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THE MAMLUK CONCEPTION OF THE SULTANATE

During their rule in Egypt and Syria (1250–1517), the Mamluks showed a certain ambiguity in their attitude toward the sultanate including its rules of succession and the ruler's source of power. This ambiguity has led to a variety of opinions about the nature of the Mamluk Sultanate in scholarly works on Mamluk history. David Ayalon implies, in “The Circassians in the Mamluk Kingdom,” that the principle of heredity was recognized to various degrees in the Mamluk state, although it was weak during the Bahri period and altogether abandoned during the Circassian period. In “From Ayyubids to Mamluks,” Ayalon confirms that when the Mamluks came to power they had not “ever dreamt of creating a non-hereditary sultan’s office” because most of the Bahri period was ruled by the Qala’unid dynasty. When nonhereditary rule came about, at least in the Bahri period, it was without any form of planning. In his “Mamluk Military Aristocracy: A Non-Hereditary Nobility,” Ayalon stresses that even during pre- and post-Qala’unid times the sultan’s office was only nonhereditary to a certain extent and that “throughout the history of the Mamluk Sultanate there is not the slightest mention of the non-hereditary character of the sultan’s office, or of the intention of turning it into such.”

P. M. Holt writes, in “Succession in the Early Mamluk Sultanate,” that the Mamluks tried to establish the right of inheritance during the years 1250–1310, but the idea was not compatible with Mamluk tradition, which did not pass down privileges to descendants. Holt suggests that the usurpations so common in this period were their way of resolving the problem in Mamluk politics (the Qala’unid dynasty being the exception). In an earlier article, “The Position and Power of the Mamluk Sultan,” Holt argues that the Qala’unid rule lasted so long because it was convenient to have a nominal sultan to act as a façade for the oligarchy of the amirs.

Robert Irwin, in The Middle East in the Middle Ages, indicates by describing Baybars’s and Qala’un’s accession to power that hereditary succession was not established in the Mamluk Sultanate before the end of al-Nasir Muhammad’s third reign (1310–41). During the earlier period Mamluk amirs claimed power and became sultan by virtue of their abilities, achievements, and the acceptance of their leadership by their peers. After al-Nasir Muhammad’s third reign, which was both long and free of civil strife, “no one questioned the rights of the descendants of Qala’un to the
Although, as Holt argued, most of the Qala’unid sultans were in effect pup-
pets, and real authority remained in the hands of Mamluk amirs. Thus the Qala’unid
dynasty reigned “without developing any explicit theory of hereditary succession,
still less of primogeniture.” Irwin also shows that an absence of ideology and irra-
tional solidarity bonds in the Mamluk caste lay behind the political instability of the
Mamluk Sultanate, and only a willingness to pursue a pragmatic approach allowed
the Mamluk faction system to keep the Mamluks in power.

This article seeks to show that, although the Mamluks seemed to waver between
the two extremes of dynastic rule and military oligarchy, they basically preferred
the latter because it was consistent with the Mamluk nonhereditary system. Be-
cause factional strife remained the key to power throughout the Mamluk period,
the Mamluks conceived of the sultan as the representative of the coalition of the
dominant factions and as a tool to ensure their positions and interests. Thus, it
would seem that the prolonged rule of the Qala’unid dynasty, which lasted for
about forty years after al-Nasir Muhammad’s death, could be explained only by a
shift in the Mamluk attitude in favor of dynastic rule, even though the dynasty
proved weak and was always directed by Mamluk factions headed by dominant
amirs. However, it is in al-Nasir Muhammad’s third reign and in the changes he
introduced into the Mamluk system that one should look for the source of the pro-
longed Qala’unid rule. After al-Nasir’s death the Mamluk system that had formed
the foundation for factional integration collapsed because the oligarchy had be-
come paralyzed. Ambitious amirs were no longer able to attain the sultanate, and
they managed to conduct the affairs of state only in unsteady coalitions behind
ephemeral sultans of Qala’unid descent. Ultimately, a consultative council (majlis
al-mashūra) was established whose members agreed to recognize the supremacy
of one among them (al-amir al-kabir) and to give effective authority solely to the
amir thus designated. By the time Barquq removed the Qala’unids from power in
1382 the process had come full circle. The Mamluks once again established a
strong sultanate, and the sultan reassumed his function as primus inter pares, in
the Mamluk factional rule.

THE SULTANATE

Social conditions in the Mamluk state remained unchanged throughout the auton-
omous rule of the Mamluks; its ruling military elite never ceased to augment its
ranks with new recruits and to restrict its membership to mamluks. Its economic
basis—land tenure as a system of payment to the army (iqtāʾ)—was never aban-
doned, although there were changes in how it was apportioned. Although these
practices kept Mamluk society from becoming an aristocracy that could pass on its
privileges to succeeding generations, they explain why Mamluks strove to exploit
the power attached to their status for as long as they retained it. Yet Mamluks
could retain their status only when they belonged to a Mamluk faction that func-
tioned as an effective interest group and was strong enough to impose its will on
other factions. Ambitions could be promoted only within the factional framework.

The Mamluk Sultanate was the outcome of a Mamluk rebellion against the
Ayyubids in which the Mamluks of al-Salih Ayyub, acting as a faction, fought to
preserve their position. After that, factionalism would be the mainspring of Mamluk politics, and Mamluk sultans would always be dependent on Mamluk recruits from among their peers (khushdāshiyā), their own household, or both. Mamluk sultans who were successful in recruiting, training, and emancipating their own Mamluk households and consolidating their hold on key positions in the army and government were able to exercise authoritative rule and act with almost arbitrary discretion. However, when their rule was backed by a coalition of dominant Mamluk factions headed by senior amirs, they served merely as heads of a military oligarchy while their position remained vulnerable and their authority restricted. Here we may be able to point to a pattern in political Mamluk history—otherwise so turbulent and difficult to trace—that can help to explain why some periods had long and relatively stable Mamluk rule and others rather short and unstable ones.

