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Political Violence and Ideology in Mamluk Society

The Mamluk era in the history of the Middle East is probably best known for two things: its impressive architectural legacy in Egypt and Syria and its political violence. As Lane-Poole wrote a century ago: ″Most of these sultans died violent deaths at the hands of rival emirs. . . . The uncertainty of the tenure of power, and the general brevity of their reigns make it more astonishing that the Mamluk sultans found the leisure to promote the many noble works of architecture and engineering which distinguish their rule above any other period of Egyptian history since the Christian era.″[1] A century after Lane-Poole, in the most recent history of the Mamluks, Robert Irwin still writes, ″The tenure of power at the top was very insecure—at first sight the history of Egypt and Syria is little more than a sequence of sultans, whose often obscure reigns are embellished only by their own assassination, by the specters of strangled viziers and slaughtered emirs.″[2]

Yet between Lane-Poole and Irwin something significant changes in the historiography of the era: the understanding of political violence in Mamluk society. Earlier historians like Lane-Poole deplored the violence, but then were faced with the task of explaining how the Mamluk system remained in place for more than two and a half centuries despite it. However, in recent years there has been a reconsideration of political violence in Mamluk Egypt and Syria. Broadly, there are two revisionist approaches.

Winslow Clifford in his dissertation, ″State Formation and the Structure of Politics in Mamluk Syro-Egypt, 648–741 A.H./1250–1340 C.E.,″ attempts to explain Mamluk politics as a ″dynamic equilibrium.″[3] Accordingly he refers to ″structured violence,″ and ″the political theater of structured violence.″ He argues, ″Violence was never the true cement of the early Mamluk state.″[4] Further, ″Far from embracing a Hobbesian ´war of all against all,´ the Mamluks cultivated a manageable system of interaction meant precisely . . . to inhibit violence and resolve conflict by ensuring a reasonably equitable distribution of resources and rotation of power

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[1]Stanley Lane-Poole, *A History of Egypt in the Middle Ages* (London, 1901), 246–47.

[2]Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382* (London, 1986), Introduction, ii.

[3]Winslow Clifford, ″State Formation and the Structure of Politics in Mamluk Syro-Egypt, 648–741 A.H./1250–1340 C.E.,″ Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1995, 4.

[4]Ibid., 2.

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within the ruling elite.″

On the other hand, analysts such as Carl Petry and Robert Irwin see the violence as central. Petry says, ″Recent analysts of military slavery in the medieval Muslim world have become convinced that, for good or ill, such feuding was not at all an aberration but in fact had evolved as a basic, indeed fundamental, dimension of militarist politics.″[5] And a number of passages in Irwin´s book *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382* consider the meaning of such violence.

Yet despite this change of perspective, there still remains a certain tendency in scholarly writing, even as one acknowledges the level of violence, to treat it as excessive—or at least as *excess* to a less sanguinary topic—*waqf* endowments, cult of saints, the status of women, and so forth. And in any case, the question remains, if the violence was somehow ″systemic,″ how did it function as part of the system—that is, how did it arise and prevail? In short, the seemingly paradoxical question still arises: how did seemingly continuous political violence serve the political system? The following essay considers not only the phenomenon of violence itself, but also its representation in the medieval chronicles, principally those of al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and Ibn Iyās. It proposes an ideological role for violence on the basis of those chronicles.

I should begin by saying that in my view the paradox of ″stable yet violent″ is the perspective illusion of a conventional way of thinking, one that assumes some sort of social equilibrium is the usual state of things. Such a perspective informs much critical thinking no less than everyday thinking (for example, conservative economists who treat such phenomena as recurrent monetary crises, environmental pollution, work place health hazards, terrorism, etc., as mere excesses and aberrations of global capitalism that, with just a bit more tinkering and fine tuning, will be largely eliminated). By way of contrast, the quasi-Hegelian view here is that such ″excesses″ and ″unintended consequences″ are fundamental to the system. What is more, such excesses play a critical ideological role in the subject´s allegiance to the political order. The premise is that of Slavoj Žižek: ″every ideology attaches itself to some kernel of *jouissance* which, however, retains the status of an ambiguous excess.″[6] Lacan used the term *jouissance* to mean that form of traumatic attachment, the ″pleasure in pain″ that Freud described as ″beyond the pleasure principle.″

Evidence for this premise can easily be drawn from contemporary politics. For example, consider the role of sex scandals in American right-wing political discourse in the past decade. Ostensibly right-wing journalists and prosecutors investigated

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[5]Carl Petry, ″Class Solidarity versus Gender Gain,″ in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikkie Keddie (New Haven, 1991), 124.

[6]Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York, 1997), 50.

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and discussed the intimate details of the sex life of Bill Clinton not out of a prurient sado-voyeuristic pleasure in the public humiliation of their opponent, but rather because of some other high-minded concern: ″It´s not about sex. It´s about character. It´s about the law. It´s about family values,″ etc. Yet their obsessive attachment to the subject meant that cable news networks constantly broadcast gross details of people´s sex lives—even as the same people who discussed these ″scandals″ also complained about coarse and offensive television programming. In other words, the American right wing is galvanized, united by the very thing they claimed to denounce—a perverse obsession with sex (why was Ken Starr always grinning?).

Since the ideology at stake is medieval Sunni Islam, an example from the medieval chronicle of Ibn Taghrībirdī will provide some evidence for the validity of this premise in another time and culture (*jouissance* is ahistorical; how the ″hard kernel″ of *jouissance* is caught in various ideological fields is historical). In 693/1294 a powerful amir, al-Shujāʻī, was murdered by a rival´s mamluks. Then, in what was common practice, his head was paraded through the streets of Cairo on a lance. Since he had been an oppressive and rapacious official, Ibn Taghrībirdī says:

> People greatly enjoyed his killing, so that when the herald carried his head through the houses of the Coptic secretaries, they beat his face with their slippers as a way of seeking justice, and they pissed coins on the heralds—who earned a lot that way. But I say that this was a reprehensible mistake on the part of the heralds—God damn them *(qātalahum Allāh)*. Even if he had been an oppressor, he was better than the Christian Copts.[7]

In other words, Ibn Taghrībirdī is affronted by the fact that Christians derived enjoyment from something—the abuse of a decapitated head—that ought to have been the exclusive enjoyment of Muslims, a fact explained by his own libidinal attachment, as a Sunni Muslim, to the violence: for Ibn Taghrībirdī, the Christians were stealing the Muslims´ *jouissance.*

This essay then will explore the libidinal economy of Mamluk violence as represented in the chronicles. I shall also say that Mamluk violence is ″excessive″—but in another sense: it is excessive as an instance of Lacanian *jouissance,* what Slavoj Žižek calls ″surplus enjoyment.″ Precisely in so far as this violence fascinates the chroniclers (and us their readers), it reveals the ″surplus

[7]Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Cairo, 1963), 8:52.

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enjoyment that is the necessary support of social relationships of domination."[8] I will try to show how violence—assassination, execution, torture—was the "hard kernel" of *jouissance* that sustained the prevailing ideology. In that ideology, medieval Sunni Islam, the social relation of lord and servant is "fetishized" in the Marxist sense—that is to say, a contingent historical relation is represented as something "already there," preordained by divine order. In the Quran 16:74 God compares master and slave in this way: "God makes a comparison: a slave, property of his master, who cannot do anything, and one whom we have endowed with wealth, who may spend it privately or publicly—are they equal?"

To show how violence forms the ideological bond, we will consider a number of historical narratives from the chronicles of Mamluk historians—mostly from al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī and Ibn Iyās—all of them versions in one way or another of one of the master narratives of medieval Islamic culture: the fall of the mighty man. That narrative will be critiqued by means of Kojève's "fight for pure prestige;" where in the medieval account, the great man falls on account of Fate or God, defeat in the ""fight for pure prestige" is solely at the hands of another man—which means that the fall of one great man is necessarily the rise of another.

