
In this book, Van Steenbergen addresses a period once summarized by the noted Mamlukist Robert Irwin as so complex that “it is difficult to find a narrative thread that will make sense of it all.”¹ This complexity, especially in terms of politics and the pursuit of power, may be a reason why the period has heretofore been a backwater in the otherwise booming field of Mamluk studies. A perusal of Mamluk scholarship listed at The Chicago Online Bibliography of Mamluk Studies,² which lists more than 5000 titles of articles, notes, monographs and reviews on Mamluk topics, reveals many studies addressing Mamluk history up to and through the third reign of al-Nasir Muhammad b. Qalawun (d. 1341), as well as numerous works addressing aspects of the so-called Circassian period of Mamluk history, which began with the first reign of the sultan al-Zahir Barquq (r. 1382-1389) and ended with the Ottoman conquest of 1517, but relatively few on the decades in between. Many leading scholars of the field have called for more intensive study of these four decades, and Van Steenbergen has answered this call.

The book is divided into five sections: an Introduction; Chapter 1, “Legitimate Power”; Chapter 2, “Effective Power”; Chapter 3, “Struggle for Power”; and a Conclusion. There are also three lists presented in the form of appendices: 1, The Qalawunid Sultanate, 1279-1382; 2, Effective Power Holders between 1341 and 1382; and 3, Struggle for Power between 1341 and 1382. They are useful resources to refer to whilst reading the three substantive chapters, for the events discussed in the substantive part of the text were complex, and the relationships between the main players often changed. But—and this is something which Van Steenbergen makes clear throughout—these aspects are understandable, since they emerged from the “same constructive strategies that shaped Mamluk socio-political society at large” (p. 169).

Confronted by this complexity, Van Steenbergen faces it directly and suggests that when dealing with the more than 1000 individuals participating in the politics of the period, a narrative strategy is not the “most


² Available online at http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/su/mideast/mamluk/
suitable approach" to take (p. 4). It certainly is not sufficient. Thus, while he makes use of narrative, particularly in Appendix Three where he identifies 74 discrete political events, Van Steenbergen also marshals a roster of other analytical tools. He makes use of prosopography to narrow down the list of significant actors to 34 (see Appendix Two), and to identify the rise and fall of four different generations of influential Mamluks. He chooses a series of thematic clusters as the lenses which he uses to frame his analysis. The first is the concept of “Legitimate Power”, which he uses in opposition to “Effective Power.” By Legitimate Power, Van Steenbergen refers to the institutional framework of the sultanate, and by effective power, he means the ability of certain individuals, by certain means, to get things done. Thus while earlier scholars have seen in this period a breakdown of the traditional Mamluk institutions, Van Steenbergen is able to show that these institutions become subordinate but are still in place. In other words, they were still necessary for the individuals using them to exercise power. They were, in effect, changed. Van Steenbergen’s extended analysis of effective power (Chapter Two is the longest chapter in the book) features an analysis of the methods used to acquire influence and exercise power. A key concept he develops is the pursuit of maqbul al-kalima, a “guaranteed say” in events (the term is Taj al-Din Subki’s (d. 1370)). Van Steenbergen presents a detailed discussion of patronage, focusing not just on the service role of the client but on the many uses of the patron’s niʿma (favor), and of kinship and other forms of relationship, all firmly bound by the evidence to the people involved. Finally, in the third chapter he extends his analytic frame by identifying and examining the roles of Mamluk households in those 74 key events. By the end of the book, readers are left with an understanding of how these many actors responded to four key moments of chaos, 1342, 1347, 1366-1367 and 1377-1378, and how their attempts to restore order were never long-lasting. While we learn that Barquq was able to break this cycle, the reasons for this are only hinted at, and must remain the subject of future study.

By necessity, this study is focused on internal developments of the Mamluk sultanate, with no emphasis on foreign affairs or cross-cultural contact. Moreover, since the institutions analyzed herein were military institutions (though admittedly in the process of being “demilitarized”), and were open only to Mamluks, the study is primarily limited to that class. Readers of this Journal will not find information about the contemporary ulama, the sectarian communities of Copts and Jews, of the relations between these and any other communities. By providing the first in-depth, coherent