

THE `ULAMA AND THE MAMLUKS:

Historiography, Methodology & Themes

The Mamluk Sultanate was one of the more enduring polities of the Islamic middle period, lasting from AD 1250 to 1517, and also one of the more unusual, ruled exclusively as it was by a caste of slave soldiers brought as children from beyond the Sultanate's borders. As adult soldiers, these freed and converted amirs fought frequently with each other for power and presided over a system that modern historians have often characterized as decentralized and precarious. Under their aegis, however, a group of "notables" managed to survive and even prosper. How this educated elite, the `ulama, managed to do so, what strategies they used and what role they truly played in Mamluk society have been the subject of a great deal of academic work, especially over the last forty years. This work has extended beyond the traditional concept of the `ulama as solely religious scholars to encompass them in social, political and cultural dimensions, often despite significant problems with sources.

There is little consensus among historians regarding the quality and quantity of primary sources for the `ulama of the Mamluk period. Despite the great volume of narrative sources, there is a concomitant paucity of quantitative, documentary sources. Thus, while some historians see a blessing, frustrated social historians bemoan their lot. Furthermore, while many historians welcome the large number of chronicles, biographical dictionaries and tracts, concerns often arise concerning the potential biases of such sources. Whenever historians consider such sources, they must always consider the purpose of the original author, who was often writing either for a specific socio-political purpose or, at the least, was mindful of potential negative effects of his writings.

Donald Little has attempted to deal with this aspect of narrative sources through the comparison and analysis of annals in a similar manner to Fred Donner's

examination of sources for the early years of Islam.¹ Concentrating upon three years in the Bahri Mamluk period, at the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century A.D., Little analyzes all of the annals for thematic similarities and differences to gain insight into the mentality and methodology of the Mamluk annalists.² In considering the annals *in toto*, Little argues that he can move beyond the "shocking carelessness, both in citing sources and in the simplest matters of accuracy [...] the lack of discrimination, a faulty sense of proportion in selecting material [...] so that the ridiculous is mixed with the sublime" he finds in the annals.³

He concludes that although taken together, the annalistic sources for the period are "among the richest to be found for any phase of Islamic history" historians must be aware that some of this richness is illusory. In the narrow period he studies, only three sources were truly original. All others drew completely or in part from these three. This copying meant that much the same topics were covered in multiple annals and, in turn, led to a measure of "uniformity". However, Little notes that even those authors who copied much of their material from the three "core" texts never did so exclusively, but rather added original material of their own, making their works unique and worthy of study.⁴ However, to scholars of the `ulama, many are of little value as they concentrate solely upon the Mamluk elite and their deeds in war and in Mamluk political circles. Fortunately, Little does identify a complementary strand of historiography, typified by the *Hawadit az-zaman* of al-

¹ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 14 (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1998).

² Donald P. Little, *An Introduction to Mamluk Historiography: An Analysis of Arabic Annalistic and Biographical Sources for the Reign of al-Malik an-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qala'un* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1970), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94-98.

Gazari, that covers not only the political machinations of Cairo but also provincial and ecclesiastical affairs.⁵

A further problem with annalistic sources, Donald Little laments, remains that many such sources only exist in manuscript form or are incomplete. This makes them more difficult for historians to access and use. In addition, in some cases, the physical location of such manuscripts in the turbulent Middle East only serves to exacerbate this problem.⁶ A clear priority for historians of the Mamluk period should thus be to publish and, if possible, to translate the most crucial sources to allow for improved accessibility to scholars. Further, Little's work covers only a very narrow period – albeit one that was particularly rich in sources. Although his conclusions have some relevance beyond this period, particularly his analyses of the motivations of individual annalists, it remains that similar work covering a wider range of time could be invaluable to historians.