Among all the various states and dynasties in medieval Islamic history, Mamluk social order in particular seems to give very clear empirical expression to this fetishized relation of master and slave. Obviously, that it was also extremely violent even by medieval standards was not, I think, mere accident.

To begin to sort out both the agents and the acts of violence, some provisional categories are necessary. A summary account of the beginnings of Mamluk rule will provide most of them. Like many good stories, it begins with a murder.

In 648/1250 a group of Bahri mamluks assassinated the Ayyubid sultan al-Mu'aẓẓam Tūrānshāh. The mamluks were frustrated with Tūrānshāh's rule and concerned about threats he had made against them. Yet it seems that although Tūrānshāh's assassination had been discussed, the event itself was not well planned. After one of the Bahri mamluks bungled an assassination attempt on him in his tent, Tūrānshāh took refuge in a wooden tower near the Nile. Hearing of the botched attempt, the other Bahri mamluks rushed to the scene and set the tower on fire. When Tūrānshāh emerged, they shot him with arrows and chased him into the river where they finished him off with their swords. The upshot was—in the context of medieval Islamic history—an anomaly: the brief reign of a woman, Shajar al-Durr, the widow of Tūrānshāh's father, al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb II. After a few weeks, to patch up this weird state of affairs, she married the amir Aybak, who is usually reckoned the first Mamluk sultan. However, Aybak's reign was interrupted after only five days when a group of Bahri mamluks led by Aqtāy secured the

[8]Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 51.

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purely nominal restoration of an Ayyubid prince, al-Ashraf Mūsá, a boy of six years at the time. Obviously Mūsá never exercised real power; his reign simply sutured a split between Bahri and non-Bahri amirs. And indeed, the ostensibly deposed Aybak continued to wield great power by virtue of being Mūsá´s *atabak* or military commander-in-chief, until, in 652/1254, after four years of maneuvering and plotting, Aybak, having secured his power base, lured his Bahri rival Aqtāy to the palace under the pretense of ″consultation.″ Aybak´s mamluks cut him down with their swords. Then they cut off his head and threw it down from the wall of the Citadel to his Bahri comrades who were waiting for him outside.[9] Aybak then deposed the child sultan and assumed the title of sultan himself.

Aybak´s reign ended in 655/1257 when his wife Shajar al-Durr, hearing he was going to displace her with a Syrian princess, had her servants strangle him while he was taking a bath. A few days later, Shajar al-Durr was herself murdered by servants of her mother-in-law who beat her to death with their wooden clogs *(qibāqīb).* Aybak´s son ʻAlī succeeded as sultan, but again merely as a place-holder until the contending forces among the mamluk amirs could sort themselves out and a clear victor could emerge.

Having proceeded only this far, certain empirical patterns and categories emerge to provide a sufficient framework for analysis.

First of all, there were, as Irwin puts it, two sorts of sultans: real sultans and ″mock sultans.″ Real sultans were powerful amirs who seize the throne either by 1) assassinating another real sultan or 2) by deposing a ″mock sultan.″ ″Mock sultans″ were usually young offspring of real sultans who tried repeatedly to establish hereditary dynasties and repeatedly failed. Their offspring simply ″fronted juntas of feuding military men″[10] until one group gained the decisive advantage. The reasons for the failure to establish a hereditary dynasty are clear: the young sultan took the throne surrounded by powerful, older mamluks practiced in the arts of politics—intrigue, extortion, and murder—while the young sultan was not. The chronicler Ibn Taghrībirdī remarked when he was witness to the fall of one such mock sultan, al-Manṣūr ʻUthmān, a Burji sultan whose ″reign″ lasted less than two months:

> As the saying goes, ″The weapon is present, but the understanding is absent.″ [This is] because they are young and inexperienced,

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[9]Al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Sulūk li-Maʻrifat Duwal al-Mulūk* (Cairo, 1956–58), 1:2:390; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 7:10–12; Ibn Iyās, *Badāʼiʻ al-Zuhūr fī Waqāʼiʻ al-Duhūr* (Cairo, 1972), 1:1:291.

[10]Irwin, *Middle East,* 27.

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> unpracticed in the arts of war, and they know nothing of deceit and double-dealing with their opponents.[11]

Most often mock sultans were not murdered, since they were seen as harmless. The most important exceptions to this pattern were the descendants of Qalāwūn who must be accounted real sultans, yet even they also served time as mock sultans and were deposed one or more times before they matured and established their power so as to rule as real sultans.

The second thing we see in the story of Tūrānshāh, Shajar al-Durr, and Aybak is the variety of violence. The following categories drawn from the preceding summary may serve as rubrics for this essay and will help us sort out the mayhem: assassination (Tūrānshāh, Aybak); execution (Aqtāy); revenge-*lex talionis* (Shajar al-Durr). To these, I would add two more: torture and spectacle. As will be seen shortly, some blurring of these categories is inevitable. Clearly we would usually say that being strangled in a bath is an assassination, while being strangled in front of the sultan is an execution. Yet, the example of al-Nāṣir Faraj will show us the difficulty of this distinction. The larger significance of political violence in Mamluk culture hinges on two matters, its prevalence and its representation in the chronicles. What can we say about the gross realities beyond the representation? We shall work backwards, considering what seems the reality and then consider what we may deduce from the narrative representation of that.

ASSASSINATION

One may wonder, how prevalent was assassination? My tally of Mamluk sultans indicates that twenty-two of fifty were murdered. More to the point, if one only counts the twenty-nine ″real″ sultans (discounting the twenty-one ″mock″ sultans who did not really hold power), roughly two-thirds of these were murdered: nineteen of twenty-nine. Again, certain empirical patterns—the how, the when, and where—emerge with respect to assassinations. Often what I term an ″assassination″ is described in the chronicles as an instance of *fatk,* which the *Lisān al-ʻArab* tells us is ″to take the man by surprise and kill him,″ whereas an execution is most often termed *qatl* (″killing″) in the chronicles. But not always.

Not surprisingly, assassinations were usually attempted when the would-be victim was likely to be alone, relaxed, and off guard. As we have seen, Aybak was strangled while taking a bath. In 698/1298 the sultan Lājīn would be assassinated while playing chess. Prayer time was also a favored time; in 747/1347 Gurlū, an amir who had manipulated events under the young Qalwunids Ismāʻīl and Shaʻbān, was similarly murdered while praying; and towards the end of the Mamluk dynasty

[11]Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 16:49.

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in 908/1502 we read of Azdamūr, the *dawādār* of the sultan Qānsūh al-Ghawrī, being shot at with arrows while on his way to pray, his thoughts presumably concentrated on that beyond to which his rival wished to hasten him on his way.[12]

Many of the Mamluks liked to hunt, and hunting provided another opportunity to ambush the victim while he was alone.[13] In 657/1259, shortly after defeating the Mongol army at ʻAyn Jālūt, Quṭuz, who had been one of Tūrānshāh´s assassins, was ambushed and killed while hunting by a group of mamluk amirs, one of whom was the future sultan Baybars. And again in 693/1293 the sultan al-Ashraf Khalīl was assassinated while hunting by a group of disaffected amirs led by Baydarā. In the instance of Quṭuz, one of the amirs struck him first with a blow on the shoulder. Then another pulled him from his horse, and when he was on the ground, the rest shot him full of arrows. In the assassination of Khalīl, the first blows struck are similarly on the hand, and then the shoulder. Al-Maqrīzī describes it in this way: ″The two rushed him with their swords [the amirs Baydarā and Lājīn]. He [Baydarā] struck him on his hand and cut it off *(abāna yadahu),* then a second time and disabled *(hadda)* his shoulder. Then the amir Lājīn got to him and shouted at Baydarā, ″Whoever would be King of Egypt and Syria should strike a blow like this!″ and he struck him on the shoulder a blow which severed it *(ḥallahu).* Thus disabled, he was finished off by the other amirs. This plan of attack is found again and again in the sources no matter what the scene; the initial blow is not meant to kill, but is struck on the right shoulder, and its purpose is clearly to disable the victim and prevent him from fighting back. For example, when the amir al-Shujāʻī, already mentioned above, was jumped by mamluks of his rival Kitbughā, the first blow was struck on his hand. Then a second blow severed his head from his body.[14] In any situation where the victim is armed, the assassinations—taking into account, to be sure, the differences in weaponry—resemble mob-style killings; the goal is first to disable, then to dispatch the victim as quickly as possible—and in such a way that his death is a certainty.

