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Edited by Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann

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For more than half a millennium the Mamluks – military slaves emanating from the steppes of southern Russia and later from the Caucasus and the Balkans – wielded power over Egypt. During this time they formed a remarkable political, military and economic elite, ruling as sovereigns from 1250 to 1517 and, after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, regaining much of their former paramountcy under Turkish supremacy. In this collection of essays, Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann have brought together the research of some of the most distinguished scholars in the field to provide an accessible and coherent introduction to the structure of political power under the Mamluks and its economic foundations. The essays also offer a unique insight into the Mamluk households and their relationship with the indigenous Egyptian population.

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*Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization*

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# The Mamluks in Egyptian politics and society

Edited by

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## Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<b>I Mamluk rule and Succession</b>	
1 Literary offerings: a genre of courtly literature	3
P. M. HOLT <i>Emeritus School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London</i>	
2 Rank-and-file Mamluks versus amirs: new norms in the Mamluk military institution	17
AMALIA LEVANONI <i>University of Haifa</i>	
3 Mamluk amirs and their families and households	32
DONALD S. RICHARDS <i>Oxford University</i>	
4 Joseph's law – the careers and activities of Mamluk descendants before the Ottoman conquest of Egypt	55
ULRICH HAARMANN <i>Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel</i>	
<b>II Mamluk households: coherence and disintegration</b>	
5 The re-emergence of the Mamluks following the Ottoman conquest	87
MICHAEL WINTER <i>Tel Aviv University</i>	
6 'Mamluk households' and 'Mamluk factions' in Ottoman Egypt: a reconsideration	107
JANE HATHAWAY <i>Ohio State University</i>	
	vii

viii Contents

- 7 Personal loyalty and political power of the Mamluks in the eighteenth century 118  
 THOMAS PHILIPP  
*Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen Nürnberg*
- 8 The Mamluk beylicate of Egypt in the last decades before its destruction by Muḥammad ‘Alī Pasha in 1811 128  
 DANIEL CRECELIUS  
*California State University, Los Angeles*
- III Mamluk culture, science and education**
- 9 Mamluk astronomy and the institution of the *Muwaqqit* 153  
 DAVID A. KING  
*Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität*
- 10 The Mamluks as Muslims: the military elite and the construction of Islam in medieval Egypt 163  
 JONATHAN P. BERKEY  
*Davidson College, North Carolina*
- 11 The late triumph of the Persian bow: critical voices on the Mamluk monopoly on weaponry 174  
 ULRICH HAARMANN  
*Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Ziel*
- 12 Concepts of history as reflected in Arabic historiographical writing in Ottoman Syria and Egypt (1517–1700) 188  
 OTFRIED WEINTRITT  
*Universität Freiburg*
- 13 Cultural life in Mamluk households (late Ottoman period) 196  
 NELLY HANNA  
*American University in Cairo*
- IV Mamluk property, geography and urban society**
- 14 The residential districts of Cairo’s elite in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries) 207  
 ANDRÉ RAYMOND  
*Emeritus Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence*
- 15 Patterns of urban patronage in Cairo: a comparison between the Mamluk and the Ottoman periods 224  
 DORIS BEHRENS-ABOUSEIF  
*Universität München*



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978-0-521-59115-7 - The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society

Edited by Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

	Contents	ix
16	Notes on the early <i>nazar al-khāṣṣ</i>	235
	DONALD P. LITTLE <i>McGill University, Montreal</i>	
17	Coptic festivals of the Nile: aberrations of the past?	254
	HUDA LUTFI <i>American University in Cairo</i>	
18	Marriage in late eighteenth-century Egypt	283
	AFAF LUTFI AL-SAYYID MARSOT <i>University of California, Los Angeles</i>	
	<i>Index</i>	290

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59115-7 - The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society

Edited by Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Illustrations

14.1	Ruling elite's residences, 1293–1341	<i>page</i> 211
14.2	Ruling elite's residences, 1341–1412	212
14.3	Ruling elite's residences, 1412–1496	214
14.4	Ruling elite's residences, 1496–1517	215
14.5	Ruling elite's residences, 1679–1700	219
14.6	The ruling elite's residences at the end of the eighteenth century	221

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59115-7 - The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface

Mamluk rule was the culmination of a long evolution of military slavery – an institution that seems to have been specific to, as well as, typical of Islamic societies. For centuries military slaves had played a role in the politics of the Islamic lands. Occasionally leading individuals had established local dynasties. But usually the power of the military slaves, or rather their officer corps, was exerted from behind the scenes. Lacking the legitimization to rule on their own officers preferred to co-opt weak caliphs or other, more legitimate, rulers.

