

The complete irrelevance of the Mamluks as a military or political institution in the face of the modern infantry of Napoleon or the power politics of a Muhammad Ali was so obvious as to let them sink into historical oblivion immediately after their physical destruction.

A serious, albeit literary, interest in them began to develop in Egypt at the end of the 19th century with the novels of Jurji Zaydan.1 This interest continued during the next century with some thirty novels about the Mamluks published in Arabic.2

As a topic of systematic scholarly interest the Mamluks were only rediscovered in the 1950s and '60s by David Ayalon. But it seems to me—and a look at the literature discussed in the two books under review confirms this—that it is only in the last 25 years that Mamluk studies have established themselves as a regular branch of studies in the wider field of the history of Muslim civilization. In Germany it were the efforts and studies of the late Ulrich Haarmann, which generated a scholarly interest in the Mamluks—as Reinfandt and Sievert gracefully acknowledge.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Mamluk institution is its internal contradictions: Slaves as rulers, outsiders as rulers and the denial of dynasty, i.e. the passing on of power from father to son or at least within the family. All three issues have to do with the legitimation of rule and political stability. "In an age dominated by genealogical concepts, the Mamluk principle of excluding a priori succession based on blood relation must have been a provocation. Denial of dynasty and humble social origin stained with the image of enslavement meant for the Mamluks a serious weakness in the legitimization of their rule which could only be compensated by good deeds...benefactors of Islamic culture...benevolent founders or supporters of popular Sufi movements..." (Reinfandt, p. 57). Sievert recognizes an aggravation of these issues over time. While in the 13th century field commanders could establish their credential as successful defenders of Islam and thus become sultans in times of relative economic prosperity, there existed hardly any threats from abroad during the 15th century even as the economic conditions deteriorated considerably. Any Mamluk sultan’s legitimacy became more questionable (p. 100).

1 Al-Mamluk al-Šārid, Cairo 1891, Istibdād al-mamālīkh, Cairo 1893, Segār al-Durr, Cairo 1911.
2 Abier Bushnak, Der historische Roman Ägyptens Literaturwissenschaftliche Untersuchung am Beispiel der Mamlukenromane, Berlin 2002.
Sievert’s slender volume which originated from an MA thesis is directly focused on the question of succession, legitimacy and stability. After the long rule of al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn and his offspring, especially al-Nāṣir Muhammad b. Qalāwūn (3rd reign 1309-1341), which had all the trappings of a dynasty, a determined reaction set in, reasserting the collective claim to power of the Emirs who were not Mamluks of the deceased ruler but his equals. Yet, for another forty years various descendents of al-Nāṣir were given the official position of sultan while regents or atabegs ruled for them. During the following Circassian period of the Mamluks each sultan appointed his son as successor, though the chances of the latter to gain power were usually nil. The historian Ibn Tagribirdi could not understand these futile efforts, when the fathers themselves had come to power through usurpation (Sievert 137). Sievert’s aim is it to analyze the function of these shadow sultans or interim sultans, as he calls them. He relies on Abū Hamīd al-Qudī’s “Tārīkh al-Malik al-Aṭār Qāṭibā” for the information on the succession to rule for Qāṭibā and his Circassian predecessors. Al-Qudī’s reports are precise in their dates but give little background of the events. After discussing the major traits of Mamluk rule and summarizing the political concepts of caliphate and sultanate as we know them, Sievert tries to tackle the contradiction between the regular appointment of a son of the ruling sultan as successor, his short term acceptance as successor at the death of his father and the subsequent take-over of power of a regent or Emir as the “real” sultan. He recognizes that between the death of a sultan and the stepping in of a “real” successor there always loomed the threat of utter chaos. “The problem of changing rulers in the Mamluk realm was made more complicated than usual through the additional need for legitimization, the oligarchic self-perception of the Emir elite and the politics of the various factions of Mamluk households” (Sievert, p. 86). In the eyes of the Emirs and Mamluks the son of a sultan did not have the right or the capability (often they were minors or even infants) to rule. Precisely in this lack of qualifications was his function. The nominal rule of the sultan’s son gave time to sort out and rearrange Mamluk factions. This process would typically lead to either the takeover by the regent in a coalition of supporters of the deceased sultan and other Mamluks or to the takeover by one of the emirs, who succeeded to forge a more powerful alliance of factions. The Circassian sultanate became increasingly an electoral monarchy but precisely because the electoral process itself was not legally institutionalized it was necessary to install the interim sultan to maintain a stable framework in which the forming of alliances took place. To his precise and compact argument, Sievert adds a second approach derived from the concept of networks institutionalized with kinship relations and/or patronage structures. But this seems not to be a specifically Mamluk characteristic and rather applicable to a wide range of social situations.

Reinfandt’s thrust is different from Sievert’s but touches upon many of the same issues. His main interest are the waqf endowments of Mamluk sultans during the Circassian period and one of his important contributions is the editing, translating and commenting (pp. 97–99) of some 19 (actually 22) waqf documents of Sultan Aṭār Qāṭibā (r. 1453–1461) and his son Muʾayyad Ahmad (r. 1461). Over the last generation we have become increasingly aware of the importance of waqf documents especially for the social and economic but also political history of Muslim societies. In his second chapter, “Pious foundations in the late Mamluk sultanate”, Reinfandt shows us with much skill and knowledge the different motives for establishing a foundation and the many ways in which the original intend of such foundations could be subverted and used for different purposes. He demonstrates, politically perhaps most important, how qitāl land could be converted into private property and thus enable the owner to convert it into a waqf. By the end of the 15th century almost half of the cultivable land of Egypt belonged to pious foundations (Reinfandt, p. 33). This reduced the income of the government drastically and forced sultans to establish their own financial instruments by establishing their own foundations.