In the pre-Thompson sub-machine gun era, the killing of al-Nāṣir Faraj illustrates the difficulties that could arise, even from a victim who has already been arrested (his is one of the examples that blurs the easy distinction between assassination and execution). Faraj surrendered to the amirs Nawrūz and Shaykh Maḥmūdī when they and the caliph al-Mustaʻīn gave him a written pledge of safety. But once they had apprehended Faraj, the amirs called in some complaisant qadis who ruled that the pledge was ″inoperative.″ They sent a party of five amirs and

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[12]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 2:3:736–37.

[13]One might expect the irony of ″the hunter being ′bagged′ ″ would have furnished the poets with obvious material, but the chronicles do not include any poetry on that theme.

[14]Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 8:46.

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executioners to Faraj, but seeing them, he realized at once what they meant to do, and he tried to defend himself. Al-Maqrīzī′s account reads thus:

> He [Faraj] defended himself. Two of the men jumped him and, after they had wounded him in several places, they threw him to the ground. At this point one of the two young assassins went at his neck with his dagger, and then he strangled him. By now he was wounded in five places. When he thought he was finished off, he stood up. [But] his heart was still beating, and he strangled him a second time. This time he was more certain he had died, and he left him, but then he moved again. So he went at him a third time and cut his arteries with his dagger.[15]

Whatever distinctions we might make between an assassination and an execution, I must add that this distinction usually has no legal implications. If the chronicles are to be believed, sultans rarely sought a legal ruling before they ordered someone killed. This distinction much more often concerns the relative rank of killer and victim, and bonds of loyalty that the chronicler might have thought ought to have existed between them. Assassination is most often the killing of a superior, whereas execution is the killing of an inferior—sometimes with, sometimes without legal pretence. In other words, the terms more nearly reflect a power relation—master and servant—rather than legal distinctions.

The slaying of the amir Shaykhūn in 758/1357 is another example that shows the absence of legal pretense and the difficulties of nomenclature. Shaykhūn was one of a powerful group of amirs who ran Egypt while a grandson of Qalāwūn, al-Nāṣir Ḥasan, learned the ropes. He was murdered in the presence of the sultan in the Hall of Justice by a mamluk named Qutlūqujā. The mamluk jumped Shaykhūn and struck him three blows with his sword, on his head, his face, and his arm.[16] The sultan gathered his private guards and hurried to safety. The killer claimed he acted solely on account of a private grudge and was executed shortly thereafter, but it was widely believed that the sultan ordered the murder.[17]

Execution

Execution was the usual fate for a Mamluk amir who lost in the game of hardball politics. The means of execution were several. Common means were strangulation,

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[15]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 4:1:224.

[16]Ibid., 3:1:33.

[17]Irwin, *Middle East,* 142.

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hanging, decapitation, bisection *(tawsīṭ),*[18] crucifixion, drowning, and burning. But as Aybak´s killing of Aqtāy shows, the simplest form of execution was to order one´s mamluks to cut the man down with swords. Strangulation with a bow string seems, as Irwin says, to have been regarded as ″more honorable.″[19] After the sultan al-Nāṣir Ḥasan consolidated his power, he arrested the amir Sarghitmish and had him strangled in prison in 759/1358. Likewise, hanging also seems to have been reserved for worthy foes; one of Baydarā´s conspirators in the assassination of al-Ashraf Khalīl in 693/1293, the amir Qujqār, was hung in the horse market.[20] But it is not always easy to determine why one means of execution is selected over another. Al-Ẓāhir Barqūq provides an example; Ibn al-Furāt tells us that in 793/1391 Barqūq ordered some prisoners to be taken to the Ridānīyah exhibition grounds, and of them he singles out three to be drowned, seven others to be crucified and then bisected.[21] If one were to single out drowning as ″more honorable″ would that be anything more than personal preference?

On the basis of my readings I would say that bisection was the most common form of execution for political opponents. This procedure was described by fourteenth century traveler Leo Africanus:

> The pains inflicted on malefactors are severe and cruel, especially those which are pronounced in the sultan´s court. He who steals is hung. He who commits a homicide through treachery incurs the following punishment: one of the executioner´s aides holds him by his two feet, another holds him by his head. The executioner, armed with a two-handed sword, cuts the body into two parts. The superior part is then placed on a pile of quicklime and can survive for twenty minutes, continuing to talk. It is a frightful thing to see and hear.[22]

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[18]Ibid., 86. The description of a method called *shaqq* may be an error. This was based on Excursus F in *The Theologus Autodidactus of Ibn Nafis,* ed. Max Meyerhoff and Joseph Schacht (Oxford, 1968), 81–82, which uses a manuscript of al-Nuwayrī´s *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab*. However, that portion of al-Nuwayrī´s work has since been published, and the word in the printed text is not *shaqq* but *shanaq* = ″gibbeting.″ On the other hand, in Ibn Faḍlān there is definitely mention of a technique in Central Asia like *shaqq,* splitting a malefactor ″in half from his neck to his thighs.″ (*Risālat Ibn Faḍlān,* ed. Sāmī al-Dahhān [Damascus, 1959], 134). So it is possible the printed text is in error.

[19]Irwin, *Middle East,* 86.

[20]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 1:3:796.

[21]Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh Ibn al-Furāt,* ed. Constantine Zurayk (Beirut, 1936), 9:1:261, ll. 5–11.

[22]Jean-Leon L´Africain, *Description de l´Afrique* (Paris, 1956), 2:519.

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It should be noted that bisection and most of the other modes of execution have no relation whatsoever to any Islamic *ḥadd* penalty. As Irwin notes, bisection seems to have derived from Mongol practice.

Decapitation, as we have already seen, was another common fate for political losers. Sometimes it was the means of execution, but often it was performed on the already dead victim for other reasons that we will explore. In 782/1389 the amir al-Nāṣirī, who had outgrown his usefulness to the sultan Barqūq, was decapitated. In 680/1281 the amir Sayf al-Dīn Kunduk al-Ẓāhirī formed a conspiracy to assassinate the sultan al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn while he was in Palestine, but Qalāwūn discovered the plot (with the help of Frankish intelligence) and had Kunduk arrested. Kunduk and his conspirators pleaded guilty and asked for a royal pardon, but Qalāwūn thought better of this. Kunduk and his conspirators were beheaded and then drowned in Lake Tiberias. This sort of ″overkill″ was far from uncommon, and raises obvious questions about the significance of inflicting further violence on an already dead body. Since it serves no practical purpose—in this case, that purpose having been achieved by the decapitation—it must serve some other end. And as I just noted, it was also often the case that someone was killed by other means and then had his head cut off.

