

Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1130–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

Studying the medieval Middle East, especially the complexities of power relationships and the questions of status and prestige among the elite, Western historians have often attempted to define these relationships in terms of the Western paradigm of formalism, legitimacy and order. In *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1130–1350*, Michael Chamberlain criticizes this approach, arguing that the West is an “artificial standard.”¹ Those comparisons that assume, explicitly or implicitly, that the Western paradigm is the norm and thus that medieval Muslim society is a corruption of that norm are intrinsically flawed. Instead, he examines anew the literary sources of the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras to map out a new model for medieval Muslim society in which knowledge rather than formal institutions and legal rights formed the basis of a tumultuous and ongoing struggle for status.

Medieval Damascus was an important cultural, administrative and commercial center for the Ayyubid and Mamluk dynasties. Although in some respects it might appear outwardly similar to European cities, Chamberlain notes rather that there were many fundamental differences between Damascus and the West. Looking at the forces that gave rise to Eurasian cities and states as a whole, he notes the dominance of “horse warriors” in ruling elites across the continent.² In the West and in Japan, these horse warriors had become the rural, landed, hereditary feudal aristocracy. However, elsewhere – not only in the Middle East but also in greater Asia – relative affluence had allowed rulers to use mercenary and slave troops who had only temporary rather than permanent or hereditary power. In Damascus, this translated into a ruling elite of warrior households, whose grasp on power was based on ties of affection and personal loyalty. Unlike the feudal

aristocracy of the West, which had formal and legal means of transmitting and reinforcing status, and with no “transcendent legitimacy,” these amirs constantly negotiated power for power and prestige in ongoing *fitna* (struggle).³ In such a society, the sultans and amirs did not – indeed, could not – create a formal state apparatus for political or social control but rather ruled indirectly through a civilian, scholarly elite centered on the *a`yan* households.

These *a`yan* households, like those of the warrior elites, had to engage in constant struggle to transmit and maintain their status in the absence of formal mechanisms and institutions. Chamberlain argues that they did this through the use of knowledge as cultural capital and through the competition for stipendiary positions (*mansabs*), especially in the madrasas. This led to an open, fluid scholarly elite in which “new men” could compete alongside those from established families, with little direct interference from the ruling amirs. Despite this ongoing competition and the absence of corporate bodies to unite them formally however, this cultural elite was able to develop a distinct group identity. Moreover, many *a`yan* households were able to survive for many generations despite the apparent insecurity of their society.

Examining the rise of madrasas in the medieval era, Chamberlain rejects the western historical view of madrasas as “institutionalized education” or as a means of transmitting legitimacy or status through formal qualifications.⁴ For the amirs, the foundation of madrasas through *waqfiyya* endowments allowed them to retain control over property in the face of Islamic inheritance laws, while using the stipends associated with the madrasas to exert influence over the *a`yan* households.

¹ Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1130–1350*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization, David Morgan, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 31.

³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70, quoting George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 281.

For the a`yan, the madrasas were only one of multiple arenas in which they fought for social and cultural status. Unlike the autonomous universities of Western Europe or the state universities of Sung China, madrasas did not hold a monopoly on higher education. Students would often study at more than one madrasas or in study circles, following a preferred *shaykh* rather than feeling any collective loyalty to the madrasa. Moreover, contrary to the assertions of such historians as Albert Hourani, the madrasas did not primarily serve as a means of training jurists.⁵ Madrasas had no set curricula, no formal examinations nor granted useful certificates. Those certificates – the *ijaza* – that students did receive came rather from individual shaykhs rather than from the madrasas.

Chamberlain, rejecting the institutional nature of madrasas, asserts rather that they were important stages for cultural *fitna*. The mansabs endowed upon the madrasas were temporary, could be divided, stripped, resigned and competed for. Unlike Western titles of honor, they were not inheritable or alienable but based upon prestige and the political dexterity of the a`yan. Of course, many a`yan did attempt to transmit their status to their offspring. Yet, in the absence of concepts of a “natural” hierarchy, they did this by preparing them to provide “benefit” to society in general and to the scholarly elite in particular through transmission of knowledge.⁶ Societal divisions became based not on birth but on perceptions of benefit; bonds of loyalties were affectionate and sentimental rather than contractual or formalized; service was characterized as voluntary and based on love not command and obedience. In such a milieu, shaykhs took on a primary importance as not only educational but also moral and spiritual guides and the center of a group bonded together in intense, personal relationships that often transcended blood lineage. With the public ritualization of scholarship and the association of purity with learning, the concept of “shaykhliness”

rather than any formal affiliation secured the a`yan their place in Damascene society.⁷

The assertion of knowledge and shaykhliness as the primary force in a`yan social competition resulted in a`yan hierarchies based not on birth, formal qualifications or position in a bureaucracy but on the breadth of learning as well as skill in lecturing, writing and debating. This is not to say, Chamberlain asserts, that concepts of order or rank were any less developed in Damascus than in the West. Indeed, among the a`yan, ranking was ubiquitous, not only of social status but also of objects, ideas and fields of knowledge, and Chamberlain characterizes the a`yan as being particularly alert to “subtle gradations” of prestige.⁸ This focus upon fame (*shuhra*), benefit (*naf*) and eminence (*sharaf*) as the basis of distinction, however, led to an emphasis upon the labor, even the “pain” of learning rather than any natural quality of the student or shaykh.⁹ The a`yan were thus ever alert for errors, for they could be used as powerful weapons in their ongoing struggles for precedence. Yet, Chamberlain notes the difficulties in analyzing “heresy” as a concept. Rejecting E. Ashtor’s characterization of suppression of heresy in Damascus as a formalized “inquisition,” he depicts it instead as another means for the a`yan to engage in social and cultural struggle within their community.

Chamberlain thus concludes that while there were no formal, institutional means of transmission of status within medieval Damascus, scholars should not assume that this translates to a fundamentally unstable society in which status was completely transitory. The a`yan households used the acquisition and transmission of knowledge, competition for mansabs and concepts of the purity and truth of knowledge as basic structuring values in society. He also reasserts that viewing the lack of formal structures and agencies in the Middle East as a corruption of Western norms is a dangerous misunderstanding. The Middle East should be viewed in its own terms.

⁵ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1991), 113–114.

⁶ Chamberlain, 110–113.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 161–162.

Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus is thus an intriguing refutation of previous scholarship of medieval political, social and intellectual history. Certainly, some of his conclusions about previous scholarship seem warranted. However, on occasion, it seems as though he protests too much. In particular, his analysis of scholars such as Ira Lepidus or Roy Mottadeh seems to deny their work the subtlety and integrity it deserves. Nevertheless, Chamberlain does propose a particular hypothesis of the interaction of knowledge and social status that stands apart from other work in the field.

Focusing upon Damascus alone allows Chamberlain to concentrate upon a greater depth of sources rather than a more shallow breadth; his analysis is often penetrating and his interpretation seldom less than interesting. This makes *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus* an important addition to the understanding of Damascene and Middle Eastern society. Although not an introductory text, it should be valuable to all those undertaking advanced study of the medieval Middle East, especially those focused upon cultural and social history.