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Julien Loiseau: Les Mamelouks. XIIIe -XIVe siècle. Une expérience du pouvoir dans l'Islam medieval

For more than two decades now, historical research of late medieval Egypt and Syria has been gathering impressive momentum. In the process, research has substantially expanded its area of operation beyond an old-fashioned prioritisation of the political history of military elites (mostly having outsider origins as a military slave or 'mamluk' in common) monopolising, transforming and maximising the sultanate of Cairo and its rule over much of the 'Middle East' between the thirteenth and early sixteenth centuries CE (seventh-tenth centuries AH). If this Mamluk history has for a very long time been the almost exclusive preserve of only a handful of political and military historians, social and cultural historians have now largely taken over, and their understandings of this so-called "silver age" of Islamic art, architecture and scholarship continue to expand and deepen. [1] Fully acknowledging the validity and riches of these ongoing achievements in the social and cultural domains of Mamluk history, Julien Loiseau has conceptualised his 'Les mamelouks' as filling a void that in his view has gradually been created by that turning away from traditional research paradigms, from their singular focus on the politics of the late medieval Syro-Egyptian military elites in particular. Understandings of those elites in their largely unique capacity of mamluks, Loiseau claims, have been advancing quite poorly in comparison with how insights are growing for all kinds of other social groups and their practices. His book on the Mamluks and their experience of power between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries wishes explicitly to contribute to remedying this. The purpose and set-up of the book, however, are not the presentation of any full-fledged new line of such type of research. It rather aims to joining those current achievements from social and cultural history with dominant understandings of those military leaderships, qualifying the latter in more nuanced and more complex terms than has ever been done before, identifying historiographical problems and debates in the process, and opening up the subject to mixed audiences of specialists and non-specialists alike. For all this, Julien Loiseau needs to be commended, since this surveying study of military slavery and political participation is above all a demonstration of his great knowledge of Mamluk history, as acquired through his admirable mastery of the full scope of available writings on the subject, as fed and supported by his impressive acquaintance with every nuance and detail of a wide array of available source materials, and as communicated in a most appealing language and style that invite and lure the reader (at least those who read French) to follow the author on his remarkable journey through the remarkable life and times of these military slaves. Loiseau is furthermore also to be commended for how he made this account of late medieval mamluks' multiple adventures very accessible and intelligible in a kind of biographical *longue durée* structure that moves from origins in Central-Asian enslavement, slave trade and Syro-Egyptian socialisation, over practices of local and regional empowerment and social distinction, to strategies of social and cultural integration and reproduction in the face of an imminent eternity, in these Mamluks' urban-centred Middle-Eastern worlds as well as in their Muslim hereafter. In six individual chapters, preceded by a contextualising introduction and ending in a brief concluding epilogue, Loiseau thus describes in minute detail what it may have meant to an uprooted child slave from the central-Asian steppes or from the mountainous areas of the Caucasus to be taken to some of the world's largest cities in late medieval Egypt and Syria.

In the first chapter (*Le Commerce des hommes*) Loiseau explains above all how the ascendancy - in quantitative as much as in qualitative terms - of military slavery in thirteenth-century Egypt and Syria was to a large extent a contingent effect of larger, geopolitical changes affecting Central-Asia. This era of Mongol expansion, conquest and territorial

consolidation had many transformative effects, including on the ancient trade of Turkish and other slaves to Islamic West-Asia. This crucial resource flow of military manpower from the Black Sea region to the slave markets of Damascus and Cairo accelerated substantially as a byproduct of war and tributary rule. When the Mongol tide settled down, however, this flow followed suit, resuming in a somewhat expanded fashion its old course as one of the many transregional commodity chains of the later medieval world that were as much regulated by complex mechanisms of supply and demand as by the diplomatic interventions of successive Mamluk sultans. As Loiseau explains, the geographical and political distance that continued to separate the sultanate from its main source of manpower very much remained one of its main Achilles' heels, to the manipulating benefit of such regional partners, competitors and opponents as the Byzantines, the Golden Horde and the Ilkhans in the early days of the sultanate, and as the Ottomans in the long fifteenth century.