In the absence of such a study, many historians continue to use narrative sources, albeit cautiously. Some focus upon a small number of sources, analyzing them in great depth to reach conclusions about a specific event or person that might have some greater resonance. In his analyses of the prominent Damascene scholar Ibn Taymiyya, Little scrutinizes contemporaneous biographical sketches, both positive and negative to reach conclusions not only about Ibn Taymiyya himself, but also about the milieu in which the scholar operated and ultimately fell into disfavor.⁷ Similarly, Ulrich Haarmann analyzes the political tracts of Ibn Haldun to reach important verdicts on the nature of intra-communal tensions among the `ulama as well as `ulama attitudes towards the Mamluk ruling elite in late fifteenth century Cairo.⁸ Such techniques mirror similar developments in

⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Donald P. Little, "The Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya," *Int. Journal of Middle East Studies* 4.3 (1973) 311–327 and "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" *Studia Islamica* 41 (1975) 93–111.

⁸ Ulrich Haarmann, "Rather the Injustice of the Turks than the Righteousness of the Arabs – Changing `ulama Attitudes

Western European historiography, especially the "microhistories" of such scholars as Carlo Ginzburg.⁹ As such, they have the same advantages and raise the same concerns. While concentrated analysis allows historians to verify chronicles and similar sources and to provide an often fascinating "snapshot" of a particular time, place or person, generalization beyond this narrow range can often be fraught with difficulties.

Others historians, including both Jonathan Berkey and Ira Lapidus, instead use large numbers of literary texts to attempt to bypass the innate problems of a single source. Berkey, in *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo*, for instance uses thirty-six separate annalists.¹⁰ Little notes that Lapidus in *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* draws upon eighty manuscripts.¹¹ Similarly, Michael Chamberlain, in *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus* uses primary sources by almost sixty separate authors, yet he also takes a somewhat different approach to such "literary sources." In addition to utilizing the content of such sources, he also considers them on a meta-analytical level.¹² Rather than "becoming bogged down determining the veracity of single anecdotes" Chamberlain avers that "historians should listen to these stories to understand how the a`yan made use of the past and contested it."¹³ The greatest value of the chronicles and biographical dictionaries therefore is not what they tell us about the events that are their ostensible subjects, but rather what they can reveal about the mentality of their authors and their owners. Why did the `ulama

towards Mamluk Rule in the Late Fifteenth Century," *Studia Islamica* 68 (1988) 61–77.

⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Jonathan Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo*, Princeton Studies in the Near East (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 221–223.

¹¹ Donald P. Little, "Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages by Ira M. Lapidus", *Ethnohistory* 15.4 (Autumn 1968), 444–445.

¹² Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization, David Morgan, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 2002), 179–182, 3.

¹³ Ibid., 19.

write and preserve these chronicles? What function did such literary efforts have in Damascene society? Clearly, he concludes, these works had considerable significance among the educated elite, especially when other potential sources for study of the period are relatively lacking. Boaz Shoshan criticizes Lapidus' treatment of literary sources as concentrating upon their production to the detriment of considerations of consumption.¹⁴ Chamberlain begins to answer that lacuna of knowledge. Not only were books symbols of prestige within Damascene society, but they also provided blessings (*baraka*)¹⁵ and created a tangible link between owner and shaykh, between consumer and producer.¹⁶ This personal link was of crucial importance to the Damascene elite.

Chamberlain contrasts the richness of literary sources with the relative paucity of documentary sources, a lack also commented on by other historians. Researchers of the Medieval Middle East rue the lack of major document collections of the size found in Western Europe or Sung China.¹⁷ While bureaucrats of Plantagenet England or France were obsessively storing land registrations, manorial court records, legal judgments and other documents, Mamluk officials preserved very little. For historians – especially social historians – who tend to privilege such quantitative sources over the qualitative “literary” sources, this can be a major hindrance to their studies. Some historians, however, have been able to work around such limitations. Carl Petry in his analysis of the geographic origins of the notables of fifteenth century Cairo extracts quantitative data from biographical dictionaries of the period, in particular the references to *nisbas* and birthplace.¹⁸ Using what are usually considered

qualitative sources, he is able to plot the origins of the elites and thus reach conclusions about the mobility of the `ulama within the Mamluk Empire as well as the levels of independence of the `ulama from the Mamluk elite.¹⁹ Joan E. Gilbert uses similar methods in her studies of Damascus.²⁰