At the time of the demise of Ayyubid rule in Egypt in the middle of the thirteenth century the slave troops of the Ayyubids seem to have hesitated as to what structure and shape their political power should take. Testimony to their hesitation and embarrassment was the rise to power of the only (albeit for only eighty days) female sultan in Islamic history. As the mother of a predeceased Ayyubid son she seemed to possess at least a shred of dynastic legitimacy.

The solution that eventually evolved was unique. The Mamluks themselves took power, formally and publicly, and enthroned one of their own as sultan. Yet, firmly opposed to any dynastic claim to power and to any undue concentration of power in the hands of one person, they continued to reproduce themselves as a ruling elite by replenishing their ranks with fresh imports of slaves from beyond the realm of Islam. The newly bought slaves were integrated into the Mamluk elite by being attached to one of the Mamluk households where they not only received their training but also developed a fierce loyalty to their master and comrades-in-arms. The Mamluks' own children and descendants, the *awlād al-nās*, were more often than not pushed aside in favour of young Mamluks succeeding to the power and wealth of their Mamluk masters who had bought and raised them. The reproduction of the ruling class by recruitment from abroad prevented its assimilation into the local population and fostered a group consciousness and loyalty among the members of this elite.

The peculiarities of the surprisingly durable Mamluk ruling system and organization in Egypt are patent. Turkish and Circassian youngsters were recruited as military slaves in the Qipchaq steppes and in the northern Caucasus. In the Ottoman period their countries of origin were mainly

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978-0-521-59115-7 - The Mamluks in Egyptian Politics and Society

Edited by Thomas Philipp and Ulrich Haarmann

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## xii Preface

Georgia and the Balkans. All these were regions markedly different from Egypt, linguistically, anthropologically and culturally. The Mamluks were brought to the Arab Middle East, were purchased by local strongmen (during the sultanate in principle only Mamluks themselves were allowed to buy white slaves), were educated to be good Muslims, and were trained, before 1517, as lancers, bowmen and cavalrymen, in consistency with the rigorous traditions of the steppes. Eventually the young Mamluk was enfranchised and – if he was good, crafty and lucky – he could ultimately be promoted to become, before 1517, a member of the military oligarchy or even sultan. In the battles of Marj Dābiq and al-Raydāniyya in 1516 and 1517 the Mamluk kingdom was destroyed; Egypt and Syria were annexed to the victorious Ottoman Empire. But as early as the end of the sixteenth century Mamluk influence gradually reasserted itself in Egypt. New Mamluk groupings came into being with a membership that was recruited from specifically Mamluk quarters, yet also attracted members of the Ottoman regiments stationed in Egypt. These so-called neo-Mamluk households enjoyed distinct social, political and economic privileges and legitimized themselves even with their proper myths of origin. The authority of the Ottoman sultan as the supreme head of the land, however, was never overtly, let alone successfully, challenged by Mamluk grandees; although, from the middle of the eighteenth century, they reasserted their actual control over Egypt.

The Mamluks had achieved very early on an aura of legitimacy for their regime when they succeeded in defending the realm of Islam against the Crusaders and the Mongols. Two-and-a-half centuries later the Mamluks' way of fighting proved to be obsolete against Ottoman firearms. Chivalrous and colourful as the Mamluks were, their military prowess turned out to be woefully inadequate against French infantry and field artillery another 250 years later. Early contemporaries of the Mamluks, both European Christian and North African Muslim observers, had clearly perceived the uniqueness of the system, its strengths, and its intrinsic contradictions. Their curiosity was aroused by the unusual arrangements of this ruling elite, whereby in the succession to power the elite's own descendants were passed over in favour of imported slaves and whereby the ruler was rather a *primus inter pares* than a dynastic monarch. It appeared that not the family, but rather the Mamluk household, was the focus of loyalty and power, and permanent ethnic separation from the ruled population was elevated to a principle. The Mamluk institution caused a lot of speculation and comment among pre-modern observers. But so thorough was the defeat of the Mamluks by Napoleon in 1798 and their subsequent liquidation by Muḥammad 'Alī that for the following generations they remained a perhaps exotic but utterly inconsequential phenomenon.

The Mamluk period was infelicitously situated between what the European Orientalists revered as the classical age of Islam and that period Egyptian nationalists would consider the dawn of modern Egypt. Orientalists could only observe the sad decline from a time they considered the height of Islamic civilization; modern Egyptian historians always felt ambivalent about an elite

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface xiii

which had admittedly led Egypt to cultural and political peaks but had never become part of the Egyptian nation.

Only some forty years ago did modern Mamluk studies receive a new impetus with the works of David Ayalon. Since then, thanks also to new approaches in social, economic and cultural history, a small but distinct number of historians have contributed considerably to the study of the Mamluks.

