Abstract

This dissertation investigates the structure, composition, and effectiveness of the Mamlūk army through the use of two military models, the Diversified Army Model and the Şāliḥī Mamlūk Model, that dominated its organization between 1250 CE and 1517 CE. The Diversified Army Model was the dominant form of military organization in the polities of the Muslim world prior to the rise of the Mamlūk sultanate. The Şāliḥī Mamlūk Model came into existence in the late Ayyūbid period during the reign of al-Şāliḥ Ayyūb (r. 1240-1249 CE) and continued to dominate the military organization of the Mamlūk sultanate until the third reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (r. 1310-1340 CE). The Diversified army Model once again came to the fore during this sultan’s reign. This period has often been viewed as one of major change or a turning point by several historians. However, there was a return to the Şāliḥī Mamlūk Model under several Circassian sultans and by the latter half of the sixteenth century, there was a merging of the two military models. The current study thus argues that the Mamlūk army was constantly in a state of change and that the reign of every sultan, not only that of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, was a turning point for the military, which was reorganized to suit realm’s and the ruler’s needs and goals.

Despite the transformations and changes in the structure and composition of the Mamlūk army, it remained a formidable force throughout the entire Mamlūk period. In addition to becoming proficient with a variety of weapons such as the composite bow, the lance, and the sword, the sources also describe the equestrian skills the mamlūks acquired through their training. Additionally, through military reviews, during which the army was assembled for inspection by the ruler and his commanders, the sultans ensured that their forces were always ready for war and that the soldiers maintained their arms, armor, and mounts. Furthermore, the slow promotion of officers (with a few exceptions when certain rulers such as al-Nāṣir Muḥammad fast tracked some of his supporters to high positions in the army), ensured that the men who rose up the ranks were seasoned and experienced soldiers. It was often from among these officers that a new sultan emerged as successors to deceased sultans. Finally, the Mamlūk army’s excellent track record in its performance on the battlefield demonstrates its enduring strength throughout the entire Mamlūk period. This strength is signified by the fact that the sultanate’s force’s remained militarily effective and largely undefeated between the thirteenth
and sixteenth centuries. The instances in which the Mamlûks suffered military setbacks and defeats are few and far apart and were the result of exceptional circumstances, often due to internal conflicts, that temporarily affected the army’s capabilities. With the exception of the final Ottoman invasion of Egypt in 1517 CE, the Mamlûks were always able to quickly recover from these setbacks and to swiftly retake any territory they had lost.