Other historians descend upon what documents do exist determined to glean what they can. A paucity of material does not mean a complete lack thereof. In particular, the endowment documents (*waqfiyyas*) of madrasas and mosques can be valuable sources of data. While Gilbert maintains, “published *waqf* documents are scant,” she is still able to assemble some interesting data from those to which she has access.²¹ Berkey, likewise, uses twenty-nine *waqfiyyas* from three Cairene archives, albeit alongside literary sources, to understand the religio-educational context of medieval Cairo and the role of the `ulama within it.²²

While Chamberlain notes that other documents survived, including the Cairo Geniza materials so fruitfully studied by S.D. Goitein and Jacob Lassner²³ and *ijaza* documents, he also draws conclusions from the *lack* of material itself. Such a lack, he suggests, is not accidental but rather is surely characteristic of a society that does not exhibit the formalized, hereditary hierarchy of Western Europe in which documents formed both a crucial proof of status and potent tools in the struggle for domination. Instead it evinces a society in which documents had no role in the transmission and retention of status. Moreover, it suggests that the “nature of state power” operated without a large and formal bureaucracy.²⁴ Both are interesting suggestions, and the

¹⁴ Boaz Shoshan, “High Culture and Popular Culture in Medieval Islam,” *Studia Islamica* 73 (1991), 75.

¹⁵ Chamberlain, 137.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷ Chamberlain, 13.

¹⁸ Carl Petry and Stanley Mendenhall, “Geographical Origins of the Civil Judiciary in Cairo during the Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 21.1 (January 1978), 52–55.

¹⁹ Carl Petry, “Geographical Origins of Academicians in Cairo during the Fifteenth Century,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 23.1&2 (April 1980), 140.

²⁰ Joan E. Gilbert, “Institutionalization of Muslim Scholarship and Professionalization of the `ulama in Medieval Damascus,” *Studia Islamica* 52 (1980) 111.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

²² Berkey, *Transmission*, 219–220.

²³ S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: an Abridgement in One Volume*, Revised and edited by Jacob Lassner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

²⁴ Chamberlain 13.

former appears to fit well with the remainder of his thesis. However, Berkey notes that the “chancery manuals” of the Mamluk era were “not produced for nothing,” but rather existed to guide and serve a bureaucracy. He argues that this leaves the exact extent of the Mamluk bureaucracy unsettled.²⁵

In the absence of plentiful documentary sources, historians have also turned to more eclectic sources for information on the `ulama of the Mamluk era. Louise Marlow examines medieval advice literature, including tracts by Mamluk era notables al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya, to assess the delicate balance between the Mamluk amirs and the `ulama and the ideals for which the `ulama strove. These tracts, she notes, emphasized the efficacy of a “mutually beneficial relationship between kings and `ulama.”²⁶ While she acknowledges that the tracts do not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation, they may demonstrate the mentality of the `ulama and the assumptions they made when appealing to Mamluk amirs and sultans.

Other sources may provide information beyond that normally sought for traditional political history. Pilgrimage guides, for instance, may offer new insights into popular culture and its effect upon the `ulama and *vice versa*. Christopher Taylor argues that the pilgrimage guides are characteristic of a culture that often accepted, if not embraced, popular manifestations of religious faith.²⁷ Berkey analyzes similar guides as well as anti-populist (anti-*bida*) tracts to better understand the interaction between *bida* populism and “high” culture in Medieval Cairo.²⁸

²⁵ Jonathan Berkey, “Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350 by Michael Chamberlain,” *The American Historical Review* 101.4 (October 1996), 1256.

²⁶ Louise Marlow, “Kings, Prophets and the `ulama in Mediaeval Islamic Advice Literature,” *Studia Islamica* 81 (1995) 113.

²⁷ Christopher Taylor, “Saints, Ziyara, Qissa and the Social Construction of Moral Imagination in Late Medieval Egypt,” *Studia Islamica* 88 (1988) 103–120.