Several aspects of these sorts of executions need to be sorted out. In and of itself the phenomenon of ″overkill″ would seem to be driven by hatred and the desire for revenge. On the other hand, decapitation of someone who was already slain does not always come under the heading of revengeful ″overkill.″ It also served sometimes as a means of publicity/spectacle—or even a more practical purpose. In 694/1393, after the amir Baydarā assassinated al-Ashraf Khalīl, some loyal Ashrafī mamluks killed him and put his head on a lance and had it carried by an executioner through the streets of Cairo. This entire episode will be considered below as spectacle. But decapitation seemed to have also served a specific, practical purpose apart from whether it was the means of execution or not. This is seen in the instance al-Nāṣirī. In his Latin biography of Barqūq, Bertrando de Mignanelli, who was resident in Egypt and Syria and was witness to many events in the reign of Barqūq, wrote, ″His head was brought before the Sultan, because the Sultan wanted to examine it carefully, as there was a squint in his eye, so that he would be in no doubt about his death.″[23] Similarly, we read of the heads of four unfortunates executed in Syria being conveyed to the sultan in Cairo for his examination. In 742/1342 the deposed sultan al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr was executed while imprisoned

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[23]Bertrando de Mignannelli, *Ascensus Barcoch,* trans. Walter Fischel, *Arabica* 6 (May 1959): 163. As Fischel notes, it seems that Barqūq′s name (which can mean ″plum″ or ″prune″) may refer to his need to squint and hence the wrinkles that resulted. But al-Azraqī in *Akhbār al-Makkah* says that it was due to their protrusion *(juḥūẓ).* (Ed. Wüstenfeld, 3:186).

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in Qūṣ in Upper Egypt, but his head was sent to the amir Qawsūn in Cairo (later in the same year Qawsūn himself, opposed by Syrian amirs, would be arrested and strangled in prison). In such instances as that of al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr and al-Nāṣirī, the decapitated head was equivalent to a death certificate for the individual.

In sum, the forms of execution could serve several different functions in addition to the permanent elimination of a political rival. There were cold executions, especially those carried out in prison such as that of al-Manṣūr Abū Bakr. At the other end of the spectrum were those executions in which feelings of revenge clearly played a part. Those carried out in public will be discussed in the next section; here we will confine the discussion to those carried out in the palace in front of the sultan or some powerful amir. The execution of al-Muẓaffar Baybars II provides an example. Al-Muẓaffar Baybars´ brief reign ended when Qalāwūn´s son al-Nāṣir Muḥammad I was restored for his third reign. Al-Maqrīzī paints a vivid picture of his ignominious end when he is captured by mamluks of his enemy Qarāsunqur: Baybars hurls his *al-kuluftāh* (a sort of embroidered cap) to the ground and says, ″God damn the world. I wish I had died and never seen this day.″ The mamluks of his enemy Qarāsunqur take pity on him; they dismount and put his cap back on his head.[24] When he is brought before the sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad I, the latter scolds Baybars II for the way he treated him when he was young: ″When I wanted roast goose you used to say, ´What does he do with goose? He eats twenty times a day!″[25] The sultan then orders Baybars II to be strangled in his presence with a bow string. But when he is almost dead, the sultan has him revived. He curses and reviles him for a while; then he has him strangled a second time, this time until he dies. According to Ibn Taghrībirdī, the sultan himself would sometimes put the bow string *(watr)* around the victim´s neck.[26]

SPECTACLE

In the chronicles the most common public form of execution was crucifixion on the back of a camel followed by bisection. Perhaps the two most complete accounts of these spectacles describe the punishments meted out to the killers of al-Ashraf Khalīl in 693/1293 by Ashrafī mamluks, and, a century later in 793/1391, the sultan Barqūq´s execution in Damascus of amirs loyal to his nemesis Minṭāsh.

In the instance of Baydarā and his confederates, the accounts of al-Maqrīzī

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[24]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 1:2:493. The *kuluftāh* was a sort of embroidered cap worn under one´s steel helmet. It seemed to symbolize membership in the military caste. See Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 16:54. When two amirs are released and pardoned the new sultan allows them to wear this cap again.

[25]Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 8:274–75.

[26]Ibid., 32.

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and Ibn Taghrībirdī describe Baydarā´s death in such a way that he seems to be killed in a fight with Ashrafī mamluks. When the tide turns against them, Baydarā´s men flee, and he is surrounded by Ashrafīs who cut off his hand first (in assassinating Khalīl, Baydarā had cut off his hand and then his arm, and following *lex talionis* the same is done to him before they give him the *coup de grace*). Then they cut off his head and carry it back to Cairo on a lance.[27]

Ibn Iyās´s version differs in having more detail—though it is not necessarily in contradiction with the other two accounts. According to Ibn Iyās, when the Ashrafī mamluks subdue Baydarā they take him to the amir Kitbughā, the leader of the Ashrafī loyalists. Rather as in the case of Yalbughā the Lunatic, as soon as the royal mamluks see him they pounce on him. In Baydarā´s case, however, Kitbughā does not call them off:

> Then they took him to the amir Kitbughā. When the Ashrafī mamluks saw him, they cut him to pieces *(qaṭṭa'ahu)* with their swords. Then they split open his belly and pulled out his liver, and each one of the mamluks cut off a piece and ate it—due to the severity of their grief for their master al-Ashraf Khalīl. Then the amir Kitbughā cut off his head and put it on a lance. He sent it back to Cairo where it was paraded and finally hung on the door of his house.[28]

This recalls the notorious episode in the battle of Uḥud, when the Muslim warrior Ḥamzah was slain, and Hind bint 'Utbah cut out his liver and ate part of it, and perhaps raises the question of its factuality—Ibn Iyās may be indulging in fictional embellishment at this point. In any event, all three chroniclers go on to describe the capture, torture, and execution of seven of Baydarā´s confederates in very similar terms. Al-Maqrīzī describes it this way:

> Baybars the Jashankīr took charge of their torture to determine who else was in league with them. Then they took them out on Monday, the eighteenth [of Muḥarram]. Their hands were cut off with an axe on a wood chopping block. Then they were crucified on the back of camels with their hands hanging from their necks. And with Baydarā´s head on a lance leading the way, they were paraded through Cairo.[29]

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[27]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 1:3:792; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 8:19.

[28]Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr,* 1:1:375, ll. 8–13.

[29]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 1:3:796.

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In the account of Ibn Iyās, the *mashā'ilīyah* or heralds precede the parade calling out, ″This is the punishment of someone who kills his master.″[30] Al-Maqrīzī also devotes considerable attention to the grief of the families:

> They took them past the doors of their houses, and when they passed the door of 'Alā' al-Dīn Altunbughā, his female slaves came out unveiled, beating their breasts. And with them were his children and his male slaves. They had torn their clothes and their cries went up. His wife was on the roof and she tried to throw herself down upon him, but her servants grabbed hold of her. She was saying, ″If only I could die instead of you.″ She had cut her hair, and she threw it down on him. The people collapsed from their crying—may mercy be upon them. They went on like that for days.[31]

The chronicle of Ibn Ṣaṣrā (fl. 793/1390) describes Barqūq′s execution in 793/1391 of a group of twenty mamluks who had been in league with Barqūq′s stubborn adversary Minṭāsh. This came after almost seven years of struggle between Barqūq and Minṭāsh, and in the train of a tremendous number of executions of collaborators. Minṭāsh would elude Barqūq for another eight months. Ibn Ṣaṣrā′s account reads thus:

> He [Barqūq] immediately ordered them crucified and cut in two at the waist, and they were brought down from the citadel with chains on their necks, barefooted, to the stables of the sultan. They brought twenty camels at once, erected crosses on them, and brought the nails. It had rained during the night of that day, and there was much mud and it was slippery. The sultan went up and sat in the Pavilion to watch them, while the area below the citadel was filled with people, and the families of the crucified stood bewailing them. The mother of Amir Aḥmad ibn Baydamūr and their neighbors, barefooted and with torn clothing, were weeping, and the people wept at their weeping. When the day was half over, they brought the prisoners out of the stables of the sultan, and nailed up all of them for fatal crucifixion. They made a circuit of the city in that mire and slipperiness. They cried out for help, but they were not

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[30]Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr,* 1:1:379.