Qala‘un’s reign (1279–90), for example, was strong because it was sustained first and foremost by his own household, which he had been able to build up during his long amirate under Baybars. By having the support of his own mamluks and his peers (al-Salihiyya), he could impose his rule on his rivals from al-Zahiriyā, the mamluk household of al-Zahir Baybars. Al-Zahir Baybars, in contrast, had begun his rule (1260–76) greatly dependent on his peers (al-Salihiyya) and only slowly and gradually had succeeded in building up his own household and giving his mamluks key positions in the army and government. Yet, even though he had his mamluk household to rely on, Baybars continued to treat his colleagues generously, for only by broad support could he defend himself from the repeated attempts to dispose him. Similarly, during the first period of his rule (1382–89) Barquq was unable to maintain his rule without satisfying the ambitions of the various Mamluk factions who were competing for power and to whom he was forced to dispense government and military honors while putting the advancement of his own mamluks in abeyance. On his return to power, therefore, one of the first things he did was to rid himself of the majority of his opponents so as to open the way for the advancement of his own household. In contrast with these long rules, we find, for example, Kitbugha and Baybars al-Jashankir, who were soon ousted and killed because the factions that supported their rule failed to consolidate their power.

The Mamluk factional pattern had its bearing on the Mamluk conception of the sultanate. Because the Mamluk sultan was dependent almost exclusively on force at all times, his hold on authority was tenuous. Mamluks regarded the sultan, especially when he was their peer, as their representative whose function was to safeguard their own grip on the state’s resources. From the outset of the Mamluk state—when the Salihi Mamluks cohered in an interest group and rebelled against the Ayyubids—the Mamluks made various efforts to shape their ideas about rulership, and although they never reached an orderly theory of rulership, they did arrive at a normative form of rulership that they acquired by trial and error. During the rebellion, no individual among the Mamluks was recognized as having a right to the throne. After they had seized power, their dominant amirs formed a council and chose one from among their rank as sultan whom they entrusted with their authority and made their representative. Selecting a sultan from among his peers became the
established practice of succession after a factional struggle over power. Although the choice was sometimes predetermined, the sources all describe decisions of the amirs as expressions of common consent—the phrase used is *ittafaqā ʿalā, “they reached agreement.”

Thus, the first Mamluk sultan, Aybak al-Turukmani, was elected in 1250 to the sultanate by the amirs and the Bahriyya who met in council in Cairo. Then, in 1260, the Mamluks agreed on Amir Rukn al-Din Baybars “after discussing among themselves whom they should appoint to rule over them.” Al-Muẓaffar Qutuz, al-Mansur Qalaʿun, al-Mansur Lajin, and al-Muẓaffar Baybars were all elected by their fellow amirs when their factions attained power.

The sultan’s elevation through the consent of his peers indicates that they had no intention of relinquishing power. In theory any amir was eligible to become sultan, and the election of one of them by the others was understood to imply that, although the electors had put aside their own ambitions for the sultanate and undertook to support his rule, the sultan was committed to safeguarding their status in return. Baybars and Qalaʿun, who both were partly supported by the faction of their peers, are praised in Mamluk sources as rulers who on the whole did not betray their solidarity with their colleagues (khushdāshiyya) and continued to treat them generously throughout their reigns. The sultan’s obligation to ensure the interests of his supporters was expressed when, after Mongol warriors arrived in Egypt from the Persian Ilkhanate and were allowed into the Mamluk army by Baybars, the Mamluk amirs expressed concern that this recruitment would do away with the factional equilibrium in the army and undermine their political power. The sultan reassured them: “Whoever wants something from the army, he can have it. I am not more than any one of you. I need no more than one horse, and all the horses, camels and property which are with me are yours.” Al-Mansur Lajin, when he was elected sultan in 1296, was required to swear an oath that he would act as one of his peers and would make no decision on his own. The Burji Mamluks compelled Baybars al-Jashankir to accept the sultanate (1308) to safeguard their economic and political interests against a rival Mamluk faction.

A greater restriction on the sultan’s authority was the threat to his rule from the senior amirs because they did not always abandon their own ambitions or refrain from undermining the sultan’s power after he was chosen. To ensure his position the sultan not only had to protect the interests of the amirs who had appointed him but also had to foster a new Mamluk guard that would be loyal to him and that he could place in key positions. Usually this new guard was nurtured at the expense of the existing one, whose members regarded the rise of a fresh Mamluk generation as a threat. When they considered themselves strong enough, the old guard felt justified, even obliged, to overthrow the sultan and to install a new one who would protect their status as the power-wielding body of the realm. Thus, the sultan had the support of his peers only as long as he abided by the agreement.

It was because al-Muẓaffar Qutuz failed to protect their interests that Baybars al-Bunduqdari and his colleagues broke their allegiance to him and assassinated him in 1260. According to one version, Qutuz reneged on his promise to appoint Baybars naʿib in Aleppo. Another version holds that Baybars and his friends suspected Qutuz of planning to kill them, a third that there was a clash of interests
between the Bahri Mamluks, to which Baybars belonged, and al-Mu'izziyya, Qutuz's faction. Al-Muzaffar Lajin was murdered by his peers because he was deemed to have violated his oath when instead of them he began to promote his own mamluks.

The justification the Mamluks adduced for his assassination shows that they were relentless in their determination to retain their share of power against any inroads an incumbent sultan tried to make. When a sultan was murdered, the assassins became the leaders of their faction, and the Mamluks even regarded one of them as having a preferential right to the throne—because their action was intended to defend the faction, it was considered legitimate. Legitimacy was naturally a matter of force, as the power to legitimize political decisions was arbitrarily bestowed upon itself by the victorious faction. Baybars and Aqtay were both commended for the murder of Sultan Turanshah in their revolt against the Ayyubids. After the assassination Aqtay was the natural candidate to become sultan, but he was himself unexpectedly murdered by Aybak al-Turukmani, who at the time was atābak al-casākir (chief commander of the army) and coveted power. Baybars fled from Aybak, only to return and seize power later and to lay the foundations for the administration of the Mamluk state.