²⁸ Jonathan Berkey, “Tradition, Innovation and the Social Construction of Knowledge in the Medieval Islamic Near East,” *Past and Present* 146 (February 1995)

Such innovations are limited mostly to the last twenty years. Even social history and more careful analysis of literary sources that allow the construction of a more complete picture of the place of the `ulama within Mamluk society have only emerged since the 1960s. Early histories show very little appreciation for the `ulama or indeed for any but the Mamluk elite. While some of this may be down to a lack of source material, earlier histories of the Mamluk also suffer from the preoccupations and the preconceptions of their authors. Edward Said’s criticism of Orientalism certainly has some relevance here. Sir William Muir, the Scottish Orientalist, who wrote *The Mameluke or Slave Dynasty of Egypt 1260–1517* (1896)²⁹, was a colonial bureaucrat in the Raj and according to Said, infused with the racism and prejudice of the “official intellectual genealogy of Orientalism.”³⁰ This may explain the barely concealed contempt Muir shows his subject. However, it barely explains the complete omission of any mention of the `ulama in the text. A more viable explanation probably lies with the focus of British academic history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. British history departments emphasized institutional and constitutional history to the exclusion of other avenues of inquiry. Aiming to effect the broad training of the next generation of imperial administrators and bureaucrats, the political structures of the Orient held the only relevance to historians such as Muir.³¹

Change from this institutional and political tradition of history was very slow to affect Mamluk history and the `ulama only gradually began to appear in the literature. In 1964, Nicola Ziadeh mentions the `ulama in his *Damascus under the Mamluks*, yet rather than consider them as an integral part of the polity, he relegates them to a chapter on “intellectual life.” Initially, this might not seem so unreasonable. The

²⁹ William Muir, *The Mameluke or Slave Dynasty of Egypt, 1260–1517 AD* (New York: AMS Press, 1896, 1973)

³⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) 99.

³¹ Richard W. Southern, *History and Historians: Selected Papers of R.W. Southern*, edited by R.J. Bartlett (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) 88–89.

`ulama were, after all, primarily scholars. When studying an elite defined by their education, a focus upon how they transmitted knowledge must indeed be integral. However, he asserts that “the state controlled higher education” through the `ulama, who strangled intellectual freedoms in a quest for orthodoxy.³² This assessment, rejected by many contemporary scholars, is surely influenced by the ethnocentrism of Western scholarship. Taking a Western European model of a strong centralized state as the norm, Ziadeh conceives of Mamluk education and intellectual policy in terms of such a state. Under such a model, the `ulama must be pawns of the state in its need to control educational “institutions.” Even setting aside the loaded question of the assumed homogeneity of intellectual thought, this does not even try to engage the possibility that the `ulama independently attempted to control education or whether the madrasas and study circles of the Mamluk period constituted “institutions.”

Ziadeh is not the only historian to conceive of the `ulama primarily in terms of their place within a putative Islamic educational system. In his studies of Islamic intellectual movements that includes the book *The Rise of Colleges* (1981) George Makdisi focuses upon pre-Mamluk madrasas, but nevertheless not only includes some material on Mamluk attitudes to the madrasas but also implies that his conclusions about earlier Islamic schools remain relevant for the Mamluk period.³³ In his model, “the madrasa was the institution of learning *par excellence*, in that it was devoted primarily to the study of Islamic law, queen of the Islamic sciences.”³⁴ Makdisi further describes the madrasas in terminology more often found in analyses of the European education system, such as “curriculum” and “institution,” and compares

madrasas to European universities, drawing parallels between the two.³⁵

Makdisi has drawn much criticism for his methods and his conclusions. A.L. Tibawi in particular takes issue with Makdisi’s work. He argues that rather than the madrasas dominating the Islamic educational complex, they were only one of several different means of the acquisition of knowledge.³⁶ Moreover, he maintains that analyzing the wide variety of the works of al-Ghazali, a prominent Mamluk era scholar, demonstrate that the `ulama were interested in far more than the narrow study of Islamic law (*fiqh*).³⁷ Finally, he argues that the comparison with the West and the use of Western terminology lead to erroneous conclusions. Rather than seeing the madrasa as a Muslim analog to the hierarchical and formalized corporations that were the Western universities, scholars must appreciate the non-hierarchical and informal nature of the madrasas.³⁸

