

The Mamluk City in the Middle East: History, Culture, and Urban Landscape

Nimrod Luz

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, XV + 265 pages.

ISBN 9781107048843

The Mamluk City in the Middle East is an interdisciplinary study of urban history in Syria, *Bilād al-Shām*, during the Mamluk Sultanate (1260-1517). This comparative study focuses on three Mamluk cities, Jerusalem, Safad, and Tripoli. The author, Nimrod Luz, explains his selection of these cities by highlighting their political significance and to some extent their analogous urban development during the Mamluk period. However, Luz actually emphasizes Mamluk Jerusalem while Safad and Tripoli become of secondary importance throughout the book. The distinguishing feature of the book is its attempts to understand the nature of these Mamluk cities and their sense of urbanism. In doing so, Luz calls into question the over-generalizing and religion-centered notion of the “Islamic city” and tries to demonstrate that the three Mamluk cities he investigates were actually “full-fledged cities.” The author successively uses physical, social, and conceptual frameworks for his analysis of the Mamluk cities and organizes the book accordingly.

The Mamluk City in the Middle East has three main sections, excluding the introduction and conclusion: a. “the tangible city,” b. “the socially constructed city,” and c. “the conceptualized city.” These three sections include seven chapters. The author details the objectives of each section and chapter clearly. This helps the reader to fully understand the content of the chapters and to see the relations between the sections and chapters. It further helps in underscoring the general emphases, arguments, and objectives of the book.

In the introduction, before summarizing the general arguments and outline of the book, the author discusses culture and landscape and then the Islamic city debate by paying attention to its Orientalist origins. After explaining and critiquing this theory, Luz stresses the importance of understanding a city in all of its social, cultural, economic, and political complexity. He summarizes his objective as understanding Mamluk cities within their own urban context by debunking the theory of the “Islamic city” and emancipating the Middle East cities from misconceptions and biases by focusing on Jerusalem, Safad, and Tripoli.

The first chapter, titled “Urban Regional History before the Mamluks: Presenting Tripoli, Safad, and Jerusalem,” is included in the introduction. Luz starts the chapter with the question, “What is the city?,” and answers this question by quoting Shakespeare’s tragedy, “but the people.” Subsequently, Luz underlines the importance of the human factor in the creation of cities with references to theorists like Ibn Khaldun, Tonnies, Simmel, and Weber. He then describes the urban development and historical human actors of the region prior to the Mamluk period. All these summaries enable the reader to draw an urban structure of the region and understand the “urban revolutions” of these three cities. Safad is comparatively a new city, while the roots of both Jerusalem and Tripoli trace back to ancient times. The author also differentiates each city from one another through detailing their primary functions: Jerusalem as a religious center, Tripoli as a main port city, and Safad as a regional center. However, all fit under the roof of this study in terms of the similarity of their urban development during the Mamluk Sultanate.

The second section, on the “tangible city,” focuses on the physical elements and built environment of the “Mamluk city” through three examples. Even though there are some comparisons with other cities, Jerusalem is paid special importance. Luz divides the motivating factors of construction in pre-modern cities into two categories: the ruling elites, which enabled the construction of public buildings, and urban residents, whose efforts enabled the building of private structures like houses, side roads, and neighborhoods. He also offers a short list of the main elements of public buildings, such as facades, vaults, domes, etc., and briefly explain what they refer to. The second, third, and fourth chapters are written under this section to analyze the architectural styles and built elements of the “Mamluk city.”

The second chapter is about the author’s field survey of Mamluk Jerusalem. Luz defines his main aim in this chapter as determining and understanding the language of vernacular architecture in a “Mamluk city.” To this end, first he presents his survey methodology and lists seven fundamental premises of vernacular architecture in Mamluk Jerusalem. Then, he details the basic components of Mamluk vernacular architecture by using photos of Mamluk Jerusalem to highlight the mentioned architectural components. By focusing on building elements, decorative motifs, and ornamentations, the author tries to characterize the vernacular architecture of the “Mamluk city” and demonstrate its architectural variety.

The third chapter is devoted to the most essential parts of a city, namely, houses. Luz argues that the morphology of residential units cannot and should not be reduced to only one factor, like religion, as done by the

advocates of the “Islamic city” theory. Houses are physical, social, and cultural units, and there were different types of houses, like private, courtyard, luxurious, and public houses or *khān*, *rab*, and *haws*. Each of these types of houses is extensively detailed in the chapter. Luz argues that there were numerous factors behind the creation of multiple types of houses in *Bilād al-Shām* during the Mamluk Sultanate.

In the fourth and last chapter of the “tangible city” section, the concept of the neighborhood is placed under the microscope. Luz discusses the concept of the neighborhood from its etymological roots to traditional approaches taken toward understanding Syrian neighborhoods. Relying on Eickelman’s study of modern Bujaat, the author emphasizes the socio-cultural aspects of city neighborhoods rather than their physical components. Luz argues that a neighborhood is primarily a socio-cultural entity and its spatial component has a secondary role. However, even if Islam had an undeniable impact on the creation of urban neighborhoods, it was not the sole factor; rather, there were other important factors like cultural and geographical features, for instance.

In contrast to the “tangible city,” the following section looks at the city as a “socially constructed” entity. The whole section underlines the inseparable connection between the city and the culture of its residents. Every creation in the city is a product as well as a manifestation of its society. Starting from this point of view, the section of the “socially constructed city,” which consists of two chapters, examines the social and cultural components of Mamluk Syria.