It was the purpose of a small conference held in Bad Homburg in December 1994 to bring together some of these scholars for an exchange of ideas and to form an impression of the 'state of the art' of Mamluk studies. The present volume is the result of this symposium. Certain questions seemed to play a major role in the discussions:

Was the uniqueness of this habit of permanently rejuvenating the ranks of the military leaders and of the virtual owners of the arable land from the outside at all perceived (and then justified) by the Mamluks and their Egyptian subjects? How real was the alleged non-heredity of power during the sultanate? Were the sons of Mamluks, the so-called *awlād al-nās*, really excluded from the political, social and economic prerogatives of their fathers, as has been often claimed in the existing scholarly literature; were they assimilated into the social environment and, if yes, in what ways? What was the rule of the Mamluk household? Another major theme is the comparison between the Mamluks under Ottoman rule and their independent predecessors in Egypt. Closely connected with this comparison is the question of the rise of the neo-Mamluks to near independence during the eighteenth century and their eventual collapse.

The contributions to the symposium can roughly be divided into two thematic parts. In the first, the struggle of members of the Mamluk elite for political and social influence *within* their own class and system is treated. We are informed about the gradual demise of the power of the sultan and then also of the leading amirs to the advantage of the rank-and-file Mamluks during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Amalia Levanoni, Haifa); the self-perception and self-representation of Mamluk rulers in late medieval and early modern panegyric historiography (Peter M. Holt, London); the principal career patterns of the sons of Mamluks before 1517 (Donald Richards, Oxford and Ulrich Haarmann, Kiel); the gradual genesis of 'neo-Mamluk households' joining Mamluks, sons of Mamluks and non-Mamluk clients together as common beneficiaries of political might and economic wealth under the Ottomans (Jane Hathaway, Columbus and Michael Winter, Tel Aviv); the limits of solidarity and loyalty among eighteenth-century Mamluks in times of crisis and affliction (Thomas Philipp, Erlangen); and finally, the capacity of the Mamluk institution in absorbing ethnic diversity in the Ottoman period (Daniel Crecelius, Los Angeles).

The second thematic part deals with the relations of the Mamluks' military establishment with its non-Mamluk environment. The following questions are

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## xiv Preface

tackled: were the Mamluks autonomous producers and patrons of culture? Here urbanization activities during the sultanate and the Ottoman period (Doris Behrens-Abouseif, Munich); educational aspects of the sultanate (Jonathan Berkey, Davidson) and of the Ottoman era (Nelly Hanna, Cairo) were dealt with. Is it possible to identify sciences that attracted the particular interest of Mamluks (David King, Frankfurt)? How did the civilian population, especially the jurists, react to the discriminating Mamluk monopoly on arms (Ulrich Haarmann, Kiel)? Were members of religious minorities and their immediate descendants used by the Mamluks as scapegoats because of their contested loyalties and their inherent vulnerability (Donald P. Little, Montreal)? Three papers, predicated upon three different scholarly disciplines (historiography, urban topography, cultural anthropology) cover both the early period of the sultanate and the era of Ottoman sway: what were the effects of the loss of political and cultural centrality on the historiographical discourse of Cairo after 1517 (Otfried Weintritt, Freiburg)? Was there any tangible relationship between social standing and the choice of residential quarters in Cairo (André Raymond, Aix-en-Provence)? What was the Mamluk contribution to the rich festive culture of pre-modern urban Egypt (Huda Lutfi, Cairo)? Finally, and now again restricted to a limited chapter in the history of Ottoman Egypt: were there any recognizable ethnic and racial barriers in the marriage patterns of eighteenth-century Mamluks (Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, Cairo)?

The two organizers of the symposium and editors of this volume owe cordial thanks to all those institutions and individuals who munificently helped us in achieving our goals. The Werner Reimers Foundation in Bad Homburg invited us to its mansion on the slopes of the Taunus mountains for three wonderful, sunny days in December 1994 and paid for part of the expenses of the participants. The sizeable remaining share was generously and unbureaucratically covered by a contribution from the Gerda Henkel Foundation in Düsseldorf. To both foundations and their trustees goes our gratitude.

Co-ordinating the diverse contributions towards this volume was no easy task. We emphatically thank Stefan Winter for helping with this and catching many stylistic flaws. His work was kindly supported by the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin. He also translated A. Raymond's paper from French into English and compiled the indices for this volume, a task completed by Stephen Conermann, Kiel. Special praise is due, last but not least, to Sibylle Appelt of the departmental office in Erlangen. She not only collected and standardized the various and at times rather heterogeneous contributions, but also typed them and thus created the neat manuscript that served as the basis for this publication.

Ulrich Haarmann, *Kiel*  
Thomas Philipp, *Erlangen*