The sources tie the election of Baybars in the council of amirs to his having slain Sultan Qutuz. Al-Čaynī, by citing Baybars al-Mansuri, reports that the Mamluks regarded the outstanding amir among the participants in the sultan's assassination as the more suitable for the sultanate: “Faris al-Dīn Aqtay al-Atabak al-Mustarib said to them: ‘Who overcame him by his sword and was the first to cause his quick death?’ They said: ‘Amir Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Bunduqdari.’ He said: ‘The first to hit is more worthy and we regard him entitled to the throne.’” In similar fashion, Baydara and, after him, Lajin claimed the sultanate on the grounds that they had helped murder al-Ashraf Khalil. Yet Baydara's claims were ignored because his faction did not gain enough power to seize the sultanate. The amirs Kurji and Tughji subsequently demanded the office of vice-sultan and sultan after they had killed Lajin (1299). The amirs of the rival factions opposed the pair but could not formally deny them the sultanate owing to the deed they had done. Able to exert enough pressure Kurji and Tughji made the amirs rescind their decision to restore al-Nasir Muhammad to power. Only the return of the army headed by Baktash al-Fakhri from the conquest of Lesser Armenia (Bilad Sis), because it upset the balance of power among the Mamluk factions and put Kurji and Tughji's faction at a disadvantage, enabled the amirs to deny them the right to govern.

**DYNASTIC Rule IN THE MAMLUK STATE**

That the Mamluks rejected dynastic rule they made obvious on several occasions. When Husam al-Din Lajin was elected sultan in December 1296, al-Nasir Muhammad, the son of Qala'un whom the Mamluks had placed on the throne, was deposed and exiled to al-Karak. Before he went into exile, Lajin apologized to him in these words: “If I knew that they [the Mamluks] would leave you in power I would allow it, but they will not leave you in power.” The firmness of their resolve to remove
al-Nasir Muhammad shows that the son of a sultan, even if placed in power by Mamluks, could not count on their continuing support but was always at risk of being deposed by them. Lajin gave al-Nasir Muhammad assurance that he would reserve the seat of the sultanate for him when he was older, but al-Nuwayri, a contemporary, says—probably correctly—that there was not a shred of truth in Lajin’s declaration. Lajin was in fact a supporter of his colleague the amir Kitbugha for the sultanate, for he was afraid that al-Nasir Muhammad would take revenge on him as he had been prominent among those responsible for the murder of his brother Sultan al-Ashraf Khalil. Nor did Lajin express any regrets for his deeds; he once admitted half jokingly that it had been his plan to slay al-Ashraf Khalil even earlier, while he was serving as his silâhdâr. Al-Nasir Muhammad was well aware of Lajin’s motives, and in his reply all he asked was that his life be spared: “Swear to me that you will let me live and I shall go.”

The Mamluk attitude toward dynastic rule was manifested again in 1305 when, from his place of exile, al-Nasir Muhammad attempted to undermine Baybars’s rule. In response, the Mamluks threatened “that they would do what they had done to the sons of al-Mu’izz Aybak and al-Zahir Baybars”—fate had not been particularly kind to either of them.

Mamluk sources try to justify their hostility to the dynastic principle by referring to Muslim theology and jurisprudence. At the enthronement ceremony for al-Muzaffar Baybars, the Mamluk factions who favored his succession stated their views in this way: “Know that the rule is barren and does not [pass] to anyone by heredity, father to son or generation to generation.” A sworn statement including these words was presented by the caliph to the sultan in the presence of the four chief qadis and was sent out to all the mosques in Cairo. A similar declaration was made by the amir Aqush al-Afram, the na’ib of Damascus, when he demanded an oath of allegiance to Sultan Baybars from the amirs in Syria: “You know that whoever sits upon the throne in Egypt is sultan, even if he is a black slave. . . .” Such statements clearly echo the debate that has raged from the dawn of Islam regarding who had the right to govern. The doctrine of the Kharijite movement, for example, had centered on the perfection of the ruler’s faith and held that the community had the right to choose anyone as leader, “even a black slave could be appointed caliph if his faith was perfect.”

The Mamluks based their refusal to recognize the authority of a rule that did not conform to their will on the concept of predestination (qâdâ’ wa-qadar), the subject of the earliest theological dispute in Islam. The Mamluks ascribed the rise and fall of a ruler to the will of God and regarded themselves as his instruments. By placing full responsibility for their deeds in the hands of God, they freed themselves from the obligation of recognizing any particular rule; in practice this meant appointing whomever they pleased to the sultanate. The 15th-century historian Ibn Iyas, for example, exonerates Sultan Barquq of moral responsibility for deposing the last of Qala’un’s sons. Ibn Iyas regards Barquq as the legitimate sultan chosen by Allah to punish Qala’un for removing the sons of Baybars from power.

Although the principle of dynastic rule conformed neither to the Mamluks’ view of a sultanate headed by a sultan who was their representative nor to their procliv-
ity to exploit power while it lasted, Mamluk sultans, even those who seized power through factional strife, occasionally did try to establish a dynasty bearing their name by willing the sultanate to their descendants. What is even more surprising is that the Mamluks consented to honor a deceased sultan's will and initiate the ascent of his son to the sultanate. Yet the dynastic rule that ensued cannot be compared to a system of inherited monarchy, but rather should be seen as unique, a dynastic rule shaped by the Mamluk outlook and by factionalism. The royal Mamluks whom the sultan had purchased, trained, and manumitted were loyal to their ustādh (master) and, after his death, transferred that loyalty to his son rather than to the new monarch, because he was *ibn ustādhīhim*. The loyalty of other factions, which consisted of the households of the sultan's predecessors and the amirs, on the other hand, was never a foregone conclusion. Because the new sultan was the head of the old sultan's household, the royal Mamluks expected no change in their position, whereas other Mamluk factions might be hostile to the new sultan and use the change of rule as an opportunity to improve their positions. Thus, the accession to the throne of a sultan's son never gained consensus in the Mamluk army and was always threatened by factional maneuvering.

The validity of the dynastic rule of minors was especially challenged by rival Mamluk factions because the son could never fulfill the traditional role of the Mamluk sultan as the leader of his peers and his own mamluks as Muslim warriors. Thus, a deceased sultan's royal Mamluks could never sustain the rule of the son for long under the pressure of political turbulence, and therefore came to regard it as an interregnum during which they could determine who among them should be the next sultan. The royal Mamluks often substituted a minor sultan with a Mamluk warrior as a pretext for a decision to seize power. Thus, for example, al-Mansur ʿAli, the son of al-Muʿizz Aybak, Salamish ʿAli Baybars's son, al-Nasir Muhammad (at the end of his first reign), Qalaʿun's son, and the Qalaʿunid al-Salih Hajji were all minors who were deposed by prominent amirs who gained support for their own rule.

