptian architecture in terms of disasters elsewhere and the consequent incoming waves of refugee architects and craftsmen. There is plenty of evidence for the influence on Mamluk architecture of buildings in Anatolian towns as well as in Ilkhanid Sultānīyah and Tabriz. In other art forms, it is difficult to separate out Ilkhanid Mongol from Chinese influence (for example, the lifting of motifs from textiles imported from China). The question of Mongol influence on the arts shades into the question of Mongol influence on the Mamluks more generally—covering such matters as large-format Qurans, dress, folklore, the courier system, haircuts, the code of the *Yāsa*. The subject got off to a poor start with Poliak’s essay. However, matters have since been put on a sounder footing by Michael Rogers, Ulrich Haarmann, Donald Little, and David Ayalon. Ayalon’s articles on the Mongol *Yāsa* and related matters are fundamental. The weight of the evidence now suggests that the cultural influence of the Mongols on the Mamluk Sultanate was not a significant factor until the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad.

The civilian elite has been another major focus of research—inevitably, since the sources are so rich (the civilian elite was very good at celebrating itself). Carl

Petry's *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*<sup>54</sup> has taken apart the notion that there was a single civilian elite. Rather there was a threefold division into first, bureaucrats—often from Syria; secondly, jurist-scholars—from all over the Islamic world; and, thirdly, religious functionaries, who tended to come from Cairo and the Delta. As for Joseph H. Escovitz's *The Office of Qāḍī al-Quḍāt in Cairo under the Bahrī Mamluks*,<sup>55</sup> it of course says many things, but the main thing I got from reading it was that it poured cold water on the notion of the qadis as spokesmen for the subjects of the Mamluks. The qadis accommodated themselves to the Mamluk regime and they handed down its decrees. They defended the interests of the civilian elite as best they could, but were on the whole oblivious to wider needs. Jonathan Berkey's survey of teaching establishments, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education*,<sup>56</sup> used both chronicles and *waqfiyahs* to study the way that the religious sciences were taught and showed how they were taught on an informal and personal basis. I have already mentioned Michael Chamberlain's view, put forward in *Knowledge and Social Practice in Damascus 1190-1350*,<sup>57</sup> that the madrasah was a conduit for managing property and paying stipends. Chamberlain has studied how a medieval society, by and large, managed without documents and, like Lapidus, he has emphasized how informal ways of getting things done compensated for a relative lack of hierarchy and formal institutions. However, Chamberlain does not believe that madrasahs were endowed in an effort to buy the ulama. In this he differs from, say, Fernandes, whose *The Evolution of a Sufi Institution in Mamluk Egypt: The Khānqāh*<sup>58</sup> argued that *khānqāhs* were a way of, as it were, buying Sufis and controlling Sufism. One problem with all this research on the civilian elite is that only civilians of a certain class got into the biographical dictionaries of Ibn Ḥajar and al-Suyūṭī. Such works tell us very little indeed about merchants, poets, sorcerers, and most of the *awlād al-nās*.

The golden prime of the Mamluks in the late thirteenth century and their wars against the Crusaders and Mongols seems to be relatively uncontentious territory. The same cannot be said of the decline of the Mamluks and there is no agreement yet on when or why or even if the Mamluk Sultanate started declining. Ayalon's "The Muslim City and the Military Aristocracy" blamed it on decadent al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, the expensive and capricious harem, the failure to keep proper military discipline, and extravagant expenditure on building projects. This kind of approach

---

<sup>54</sup>Princeton, 1981.

<sup>55</sup>Berlin, 1984.

<sup>56</sup>Princeton, 1992.

<sup>57</sup>Cambridge, 1994.

<sup>58</sup>Berlin, 1988.

has been echoed and underlined by Amalia Levanoni in her *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn 1310-1341*.<sup>59</sup> She similarly found seeds of decline in the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, though there are points of difference between her and Ayalon. Levanoni places less stress, I think, on the personal failings of the Qalawunid sultans. However, I think if one is looking for the causes of Mamluk collapse in the sixteenth century, then the 1330s is too early to start looking for it. It also seems rough to blame any of it on the royal princesses. I doubt if the cost of their dresses contributed much to the decay of one of the world's great medieval empires and I do not think we should encourage al-Maqrīzī and al-Suyūṭī in their misogyny.