Michael Chamberlain concurs with much of Tibawi’s argument. However, he somewhat mischaracterizes Makdisi’s argument at least in part. Drawing attention to the significant differences between Western universities and the Mamluk madrasas, he maintains this should preclude Makdisi’s referring to the latter as “colleges.”³⁹ In doing so, he implies that Makdisi concludes that madrasas were essentially the same as Western European collegiate universities. However, he does not acknowledge Makdisi’s own comparison between the two, in which Makdisi concedes and delineates many of the same points Chamberlain makes against him.⁴⁰ In fact, the greatest difference between the positions of Makdisi and Chamberlain regarding the comparisons between Western universities and madrasas is predominantly terminological. Although

³² Nicola A. Ziadeh, *Damascus under the Mamluks*, The Centers of Civilization Series (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964) 99.

³³ George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), 41–2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 224 and *passim*.

³⁶ A.L. Tibawi, “Origin and Character of al-Madrasah,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 25.1/3 (1962) 218.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 230

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁰ George Makdisi, “Madrasa and University in the Middle Ages,” *Studia Islamica* 32 (1970) 255–264.

Chamberlain's argument is, in this case, regrettable, it does not negate all the criticisms of Makdisi. Both Tibawi and Chamberlain decry the lack of political, economic and social context in Makdisi. Chamberlain maintains that when considering the transmission of knowledge in Mamluk Damascus, a focus upon the madrasa as 'institution' draws attention away from the critical role that social, economic and political considerations played in their foundation and maintenance.⁴¹ However, while he attempts to set his own work apart from his predecessors, on occasion he overstates his case. While earlier works like Ziadeh misinterpret political factors, or like Makdisi downplay the social, political and economic, the same cannot be said of the works of Ira Lapidus or Jonathan Berkey.

In *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo* (1992), Berkey sets Islamic learning firmly within the social, cultural and political context of the Mamluk city. Although, like Makdisi, he privileges madrasas as the foremost "institutions" of learning in the era, he expands upon Tibawi's "unity in diversity" theme to describe a broad swathe of different methods that Cairenes used to transmit knowledge.⁴² Moreover, his descriptions of the establishment and functioning of the madrasas demonstrate more effectively than Tibawi that while teaching of *fiqh* remained important in many madrasas, it did not dominate the activities of madrasas to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, he notes that some endowed madrasas made no provision for teaching at all.⁴³ Others concentrated upon religious knowledge or a more general "curriculum." To describe madrasas as institutions that aimed only to produce the next generation of judges (*qadis*) and bureaucrats would, Berkey argues, be a great simplification of the role of such foundations in Mamluk society. Even Joan Gilbert's argument that "the primary function of the madrasa system [...] was to create a professional class of scholars that would influence all of Muslim society"

⁴¹ Tibawi, 236 and Chamberlain 70.

⁴² Berkey, "Transmission" 49 and *passim*, and Tibawi, 218.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

would be too narrow a model in Berkey's conception of madrasas.⁴⁴

Berkey avers rather that historians should recognize that to medieval Muslims, the acquisition of knowledge was "an activity always worthy of approbation and encouragement." It was a vital part of being a "good" Muslim.⁴⁵ This privileging of learning and knowledge within Islam had important consequences for the 'ulama. It transmitted prestige and status to the educated within the Islamic community that historians should not underestimate. It also meant that learning was not an exclusive but an inclusive activity, open to a far wider range of students than one might expect to find in a medieval college of the European model. This leads Berkey to argue that the traditional definition of 'ulama as professionalized religious scholars and judges is too narrow. Instead, he insists that the 'ulama were not an exclusive elite but also included "members of social, occupational and cultural groups who might not rely primarily on education or legal activities for a livelihood."⁴⁶ This contrasts again with Makdisi and with Gilbert, who concludes that the professionalization of the 'ulama and the institutionalization of the madrasas had occurred by the beginning of the Mamluk era.⁴⁷ While certainly some segments of the community were professionals, living off their status as scholars, qadis and teachers, Berkey does demonstrate that the desire for learning and the designation of someone as an 'alim extended beyond this narrow base. Indeed, on occasion, even a Mamluk emir could become a scholar and occupy the liminal zone between 'ulama and amirate.⁴⁸

Just as being part of the 'ulama was not a black or white issue, neither was the position of madrasas within their wider context. Madrasas were not set apart from the other activities of the city, spatially or socially, as was

⁴⁴ Gilbert, 122.

