Jo VAN STEENBERGEN, Order out of Chaos: Patronage,
Conflict and Mamluk Socio-Political Culture,
1341-1382

Leiden, Brill, 2006, 210 p.

Bethany J. Walker

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ORDER OUT OF CHAOS: PATRONAGE,
CONFLICT AND MAMLUK SOCIO-POLITICAL
CULTURE, 1341-1382

Jo VAN STEENBERGEN

Leiden, Brill, 2006, 210 p.

There has been a growing interest among Mamluk historians in periods of transition and the mechanisms of social and political change. Inspired by studies on the decline of the Mamluk state, which have sought in the fourteenth century the roots of the political and economic malaises so lamented by contemporary observers in the fifteenth, recent scholarship has begun to redefine the post-plague era as one of multi-faceted transformations, reevaluating social and economic developments of the time as reflections of imperial dynamism and pragmatism.¹ In this regard, attention has increasingly been drawn to Sultan Barqūq (d. 801/1399), whose reign is being appreciated as one of positive innovations in the Mamluk body politic and its financial institutions.²

1. One should note among these works are Amalia LEVANOVIĆ's *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun (1310-1341)*, (Leiden, 1995) and the proceedings of the panel entitled "Decline or Transformation: The Economy of the Late Medieval Middle East" convened at the International Conference on Medieval Studies at the University of Western Michigan in May 2005, the papers published in *Mamluk Studies Review* 11.1 (2007).

2. See, in this respect, Daisuke IGARASHI, "The Establishment and Development of al-Diwan al-Mufrad: Its Background and Implications", *Mamluk*

Van Steenbergen's *Order out of Chaos* is an important contribution to these efforts. This monograph, based on his doctoral dissertation, is the first systematic investigation of a period too long neglected in Mamluk historiography: the critical years between the death of Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in 741/1341 and the accession of Barqūq in 784/1382. Traditionally dismissed as an erratic and transitory stage in the history of the Mamluk state, when the throne was occupied by several minors and was, moreover, a confusing period of rebellions and political collapse, Van Steenbergen engages these years precisely because of their chaotic and "transitory" character. That the period was more than one of transition between the Bahri and Burji regimes, that it had a momentum of its own, is based on his claim that social and political changes "were not 'cloaked' under any institutional disguise and therefore were more significant and revealing than ever" (p. 5). The author rejects an institutional approach to political change

Studies Review 10.1 (2006), 117-140. Articles on related topics by Igarashi and others are forthcoming in the same journal.

for prosopography, building a biographical database of the “Effective Power”-holders of the era, identifying their professional and personal networks, and investigating the ways in which they were nurtured. What is new about his approach is his emphasis on socio-political process, over structures, and individual action, over the functions of state institutions.

Building on earlier works by Lapidus and Chamberlain, Van Steenbergen comes to understand the political dynamics of the period through the socio-political interactions of individuals.³ By examining the political and economic patronage of officers of the state and the networks they built on that basis, he redefines what has been traditionally described as a period of “chaos” as one of creativity in conflict, where political struggle was not necessarily destructive: security and order could result from penetration of an amir’s circle of patronage into Mamluk society beyond his own household (p. 169-70). Successful patronage and ever expanding networking resulted in what the author describes as “Effective Power”, which he differentiates from the “Legitimate Power” of elite institutions, such as the sultanate. Explicating his ideas about the exercise of socio-political power, and the development of Mamluk political culture, he divides his analysis into three parts, which constitute different chapters of the book: Legitimate Power, Effective Power, and Struggle for Power. In addition to Egyptian source material, he pulls heavily on Syrian chronicles and biographies for each chapter (making greatest use of

Ibn Qāḍī Šuhba, al-Kutubī, Ibn Kaṭīr, and al-Šafadī), a choice that in the opinion of this reviewer depends the author’s analysis. The Syrian source material, which is underutilized in Mamluk studies on the whole, provides uniquely local perspectives on political events of the period, as well as detailed information about the activities of individual amirs, their personal and professional relations outside of Egypt, and the composition of their households.

In the first chapter the author evaluates the long-term implications of the transformation of the Mamluk elite over the course of the fourteenth century, in the absence of major large-scale military operations, from a military body into a body politic (p. 15-19). The politicization and demilitarization of both the sultanate and amirates – the “legitimate” power holders – channeled professional activity into socio-political networking and over time redefined the function and authority of previously military offices in those terms. In this analysis, the prerogatives of the sultan were gradually limited to the promotion of amirs, as military activity was limited and high-ranking amirs came to control the sultanic fisc. On this latter point, the author does not elaborate, and this is one area of scholarly inquiry that should be explored in the future. Institutions and offices in this period were simply opportunities – their realm of authority and function were what the officer made of them (p. 45).

Chapter Two is devoted to the effective, rather than institutional, exercise of power through the cultivation of personal and professional ties among sultans, amirs, and mamluks, based on the ability to grant a favor (*ni‘ma*), such as an office

3. The works include Ira LAPIDUS’ *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1967) and Michael CHAMBERLAIN’S *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350*, (Cambridge, 1995).