[31]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 1:3:796.

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helped. Their families tore their clothes in grief for them, especially for the amir Aḥmad ibn Baydamūr. He was a native of the city, a good lad, who had caused no one any harm. Everyone liked him, for he was close to the people. The people saw him in this state, crucified, and his mother and neighbors bereft of hope. Shaykh ʻAlāʼ al-Dīn ibn Aybak eulogized the amir Aḥmad ibn Baydamūr well, telling what happened to him, how the people wept, how the sultan did not accept intercession for him, when he recited a description of his state at that time in a poem:

> Leave him on the cross, like a bridegroom without tambours or candles.
> But the eyes of men are on him. For him there was shedding of tears.
> And hearts fell melted with grief and pain within their ribs.
> For alas! He was a star of beauty which has left us without rising!

They brought the prisoners to the bridge of Zalābīyah while the sultan watched from the Pavilion. Then they took them down from the nails and began to cut them in two, one after another. The amir Aḥmad ibn Baydamūr remained to the last. When he saw what had happened to his companions and that only he remained, he breathed a sigh and recited this single verse

> I see death lurking between the sword and the executioner´s mat
> Watching me wherever I turn.

Then they cut him in two, and the families of those cut in two each took their relatives to bury them. They brought a bier and took amir Aḥmad and Muṣṭafá to their tombs in four pieces.[32]

Ibn Ṣaṣrā´s description is almost ″cinematic.″ He describes in some detail the positions and attitudes of the sultan, the families, and the spectators, setting the stage as it were before the condemned are brought forth. He places particular emphasis on the muck and mire through which the crucified make their fatal tour,

[32]Ibn Ṣaṣrā, *A Chronicle of Damascus, 1389–1397*, ed. and trans. William M. Brinner (Berkeley, 1963), 139–42 (pp. 103–5 in the Arabic text, *Al-Durrah al-Mudīʼah fī al-Dawlah al-Ẓāhirīyah*).

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and one can see in his emphasis the objective representation of a medieval commonplace: the precariousness and instability of life in this world, *al-dunyā,* in contrast to the stability of the next world, *al-ākhirah,* a theme that is central in the ″master narrative,″ the fall of the mighty man. Finally, Ibn Ṣaṣrā ″zooms in,″ focusing on one individual, the amir Aḥmad ibn Baydamūr, whose youth, beauty, and popularity in Damascus (and possibly his innocence) make his fate particularly heart-wrenching. The sultan´s emphatic rejection of clemency is followed by a poem in which, striking a Gothic note, Ibn Baydamūr is ″married″ to death. Ibn Ṣaṣrā´s text, lingering over painful details so as to show us beauty being destroyed, is a perfect example of Lacanian *jouissance,* the excessive pleasure-in-pain that escapes the equilibrium of the pleasure principle—as well as the ″dynamic equilibrium″ of historians and political scientists.

TORTURE

Torture was commonplace. The terms most commonly used to mean torture are *ʻadhāb, ʻuqūbah,* and *muʻāqabah.* The verb *ʻaṣara* is also common, but seems to be used to mean more specific forms of torture involving presses of some sort. Yet, here again, it must be said that the term ″torture″ is our own; the chronicles do not really distinguish between punishment and torture. For example, when al-Maqrīzī speaks of a famine and economic crisis in Iraq in the year 825/1422, he employs the same terms where we would clearly translate *ʻuqūbah* as simply ″punishment″: they were, he says, ″ʻuqūbah min Allāh la-hum bi-mā hum ʻalayhi min al-qabīḥ.″[33] Thus, while the writers may register disgust at particular instances, torture per se—as we usually think of it—is not something condemned by these writers.

In an atmosphere of relentless conniving and plotting, torture was used to uncover the identities of plotters and conspirators. Yet its principle purpose in Mamluk politics was more mundane: it was used to raise revenue. All the most adept fiscal officers specialized in it. It was assumed that powerful officials would have used their office to amass secret hordes by means of bribes, extortion, and so forth, and once they were dismissed they were commonly tortured to reveal their caches of money and jewels and expensive cloths. For the less prominent, other means had to be used to identify those likely to yield secret wealth. In al-Nāṣir Muḥammad´s third reign, al-Yūsufī describes how the *mutawalī* of Cairo, Aydakīn, used to go about in disguise at night and eavesdrop on houses, listening for singing or the sounds of drinking, the assumption being, it seems, that if the residents could afford musicians, they must have money. If such sounds were

[33] Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 4:2:611.

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heard, Aydakīn would raid the house and extort money from them.[34]

When al-Ashraf Khalīl assumed the throne in 689/1290 he immediately turned on the amir Turantāy. Al-Maqrīzī tells us Turantāy was killed *ba'da 'uqūbah shadīdah* (after severe torture.) Ibn Taghrībirdī says that Khalīl *basaṭa 'alayhi al-'adhāb ilá an māt* (put him to torture until he died). When the vizier Ibn Sal'ūs, a favorite of al-Ashraf Khalīl, was arrested after Khalīl's murder, he was tortured to force him to reveal where he had hidden his wealth. His enemy the amir al-Shujā'ī turned him over to the amir Lu'lu' al-Mas'ūdī, the *shādd al-dawāwīn,* who carried out the torture. Al-Maqrīzī wrote, "Fa-'āqabahu bi-anwā' al-'uqūbāt wa-'adhdhabahu ashadda 'adhāb fa-istakhraja minhu mālan kathīran." In Ibn Iyās the episode is described in this way: "He [al-Shujā'ī] began to torture *(yu'āqibuhu)* Ibn al-Sal'ūs every night. He used presses on his joints until he died under the blows."[35]

At times it seems that some symbolism played a role in the specific torture. I have mentioned the significance of the embroidered cap *kuluftāh.* The metal helmet that all mamluks wore over this in battle was also used as an instrument of torture. In 800/1398 Barqūq had the powerful amir Ibn Tablāwī arrested and tortured at the instigation of the amir Yalbughā the Lunatic. The latter placed an iron helmet on Ibn al-Tablāwī's head, and then heated it over a fire.[36] An even more sadistic variation of this is found in the instance of Tāj al-Dīn Aḥmad, a scribe, arrested and tortured in 755/1354 by the amir Shaykhūn. A barber was summoned who shaved Tāj al-Dīn Aḥmad's head and made incisions in his skull. Then beetles were put in these incisions and a brass helmet was placed on Tāj al-Dīn's head. Again the helmet was heated over a fire and the beetles ate their way into his brain.[37]

"Kingship is Childless"

The foregoing examples, a small sample taken from a list of prominent men only, suggest the extent and varieties of political violence in Mamluk society. Obviously the chronicles usually make no mention of lesser lights who were tortured or executed. Nor does the preceding sample take into account mass violence: riots by lesser mamluks, or popular protests and uprisings by the commoners. An idea of the extent and variety of these latter sorts of violence can be found in Chapter V of Lapidus's *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages.*[38] But if this brief survey

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[34]Al-Yūsufī, *Nuzhat al-Nāẓir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Nāṣir* (Beirut, 1987), 196–97.

[35]Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr,* 1:1:379.

[36]Ibid., 1:2:499.

[37]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 3:1:6.

[38]Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1967) 143–84.

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convinces the reader that Mamluk politics were unusually violent even by medieval standards, why was this so?