Fate was not much kinder to adult sons of sultans placed on the throne because, for all their initial enthusiasm to sustain their rule, continuous threats came from their father's royal Mamluks. The royal Mamluks of a deceased sultan invariably expected his son to maintain their priority over other Mamluk factions in return for their support, thereby restricting his ability to rule effectively. As the son quite naturally tried to introduce his own confidants into the regime and build up his own household, clashes with his father's Mamluks were inevitable. Naturally, the new sultans needed time to build a loyal household, and this made them vulnerable; they were easily deposed, or even murdered, for their attempts to establish effective rule. Thus, for example, al-Malik Saʿid Baraka Khan was deposed (1279) by his father's Mamluks because of his decision to remove them from the positions they held and to dispossess them of their *iqtāʿāt*, which he then transferred to Mamluks close to him, the khāṣṣakiyya. Sultan al-Ashraf Khalil was murdered (1293) by his father's Mamluks, even though it was they who had appointed him, “because he put them down and promoted the young mamluks of the khāṣṣakiyya.”

In contrast with al-Ashraf Khalil, his brother al-Nasir Muhammad clearly gained the upper hand in the factional struggle. When he ascended to power for
the third time (1310), he already had at his disposal a Mamluk guard whom he had recruited since his first accession in 1293. Supported by his own Mamluks, al-Nasir Muhammad could, shortly after his third accession, launch a campaign and eliminate the senior amirs of his predecessors’ households. Of all the dynastic rules in Mamluk history, only al-Nasir Muhammad’s reign was long and firmly established—not surprisingly, he based the legitimacy of his rule not on any dynastic principle but on force. For example, when the sage Shaykh Nur al-Din ʿAli al-Bakri criticized al-Nasir Muhammad and questioned the legality of his expenditures as sultan, he actually meant to question the legitimacy of his rule. In his reply the sultan asserted that the legality of his expenditures derived from his right to rule even though he was the son of a sultan; the right was his, not because of any dynastic principle, but because he had triumphed in a factional struggle: “I did not take the rule by heredity, but I took it by my sword.”

Al-Nasir Muhammad himself did not think he was under any obligation to pass on his rule to one of his sons. In 1317, when he fell ill and thought he was dying, he named one of the amirs closest to him, Tughay al-Husami, as his successor. When, subsequently, he had al-Husami killed, this was not because he had changed his mind, but because naming him as successor had accorded to Tughay al-Husami a status that now threatened his own. About fifteen years later, on 25 November 1331, before departing on the hajj, al-Nasir Muhammad again brought up the subject of his successor. After convening the amirs, the four chief qadis, and the caliph, he informed them that he intended to appoint his son Anuk as his heir and sent him in state procession through Cairo to the Citadel bearing the ceremonial regalia (ṣhiʿr al-saltana). After the preparations for the ceremony had been made, al-Nasir Muhammad, for obscure reasons, reversed his decision “and rescinded everything, and ordered Anuk to wear the decoration of the amirs, and the title of sultan was not to be given to him.” Anuk died in 1340, shortly before his father.

Even on his deathbed, al-Nasir Muhammad continued to adhere to the principle that the rule was not to be handed down from father to son. “0 amirs, I have fifteen sons,” he said, “How will one of them maintain his rule?” Nor did he bequeath property to his sons, for he believed that in the Mamluk state the position of power they had achieved allowed the Mamluks to disregard even the shariʿa laws of inheritance. Seeing that the children of Aqush al-Afram, one of his father’s senior amirs and nāʾib of Syria, had been left with nothing, al-Nasir Muhammad said to Amir Bashtak, “On this account I will leave my children neither property nor money.”

It was actually the Mamluk amirs themselves who forced al-Nasir Muhammad in his final moments to appoint one of his sons as his successor. In doing so, they did not for a moment think of releasing the sultanate from their control, but simply anticipated a struggle and were anxious to place a nominal sultan on the throne until they resolved the issue. Al-Nasir Muhammad clearly shared the view that the rule of his son was at best nominal; in his will, he said: “If you observe him [the sultan] doing wicked deeds not befitting the sultanate, and he does not accept the counsel of any of you, drag him by the legs and cast him out to the curse of Allah and set up after him whomever you choose of his brothers. If he is suitable,
so much the better, but if he is not, deal with him as you did with the former. . . .”

An examination of the comparatively long rule of the Qala’unids actually shows that each of their reigns had characteristics very similar to those of dynastic rulers before al-Nasir Muhammad’s third reign. From the death of al-Nasir to the ascent of Barquq (r. 1341–82), twelve sultans of the Qala’uni house were installed (one, al-Nasir Hasan, was in office twice). Most of them had no training at all, but were placed on the throne directly out of the harem. Eight of the twelve were minors, and their rule was in name only. In the words of Ibn Taghri Birdi, “Most of the Egyptian rulers who ruled after him [al-Nasir Muhammad] obeyed one of their officials, and that man became the sultan in practice and the sultan obeyed his commands.”

All but one of the twelve Qala’uni sultans were again removed by the Mamluk amirs (al-Salih Isma’il died of an illness). Seven were deposed and then murdered. Their reigns were brief and nominal; five of them less than a year; two for less than two years; three for four years; only two, al-Nasir Hasan and al-Ashraf Sha’ban, retained the sultanate for longer than five years. Al-Nasir Hasan and al-Ashraf Sha’ban were the only Qala’unid sultans in this period who succeeded in recruiting a household of their own; this was due to their comparatively long reigns. Yet their households were smaller and weaker than those of the dominant amirs who actually held power, and when these sultans attempted to rule autonomously they aroused factional struggles in which each of them was defeated and eventually murdered.

The offhand manner in which the Mamluks first elevated and then deposed the Qala’uni sultans clearly reflects the insignificance they attached to the question of the suitability of the person they had placed in power. When al-Nasir Hasan took office the first time, at the age of eleven, the Mamluks who installed him were not even sure of his name. When Yalbugha al-Nasiri and Mintash disagreed in February 1389 over who should be sultan, they decided to cast lots among the Qala’uni princes. When the name of al-Mansur Hajji, who had previously been deposed, was picked out, he simply ascended a second time.