The fifth chapter is all about the *awqāf*, the pious foundation of *Bilād al-Shām* during the Mamluk Sultanate. While mentioning the information on waqf buildings, inscriptions, and deeds, the book refers to the endowments only of Jerusalem and Tripoli, because the author states that there is insufficient data to actually discuss the endowments of Safad. What distinguishes the book from other studies in this section is the author’s continuous critiques of commonly held views about Islamic waqf culture. Contrary to generally accepted views of waqfs as static and dormant estates, which set back the urban economy, Luz argues that they were quite flexible “catalysts” of urban development. Throughout the chapter, he tries to show the positive impact that these charitable trusts had on city planning and economics. They could annex new areas into a city and pave the way for urban expansion, as in Jerusalem, Tripoli, and even Safad. Further, some endowment buildings, like *khāns* and caravansaries, smoothed the way for traders and pilgrims and supplied the monetary requirements of a city, while their incomes also gave rise to new building activities which stimulated urban and economic development. In short, Luz directs his criticism again against the “Islamic city”

debate by focusing on waqf culture, offering multiple readings of such endowments in this chapter.

While continuing to examine the “socially constructed city,” the sixth chapter analyzes the visual expressions of the patrimonial Mamluk State through physical elements of the city. It offers a semiotic reading of architecture, symbols, and icons of the provincial Mamluk cities which represented society’s ideals, desires, and culture—in short, the society itself. Luz explains how ruling and religious elites of the Mamluk Sultanate gained legitimacy through the built environment by drawing on Gideon Sjoeborg’s four principles for the pre-industrial city: the appeal to absolutes, tradition, experts, and the governed. Indeed, these four principles of Sjoeborg are further developments of Weber’s theory that considers rules, traditionalism, and charisma as the fundamental tools through which authority gains legitimacy. Through using these principles, Luz does not ignore the peculiarities in the social structure and the legitimizing preferences of Mamluk Syria. However, throughout the sixth chapter, he dwells upon the legitimacy of religious piety through religious buildings and likens the functions of these “state-sponsored” religious construction projects to “mass-media channels.”

Throughout most of the book, the author approaches the city with its tangible and representative aspects. However, in the final section, on “the conceptualized city,” the author discusses the city in a more intangible and non-representational way. The author explains what he means by “conceptualization” by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus.” Luz states that habitus has a determining impact on the ways that people understand the city, their perceptions about the social and cultural aspects of urban life, and also how they speak of the cities.

One of the chapters under this part examines what Luz calls the “storytellers” of *Bilād al-Shām* during the Mamluk Sultanate. This is a blanket concept for people who offered narrations about the city, like local residents, travelers, traders, pilgrims, and chroniclers. Every narrator reads and narrates the city based on his/her own “habitus”—perceptions, cultural codes, and senses. In short, they describe the city dependent on their conceptualization of the landscape. In this respect, the author divides the perspectives of these storytellers into internal and external ones. He also offers some examples about the “mental maps” of these storytellers.

In the eighth and last chapter, Luz, building on Habermas, discusses the public sphere. The main discussion throughout the chapter is the nature of the public sphere in Mamluk Syria. Luz characterizes the public sphere in

Mamluk cities as non-autonomous from politics but also as a public realm which enabled people to become part of social life. The emphasis of the chapter is placed on the urban autonomy of religious elites, *ulema*, and the ruling elites in the public sphere. In this regard, the author describes some particular problems, like the oil affair of Jerusalem and the conflict over Mount Zion, to shed light on the autonomy of both religious and ruling elites of the public sphere.

The Mamluk City in the Middle East claims that there is a sense of Mamluk urbanism and, as opposed to the overgeneralized frame of the “Islamic city,” tries to show this sense of urbanism throughout Mamluk Syria. The starting point of the book responds to a need for a better understanding of urbanism in Muslim societies. However, as Luz himself states, the “Islamic city” debate is already dead, even if it has not yet disappeared completely. Therefore, Luz’s efforts to show the fallacy of the “Islamic city” arguments at every possible opportunity throughout the book seems excessive.

Even though the book purports to focus on three less well known Mamluk cities, the main emphasis is on Mamluk Jerusalem. Jerusalem is mentioned a total of 531 times in the book, while Tripoli and Safad are mentioned, respectively, 161 and 95 times. This fact alone reveals the main emphasis of the book. This discrepancy could be related to the scarcity of existent sources about the other cities prior to the sixteenth century, which Luz states was one of the main obstacles during his research. For example, he states that because there was a lack of sources, the cartographic image of Safad’s pious endowments could not be given. However, he offers no clear explanation or justification for why he focuses on Jerusalem. In short, constructing the whole book around Jerusalem is somewhat at odds with the stated aim of the book, which purports to focus on three Mamluk cities.

An additional problem is that the author effectively replaces the concept of the “Islamic city” with another, the “Mamluk city.” What is the “Mamluk city”? Does it mean Mamluk Jerusalem? If so, what is the representational value of Mamluk Jerusalem for the “Mamluk city”? There is not a clear answer to such questions in the book.

There are many references in the examination of the three cities throughout the book. The content is further supported by photographs and maps. Most of these photographs were taken by the author himself. All of them are quite important and valuable, especially since they are uncommon in studies about Mamluk urbanism. As for the bibliography, the primary sources of the book consist primarily of Arabic sources and translations. However,

no archival sources are used. This is a crucial problem for an urban history study. All in all, Luz's book has an important place among urban history studies, especially insofar as it offers an enlightening perspective into medieval times in eastern cities. However, in terms of the primary objective of the book—which is to refute the argument about the “Islamic city”—an inadequate use of primary sources weakens the efficacy of the book.

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DOI 10.26570/isad.650332