Various explanations of Mamluk politics have been proposed. Sometimes it is argued that the conditions of mamluks—as strangers in the society they governed, cut off from their own families—tended to remove many of the restraints that might have otherwise acted as a check on their violence. Only religion might play such a role. But its effect—even though many mamluks were pious men—was, as we know, obviously weak in this area. And in any case, as we know from our own experience, one need not be an accomplished theologian to find religious sanction for horrific violence.

More often, the notion of *khushdāshīyah* is sometimes employed to explain factional strife in Mamluk politics. A mamluk who had been purchased and trained by the same master as another was the latter's *khushdāsh*. This tie, as Irwin says, "has been seen as the cement that bound mamluk factions together."[39] But this explanation must be rejected. For one, as Irwin also notes, the term was used very loosely. For another, contending mamluks often sought support outside the mamluk class. But most importantly, the instances of amirs who were *khushdāsh* to each other contending with one another, assassinating or executing one another, are numerous enough to call into question the explanatory power of the term. To cite only two prominent examples, as Holt notes, "both al-Ẓāhir Baybars and al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn were opposed by rebellious governors of Damascus, each of whom was a *khushdāsh* of the sultan against whom he rebelled."[40] As Irwin argues, the notion that the principle bond of loyalty of a faction to the amir who led it issued from any source except self interest in the most material sense is suspect. "The factions," Irwin writes, "were hardly more than coalitions formed by the greedy and the ambitious; they were in the main innocent of 'any common fund of party principle.'"[41]

But there is another aspect of *khushdāshīyah* that is important: not its supposed camaraderie, but rather that it is part of a master/slave relation. In order to consider the role of this relation in Mamluk political violence, I would return to the beginning of the dynasty and the episode of Shajar al-Durr's reign.

Her brief reign after the assassination of Tūrānshāh is, in the context of the medieval Islamic state, a conspicuous anomaly. It can only be explained by the fact that Tūrānshāh's killers, even if they had more or less resolved that he ought to be eliminated, had not yet figured out what was to come next. The description

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[39]Irwin, *Middle East,* 88.

[40]P. M. Holt, "The Position and Power of the Mamluk Sultan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38 no. 2 (1975): 248.

[41]Irwin, *Middle East,* 152. See also 89–90, 153–57.

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of the assassination in the chronicle shows it unfolding without careful planning, and is consistent with this surmise.[42] What Shajar al-Durr´s reign masks to some extent, and what neither Tūrānshāh´s killers nor those who opposed them seemed to realize at the time, is that the assassination of Tūrānshāh effectively abolished the principle of hereditary succession. As noted above, attempts would be made by certain Mamluk sultans to put their sons on the throne, but these usually failed—and even when they succeeded, it was not because the hereditary principle was generally recognized, but rather because the son, after he was deposed as mock sultan, somehow survived to learn the game of Mamluk politics well enough to build a power base and then usurp the throne himself, a pattern best seen in the multiple reigns of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn.

Two well-known sayings regarding this remarkable state of affairs crop up in the chronicles. One is the so-called ″Law of the Turks″: ″He who kills the king is the king.″ The second is the saying ″al-mulk ʻaqīm″ (kingship is childless). These statements have occupied the attention of a number of scholars. Ibn Taghrībirdī asserted that the Mamluk rulers introduced the so-called law code of the Mongols (=″Law of the Turks″), the *Yasa,* into their domains, and many historians, David Ayalon most prominently, have taken pains to show the dubiousness of this.[43] More recently, Ulrich Haarmann has concerned himself with possible historical precedents for the specific ″Law of the Turks″ stated above, viz., ″He who kills the king is the king.″[44]

But the contention here is that the meaning of these two well-known statements cited by Ibn Taghrībirdī are examples of ″retrojection.″ They are best understood not with reference to some cultural import from Turkish or Mongol societies in Central Asia, but rather to the violent events which gave birth to the Mamluk dynasty, not in reference to some dim past, but rather to a new and startling present, one in which the abolition of the hereditary principle brings forth a more primal sort of politics in which there is no ideological stake. Political violence among Mamluk politicians is devoid of any ideological/religious significance—as Irwin says, ″The factions were hardly more than coalitions formed by the greedy and the ambitious.″ Remarks made about Aybak, the first Mamluk sultan, support such an interpretation. Ibn Taghrībirdī quotes some mamluks as saying, ″When we want to remove him, we can because of his lack of power and his middling

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[42]Peter Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. P. M. Holt (London, 1992), 38–39.

[43]David Ayalon, ″The Great Yāsa of Chingiz Khān: A Re-examination,″ *Studia Islamica* 33; 34; 36; 38 (1971; 1971; 1972; 1973): 97-140; 151-80; 113-58; 107-56.

[44]Ulrich Haarmann, ″Regicide and the ´Law of the Turks,′″ in *Intellectual Studies on Islam,* ed. Michel M. Mazzaoui and Vera B. Moreen (Salt Lake City, 1990), 127–35.

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rank among the amirs.″[45] The unnamed mamluks′ words make it clear that, for them, monarchy is not charismatic in any way.[46]

The rejection of a principle of hereditary succession effectively meant that there was no recognition of any principle of legitimacy—other than power itself. Violence done to one′s rival should not, then, be attributed to the breakdown of authority—it was the source of authority. Nor, for that matter, is the trend in the later stages of the dynasty for rank-and-file mamluks to assert their power against the amirs to be considered as some sort of deterioration of the system.[47] Rather it is the logical extension of power politics throughout the entirety of the military class. For these reasons, we can say that Mamluk politics revealed—whether Mamluk politicians themselves knew it or not—the fetishistic basis of the master-slave relation that served as the social paradigm for not only Mamluk society, but medieval Islamic society in general. As in the Kojèvian ″fight for pure prestige,″ the willingness to risk one′s life was precisely the ante required to play the game of Mamluk politics; the death notices of amirs abound with the terms like *shujā‘* (brave), *miqdām* (bold), possessing *fitnah* (acumen), and *ḥazm* (determination). Mamluk political violence is ″imaginary″ in the Lacanian sense of the term; insofar as the hereditary principle is a symbolic feature par excellence—in the Lacanian sense—its abolition brings forth a politics of pure rivalry devoid of ideological content.[48]

How then to square this account of Mamluk politics with the historians such as al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī, and Ibn Iyās? What remains is to examine the

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[45]Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 7:4. Also in P.M. Holt, ″Succession in the Early Mamluk Sultanate,″ in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Supplement VII (Stuttgart, 1989), 145.

[46]The contrast between the blunt assessment offered by the amirs of Aybak and the portrait of a sultan that emerges in an ″official″ biography such as that of al-Ẓāhir Baybars by his ″spin doctor″ Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir, and in anecdotes told of Quṭuz found in Ibn al-Dawādārī′s *Kanz al-Durar,* could not be stronger. Syedah Fatima Sadeque, *Baybars I of Egypt* (Dacca, 1956), 9–10, 31 (Arabic text), and Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar wa-Jāmi‘ al-Ghurar,* ed. Ulrich Haarmann (Freiburg, 1979), 8:40–3.

[47]David Ayalon, ″Studies on the Structure of the Mamluk Army,″ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15 nos. 2 and 3 (1952–53): 210–13, and Amalia Levanoni, ″The Rank-and-File versus Amirs: New Norms in the Mamluk Military Institution,″ in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society,* ed. Philipp and Haarmann (Cambridge, 1998), 17–31.