Others have been disinclined to blame al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's alleged fecklessness and extravagance and they have looked for broader causes. For example, Rabbat's book on the Citadel suggests a more positive approach to the sultan's public works and attributes decline to international economic factors.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Garcin, in his contribution to *Palais et maisons du Caire*, does not find fault with the sultan. Moreover, it must be asked, could things ever have gone all that well with the sultanate after the onset of the plague epidemics from 1347 onwards? Ayalon, himself, was the pioneer on the subject of the plague—in the first study he published in English on the Mamluks in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1946. Ayalon's article suggested that the declining quality of mamluk training and the breakdown in discipline were in large part a product of the need to recruit and train soldiers faster, because of losses due to plague. The few pages in A. L. Udovitch's incisive little essay "England to Egypt" devoted to the demographic and economic effects of the plague are hard to beat, as they demonstrate how demographic decline explains military rapacity, Bedouin incursions, and most of the rest of the problems of the later sultans. Subsequently Udovitch's student, Michael Dols, published *The Black Death in the Middle East*.<sup>61</sup> Dols, like Lapidus, was preoccupied by comparisons with Europe and he, as it were, constructed an ideal type of bubonic plague, in order to assess how Egypt's plague matched up with those of England and Italy. Anybody who might conceivably have been seduced by Poliak's notion that Egypt experienced a slow but steady demographic increase after 1348 would have been firmly disabused by Dols. And finally on plagues, Lawrence Conrad's more literary approach to chronicles which reported on them provides a necessary caution against believing that everything one reads

---

<sup>59</sup>Leiden, 1995.

<sup>60</sup>Nasser O. Rabbat, *The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture* (Leiden, 1995), 242-43.

<sup>61</sup>Princeton, 1977.

on this matter is documentary fact.<sup>62</sup> Similarly Adel Allouche's introduction to his translation of the *Ighāthah* in *Mamluk Economics: A Study and Translation of al-Maqrizī's Ighāthah*<sup>63</sup> cautions against taking al-Maqrizī to be an unprejudiced and reliable source on money matters. Religion took precedence over monetary theory in his muddled brain.

From decline one proceeds to doom. Until recently there was hardly anything to read on the last days of the sultanate. (Well, there was Stripling's old book.) Now we have Petry's two books, one by Har-El, and a number of other more specialized studies (for example, James B. Evrard's *Zur Geschichte Aleppos und Nordsyriens im letzten halben Jahrhundert der Mamlukenherrschaft (872-921 A.H), nach Arabischen und Italeinischen Quellen*<sup>64</sup>). Petry has emphasized the contrasting personalities of Qāytbāy, the dignified conservative, and Qānshuh al-Ghawrī, the ruthless innovator. In some ways Petry is very hard on al-Ghawrī (for I think that anyone who has heard the penultimate sultan talking—as he does in the *Majālis* and the *Kawkab al-Durrī*—must admire him). But Petry's approach to al-Ghawrī is a useful corrective to Ayalon, who overdid the image of the last Mamluks as blinkered, chivalrous reactionaries. Petry's earlier article "A Paradox of Patronage during the Later Mamluk Period" on the coexistence of financial crisis and royal magnificence under Qāytbāy is cogent, for the question is well-put and persuasively answered. The trouble with studying the very last days is the paucity of Arabic sources. The way forward will, I think, depend on increasing use of European sources. Ulrich Haarmann's important recent article "Joseph's Law" makes strikingly effective use of Western sources. Evrard has similarly used Italian sources.

So now, what of the future? I think the main thing is to get away from the activity of studying whatever it is that the obvious sources (mostly chronicles and biographical dictionaries written by ulama) want to tell us. One way of doing this is by use of archives, but I am not clear how much more the Geniza and the Ḥaram al-Sharīf documents have to tell us. There is clearly more material in *waqfiyahs* to be worked on. Even so there are limits to this sort of evidence and several architectural historians have noted mismatches between an endowment's specifications and the building as actually built. Also, I feel that the study of *waqfiyahs* tips Mamluk studies even further in the direction of becoming ulama studies, at the expense of looking at the secular aspects of the age.