The second chapter (*La formation de la société militaire*) continues this pursuit of the young mamluk's trajectory and explains in the greatest possible detail how military slaves entered and became partners in what Loiseau termed 'the military society' of Egypt and Syria. Markets and price setting, local access and interests from urban elites as regulated through the selective effects of the huge long-term investments that were required from buyers and owners, and the young recruits' socialisation and acculturation in the - at most - few dozens of grand and smaller households (*bayts*) of military leaders (*amirs* and, especially in the fifteenth century, *sultans*) that made up that 'military society' in Egypt's and Syria's cities: a detailed analysis is presented of each of these economic, social and cultural practices that continued to transform hundreds or even thousands of children from annual contingents of central-Asian tribal booty or tribute to the core of the sultanate's highly successful and widely feared military might.

In chapter three (*Le règne de l'armée*) Loiseau argues indeed that the sultanate's hegemony and this military might of the mamluk cavalries of its military households were intricately interconnected, that they were in fact one and the same. "From the simple soldier to the *amir*, from the viceroy of the sultan to the sovereign himself if he had emerged from the ranks of the officers, the Mamluks were not just the heart of the 'victorious armies' of Egypt and Syria, [...]", Loiseau explains, "they were the very substance of the *dawla*, both servants of the 'reign' of the sultan and members of the 'State' of which he was merely the temporal head: the 'almighty dynasty of the Turks' (*al-dawla al-qāhira al-turkiyya*), as it was called by one of them, the historiographer Baybars al-Ma¹⁶³lū¹⁶³ḥī" (p. 90 "Du simple soldat à l'émir, du lieutenant du sultan au souverain lui-même lorsqu'il était issu du rang des officiers, les Mamelouks ne formaient pas seulement l'âme des "armées victorieuses" d'Egypte et de Syrie, ...Ils constituaient la substance même de la *dawla*, à la fois serviteurs du "règne" du sultan et membre de l'Etat dont il était temporairement la tête, la 'subjugatrice dynastie des Turcs' (*al-dawla al-qahira al-turkiyya*), pour reprendre les mots de l'un d'entre eux, l'historiographe Baybars al-Mansuri.") This chapter then explains how the army and the state in its financial bureaucratic manifestation (l'Etat nourricier) were closely related, how the latter actually existed to the benefit of the former, and how at the same time this particular organisation of the redistribution of tributary resources through some form of bureaucratic fiscal organisation transformed substantially over time, weakening at some point the military hierarchies of the sultanate but restoring them to some of their former glories in the later decades of the sultanate. The chapter also discusses in great detail the extremely vexed and much debated issue of the relationship between Loiseau's military society and the sultanate itself. In this context that sweeping claim that "the Mamluks collectively ruled over Egypt and Syria for more than two centuries and a half" (p. 106) is qualified by the acknowledgement that only twenty-two of the polity's fifty sultans actually were mamluks. A slight majority of sultans indeed mainly consisted of descendants succeeding their mamluk fathers on the throne, representing an equally genuine political reality that was topped by the fourteen descendants of sultan Qalāwūn (1279-1290) who continued to sit on the sultanate's

throne between 1290 and 1382. Loiseau skilfully reconstructs and deconstructs the different succession debates that over time various analyses of this complex sequence of different sorts of sultans has given rise to, offering as a consensus explanation that this was mainly the outcome of an inherent reproductive contradiction in the political culture of the regime that continued to oppose the ambitions of fresh generations of mamluks to the vested interests of predecessors who had already achieved some of those ambitions. Pending contexts and circumstances, different political solutions for this tension emerged victoriously, Loiseau argues, including one that favoured the - "exceptional" - time of the Qalawunids in the fourteenth century, and another that generated the success of Barqūq and a substantial number of his mamluks between the 1380s and early 1460s.