[48]The importance of the master-slave relation in various places and times in the Islamic Middle Ages is seen in Hodgson, and in Paul Forand′s article ″The Relation of Slave and Master in Medieval Islam,″ in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1 (1971): 59–66. Walter Andrews, in *Poetry′s Voice, Society′s Song* (Seattle, 1985), 90, wrote, ″As the system of slavery grew to pervade the military and palace services, this peculiar master-slave relation appears to have become the dominant pattern of relationship throughout the central government. Even [free] born Muslims . . . came to define their relation to the *padishah* (monarch) as that of slave to master.″

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ideological role of this violence in the chronicles, for in the chronicles violence is given an ideological content.

Nakāl: The Hard Kernel of *Jouissance*

Al-Maqrīzī´s account of a failed assassination plot against the first Burji sultan, al-Ẓāhir Barqūq, combines several of the preceding types of violence: attempted assassination, torture, and execution. An amir named ʻAlī Bāy al-Khazindār planned to assassinate Barqūq on the occasion of one of the rituals of Mamluk rule, the sultan´s annual opening of the Nile canal in Cairo. Al-Maqrīzī writes:

> When he [Sultan Barqūq] opened the canal as was the custom, he was accompanied by the amirs except for the amir ʻAlī Bāy the Khazindār. The latter secluded himself in his house for some days due to an illness that had befallen him—at least apparently—but harboring inside himself his murderous intention *(fatk)* towards the sultan. For he knew that when he descended to open the canal, he would pass by his house with the amirs, and so he plotted the assassination *(ightiyāl)* of the sultan.[49]

ʻAlī Bāy gathered a group of armed mamluks in his house ready to rush Barqūq and kill him as he passed, but the sultan was tipped off. The standards that marked his place in the parade were removed and the door of ʻAlī Bāy´s house bolted from the outside. By the time ʻAlī Bāy and his men got out, the sultan had already safely passed. In the mêlée that ensued ʻAlī Bāy´s mamluks deserted him and he hid in the heating room of a bathhouse, where he was apprehended. ʻAlī Bāy was tortured for two days to force him to reveal his collaborators, and then strangled.

If the political struggles per se were without ideological content, in al-Maqrīzī´s narrative we find rhetorical effects with certain broad ideological implications. The sentence in the translation above that begins ″The latter secluded himself in his house . . . ″ reads in Arabic: ″fa-innahu kāna qad inqaṭaʻa fī dārihi ayyāman li-maraḍ nazala bi-hi fīmā aẓharahu wa-fī bāṭin amrihi annahu qaṣada fatk bi-al-sulṭān.″ In his use of the verb *aẓhara* and the participle *bāṭin* al-Maqrīzī falls back on one of the most venerable rhetorical contrasts in medieval Arabic literature, that between what is exterior and apparent, *ẓāhir,* and what is interior and unseen, *bāṭin.*[50] The two terms are ubiquitous in the literature and are at once both rhetorical

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[49]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 3:2:903.

[50]Whether the words are actually al-Maqrīzī´s or not is another matter—al-Maqrīzī was known to copy long tracts from other writers without attribution. See the *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., article ″Al-Maḳrīzī″ by Franz Rosenthal, and ″Notes on the Early *Naẓar al-Khāṣṣ,*″ by Donald

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and interpretive devices. In a broad sense they were key terms in a pervasive medieval worldview wherein *bāṭin* designates the unseen but real, while *ẓāhir* refers to mere appearance, which is often misleading.[51] And this is how al-Maqrīzī employs them here. In order to explain ʻAlī Bāy´s treachery, al-Maqrīzī writes:

> The reason for this it seems is that one of his private mamluks, his steward *(shādd sharāb khānātihi),* took an interest in one of the slave girls of the amir Aqbāy al-Turantāy, wanting from her that which a man wants from a woman. But problems arose between them and that got back to Aqbāy. So he seized him [ʻAlī Bāy´s mamluk] and gave him a violent beating. Then ʻAlī Bāy got angry and complained of him [Aqbāy] to the sultan, but the sultan paid no attention to him. . . . So he [ʻAlī Bāy] got angry about that, and it stirred in him a hidden sense of outrage *(al-baghy al-kāmin).*[52]

This account of ʻAlī Bāy´s plot is preceded in the chronicles by an account of a polo match among the mamluks attended by the sultan exactly one week before it. The polo match was followed by a drunken party that scandalizes the austere sensibility of al-Maqrīzī, who concludes:

> It was a day of extreme infamy and repulsiveness; intoxicants were flaunted, and the mamluks *(al-nās)* publicly committed abominations and sins the likes of which had not been known. Learned people *(ahl al-maʻrifah)* surmised that the end was near, and this was so. From that day forward indecencies were committed in the land of Egypt, while modesty diminished.[53]

Al-Maqrīzī tells us that the sultan afterwards gave ″the commoners *(al-ʻāmmah)* permission to plunder the leftover food and drink.″[54] And he stresses that the sultan wanted to join in the drinking, but was advised to leave and go back to the Citadel. Moreover, the language describing the drunken mamluks´ behavior on this occasion emphasizes the publicity of it, in the strictest sense: ″tajāhara al-nās

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Little, in *The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society*, 226.

[51]Such a view, of course, finds justification in the Quran 57:3, where God is *al-Bātin*—″the Unseen.″

[52]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 3:2:903.

[53]Ibid., 902.

[54]Ibid.

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min al-fuḥsh wa-al-ma‘āṣī.″[55]

What emerges then in al-Maqrīzī is a moralizing narrative in which the public and visible turpitude of the drunken polo match party begets ‘Alī Bāy′s secret and disastrous assassination plot which also, al-Maqrīzī tells us, came about because of sexual indecencies. If we consider the rhetorical structure contrasting what is internal and unseen and what is external and apparent—his apparent illness but his unseen murderous intent, his secret hatred—the moralizing intent of al-Maqrīzī′s narrative is clear. Also apparent is the libidinal charge the violence carries; al-Maqrīzī′s narrative weaves from public turpitude (the polo match debauch) to private sins (fornication and hatred) and ends in public violence (attempted assassination).

Al-Maqrīzī concludes his account with—what else?—the torture and execution of ‘Alī Bāy: ″On Tuesday evening, the twenty-second [of Dhū al-Qa‘dah] ‘Alī Bāy was severely tortured in front of the sultan. His feet and knees were broken, and his chest was crushed. But he did not implicate anyone else. Then he was taken outside and strangled.″[56]

The rhetorical strategy that attempts to endow violence with a moral content is even more apparent in two other accounts from al-Maqrīzī. The first is the torture and execution of the disgraced vizier Ibn al-Sal‘ūs in the wake of al-Ashraf Khalīl′s assassination in 693/1293. Ibn al-Sal‘ūs, a Syrian, made many enemies with his techniques of raising revenues, and when his patron Khalīl was murdered, his days were numbered. The amir al-Shujā‘ī arrested him and had him tortured in the Madrasah Ṣāḥibīyah. Al-Maqrīzī says the amir Lu’lu’ al-Mas‘ūdī took charge of his torture:

> Every day he would lead him from the madrasah to the Citadel on a donkey, and the riffraff would accost him along the way with their worn out sandals saying, ″Master! Audit these for us!″ They

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[55]The accounts of both the drunken polo party and the plot of ‘Alī Bāy in Ibn Taghrībirdī and Ibn Iyās repeat much of al-Maqrīzī′s text verbatim, though each writer adds a few details. After repeating al-Maqrīzī′s statement that the plot of ‘Alī Bāy ruined Barqūq′s relations with the mamluks, Ibn Taghrībirdī adds the now well-known piece of advice that Barqūq′s wife supposedly gave him: that he ought to make his mamluks *ablaq,* of four stripes, that is, composed of four different peoples: Mongols, Circassians, Greeks, and Turks (Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 12:88). Ibn Iyās mentions al-Maqrīzī as a source, and then amplifies with his own observations. He tells the reader that the steward was one of ‘Alī Bāy′s favorites *(kān ‘azīzan ‘indahu)* and the number of blows he received from Aqbāy. And when ‘Alī Bāy goes to the sultan to complain, Ibn Iyās adds dialogue: ″So he [‘Alī Bāy] got angry and he said, ′If you won′t take revenge for my mamluk, I will take revenge for him with my own hand′ (Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i‘ al-Zuhūr,* 1:2:502–8).

