

Carl F. Petry,

The Mamluk Sultanate: A History,

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Petry, a leading scholar of the political, social, and cultural history of the Mamluk period for nearly half a century,¹ has compiled the first comprehensive volume in English on the Mamluk Sultanate, one of the most important political structures in Islamic history. *The Mamluk Sultanate: A History*, explores the Sultanate's history from its foundation to its demise at the hands of the Ottomans through a range of themes, including its political history, military establishment, administration, bureaucracy, political economy, foreign policy, and cultural legacy.

In the introduction, Petry begins with an excerpt in which Ibn Khaldūn appraises the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and the role they played in Islamic history. From the formation of Mamluk Studies as a distinctive branch of the field of Islamic history in the second half of the 20th century,² a large body of scholarship, especially in the past fifty years, has been produced on diverse topics with innovative approaches. Petry states that beyond providing a summary of the political history of the Mamluk Sultanate, a single volume that evaluates all these studies has yet to be written, and his aim is to revisit Ibn Khaldūn's observations on the Mamluks in the light of recent scholarship. In other words, the book attempts not only to provide a comprehensive historical narrative about the Mamluks, but also to reveal how this scholarship transformed the understanding of the history of Egypt and Syria during the Mamluk period. To this end, Petry organized his book into seven major themes: (1) a fifty-page political history in chronological

1 Carl F. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Petry, *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of Mamlūk Sultans Al-Ashraf Qāyrbāy and Qānshūh al-Ghawri in Egypt* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993); Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians?: The Last Mamluk Sultans and Egypt's Waning As a Great Power* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Petry (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Egypt. Vol. 1: Islamic Egypt, 640-1517* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Petry, *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society: Narratives from Cairo and Damascus under the Mamluks* (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center, 2012).

2 For an extensive review of the formation of the Mamluk Studies in the West, see: Ulrich Haarmann, "Mamluk studies – a Western perspective", *Arab Journal for the Humanities*, XIII/51 (1995), pp. 328-347.

order, (2) the Mamluk military establishment, (3) the Sultanate's relations with other polities in the Islamic world, Europe, and Africa, (4) vocations in bureaucracy, judiciary and education, (5) political economy, namely, agriculture, local and interregional trade, and sources of revenue in various periods, (6) cultural legacy, literary production, and historiography, (7) the rural environment, gender relations, religious minorities, and Sufism.

The first chapter presents a synopsis of events from the foundation of the Sultanate to its demise. Rather than a mere political narrative arranged according to the reigns of sultans, Petry highlights key turning points and critical junctures. By addressing transformations in the military establishment, foreign relations, administration, economy, and cultural milieu, he turns this first chapter of the book into an introduction to the remaining chapters. When dealing with the Baybars' reign, for instance, he discusses several significant issues, such as his attempt to unite the administration of Egypt and Syria and to centralize the Sultanate's bureaucracy, the enlargement of the Mamluk military cadets, and the re-establishment of the Abbasid caliphate in Egypt. He points out how the sultans from Qalawun family, particularly al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, broke the ruling oligarchy of mamluk amīrs and formed a quasi-dynasty and discusses the advantages and drawbacks of this experience. In his treatment of the reign of Barsbay, Petry focuses on his rivalry with the Timurid ruler Shahrukh for the custody of Ḥaramayn, and his monetary reform to regain control of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean trade vis-à-vis the rise of the European currency in the market. He discusses Mehmed II's conquest of Constantinople and its repercussions in Cairo during Inal's reign and how the Ottomans, having escalated their pressure on the principalities on the northern border of the Mamluk Sultanate, then became the central focus and rival of the Mamluks. In this way, Petry facilitates the reader to navigate through the intricate and complex venture of the Mamluk Sultanate by pointing to the critical moments and transformations in its history.

Understanding the functioning of a polity ruled by "slave-soldiers" requires an examination of the Mamluk military institution. Petry turns to this topic in the second chapter and explores a wide range of issues, including the purchase of mamluks as slaves, the training curricula in the barracks, their manumission and ranks, transformations in the military training, and challenges in the recruitment of mamluks from various regions. The mamluks, who constituted the ruling oligarchy, came largely from the Kipchak steppes in the formative years, but in later periods, they were recruited from a vast region stretching from the

Balkans to India. Petry dedicates a large section to the educational curriculum of the mamluks and reveals that it encompassed advanced military training as well as a substantial education in the Arabic language and religious disciplines. Petry argues that being familiar with how Islamic law is practiced ruling the society was an essential part of the education of trainees, who were expected to play an active role in the politics of the Sultanate in the future. Once literary and religious instruction is completed, formal military training begins, focusing on horsemanship and cavalry tactics. Upon completion of their training, cadets are manumitted in a formal ceremony and assigned to the military and administrative ranks according to their qualifications. Petry introduces in detail these ranks and titles within the Mamluk military establishment -royal mamluks, khassakis, slaves of former sultans, officers of ten, forty and one hundred, descendants of mamluks (*awlād al-nās*), and halqa. Then, he turns to the amīrs appointed to senior positions such as viceroys (*nāʿibs*), atabak al-asākīr, raʾs nawba, silāhdār, amīr ākhūr, hājib, dawādār, khāzindār, ustādār, nāzīr al-mufrad, and the transformations in authority and duties associated with these offices. Along with the intense group loyalty (*khushdashīyya*) that mamluks acquired during their training, Petry tries to reveal the rationale behind the opportunism and duplicity that emerged in the competition for power among different groups and that characterized the Mamluk politics. For him, group loyalty and factional rivalry create a constant competition that promotes military and political success on the one hand and endemic fear of betrayal on the other. This milieu of competition and paranoia is the field in which Mamluk politics was shaped.