Despite such inevitable reproductive tensions and related spirals of violent competition between different generations, however, these mamluk "Turks by profession" did constitute one particular "martial race" (p. 141), as is then argued and explained further in painstaking detail in chapter four ('L'identité mamelouke'). This identity, Loiseau claims, was constructed in a socio-cultural context (a "habitus", p. 144) that was to some extent the shared preserve of late medieval West-Asian military elites across political boundaries. At the same time, however, in the Mamluk sultanate it remained distinct from any other of the wider regions' political identities as well as internally connected as one communal mamluk identity across two centuries and a half, "as a primary colour which new nuances will never entirely efface but may rather provide with some kind of renewed splendour" ("comme une couleur dominante que de nouvelles nuances n'effacent jamais tout à fait, mais peuvent lui donner en revanche un éclat renouvelé" p. 145). This identity was rooted in an invented tradition of "Turkish" military prowess and horsemanship with some Mongol flavour. It somehow disintegrated in the mid-fourteenth century, only to be resuscitated by the end of the century when an innovative ethnic - especially Circassian - layer was added. This "ethnicisation of power" from the reign of sultan Barqūq (1382-1399) onwards ("Les Circassiens, ou l'ethnicisation du pouvoir", p. 196) - an ancient theme in the periodisation of the sultanate's political history, but re-introduced here in a novel guise - is related by Loiseau to the preceding chapter, explaining that Qalāwūnid dynastic rule in the mid-fourteenth century actually went hand in hand with a crisis in the (non-reproductive, and thus anti-dynastic) traditional mamluk identity and elite cohesion, to which sultan Barquq then successfully "responded by becoming the first genuine mamluk Circassian sultan, the first one who was to manage to double up the solidarity that emanated from military slavery with an ethnic cohesion" ("C'est à cette crise que sut répondre l'émir Barquq, en devenant à proprement parler le premier sultan mamelouk circassien, celui qui le premier sut redoubler la solidarité issue de l'esclavage militaire d'une 'asabiyya ethnique"; p. 199).

The penultimate chapter five ('La demeure des émirs') describes the physical integration of these Mamluks - of the sultans and amirs and of their households of mamluks - in their natural, urban environments in Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo and in the other cities of Egypt and Syria. Loiseau reconstructs the patterns of urban residence of these military elites, from the urban court-citadels over the immense palaces - first organised around their stables, later around the semi-public spaces of the loggia - that everywhere gradually withdrew from the wider urban textures of these cities to be constructed increasingly in more exclusive quarters ('Taht al-Qal'a' - At the Foot of the Citadel') for - mostly only temporary - occupation by the military leaders of the day and by their entourages. In the sixth and last chapter ('La sédentarisation des Mamelouks') this discussion of the integration of the Mamluks in their wider urban social and cultural environments is furthered by considering Mamluk engagements with religion and with the establishment of genuine families and family patrimonies. The lens chosen by Loiseau for this purpose is mainly that of real estate investment, as this is one of the few urban practices of these Mamluk elites that have left archival traces, in the format of the documents that formalised and regulated the establishment of religious endowments (waqf). Loiseau's superb mastery of this type of

source material is amply demonstrated in his detailed analysis of funerary foundations as a means of - above all - 'sedentarisation', of claiming a legitimate place and space for oneself and for one's posterity in local socio-cultural environments that these Mamluks had only entered as alien and uprooted outsiders. Religious real estate, sons, daughters, wives and concubines are all demonstrated to have joined forces through the endowment system to achieve social reproduction for an amir's household in the face of a political context that seemed to forestall any such ambitions, at least as far as amiral power and status were concerned. One of the more surprising examples, adduced by Loiseau, of the level of success that such household reproduction in spite of the political system could achieve, is that of the amir Manjak (d. 1375), cleverly established in the latter half of the fourteenth century and equally cleverly managed by at least nine generations of his descendants well into the seventeenth century, when in 1669 one of Manjak's last known descendants, also named Manjak, was recorded to have died and to have been buried in the family mausoleum in Damascus (p. 241).