One way of getting away from the pious mutterings of the turbaned elite is to focus properly on the amirs. Reuven Amitai has already produced a prosopographic

---

<sup>62</sup>Lawrence Conrad, "Arabic Plague Chronologies and Treatises: Social and Historical Factors in the Formation of a Literary Genre," *Studia Islamica* 54 (1981): 51-93.

<sup>63</sup>Salt Lake City, 1994.

<sup>64</sup>Munich, 1974.

essay on the Zāhirī and Ṣāliḥī amirs and I have great expectations concerning the similar research he has in progress on Maṣṣūrī amirs and mamluks. Another way is to redirect attention to the marginals in Mamluk society. Paul Kahle, an obsessive collector of shadow-puppets, was a pioneer in this sort of territory, with his articles on shadow theatre and on gypsies. Poliak wrote on popular revolt and Brinner on the mysterious *ḥarāfīsh*. Much more recently we have had Boaz Shoshan on popular culture in general, Shmuel Moreh on live theatre, Carl Petry on crime, Everett Rowson on gay literature, and G. J. H Van Gelder on *Ḥalbat al-Kumayt* (an *adab* treatise on wine-drinking). Perhaps the biggest problem in dealing with popular culture is clearly separating it out from high culture. Consider the cult of the criminal and the mendicant among the literary elites in Abbasid and Buyid times. Where should one place Ibn Dāniyāl, the friend of the sultan and the amirs, but also the author of low-life shadow plays? Where should one place those wild Sufis with a following of riffraff, but who nevertheless found patronage and protection in the highest places? While on the subject of people who were neither amirs nor ulama, Huda Lutfi's "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'ī Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises" has shown how much interesting material about antinomian behavior can be derived from just Ibn al-Ḥājj's *Madkhal* alone. And, of course, we are likely to see a lot more published about Mamluk women in the near future.

A reasonable amount has been produced fairly recently on popular literature. There is more written on *The Thousand and One Nights* than one can shake a stick at. Malcolm Lyons, Remke Kruk, Harry Norris, and others have produced important works on the popular epics. However, as I see it, far too little work is being done in America or Europe on the high literature of the late Middle Ages—the *adab* and poetry. Emil Homerin is practically unique, as far as I know. Nothing is more likely to transform our perceptions of the Mamluk age than a detailed study of the belles-lettres of the period. But perhaps a forthcoming volume of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* will encourage researchers to venture into the *terra incognita* of Mamluk *adab*. And with reference to *terrae incognitae*, what about the Mamluks in the scramble for Africa? André Raymond has shown how much Cairo's prosperity under the Ottomans depended on trade with Black Africa—on the commerce in black slaves, gold, and other commodities.<sup>65</sup> It is also plausible then that the African trade may have been important in the Mamluk period also. On the subject of commerce and slave imports, I find it astonishing how little reference is made by Mamlukists to Charles Verlinden's various publications on the European trade in white slaves.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle* (Damascus, 1974).

<sup>66</sup> See especially Charles Verlinden, *L'Esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale* (Ghent, 1977).



I have not discussed scholars working and publishing in the Arab world (though the names of Hassanein Rabie, Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Rāziq, Muḥammad Zaghlūl Sallām, Ayman Fu’ād Sayyid, Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, and others come to mind). In sad practice, so much of Western research is conducted without reference to Arab work. This should change. But I have gone on long enough as it is. When I started as a student, there was hardly anything to read on the Mamluks, except what had been produced by the Israelis. Really one could read one’s way through the field in a week. Now, though, there is a lifetime’s reading awaiting your students. (Aren’t they the lucky ones!) Israel is still an important place for Mamluk studies, as are Germany and France, but most of the work in the field is now being done in America. Compared with Fatimid, Saljuq, or Ayyubid studies, Mamluk studies is in great shape. It has its set-piece controversies, its website, its journal. You here at Chicago, at the center of Mamluk studies, should feel particularly cheerful. Even so most of one of the world’s great empires still remains mysterious. “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”