CHAPTER 2

Usages of Kinship Terminology during the Mamluk Sultanate and the Notion of the ‘Mamlūk Family’

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Introduction

Inspired by the work of David Ayalon, most students of Mamluk politics and society have tended to focus on mamlūk ties such as the relationship between a master and his mamlūks, or the connections among mamlūks of the same household serving the same master (khushdāshiyya), and underestimated the role of non-mamlūk elements in Mamluk politics and society, and the importance of non-mamlūk relationships such as blood ties and marital ties. Although not uncontested, Ayalon’s notion of a ‘one generation nobility’ is still very persuasive, and the Mamluk Sultanate is still sometimes perceived as a political entity dominated by a non-hereditary principle in which any influence of non-mamlūk elements “was the result of the breaking of some ‘basic law’.”

Amalia Levanoni was one of the first specialists to challenge the perception of the Sultanate’s ruling elite as exclusively, or almost exclusively, mamlūk. In her A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad Ibn Qalāwūn (1310–41), published in 1995, she drew attention to the role of marital ties and non-mamlūk elements including the mamlūks’ descendants (awlād al-nās) and mamlūks’ relatives, in Mamluk politics and society during al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn’s third reign (709–41/1310–41). In her “Awlād al-Nās in the Mamluk Army during the Baḥrī Period,” published in 2006, Levanoni further explored the position of mamlūks’ descendants during the Turkish period of the Sultanate (648–784/1250–1382), and showed that even in the early Turkish period (648–709/1250–1310) mamlūks’ descendants at times held high-ranking military positions. In the last three decades, students of the Mamluk Sultanate have gradually come to acknowledge the role played in Mamluk

1 See for example Northrup, The Baḥrī Mamluk Sultanate 256–9; see also ibid., 243, 245, 263.
2 Richards, Mamluk amirs 32; see also Fuess, Mamluk politics 95–6.
3 Levanoni, A turning point 34–72.
politics and society by mamlūks’ descendants and mamlūks’ relatives, and the importance of marital ties in consolidating networks of dependencies and loyalties between sultans and their amīrs, and in transferring status, privileges, and property, thus challenging Ayalon’s notion of a ‘one generation nobility’ and the exclusive nature of the Sultanate’s ruling elite.⁵

On the other hand, Ayalon’s notion of the ‘mamlūk family’ has received less attention and has been less contested. According to Ayalon, the mamlūk’s period of enslavement determined his affiliations for life; therefore, the structure of Mamluk society was based on what he called the ‘mamlūk family’ or ‘slave family.’ This was not a family based on blood relations but on relations of slavery and patronage. The patron and the comrades in servitude formed the family of the mamlūk. The patron and his freedmen developed relations very similar to those of a biological family, and the terminology marking the relations among them was identical to biological family terminology.⁶

Some scholars have argued that the concept of khushdāshiyya; i.e., the horizontal bond of loyalty between the mamlūk of one master, was at most a “moral ideal, which never actually managed to defeat individual interests” rather than “a historical reality,”⁷ and have emphasized the materialistic nature of the relationship between a master and his mamlūk (i.e. patron-client ties).⁸ Nasser Rabbat even suggested that:

[T]he relevance of these presumed relational structures in accounting for the shifting loyalties of the Mamluks after their manumission is at best mixed and often disappointing....[T]he number of incidents reported by the chroniclers in which a khushdāsh came to the assistance of his

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⁵ Haarmann, The sons of Mamluks 141–68 (esp. 142); idem, Joseph’s law 55–84; Petry, A paradox of patronage 199–203; idem, Class solidarity versus gender gain 122–6; Richards, Mamluk amīrs 32–54; Behrens-Abouseif, Waqf as remuneration 55–67; Van Steenbergen, Mamluk elite 192–4; idem, Order out of chaos 76–85; Bauden, The sons of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad 78–9; Yosef, Ethnic groups; idem, Mamluks and their relatives 55–69; Broadbridge, Sending home 1–18; D’Hulster and Van Steenbergen, Family matters 61–82; Sievert, Family 81–103.

⁶ Ayalon, Mamlūk: Military slavery 14–5; idem, Mamlūk military aristocracy 206–7; idem, Mamlūkiyyāt 327–8; idem, Bahri Mamluks, Burjī Mamluks 42–3.

⁷ Van Steenbergen, Order out of chaos 86; and see also Sievert, Family 93.

⁸ Van Steenbergen, Order out of chaos 57–75; Sievert, Family 101–2; Irwin, Factions in Medieval Egypt 237. However, Van Steenbergen emphasizes that the mamlūks of a master should be considered as more than mere calculating clients. See Van Steenbergen, Order out of chaos 88–9.