⁴⁵ Berkey, "Transmission", 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁷ Gilbert 124.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Berkey, "'Silver Threads among the Coal': A Well-Educated Mamluk of the Ninth/Fifteenth Century," *Studia Islamica* 73 (1991), 109–125.

often the case in Europe. There was no friction between “town and gown” in Mamluk Cairo. Instead, the Cairene educational complex existed as an integral “part of the continuum of Islam”⁴⁹ The madrasas and other educational foundations of Cairo were public not private or semi-private space, while the imams and other `ulama performed vital communal functions beyond teaching.⁵⁰

Learning was also, Berkey emphasizes, an intensely personal experience in which the ties of loyalty and friendship between shaykh and student formed the basis not only of the learning process itself but also created bonds that lasted far beyond, creating networks of social ties within the `ulama.⁵¹ In this, he reflects the work of Roy Mottahedeh, who demonstrated the critical role that personal ties of loyalty played in Islamic society.⁵² Chamberlain too emphasizes this aspect of the `ulama learning experience, describing in fascinating detail the ways in which the learning process included not only traditional scholarship but also the transmission of “benefit” and the acquisition of “shaykhliness,” a moral and social position within the Mamluk city.⁵³ Although he criticizes Berkey for approaching the subject of knowledge through studying the institutions of Cairo rather than through the study of the civilian elite (a`yan) households, Chamberlain actually reaches many of the same conclusions as Berkey, albeit with a somewhat different emphasis. He argues that knowledge conferred more than a narrow professional benefit upon the `ulama and that members of a`yan households sought out knowledge primarily for social reasons, as a means of accruing social capital and receiving and transmitting status. In the fluid and often-precarious Mamluk system, the `ulama used knowledge and its associated benefits as weapons in an ongoing battle (fitna) for social and

political status within the community of notables.⁵⁴ To Chamberlain, even aspects of the `ulama experience such as the ways that the `ulama dealt with “heresy” can be explained by this fitna. Rather than considering suppression of “heretical” `ulama as “inquisitions” or attempts to impose a strict orthodoxy,⁵⁵ Chamberlain argues that they can best be explained as manifestations of fitna, in which `ulama used accusations of heresy to best their rivals for social status.⁵⁶ He uses as an example Ibn Taymiyya, also studied by Donald Little, to illustrate that local `ulama social pressure rather than state interference led to the fatwas issued against the scholar.⁵⁷

If Chamberlain considers the social, cultural and political maneuverings primarily within the `ulama itself, Ira Lapidus concentrates instead upon the position of the `ulama within the broader society in his work *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*. Describing the formation and political continuance of the Mamluk state, in which the military elite of Mamluk amirs continually struggled with each other for domination, he concludes that the amirs had neither the time, the inclination nor the political legitimacy to construct a centralized state.⁵⁸ While the amirs concentrated their attentions on their internecine strife and upon the extraction of resources from the cities, there grew a vacuum into which the `ulama stepped. In addition to providing for the religious and educational aspects of urban life, the `ulama provided crucial administrative, political and social leadership to the community. Shaykhs led the city’s quarters, providing moral guidance and ensuring its members cleaved to accepted social norms. They saw to practical matters, seeing to upkeep of the physical setting of the quarter. Most importantly, they acted as mediators between the commons of the quarters and the amirs,

⁴⁹ Berkey, “Transmission”, 49.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 191.

⁵¹ Ibid., 22, 34–40.

⁵² Roy P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society*, revised edition (London: I.B. Taurus, 1980, 2001)

⁵³ Chamberlain, 112, 150.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁵ Ziadeh, 100 and E. Ashtor quoted in Chamberlain 168.

⁵⁶ Chamberlain., 171.

⁵⁷ Chamberlain 170 and Little, “Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya.”