In the third chapter, Petry argues that the foreign policy of the Mamluk Sultanate was underpinned by a dedication to maintenance of the status quo, that is, the coherent territorial unity of the Syro-Egyptian region. South-eastern Anatolia and Jazira served as buffers that protected the Sultanate from foreign enemies. The Delta and Upper Egypt serve as major centers of agricultural production, which supports the military. Linking the Mediterranean and East Asian trade, the Red Sea is of importance for both interregional trade and safe access to Ḥaramayn. The underlying policy to maintain the status quo in these regions is characterized by a commitment to coexistence with other powers, reliance on diplomacy to resolve disputes and recognition of mutually defined spheres of influence and commercial interests. Petry scrutinizes how this policy implemented in the context of the Sultanate's relations with the powers in Syria, Hijaz, Anatolia, Iran, Europe and Africa. As for the Mamluk-Ottoman relations, the evolving processes may be classified

as coexistence, escalating rivalry, predicament, and inevitable confrontation. These processes stem from contrasting imperial ideologies. While the Mamluk Sultanate pledged itself to ensure order in the Syro-Egyptian region and sustenance of the ruling oligarchy's elite lifestyle, the Ottomans defined their legitimacy through conquests (*gaza*), and territorial acquisition became its overriding goal. In the Ottoman's worldview, the ideal policy was a single imperial power with wealthy resources to subdue unruly clients and integrate various groups under a cohesive authority. These contrasting perspectives promoted an inevitable conflict that ultimately led to the Ottoman conquest of the Mamluk territories.

The fourth chapter explores the bureaucratic, judicial, and scholarly positions to reveal the organisation of the bureaucracy, law, and education in the Sultanate. Petry developed a fivefold typology to these positions as bureaucracy (vizier, *nāzir al-mufrad*, *kātib al-ṣir*, *ustādār*, and *nuzzār*), civil judiciary (chiefjudge, judge, deputy judge, *muḥtasib*, notary, *muftī dār al-adl*), scholarship (*mudarris* and *mu'īd*), custodians of religion (*khaṭīb*, *imām*, *muqri'* and *muhaddith*), and Sufi mystics. The biographical dictionaries of the period narrate the education and career of the holders of these positions - i.e., notables (*a'yān*) or learned (*'ulamā'*) - and credit them with expertise, status, and authority. Through analysing these narratives, Petry defines these positions, traces changes in their authority and status over time, and provides representative examples from the careers of position-holders. Although he discusses their instruction to some extent, topics related to scholarly practices and written products are mostly dealt with in the sixth chapter.

Among the most extensive chapters in the book, "The Political Economy: Contexts of Innovation" addresses topics such as agriculture, husbandry, fiscal administration, taxation, domestic economy, interregional trade, waqfs, and other revenue sources of the Sultanate. Petry suggests that the Mamluk regime effectively regulated and excised agriculture and commerce during its formative years, but in later periods, declines in local workforces due to the constant plagues, land degradation, privatization of state land into personal domains of senior amīrs, and the increasing influence of other regional powers in trade required the Mamluk regime to find ways to generate new sources of revenue. For example, the increasing alienation of agrarian real estate from state ownership through conversions to waqf, especially during the Circassian period, impelled the Mamluk administration to expropriate the surpluses generated by waqfs without substantial intervention in designated charities.

The sixth chapter of the book (Cultural Legacy: Patronage, Audience, Genres, Historiography) focuses on the written cultural legacy of the Sultanate. During the Mamluk rule over Egypt and Syria, scholars and bureaucrats compiled legal compendia, commentaries, political treatises, literary anthologies, chronicles, urban topographies, and manuals of diplomatic. These written products are unequalled for their quantity and diversity in Islamic history as a whole. Petry investigates the motivations behind the patronage of these works by the Mamluks and other social groups, literary genres, and their growing audiences, and especially the development of historiography. He argues that the salient feature of Mamluk historiography is its sensibility and interest to the ordinary world of the present. While the historians mostly followed the previously developed annalistic framework for introducing events and biographies, they distinguished from it with their focus on contemporary experience.

The final chapter discusses new research themes and methodological approaches that have emerged in the field of Mamluk studies in recent decades, including studies on the rural environment, gendered issues, Sufi practices, and the status of Christian and Jewish minorities. As for the latter, despite the general impression towards the shift of Christian and Jewish communities from majority to minority during the Mamluk period and narratives related to the destruction of churches and the discontent with the employment of Coptic clerks in bureaucracy, Petry suggests that there is no statistical evidence that indicates a demographic decline in these religious communities or elimination of Copts from the Mamluk bureaucracy. While discussing the growing influence of Sufism during the Mamluk period, he argues that this development was not against the legalism of ulama or the result of the traumatic effects of the Crusades or the Mongol invasions. Instead, the burgeoning interest in Sufism stems from its contribution to spiritual renewal, cultural enrichment and social equity.

All in all, *The Mamluk Sultanate* offers an insightful and enjoyable read with its multi-layered but cohesive outline as well as maps, photos, poems, and excerpts from the sources interspersed elegantly among its pages. For Petry, the Mamluk elite, throughout the two-and-a-half century period, endured in an environment of rapid change and a world of rising turbulence that threatened stability with its significant capacity to adapt to the new political, economic, social and cultural conditions. The book attempts to examine this phenomenon of endurance from several perspectives through its chapters. Due to this emphasis on adaptation and innovation, the author particularly focuses on the developments of the ninth/

fifteenth century, and the formative periods of the Sultanate are relatively less discussed. However, Petry's comprehensive book is a long-awaited and much-needed introduction to the history of the Mamluk Sultanate and an excellent synthesis of the ever-expanding scholarship in Mamluk studies.

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