The Mamluks were careful to divest the Qala’uni progeny of any real power. Abu Bakr, who became sultan on 6 June 1341, by virtue of the will left by al-Nasir Muhammad, was removed after fifty-nine days when he showed that he was ambitious, eager for power, and had qualities of leadership. He was replaced by his brother, the six-year-old al-Ashraf Kujuk. Sources report that when the child signed decrees the hand clutching the pen was guided by his teacher helping him inscribe the letters of his name. Al-Nasir Ahmad attempted to rule independently even before he ascended to the throne, so the Mamluk amirs decided among themselves when they elevated him that they would not let him act freely in anything so as to prevent the harm he might otherwise do. When al-Nasir Ahmad was appointed sultan in 1341, Amir Tashtamur, who was the power behind his throne, concluded that al-Nasir Ahmad “would sign only the sultanic decrees that he [Tashtamur] selected and ordered the hājib that no one submit a petition to the sultan except in his presence.” Al-Nasir Ahmad was deposed after about three months in office.
In 1347 the amirs decided, in the newly constituted majlis al-mashûra, that the sultan would no longer have any control over the treasury.\(^{77}\) The sources state that Sultan al-Salih Salih “was subject to a harsh restriction, he had no authority and was unable to act as he saw fit in matters of government.”\(^{78}\) Al-Nasir Hasan was deprived of any independence of action; power was held instead by Amir Īzz al-Din Azdamur al-Khazindar. Later, when al-Nasir Hasan tried to rule with some measure of autonomy, he was slain (1361) by his own Mamluks. Yalbugha al-Umari, who placed al-Mansur Salah al-Din on the throne, continued to rule as he pleased, whereas “al-Mansur was left with nothing but the title.”\(^{79}\)

The Mamluk amirs dismissed the tailor al-Mansur Hajji had chosen for himself. Hajji’s response clearly reflects the nature of his rule, “If my command is not obeyed even when it concerns a tailor, what is the point of this sultanate?”\(^{80}\)

The Qala’unids, then, despite their forty-year rule, never had the opportunity to form a permanent military regime that could remain loyal to their dynasty and replace Mamluk factionalism. Not only did the rule of the Qala’unid dynasty not eliminate factionalism in Mamluk politics, it actually contributed to its maintenance and to further turbulence. Seen against this background, the prolonged rule of the Qala’unids does not testify to any profound changes in Mamluk political concepts, but rather provides a hint of the strained fractional interrelations that prevailed in the Mamluk army in the wake of al-Nasir Muhammad’s death.

To consolidate his power, al-Nasir Muhammad set about buying the fealty of the Mamluks to his rule. To this end he introduced new methods of training and advancement into the Mamluk army. The mamluks were now treated leniently, and generous awards and honors were conferred on them in return for their loyalty to the sultan. Already noticeable during al-Nasir Muhammad’s rule, but more conspicuous after it, was a change in relations within the Mamluk factions. The khushdashiyya—the fealty of the mamluks to their overlord and their solidarity with their fellows—was pushed aside for more material rewards such as larger iqṭā’, gifts, and more money. The mamluks were soon found ready to betray their master and peers for the sake of gain.\(^{81}\) The amirs played their part by encouraging the mamluks to shift their allegiance from one faction to another, by bribing them with money and privileges to win them over.\(^{82}\)

As the mamluks shifted among factions and the struggle for power grew more intense, the dependence of the amirs on the rank-and-file mamluks became greater as well. The amirs could no longer be certain of the actual strength of their faction. In these circumstances they soon found themselves incapable of deciding who should rule. Because the mamluks were too unmanageable and could not be trusted not to violate their allegiance at the crucial moment, the amirs preferred puppet sultans of the Qala’unid house who simply served as a pretext for them to postpone decisions among themselves while keeping their options open.

Unable to decide who should rule, coalitions were continuously formed and again disbanded among those who actually held power in the name of a Qala’unid sultan. These coalitions consisted of at least two amirs who would temporarily put aside the enmity between them and join forces to seize control of the government. None of the amirs who entered into these coalitions intended to give up his own ambition in favor of some colleague—each member of the coalition remained highly vigilant
because his partners could always succeed in buying the loyalty of his own supporters. The coalition usually dissolved when one of the amirs killed the other in collaboration with a third amir who would then form a new coalition with the survivor. Examples of this pattern abound in the literature: Qawsun and Bashtak, Qawsun and Aydughmush, Aydughmush and Altumbuga al-Maridini, Mughlatay and Mankalibugha al-Fakhri, Mughlatay and Taz, and Taz and Shaykhu.

RESTORATION OF THE SULTANATE

The Mamluk amirs were often trapped in indecision, but at the same time remained on their guard so as not to let power slip from their hands. The impetus to reestablish a strong sultanate came from an economic crisis that beset their state when, after al-Muzaffar Hajji was deposed in December 1347, they found the treasury empty. This led the amirs to call off their rivalries and set up a ruling body intended to represent a consensus among them. To this end they revived the majlis al-mashūra. The original majlis al-mashūra had merely operated as an advisory body to al-Nasir Muhammad; this new majlis consisted of nine amirs led by a tenth who held the office of ra’s nawba.

The new majlis al-mashūra did not herald a new era in which the factions conceded their interests, however. Mutual suspicions remained, and the majlis could operate only circumspectly on matters where the Mamluks could agree to cooperate. The amirs of the majlis were careful to prevent any one of their number from obtaining the power needed to gain control over the sultanate. To ensure this, they first delineated those functions that related to handling state economic resources and delegated them to different amirs. Amir Shaykhu controlled the sultan’s treasury (khizānat al-khāṣṣ), for example, and Amir Baybugha Rus administered the distribution of iqṭāʾ and the promotion of mamluks to the rank of amir in Egypt and Syria.

Nevertheless, the majlis al-mashūra was important because it established precedents for the restoration of the sultanate. The first step was an indirect one. To guarantee control of the state economy, the amirs of the majlis transferred the administration of the treasury from the sultan to themselves. They decided “not to allow the sultan to act as he saw fit with the money or to make grants to anyone and not to allow him anything he might request.” The sultan, who until then had officially controlled the treasury, now, as approved by the majlis, received from it an allowance of one hundred dirhams a day with a supplementary sum to cover his daily expenses. This allowance was tellingly called jāmikīyyat al-sultan, or nafaqat al-sultan. In Mamluk sources the word jāmikīyya refers to the monthly wage that the sultan paid the simple soldier, and the word nafaqa was used for a grant given to the mamluks by the sultan on his installation or on the eve of their departure for a military campaign.