⁵⁸ Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 110 and *passim*.

especially when discussing taxes and other financial burdens imposed by the Mamluk rulership.⁵⁹ On a citywide level, the `ulama not only administered all legal functions within the community – which one should expect – but also provided the only uniting force within the decentralized city. They even led protests and rebellion against the Mamluk elite when the demands of the latter forced their hands.⁶⁰

According to Lapidus, the `ulama provided not only a social benefit for the local people but also for the Mamluks too. Provision of endowments for mosques and madrasas allowed individual Mamluk emirs to transmit their wealth and status to sons and daughters who could not otherwise inherit in the Mamluk slave system. Their offspring could become `ulama or marry into the `ulama social group, entering an elite that was, if not as politically powerful as the amirs themselves, capable of ensuring a maintenance of prestige.⁶¹ This is very similar to Chamberlain's argument, admittedly with an emphasis upon the benefit to amirs' offspring not to all a`yan, although the argument appears to hold for both. Lapidus also includes a finer definition of the a`yan than does Chamberlain, infusing the description with levels of subtlety and placing them clearly within the strata of Mamluk society.⁶² Although Lapidus clearly sees Mamluk society as understandable in class terms and, in consequence, defines the `ulama as a class, he does not completely contradict Berkey's idea of the `ulama as a broad and ever-changing category. Rather, Lapidus' vision of the `ulama is also extensive and open, with considerable social mobility.⁶³ Moreover, while he talks about class, he argues that other means of self-identification, such as ethnic origin, religion or religious affiliation, often proved far more important to Syrian social and political life.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 152.

⁶¹ Lapidus, 74 and 109.

⁶² Ibid., 79.

⁶³ Ibid., 111.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 87.

In his response, while broadly agreeing with much Lapidus' theory, M.N. Pearson argues that Lapidus' categorization of the `ulama is too all-encompassing, that Lapidus uses `ulama as a term into which "can be lumped any leader at all." While he does not provide an alternative definition of the `ulama – arguing that only further research can provide such answers – he avers that conflating the `ulama with the broader category of notables may be overstating the influence of the `ulama on Mamluk society. Indeed, he argues that given that not all Muslims were "good" Muslims, it is unreasonable to expect the populace at large to confer leadership upon an essentially religious group.⁶⁵

Pearson also criticizes a tendency among historians to see the Mamluk system as one consisting of a sharp dichotomy between amirs and a`yan.⁶⁶ Both he and Lutz Wiederhold, who echoes this criticism, attribute this to the influence of Marshall Hodgson.⁶⁷ According to Hodgson, political and social power was divided between the two groups. However, Pearson and Wiederhold argue that instead one should view the reality of the Mamluk polity as one in which both groups continually negotiated for social and political power both between each other and, crucially, within their own communities. Furthermore, in this fitna for power, individual amirs and `ulama often cooperated with each other to undermine members of their own class. Much of this argument is evident in both Lapidus and notably in Chamberlain, but Wiederhold argues that further work remains to be done to untangle the complexity of elite relationships under the Mamluks. Certainly the older trope that the main or even the only political role for the

⁶⁵ M.N. Pearson, "Premodern Muslim Political Systems," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102.1 (Jan 1982), 50.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁷ Lutz Wiederhold, "Legal-Religious Elite, Temporal Authority and the Caliphate in Mamluk Society: Conclusions Drawn from the Examination of a 'Zahiri Revolt' in Damascus in 1386," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31.2 (May 1999), 203 and Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Volume 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, 1977), 64.

`ulama was the legitimation through religion of the Mamluk elite now seems insufficient.⁶⁸

While further study of the complex political relationships within the Mamluk polity is one area of potential research, other areas also remain relatively unstudied. Asma Sayeed admits that some historians have commented upon female hadith transmitters and both Berkey and she have examined the role of women within the `ulama and the urban educational system in more depth. However, Sayeed argues, “We still lack analyses that synthesize the fragmented historical evidence to reconstruct more complete portraits”. She maintains that only through understanding the lives of such female scholars as Zaynab bint al-Kamal can historians not only recognize such women “as archetypes not anomalies” but also accept the role of women in both the scholarly environment and the broader context of Mamluk society.⁶⁹