[56]Al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk,* 3:2:907.

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> made him listen to every sort of nastiness, and he was subjected to inexpressible humiliations and punishments. This Lu'lu' owed his position to Ibn al-Sal'ūs. . . . Ibn al-Sal'ūs was nice to him and made him the inspector *(shādd)* of the *dīwān*s in Egypt. And he [Lu'lu'] advanced in his service to the point that he was almost like one of his deputies—Ibn al-Sal'ūs simply called him ″Lu'lu'.″ But God decreed that he fall into his [Lu'lu's] hands, and he went to extremes to humiliate him.[57]

After he describes the killing of al-Nāṣir Faraj, a son of Barqūq who—like Rasputin—did not go easily, al-Maqrīzī writes:

> They stole his clothes and dragged his body out. Then they threw it on a pile of garbage rising up [below the Citadel in Damascus]. He was naked with only his underwear covering his private parts and his thighs, and his eyes were open. People passed by him—amirs and mamluks—but God had turned their hearts away from him. The rabble played with his beard and his hands and his feet all day Sunday as an exemplary punishment of him from God. For truly he had thought nothing of the majesty of God, and thus God showed him his omnipotence.[58]

The theme of the fall of the mighty was, of course, one dear to medieval historians for whom it provided confirmation of the ″vanity of the worldly pursuits″—and possibly consolation for their own lack of power. Al-Maqrīzī, among the three historians, places special emphasis on it in his introduction to his work. Immediately after his *bismillah,* al-Maqrīzī writes: ″Say ′Allāhumma, lord of lordship *(mālik al-mulk),* you give power to whom you will and you take it from whom you will, you make mighty whom you will and you humble whom you will. . . . ′″[59] Al-Maqrīzī concludes by saying that God helps his faithful servants conquer kings and take the wealth that they [the kings] have gained merely through power and force, and these people then pass it on to their sons and their sons′ sons, but, ″When they diverge from the guidance their prophets have brought them, He inflicts upon them calamities and destruction, and He gives power over them to the scum of the rabble *(ra'ā' al-ghawghā')* . . . who, after gaining power, bring

[57]Ibid., 1:3:798.
[58]Ibid., 4:1:224.
[59]Ibid., 1:1:26.

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down upon them ruin."[60] His introduction, which begins with *mālik al-mulk,* ends with *ra'ā' al-ghawghā,'* its obverse, and with it we have descended from the loftiest to the basest—the scenes of the drunken polo party and the corpse lying on the garbage heap seem precisely the sorts of scenes anticipated by the phrase *ra'ā' al-ghawghā'*. In fact, in his account of the death of al-Nāṣir Faraj, *ghawghā'* is the very word al-Maqrīzī uses. But another term is more important here.

In the accounts above, al-Maqrīzī twice uses the same word to explain the terrible punishment and torture suffered by the losers—*nakāl,* translated above in the instance of Ibn Sal'ūs rather weakly as "punishments." But in fact it means more than simply "punishment." In *Lisān al-'Arab* Ibn Manẓūr quotes al-Jawharī: "nakkala bi-hi tankīlan idhā ja'alahu nakālan wa-'ibratan li-ghayrihi."[61] Al-Maqrīzī employs the same term to describe the killing of al-Nāṣir Faraj. And we find Ibn Taghrībirdī using it much the same way when he describes the punishment of the two amirs Qutlubughā al-Fakhrī and Ṭashtamur Ḥimmiṣ Akhḍar by the sultan al-Nāṣir Aḥmad in Karak in 742/1342: "The sultan imprisoned Qutlubughā al-Fakhrī and Ṭashtamur Ḥimmiṣ Akhḍar in the citadel of Karak after he made a public spectacle of Fakhrī, who was grossly humiliated by the common people."[62]

The language the two historians use is Quranic. *Nakāl* and variants are found in the Quran in five places. In 2:65–66, God says, "You have learned of those among you who broke the Sabbath. We said to them, 'Be contemptible apes!' We made them an example *(nakālan)* to their contemporaries and to those who came after, and a lesson to the righteous." In 5:38, He says, "as for male and female thieves, cut off their hands as punishment for what they have earned as exemplary punishment from God." And in 79:25, "God smote him with a punishment in the hereafter and in this world."[63] Beyond the insistence of al-Maqrīzī and other writers on the exemplary nature of torture and execution—that they are signs from God—the language used to describe instances of torture and execution in the chronicles cannot help but resonate with the temporal deaths and eternal tortures God inflicts on unbelievers in the Quran. For these reasons, insofar as al-Maqrīzī, Ibn Taghrībirdī, and Ibn Iyās are successful in interpreting the violence this way, a consistent analogy emerges: Just as God inflicts horrible torments on unbelievers

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[60]Ibid., 1:1:28.

[61]Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut, n.d.), 11:677.

[62]Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm,* 10:68, l. 5. "Fa-sajana al-sulṭān Qutlubughā al-Fakhrī wa-Ṭashtamur Ḥimmiṣ Akhḍar bi-Qal'at al-Karak ba'da mā nakkala bi-al-Fakhrī wa-uhīna min al-'āmmah ihānatan zā'idatan."

[63]Yet there is some unintended irony in the way al-Maqrīzī uses the word in the case of Ibn Sal'ūs when he says that "he was subjected to inexpressible punishments" *(fa-yanzilu bi-hi min al-khazy wa-al-nakāl mā lā yu'baru 'anhu),* since *nakāl* means precisely a punishment from which a meaning/lesson (*'ibrah)* can be derived, as we have seen in the notice in the *Lisān al-'Arab.*

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who defy him, so too are horrible torments inflicted on those who defy a sultan, an amir more powerful in the political hierarchy. The recurrence of a variety of epithets designating those at the base of this hierarchy of domination in these contexts—*arādhil, ra'ā', ghawghā'*—is not by chance either, as al-Maqrīzī signaled in his introduction. And, indeed, in addition to the term *nakāl* other elements of the vocabulary of punishment, torture, and humiliation in the Quran recur in the chronicles; variants of *'aqab, 'adhāb, hīn*—all used in the Quran—also are common in the chronicles. Whether the writer bewails the punishment meted out to a loser in this instance or lauds it as well deserved in another is to some extent irrelevant—the over-arching pattern is one of an oscillation between fascination and disgust with violence. For, indeed, had Baydarā succeeded, had 'Alī Bāy succeeded, had Minṭāsh succeeded—had any of the other rivals in the political game succeeded—the same moral could have been applied to their victims: the mighty man who falls because he is too much absorbed with matter of *dunyā* to the detriment of *dīn*. In other words, the ″moral″ is in large degree independent of the actual empirical events—that is, of the violence.

The violence then is ″excessive″ in this sense too: that it exceeds the attempt of the historian to inscribe it in some such explanatory myth, and it exceeds it precisely insofar as it reveals the ″truth″ of the social structure of Mamluk society—that the relation of master and slave is ultimately based on nothing but violence and death. *Nakāl,* we should say, should be understood not so much as ″exemplary punishment,″ but rather as ″exemplary violence.″ Insofar as it alternately fascinates and disgusts the chroniclers *nakāl* is the ″hard kernel of *jouissance,″* the surplus enjoyment that sustains the ideological bond of the chroniclers. The sublime monuments of Mamluk architecture are built not only of sandstone, but also of blood.

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