

Mehdi BERRIAH

*L'art de la guerre chez les Mamelouks (1250-1375):  
Stratégies et tactiques*

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الكلمات المفتاحية: المماليك، استراتيجية عسكرية، تكتيكات عسكرية، حرب، العصور الوسطى، الشرق الأوسط

Since the appearance of David Ayalon's pioneering studies from the 1950s on the "Mamluk" army, the work of military and political historians who focus on the Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo has grown steadily. While cognizant of the significance and wealth of existing research on the tactical and military aspects of the Sultanate's history, Mehdi Berriah adds his monograph *L'art de la guerre chez les Mamelouks (1250-1375): Stratégies et tactiques* as a work addressing persistent gaps in the conversation. To explain the military successes of the Sultanate during the 125 years treated by the book, the author analyzes three main arenas of conflict faced by the early Turkish or so-called "Bahri" rulers: the Mongols, Crusaders, and Armenians (in that order). Rather than revisit the well-covered ground of the army and its institutions, the author limits the investigation to strategies, tactics, and practical aspects of Mamluk warfare (p. 8-9). The book instead describes the mechanisms of the army and explains its effectiveness in medieval Near Eastern history.

The first part, which situates the book's premises (p. 5-133), includes the first three chapters and sets the stage for later discussions based on the methodological stakes, the value of existing scholarship, and a survey of the corpus of primary sources.

In Chapter One, the author outlines his methodology, which involves supplementing data drawn from narrative sources with commentary drawn from military and *furūsiyya* horsemanship manuals (p. 27). To present what is termed "stratégie mamelouke", the book embarks on an etymological analysis of Arabic terms denoting war (*ḥarb*, *qitāl*, *jihād*) (p. 10-14), followed by a theoretical discussion of the debates over Western understandings of "war", and considers whether medieval Muslims themselves perceived war as science (*'ilm*) or as art (*fann*) (p. 16-17). M. Berriah

above all explains how strategy differs from tactics, while noting that military elites of the Sultanate themselves did not clearly separate the two (p. 17-21).

In the second chapter, "Les questions militaires mamelouks: bilan et état de l'art" (p. 35-94), the author skillfully reconstructs and deconstructs modern scholarship, setting forth the views of key historians of the periods in question such as Ayalon, Paul Chevedden, Claude Cahen, John Masson Smith, Reuven Amitai, Amalia Levanoni, Linda Northrup, David Nicolle and others. Here, the author establishes the parameters of past scholarship to make apparent his own intervention and contributions. Aspects such as tactics, strategy, and military ideology in the early period of the Sultanate are underscored as having largely evaded the attention of modern research (p. 94).

In Chapter Three on the sources (p. 95-133), the author establishes the historical and normative material (Arabic chronicles, encyclopedias, military treatises, and *furūsiyya* literature) that provide rich documentation on the state of the army in the Syro-Egyptian territories (p. 95). Going beyond the standard Arabic chronicles for the period, the chapter includes Persian (p. 110-112), as well as Armenian, Latin, and Syriac authors (p. 113-116). The author underscores the didactic nature of much of the material (p. 119), and incorporates insights from archaeology, iconography, and weaponry.

Part Two, "La situation géopolitique et les forces en présence au Proche-Orient dans les années 648-658/1250-1260", (p. 135-245) begins an examination of the geopolitical context of the Near East. In Chapter Four, "Une prise du pouvoir par et pour la guerre" (p. 137-158), the author examines the final decades of Ayyubid rule, highlighting weakened policies toward the Crusaders and growing discontent with Ayyubid leadership (p. 138-142). He situates the Bahri Mamluk intervention at Manṣūra following Louis IX's failed crusade (p. 143-147), traces the origins of the Mamluk Sultanate under Shajarat al-Durr, and considers the failure of Syrian Ayyubids under Nāṣir Yūsuf against the Mongols (p. 151-152). The chapter also explores the psychological impact of the Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt in 1260, which inaugurated six decades of Mamluk-Mongol conflict (p. 156-157). These events collectively help historicize the subsequent three chapters devoted to the Mongols, Franks, and Armenian kingdom of Cilicia.

Chapter Five (p. 159-208) presents a detailed study of the Mongol military machine which argues that the Mongols posed the greatest threat to the Sultanate under capable leaders such as Hülegü and his successors (p. 159-160). The chapter addresses challenges faced by modern scholars, including

conflicting reports on the size, armament, and logistics of Mongol armies (p. 171-179). The author further examines the Mongol art of war, highlighting tactics such as sowing discord and disinformation (p. 188-189), strict obedience to leadership (p. 193), and the use of psychological terror (p. 200-207).

A recurring theme in Chapter Six's discussion of the Franks (p. 209-234) is their limited military forces and the heightened internal tensions resulting from an inability to receive reinforcements from afar (p. 214-219). This chapter engages with the tactical aspects and challenges faced by Crusading armies, who are presented as formidable warriors renowned for their combat prowess. The chapter examines military tactics such as ambushes, the Franks' occasional lack of cohesion or discipline, and even the role of women in the fighting (p. 228).

The comparatively shorter seventh and final chapter on the Armenians (p. 235-245) offers a detailed exploration of the military and strategic decisions that defined the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia prior to its final destruction in 1375 – the date chosen as the book's terminus. The chapter examines their status as loyal allies of the Mongols (p. 239-243), as well as their fortifications and geopolitical relationships.