Similarly, there are considerable lacunae of knowledge regarding the relations between `ulama and commons and between the urban elite and the countryside. While Lapidus’ *Muslim Cities* begins to address the first question, Arjomand suggests that Lapidus has only begun to scratch the surface of a problem potentially as complex as that of amir-`ulama relations.⁷⁰ The works of Boaz Shoshan, Christopher Taylor and Jonathan Berkey have also begun to address the intersection of `ulama and commons, especially with regard to culture. Shoshan argues persuasively for a two-way “cultural flow” between high and popular culture at odds with a trope of “elite” high culture cut off from populism.⁷¹ Berkey continues this theme, demonstrating how society as a whole – both popular and elite –

⁶⁸ For further discussion of this trope, see Marlow, 116 and Said Amir Arjomand, “The Law, Agency and Policy in Medieval Islamic Society: Development of the Institutions of Learning from the Tenth to the Fifteenth Century,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 41.2 (April 1999), 286.

⁶⁹ Asma Sayeed, “Women and Hadith Transmission in Two Case Studies from Mamluk Damascus,” *Studia Islamica* 95 (2002), 71–72.

⁷⁰ Arjomand 286.

⁷¹ Shoshan, 89.

constructed knowledge and influenced and changed the definitions of right (sunna) and wayward (bida) over time.⁷² In doing so, they changed the basis for morality in Mamluk society constructing, as Taylor defines it, a new “moral imagination.”⁷³ Nevertheless, historians should consider the work of these authors as a starting point for further examination not a complete solution.

An encouraging and “fruitful” potential avenue of new research is that into the concept of the Mamluk “ethnocity.”⁷⁴ A response to the notion that Islam is a religion of cities, it examines the relationship between urban and rural areas without making the prior assumption of a fundamental dichotomy between the two but rather analyzing differences alongside similarities, linkages and influences. Certainly, similar work in Europe has generated such new and provocative theories about pre-Industrial development that the study of the ethnocity may have the potential to revolutionize historical thought on the region.⁷⁵

Finally, an important gap in the modern historiography of the Mamluks remains the continuing lack of a successful modern synthesis of all information into a general work on Mamluk society. Lapidus, Berkey and Chamberlain integrate a great deal of information and analysis into their studies, but these works are limited temporally, geographically and thematically. Robert Irwin’s *The Middle East in the Middle Ages* might appear to provide such a synthesis for the early period of the Sultanate, yet it contains little on the `ulama or upon the social and cultural nature of Mamluk society, and its considerations of politics introduce none of the complexities revealed in more recent historical research.⁷⁶ As increased access to documents leads to more social history and as more research emerges about

⁷² Berkey, “Tradition,” 49.

⁷³ Taylor, 114.

⁷⁴ Pearson, 50.

⁷⁵ For example, see George Huppert, *After the Black Death: A Social History of Early Modern Europe*, 2nd edition, Interdisciplinary Studies in History, Harvey J. Graff, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998)

⁷⁶ Robert Irwin, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382* (London: Croom Helm, 1986)

the social, political, economic and cultural role of the `ulama in Mamluk society, the need for a new synthesis becomes ever more pressing.

Historians have achieved a great deal in the last forty years in the field of Mamluk `ulamology.' Despite issues with sources, including legitimacy of the narrative sources, the paucity of documentary sources and access to either, historians have managed to find new and provocative ways to approach the subject. Rejecting ideas of the `ulama as the religious and educational elite wing of a Mamluk state, scholars such as Lapidus, Chamberlain, Berkey, Petry and Shoshan have demonstrated that the `ulama played a far broader role

within a decentralized society, manipulating knowledge for social capital, influencing and absorbing culture and morality, uniting disparate factions and performing administrative and political functions all within a heterogeneous world of shifting boundaries, fluid institutions and social systems open to widespread mobility. While much work remains, particularly in the fields of economic and social history and with respect to the interactions of the `ulama with the commons and with the countryside, scholars may now begin to understand the complexities of the `ulama and their environment far better than ever before.

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