(with *iqṭāʿ* assignment) or cash reward, and to intercede for the same to a higher level patron on behalf of a client. The ability to gratify larger numbers of clients in this manner was, Van Steenbergen argues, the key to acquiring and using political power in Mamluk society. The author considers several strategies used in building such networks: mediation (*ṣafāʿa*), kinship (in its many forms), distribution of *iqṭāʿāt* under one's control, and guardianship over minors on the throne.

The author explores the roots of political chaos in Chapter Three. Here he identifies seventy-four socio-political clashes (described in Appendix Three), arguing that rebellions and quarrels among patrons were largely the result of frustrated professional ambitions: with less opportunities for advancements in the military-political hierarchy, and decline in the number of military offices, mamluks and lower-ranking officers turned to more powerful patrons in their bids for offices and the lucrative *iqṭāʿāt* that went with them (p. 132). Although he does not identify the reasons for the decline in the numbers of offices and *iqṭāʿāt* in this period, he does suggest that ever expanding circles of patronage and the introduction of numerous new clients into the system created intense competition for patrons and increasingly limited financial resources. He divides the period into six "episodes" when dominant networks emerged, creating periods of stability, however temporary, led by four generations of effective patrons: those of the senior amirs of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, their juniors, the former clients of al-Nāṣir Ḥasan, and the mamluks of Yalbūḡa (p. 171).

The concluding chapter reiterates a theme that pervades the work: the system, as a whole, and most individuals desired stability and security, even if their behavior and decisions frequently threatened it. When dominant network emerged, they created, for a time, stable structures that functioned as the most effective governing institutions once did. In a final analysis, Van Steenbergen offers tantalizing thoughts on Barqūq's reign that are particularly relevant to current debates on his institutional reforms: Barqūq's accession to the throne was made possible by the simultaneous disappearance of the Qalawunid line and the ability of an Effective Power-holder to unify "his network with the realm's institutional framework" (p. 168).

The work closes with three appendices, two of which are the biographical databases upon which the author's analysis was based. The first includes a list and reign dates of the Qalawunid sultans. The second constitutes a list of what the author considers to be the effective power-holders of the period and includes twenty-seven amirs and seven sultans, summaries of their political and military careers, references to the primary sources that initially provided the biographical data, and cross-references to entries in Appendix Three. The latter details in brief narrative form the socio-political conflicts of the period that are the basis of this study. His examples of conflict include arrests of amirs, rebellions against sultans, abandonment of old patrons for new ones, conflicts over financial resources between sultans and amirs and the general struggle for control over the Treasury, dethronements of sultans,

the murder of amirs by other amirs, politically-motivated rumor-mongering and intimidation, and perceived offenses (verbal and physical) by one officer against another (p. 189-196). Collectively the appendices are accessible references and conveniently replace what could have been long and unwieldy footnotes within the text.

The work as a whole is valuable for its methodology, selection of sources, and chronological coverage in gaining a better understanding of the exercise of power among the Mamluk elite. However, the author risks trivializing, or ignoring, important institutional developments through his exclusive emphasis on individual actors and their networks, which, he implies, take over the roles played previously by the institutions of the state (political, financial, administrative). A basic premise of the work – that acts of patronage within the ruling elite defined the political culture of the second half of the fourteenth century and created networks out of which the more stable structures of the Burji period developed – is convincingly argued throughout. Nonetheless, traditional governing institutions continued to restrict and shape political behavior in this period, though in different ways than before: the author himself notes that respect for the institution of sultanate, and for the Qalawunid dynasty, specifically, limited political ambitions to intra-amiral rivalries, rather than grabs for the throne (p. 26, 134-6). To fully appreciate the complexities of the late Qalawunid era, we need to consider, as well, the relationship between political networking and the transformation of Mamluk institutions. In this regard, one should consider recent

scholarship on Mamluk financial reforms, which has explored changes in the form and function of foundational institutions such as the *iqtāʿ* and *awqāf* systems previous to and during Barqūq's reign. These changes were more than the "haphazard institutional evolution" of military offices described herein (p. 43) and were part of a gradual evolution of financial practices over time and by multiple policy-makers. Clearly, the networks examined in Van Steenbergen's work are meaningful within an institutional context, even if these institutions did not function as they did previously. Human relations, in general, operate and develop in a culturally determined environment, the parameters of which are largely defined by institutional structures and negotiated by socio-political actors. One cannot, and should not, divorce the institutional from the behavioral.

Van Steenbergen's work is, nonetheless, a masterful and very valuable evaluation of the transition between the Bahri and Burji Mamluk periods and offers, for the first time in many years, a refreshing sociological perspective on Mamluk political culture. For those interested in Mamluk "decline", Barqūq's reign, and the socio-political contexts of the reforms of the post-plague era, it is a "must-read".

Bethany J. WALKER

Assistant Professor at Missouri
State University