This example of the - admittedly exceptional - longstanding social reproduction of the household of the amir Manjak also brings up a number of crucial general issues, which were perhaps too large to be dealt with in any relevant detail within this book's remit. These concern questions that have to do with the complex understandings of collective social agencies and practices, with the realities and explanations of social distinction, and with social organisation in late medieval Syria and Egypt at large. The general approach of Loiseau's book is that of political power, social distinction and access to tributary resources in late medieval Egypt and Syria being the exclusive - with some ups and downs, especially in the fourteenth century - domain of one essentially unchanging and historically unique collectivity of "les Mamelouks/mamelouks". This approach, which is entirely in line with some of the dominant perspectives in the field, seems to presuppose one or another form of organisational unity, of socially transcendent continuity, and of autonomous historical agency that connects all historical agents of mamluk origins, appearing in the sources as political agents, to some unchanging 'Mamluk' political essence that originated in the mid-thirteenth century and that somehow defined, structured and aligned the behaviour of each and everyone of these actors in similar ways well into the early sixteenth century.

In traditional approaches this historical collectivity of the so-called Mamluk "one-generation nobility" - a notion meant to capture the imagination of its institutionally reproductive but socially discontinuous nature - tended to be explained from the structural perspectives of the Mamluk state and its patrimonial institutions. Loiseau tries to be far more nuanced and largely avoids any detailed discussions of the debated issue of state institutions, approaching the state mainly from the perspective of an organisational system for surplus collection and redistribution. At one point in the text, however, it is suggested that the state essentially was the army and had financial interests that were fundamentally different from those of the sultans, the amirs, and all kinds of others ("[...] la tension entre la défense des intérêts de l'Etat (de l'armée, pour l'essentiel), la consolidation des intérêts particuliers de ses officiers (émirs et sultans) et la préservation de leurs fondations pieuses (dont vivaient également des bataillons d'oulémas) était plus ancienne." [p. 269]). At such specific instances one cannot help but wonder who or what these vexed categories of 'state' and 'army' actually are meant to stand for, given that chapter two of the book carefully demonstrated how those armies were largely identical to the households of these sultans and amirs, and that in chapter three it is argued, as detailed above, that these amirs, sultans and mamluk armies were "the very substance of the dawla" (p. 90).

For Loiseau that state - whatever its definition - does not however represent the essence of that Mamluk historical collectivity. This rather lies in a shared elite identity, summarised at one point as - indeed - "the essence of their identity: conversion to Islam, professional Turkishness, mamluk filiation ("l'essentiel de leur identité: la conversion à l'Islam, la turcité professionnelle, la filiation mamelouke [p. 205]). The realities of these identity components

are quite convincingly argued and elaborated indeed. However, the issue as discussed here also begs the question of the causal relationship between political action and cultural identity, and whether the latter indeed defined the former in essentially unchanging reproductive ways, or whether perhaps things may also develop the other way around, or at least in mutually transformative interactions. The latter is at least suggested in the substantial political and politico-cultural changes that are charted in chapters three and four, where fourteenth- and fifteenth-century political realities appear as as equally distinct and as genuinely different from each other as fourteenth- and fifteenth-century political identities did. All appear furthermore as connected to thirteenth-century origins through mythicising social memories - such as the Romance of sultan Baybars, occasionally returning in the book as an entertaining but also suggestive literary topos connecting various chapters - rather than through any practices or identities that were unchanging in their essence. To return to the question of some historical form of Mamluk collective action, it should also be acknowledged that collective political identities, including a Mamluk one, tend to be *a posteriori* rather than *a priori* constructed as essentially unchanging. The successful reproduction of the Mamluk amir Manjak's household suggests above all how such identities tend to be cut across by all kinds of other identities and interests, especially - in the case of the sultanate at least - those of the leading households that defined the social and cultural fault lines along which the elites and their social practices of reproduction operated. This certainly was the case in Manjak's time of that alleged fourteenth-century crisis of socio-political identity, of political cohesion, and of Mamluk power. Despite its resolution due to Barqūq's so-called politics of "ethnicisation", Manjak's practices of social reproduction also continued their socially disruptive effects at the turn of the fourteenth century, when the amir Sudun min Zadah is explained to have similarly organised the survival and continuity of his own household (as detailed on pp. 270-274), as well as for most of the fifteenth century, when the resulting "waqfisation" of state lands became an issue of ever greater concern for the sultanate's political economy.