It was the second step that contributed directly to restoring the sultanate. After another economic crisis in 1353, which none of the amirs dared try to solve on their own, the majlis was forced to put the administration of government in the hands of that amir from among their number who would agree to take the risk. The volunteer was Amir Shaykhu, who “set as a condition that no one but he alone
would speak on any matter whether grave or trivial, and they agreed. This agreement of the majlis al-mashura unconditionally to obey one of their number virtually assured the reinstatement of one-man rule. The amir elected to administer the government was given the title of al-amir al-kabir, already indicating that his status was higher than that of his colleagues. The executive powers which he was granted were those formally vested in the office of atâbak al-‘asâkir. Shaykh al-amir al-kabir, and it was through this title that he wielded power.

From then on the holders of the office of al-amir al-kabir acted as sultans, and the Qala’uni sultans were stripped of all real power. Sarghitmish, Azdamur al-Khazindar, and Yalbugh al-‘Umari all directed the affairs of state as amir kabir. Al-‘Umari even established an army of his own, previously the exclusive prerogative of the sultan, numbering somewhere between 1,800 and 3,000 mamluks. The appointing of amir mi‘a (amir of a hundred) and muqaddam alf (commander of a thousand), as well as military and administrative appointments, had been the prerogative of the sultan. Now these powers were placed in the hands of Yalbugha al-‘Umari, who made many of his mamluks nuwwâb in the provinces and gave them the rank of amir mi‘a and muqaddam alf. The status of Yalbugha al-‘Umari as ruler was also reflected in court ceremony.

In 1377, after the Mamluks rebelled against Sultan al-Ashraf Shâ‘ban and placed his eight-year-old son al-Mansur ‘Ali on the throne, Aynabak, who then as al-amir al-kabir held the post of atâbak al-‘asâkir, decided to make the sultan’s building complex, al-istabl al-sultâni, his official residence. It was originally the sultan’s stables and arsenals; it also housed the functionaries in charge of the animals and their equipment. Then in 1313 al-Nasir Muhammad had built above these structures a resplendent palace, al-Qasr al-Ablaq. The enthronement ceremony of al-Mansur ‘Ali was held at al-istabl al-sultâni. The installation of al-amir al-kabir in this residential-military complex further increased his status and provided him with a major strategic advantage. At the oath-taking ceremony conducted by Aynabak before the sultan left for the war against rebels in Syria, the amirs swore allegiance first to Aynabak and then to the Qala’uni sultan.

After Aynabak was assassinated by Barquq and his coalition partner Baraka, it became the custom for ruling amirs, primarily al-amir al-kabir, to live in al-istabl al-sultâni. Barquq, who now became al-amir al-kabir and assumed the office of atâbak al-‘asâkir, followed his predecessors and installed himself in the complex. Once there, he acted, again like his predecessors, as ruler of the land. He bought a large number of mamluks and lodged them in the Qal’c a. From this position of power he was able to assassinate Baraka and destroy his power base, and he became the first amir kabir to rule in complete independence of an alliance of amirs by bestowing upon his mamluks and appointing his trusted followers to key positions in the state. Barquq’s rule won such wide support that he became the first amir kabir to mint coins bearing the symbol (rank) of his amirate, as sultans customarily did on their ascent to power. Once Barquq had won recognition for his primacy among the mamluks, the leadership of the house of Qala’uni had come to an end, and Barquq moved unhindered from al-istabl al-sultâni to the sultan’s palace.
Barquq's rise to power resolved the problem of Mamluk rule. The Mamluks once more could regard the sultanate as an institution of government that they awarded to those who came out the victors in the traditional struggles among Mamluk factions.

In the course of the 15th century, the Mamluks demonstrated their definitive rejection of dynastic succession. At the time almost every sultan endeavored to hand down the sultanate to his descendant by a will, even though he could be almost certain that the will would be violated shortly after his death by his own mamluks. Yet, deposed sons were treated decently by their father's Mamluks and their replacement by Mamluk amirs was generally smooth and easy. Under these circumstances, although we do find sultans attempting to establish a dynasty bearing their names, some form of mutual understanding seems to have existed between the sultan and his household whereby the sultan would will his rule to his son to create an interregnum after his death in which his Mamluks could choose one of their number to the sultanate. Thus, for example, al-Muẓaffar Ahmad, the son of al-Muẓayyad Shaykh, al-ʿAziz Yusuf, the son of al-Ashraf Barsbay, al-Mansur ʿUthman, the son of al-Zahir Jaqmaq, and al-Muẓayyad Abi al-Fath, the son of al-Ashraf Inal were all put on the throne temporarily until dominant amirs seized the sultanate.

There are only two instances of sons of sultans trying to establish effective rule, but in so doing they were doomed to death. During the six years of his second reign (1406–12), al-Nasir Faraj, Barquq's son, fought in vain to maintain his rule. After seven campaigns against rival factions, he was killed, his body cast upon a dung heap. Al-Nasir Abu al-Sacadat Muhammad, Qaytbay's son, was brutally killed by his father's Mamluks when he tried to assert independent rule. His attempt was considered by contemporary judges as contravening the Egyptian political tradition.

Throughout the 15th century the Mamluks enforced their one-generation rule more rigidly than ever. Before the election of a sultan, street fights over power were routine: "It was a habit in the fights that the two factions confronted each other with force . . . and the fight continued, with each of the factions hoping for victory, till one of them finally gained it." The sultan was elected by the victorious factions. As had been the case in the formative period of the state, his peers regarded him as a representative of their collective rule. Al-Muẓayyad Shaykh, al-Zahir Tatar, al-Ashraf Barsbay, and others became sultans after a general agreement to their rule on the part of the supporting Mamluk factions had been reached.

