

**Christian Mauder.** *In the Sultan's Salon: Learning, Religion, and Rulership at the Mamluk Court of Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (r. 1501–1516).* (Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and texts volume 169/1). Leiden: Brill, 2021. 2 volumes. ISBN 978-90-04-43576-6 (hardback, set), ISBN 978-90-04-47100-9 (hardback, vol. 1), ISBN 978-90-04-47101-6 (hardback, vol. 2); ISBN 978-90-04-44421-8 (e-book).

**Review by Sabira Ståhlberg (independent scholar)**

The Mamluk sultans and their courts (648–923/1250–1517) – and especially the last one, Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī (ruled 906–922/1501–1516) – are discussed by Christian Mauder in a solid brick of a book with 1,302 pages. This two-volume revised work based on his PhD thesis requires that the reader possess some background knowledge, both of the historical period and preferably also of the languages used in the book (mainly Arabic but also others, such as Persian and Ottoman Turkish). However, a non-expert on Mamluks or the Islamicate<sup>1</sup> world can enjoy the book, because the text is well-written and the narrative clear and detailed.

In the introduction of Volume I, the author asks the important question of what a court is. The court of the Mamluk sultan in Egypt was not only a political entity but also a series of events, symbols, and spaces where social relations, communications, and personal interests were acted out. The author focuses especially on *majlis* (Arabic plural *majālis*) sessions, which were a key part of the court life during al-Ghawrī's rule. These regular salons were something like debates or seminars, where scholars presented their thoughts or topics and discussed different questions with the sultan. The topics of the *majālis* ranged from religion and history to law and literature. Because of their foreign background, the Mamluk sultans were often thought to be uneducated – or at least not as educated or well-versed in religion and literature as the Arabic scholars who usually wrote their biographies. The author shows that al-Ghawrī was not only educated but also worked on improving both his knowledge and his image as a scholar. His court was accessible and the sessions open to different kinds of people: among others, he invited scholars and officials to his *majālis*, as well as travelling scholars, envoys, and foreigners. There were always many others present, too, who did not belong to the elite, such as performers (e.g. musicians, jesters) and servants, who were listeners to the discussions.

Several sessions were documented by participants, who had interests in raising their own status or situation and tried to do so by writing accounts of the *majālis*. Some of these documents have been preserved to the present day, and they form the foundation for this book. In the second chapter, the author compares standard narratives to existing research and historical developments during al-Ghawrī's rule. The third chapter looks into other sources in Arabic, Turkic, and

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<sup>1</sup> The concept *Islamicate* includes regions influenced by Islam and/or where Muslims dominate the culture.

European languages. Genres such as chronicles, journals, dictionaries, literary offerings, chancery manuals, and poems are also included. In the fourth chapter, al-Ghawrī's court is discussed in detail, with emphasis on the learning and transmission of knowledge which took place. In the fifth chapter, the religious life at the court is discussed in terms of events connected with religion, the presence of other religious groups (e.g. Sufi, Shi'a) at the Sunni Muslim court, religious debates, and the sultan's role in the religious life of the court and country as protector, promoter, and scholar. Volume I ends with a chapter on the significance of religious communication at the court.

In Volume II, the sixth chapter begins with a discourse on rulership, representation, and legitimation of rule, all important questions for the "foreign" Mamluk sultans: al-Ghawrī himself was identified as a Circassian soldier-slave, who knew Caucasian languages and also Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Kurdish, and Armenian. Besides the sultan's own poetry, literary works, symbols and court events, there were also celebrations to further legitimise his rule in the eyes of the locals. Political theories, relations with the Caliphate and a reinterpretation of it, communicative strategies, and how the political communication at al-Ghawrī's court oscillated between traditions and innovation are also discussed here. The final chapter of the book contains conclusions with a summary, results, and further perspectives, and it is followed by around three hundred pages of appendixes, a bibliography, and indexes. These include lists of the works cited in the accounts about the *majālis*, known participants in the sultan's salons, and parallel passages in the session narratives.

Christian Mauder's highly interesting work opens up a little researched period and topics concerning Islamicate politics, cultural, intellectual, and educational activities at the Mamluk court, as well as a discussion of courts and their actual definitions, especially outside Europe. The communicative significance of the events at the court, the possibility for a "reconfiguration" of meeting spaces, and the constant creation and representation of specific forms of communication and identities are important aspects which have mostly been overlooked so far by researchers, notwithstanding that they offer many more and flexible possibilities to view court life than traditional scholarship on power centres.

The author elegantly manages the use of primary sources in several languages and provides precise translations. Thus, among many other important topics, the multilingualism and multiculturalism prevalent at the court are ably acknowledged and their significance discussed. Questions about the character, reliability, and usefulness of different kinds of sources, in addition to a very clear, meticulous dealing with facts, are necessary and present throughout this work. Together with the discourse about concepts and the state of research on Islamicate court life and the Mamluks, the facts extracted from the sources contribute to a well-balanced and well-researched work.

*In the Sultan's Salon* is a complex and multi-layered study. It is valuable also for scholars outside the fields of the Mamluk, Islamicate, court studies, and premodern period; similar court cultures can be found in other regions even some centuries later, including Central Asia, and it could be useful to apply the methods and approaches from this work to them. The fluent academic style of writing can further be recommended for all who work with historical and cultural studies. This book is slow reading, but it is worth every minute.