Related fundamental questions that are similarly inspired by Loiseau's comprehensive study concern issues of social distinction, not just between politico-military elites and other social groups, but also among the so-called Mamluks themselves. Different distinct household and other social identities were clearly publicly acclaimed through such symbolic forms as relational names (nisbas) and blasons (pp. 147-155). Another distinction that might demand further thought and consideration in the larger field concerns that between masters and their slaves, be they mamluks or not. Surely mamluks were above all transported to Egypt and Syria in such high numbers and over such a long period of time to serve as the region's new generations of soldiers, to serve their masters rather than to replace them. With totals for the entire period of only twenty-two mamluk sultans and only a few hundreds of mamluk senior amirs at most, late medieval Syro-Egyptian political realities warn against imposing any too simple teleological readings of military slavery and political participation. As is also made clear by Loiseau's detailed reconstruction of what essentially were two distinct sets of late medieval Syro-Egyptian social practices - the ones of military slavery and service, the others of socio-political distinction and reproduction - the transfer from one status to the other was never self-evident, but rather a very complex, highly selective, and hugely transformative process, in which a high number of obstacles had to be overcome. These obstacles, and the solutions to overcome them, were surely not just the exclusive domain of former military slaves, even though their socialisation in leading households provided select groups of them (as well as at regular times their masters' surviving sons) undoubtedly with substantial advantages. As, amongst many others, Loiseau himself has also demonstrated elsewhere (see eg. his superb *Reconstruire la Maison du Sultan* [Cairo, 2010, 2 vols.]) and as he also indicates regularly in this book (eg. p.90 ["L'histoire de l'Etat mamelouk ne réduit certes pas à celle de la société militaire"]), many other partners, associates, assistants and clients of a great variety of origins and trades always joined forces in regularly changing constellations of households, networks and other social groups and communal identities that together defined

the courses and outcomes of the endless tensions, competitions and negotiations that made for the dynamic social and cultural orders of the late medieval sultanate. Loiseau's mamluks and their masters were crucial players in these processes, and his book 'Les mamelouks. xiii^e-xv^e siècle' is therefore highly recommended to anyone interested in understanding better how and why they were. Those readers keen to understanding the wider complexity of the Syro-Egyptian sultanate's "experience of power in medieval Islam" ("une expérience du pouvoir dans l'Islam médiéval") should simultaneously try and look beyond this book, so as to be able to fully appreciate Loiseau's opening acknowledgment that in today's research his "Mamluks' integration ... in their environment is ... highly emphasised" ("l'intégration des Mameloukes dans leur environnement est ... soulignée à l'envi", p. 23) and that increasingly "the networks, circles and clienteles that situate [them] in the society of their time get fully exposed" ("Apparaissent ainsi en plein lumière les réseaux, les cercles, les clientèles qui situaient les Mamelouks dans la société de leur temps", p. 23).

Note :

[1] C.F. Petry: "Scholastic Stasis in Medieval Islam Reconsidered: Mamluk Patronage in Cairo", *Poetics Today* 14/2 (1993), 323-348, 324.)