That the sultan remained dependent on the support of the mamluks becomes obvious in the sources of this period. They introduce the rather surprising phrase, kāna murashshahan lil-saltana, "was a candidate for the sultanate." As in modern times, the term "candidate" implies that the electors have an advantage over the would-be ruler. During al-Zahir Khushqadam's terminal illness, for example, the mamluks discussed who would be the next sultan (1467): "Few [Mamluks] were regarded as candidates;[.] the sultan's mamluks elected Yalbay. . . ." After al-Zahir Qansuh's death the amirs differed over who should be elected the next sultan (1498): "So Tany-Bak's candidacy was mentioned, but the army did not agree
upon it. Then there was Jan-Balat’s and the army again did not agree, but Tuman-Bay persisted in supporting him till he became sultan."^{119}

That the Mamluks’ choice of sultan was often openly dictated by personal ambition was clearly admitted. As *al-amir al-kabir*, al-Zahir Tatar showered on the amirs and mamluks all that had been gathered in the treasury during al-Mu2ayyad Shaykh’s ten-year-reign (1412–21). In Syria on a campaign, he said of his prodigal generosity: “If I come back safe and victorious, money will [again] be found, but if this does not happen then it will be better not to leave anything to those who come after us.”^{120} After Tatar’s death in 1421, his Mamluks announced to Amir Jani-Bak that they would accept his leadership if he guaranteed their lives, positions, and property.^{121}

When in 1516 al-Ashraf Tuman-Bay was preparing for battle against the Ottomans, the Mamluks refused to accept his excuses for the small awards he had granted them. When he threatened to resign, they responded: “If you want to act as sultan, then you have to follow the conduct of the rulers who preceded you, but if you want to go, let God’s curse be on you! Another will come and be sultan [instead of you].”^{122} This rebuke by rank-and-file Mamluks indicates that the almost total lack of any distance between mamluks and their leaders could easily lead to anarchy. Whereas in the formative period of the state sultans could act as autocrats when their power was sufficiently consolidated, by the 15th century they were continuously and strongly dominated by the will and actions of their supporters. In fact, the sultan’s reign was safe only when the power of the Mamluks he himself had purchased and trained (*al-ajlab* or *al-mushtarawdt*) was balanced by that of veteran Mamluks who decided to attach themselves to him. Moreover, veteran Mamluks were generally allowed to command ranks whereas the *ajlab* were hardly promoted during their master’s lifetime. This clear-cut division between the commanding level and the rank-and-file prevented the *ajlab* from establishing their own leadership. When al-Zahir Khushqadam learned that his mamluks were plotting to murder him, he hurried to appease al-Zahiriyya veteran Mamluks, and with their support he was able to restrain and control his own (1463).^{123} In many other instances the veteran Mamluks were brought under control by the terror the *ajlab* could inspire in them.^{124}

By exploiting their decisive role in the balance of power, the Mamluks removed all barriers between themselves and the sultan. On occasion, amirs did not obey the sultan’s decrees of nomination and *iqtā* allocation or refused his orders to take part in battles.^{125} The *ajlab* were much less controllable. They often threatened to desert when they were dissatisfied with the awards they had been granted.^{126} They frequently abused the sultan and his officials and with impunity committed crimes against them as well as against Cairene civilians.^{127} Al-Zahir Jaqmaq’s *ajlab*, for example, one day in 1442 climbed the roofs of their barracks and began stoning the officials as they passed through the QalSc’a gates. They then broke into the sultan’s arsenal and stole weapons. When the sultan still refused their demands, they killed eleven Mamluks and more than thirty civilians.^{128}

In 1461, fear of his Mamluks caused al-Ashraf Inal to discontinue the customary ceremonies of slaughtering animals and distributing their meat in the QalSc’a on the occasion of *Id al-Adha*; the previous year his Mamluks had humiliated and
stoned him, causing him to flee the ceremonies. In 1498, on the anniversary of the Prophet's birth, the Mamluks stoned the amirs and the jurists who came to greet the sultan and even poured sewage on them.

Qaytbay's Mamluks intended to set the house of the muhtasib Badr al-Din ibn Muzahir on fire because he had fixed maximum prices on consumer goods (1486). When they learned that he had gone into hiding, they turned to the granaries of the sultan and the amirs and plundered those. Qaytbay sent the khassakiyya Mamluks headed by muqaddam al-mamālik, the official in charge of their discipline, to stop them. When they failed to do so, Qaytbay personally confronted the ajlāb. On seeing him they fled, but only to plunder another official's house, and they did not stop until the following day. When order was restored, they were not punished, but the civilian officials were replaced.

During most of this period, the sultan functioned under the inescapable pressure of Mamluk factionalism and frequently submitted to the Mamluks' decisions. They forced him, for instance, to fulfill their demands for fiefs allocations, payments, and nominations. They even interfered in foreign-policy decisions.

Against this background, one is led to ask why the post of sultan, feeble as it had now become, was preserved at all. As the sources indicate, the answer seems to be that the sultan was needed to function as the elected appeaser among the Mamluk ruling factions. To put it in the Mamluks' own words: "We want a man to raise to the sultanate who will not give priority to one faction over another, but all factions will be equally treated by him in ousting and granting and in nominating and dismissing."

NOTES

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7Ibid., 126.
8Ibid., 127, 128, 132, 134, 144, 149.
9Ibid., 156.
10Ibid., 154.


On the formal source of the sultan’s power, see Holt, “Mamluk Sultanate,” 44–47.


Ibn Wāsīl, fol. 91a, 95a; Qutb al-Dīn Mūsā ibn Muḥammad al-Yūnīnī, *Dhāyi al-ʿalā mirʿat al-zamān*, vols. 1–4 (Hayderabad, 1961) (hereafter *al-Yūnīnī*), 1:55; ʿAbd Allāh ibn Aybak, Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmiʿ al-ghurar*, ed. Ulrich Haarmann, vols. 8–9 (Cairo, 1972) (hereafter Ibn al-Dawādārī), 8:13; Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-maʿrifat duwal al-mulūk*, vols. 1–4, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭaḍhī Ziyādā (Cairo, 1930) (hereafter *Sulūk*), 1:362, 369; *Nujūm*, 7:54. The placing of Aybak on the throne was the result of a compromise reached among the senior Sāliḥī, and especially the Bahriyya, amirs who had their eyes on the rule. They were sure that, when the time was ripe, deposing him would be no great problem because of his weak position.


Ibn al-Furāt, 7:150, 168; 8:74; Zubda, fol. 43a, 90a–b, 159b–160a; *Strāt al-Ẓāhir*, 33, 73, 74, 79, 96. About Aybak’s attitude to his peers, see al-Yūnīnī, 1:59–60.

*Sulūk*, 1:515.

Al-Yūnīnī, 2n, fol. 81a; Zubda, fol. 194b; *Iqd*, fol. 177b; Sulūk, 1:822; *Nujūm*, 8:99.


Zubda, fol. 40b–41a.

*Tuhfa*, fol. 70b–71a; *Strāt al-Ẓāhir*, 69; *Nujūm*, 7:100.

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54 Zubda, fol. 97a-b; al-Nuwayri, 2n, fol. 73a; Ibn al-Furat, 7:150; Ibn Wasīf, fol. 69b–70a, 72a–b, 73b; Ibn Duqmāq, fol. 96a–b; Shams al-Din Muhammed ibn ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Sakhwātī, al-Dawū ṭ al-lāmi’i li-all al-garn al-tāṣēt, 12 vols. (Beirut) (hereafter Daw’), 3:11; al-Šayrafi, 1:36; Sulāk, 1:658; 3:474–75.

55 Al-Yūnī, 4:42; Tuhfa, fol. 33a; Zubda, fol. 88b–89a, 91b–92a, 98a; Ibn al-Furat, 7:117, 140; al-Šuqā’ī, 52.

56 Zubda, fol. 181b; Tuhfa, fol. 59b; al-Nuwayri, 2n, fol. 46a–47b; al-Šuqā’ī, 70; Sulāk, 1:792; Ibn al-Furat, 8:100–101.

57 Al-Yūnī, 2907/E4, fol. 165a, 177b, 180b, 181a–b, 183b, 189b, 214a, 218a–b, 222b; al-Nuwayri, 2n, fol. 48a; Sulāk, 2:77; Nujum, 9:14.

58 Al-Nuwayri, 2n, fol. 70b; see also Haarmann, “Mislr”, EF, 7:169.

59 Al-Nuwayri, 2n, fol. 100b–101a.

60 Sulāk, 2:343; Nujum, 9:99; Durar, 1:446.


62 Nujum, 8:81.


64 Nahj, 105–6. See the use they made of this will when they deposed al-Kamil Sha’ban in 1347: Sulāk, 2:709; Nujum, 10:134; Durar, 2:289.

65 Nujum, 9:137, 187, 207; Manhal, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. arabe no. 2070, fol. 173a; Sulāk, 2:714.

66 Nujum, 9:175.


68 Ibid., 171.

69 The Nasiriyya took a minor part in factional strifes after al-Nasir Hasan’s death (1361) and al-Ashrāfīyya, al-Ashrāf Sha’ban’s household, was only a minor partner in the factional coalitions that deposed Barquq in 1389. The Yalbughawiyya, the household of one of al-Nasir Hasan’s dominant amirs, however, dominated Mamluk factionalism during the 1370s and 1380s, and out of its ranks came the Mamluk sultan Barquq, who deposed the Qalā’unids. Nujum, 11:258, 333, 334; Manhal, 3:94–95.

70 Sulāk, 2:745; Nujum, 10:187.

71 Ibn al-Furat, 9:94.


73 Ibn Duqmāq, fol. 159a; al-Shuja’i, 162–63; Sulāk, 2:593.

74 Al-Shuja’i, 203–4.

75 Sulāk, 2:606.

76 Ibid., 2:618, 619.

77 On this body see n. 85. Sulāk, 2:751; Nujum, 10:190.

78 Sulāk, 2:919; Ibn Duqmāq, fol. 164a.


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84 Suluk, 2:751, 842; Nujum, 10:190.
85 The origins of the crisis lay in al-Nasir Muhammad’s extravagance and Amir Qawsun’s and Sultan al-Nasir Ahmad’s emptying the treasury of money and valuables to buy supporters for their regime; al-Shujai, 142–43; Suluk, 2:473, 572, 578, 586, 618–19.
86 Al-‘Umari mentions that the Mamluk sultan had a consulting body, al-mashura, which consisted of aged and magnate amirs of a hundred, which indicates, later on, that the sultan of his time was al-Nasir Muhammad: Shihab al-Din Ahmad Ibn Yahya Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-‘Umari, Masālik al-afbār fi mamālik al-amṣār, ed. Dorothea Krawulsky (Beirut, 1986), 101, 102, 107; Zettersteen, Beitnogte, 210; Suluk, 2:485, 498; Khiṭaḥ, 3:339; 4:108.
87 For a definition of his function, see Ibn al-‘Abbās Ahmad al-Qalqashandi, Kitāb subḥ al-āʿshā (Cairo, 1914) (hereafter al-Qalqashandi), 4:18; Ayalon, “Mamluk Army,” pt. 3, 60–61.
88 Suluk, 2:751; Nujum, 10:190.
89 Suluk, 2:751.
91 Suluk, 2:890.
96 Suluk, 3:39; Nujum, 11:47; Durar, 5:151, 213.
98 Suluk, 3:19, 122–23.
99 Ibid.
100 Suluk, 3:315, 316.
101 Inbā’, 1:193; al-Zaḥīrī, 27.
102 Suluk, 3:310.
103 Ibid., 315, 316.
104 Ibid., 468, 474, 616; Nujum, 11:289.
105 Suluk, 3:453; Ibn Qāḍī Shubba, 63.
107 Ibid., 316, 323.
110 Nujum, 16:36, 55.
113 Ibn Iyās, 2:348; Suluk, 4:563.
115 Nujum, 16:244; al-Ṣayrafi, 3:420, 430, 437.
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117On linguistic relativity, see Robertson, Sociology, 70–74.


119Ibn Iyās, 2:369.

120Al-ʿAynī, 158. See also Nujām, 14:222; Sulāk, 4:595; al-Šayrafi, 2:514. For another example, see Sulāk, 4:1190–91.

121Nujām, 14:215.


123Nujām, 16:279–80, 282.


128On what caused or what came out of this revolt the sources contain no information; al-ʿAynī, 578; Nujām, 15:352; Tibr, 41.

129Nujām, 16:94. For more instances, see ibid., 98, 101; Hawādhith, 2:504, 547; Dawʾ, 2:329.


136Ibid., 239.