The subsequent three chapters that make up Part Three, "Des stratégies pensées en fonction de l'ennemi" (p. 247-499), are in dialogue with the previous chapters of Part Two that established the formidable three-pronged threat posed by the Mongols, Franks, and Armenians. Chapter Eight, "La défense et la dissuasion : bases de la stratégie du sultanat mamelouk face aux Mongols" (p. 250-365) returns to Chapter Five's discussion of the Mongols. The chapter explores the comprehensive strategy of the Sultanate in confronting the Ilkhanids by means of a defense that included an expanded network of fortresses in Syria (p. 267-277), support from local Kurdish, Turkmen, and especially Bedouin auxiliaries (p. 285-293), as well as espionage, communication and early-warning systems, intelligence networks (spies and messengers), and diplomatic alliances with the Golden Horde. The chapter also details the efforts of the Sultanate to internally destabilize the Ilkhanate through subterfuge, bribery, diplomacy (p. 344-347), targeted assassinations carried out by *fidāwīs* (p. 355-361), and the planting of disinformation (p. 361-364). The Mongols, for their part, likewise employed patrols, scouts, spies, their *yam* courier system, and signal fires (p. 281, 294-305).

The ninth chapter "Attaquer, user et expulser : caractéristiques et finalités de la stratégie mamelouke anti-franque" (p. 366-431), demonstrates

the Sultanate's strategies against the Franks, which followed a different logic of deterrence in response to their threat in Syria (p. 366). The author's analysis characterizes Mamluk strategy against the Franks as more proactive and aggressive, aimed at preempting any new Crusade attempts from the Latin West while also thwarting potential Frankish–Mongol collusion. Responding to Frankish demographic weakness, the Mamluks engaged in raids, sieges, and asymmetric power-sharing arrangements (*munāṣafa*) while successfully dismantling Frankish strongholds. The chapter outlines other strategies employed against the Franks, including psychological pressure (p. 398-399), assassinations (p. 421-422), and temporary truces (*hudnas*) (p. 423-426).

Chapter Ten, "Affaiblir, exploiter puis conquérir : le cas de la stratégie évolution des Mamelouks contre le royaume d'Arménie" (p. 432-499), follows up on the discussion of the Armenians from Chapter Seven, providing greater detail on Mamluk military, diplomatic, and ideological strategy toward the kingdom of Cilicia. Here, the author analyzes the Sultanate's strategy of neutralizing Armenian forces, followed by the destruction or repurposing of fortresses to push the frontier northward (p. 456-458). Forcing the Armenians to pay steep annual tributes rendered the kingdom financially unsustainable. A recurring theme in the chapter is that the Mamluks were not purely conquest-driven but combined reprisal, economic strangulation, religious legitimacy, and internal manipulation to dismantle the Armenians and punish their unwavering alignment with Mongol imperial ambitions (p. 438).

In the fourth part of the book, "La pratique de la guerre chez les Mamelouks," (p. 501-635) comprised of the final three chapters, the author moves the discussion toward the strategies and tactics that provided the Sultanate with clear advantages over its enemies. Chapter Eleven's discussion of "Fondements et caractéristiques" (p. 503-545) evaluates the military prowess of the Mamluks across various forms of combat. A significant focus is the strategic use of archery in battle. The emphasis placed on discipline highlights a correlation between military success and stringent internal rules. The chapter also provides instances of tactical flexibility, demonstrating how the Mamluks quickly adapted to changing battlefield conditions. An important discussion of Mamluk equestrian expertise rounds out the end of the discussion. Rooted in Prophetic traditions (*sunnah*), the equestrian literature enabled religious authors such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya to approach *furūsiyya* practices on legal jurisprudential grounds (p. 511, 518-522).

The penultimate Chapter Twelve, “Les tactiques de combat” (p. 546-567) delves deeply into military tactics, including cavalry charges, ambushes, and broader strategic aspects of warfare. The chapter presents a compelling comparison between Mamluk cavalry practices and those of Frankish knights and Mongols. The author focuses on the conscious use of surprise and trickery (p. 550), encompassing ambushes, feigned retreats, encirclements, and false openings, as well as the presumed psychological impact these tactics had on enemies. The discussion nuances the book’s earlier analyses of some of these phenomena (p. 182-187).

The book’s thirteenth and final chapter, “La poliorcétique” (p. 568-635), offers detailed commentary on Mamluk mastery of siege warfare (both conducting and resisting), exemplified by the rapid conquest of Frankish strongholds (p. 568). Their approach combined secrecy, reconnaissance, and surprise attacks, supplemented by artillery (including *manjaniq* and smaller machines) (p. 578-587). The author examines the specialized corps of engineers responsible for siege craft, including *naffātūn* for incendiary weapons (p. 599-607), as well as sappers, road-levelers, and masons (p. 608-609). Despite fierce resistance, occasional setbacks, and naval limitations against Frankish forces (p. 628-631), the Sultanate’s combination of firepower, stratagem, and surprise facilitated the capture of numerous fortresses (p. 631-634). Importantly, the author calls attention to the need for future scholarship to produce a similarly comprehensive analysis of war strategies during the subsequent Circassian period of the sultanate (traditionally 1382–1517), given the richness of available sources.

Throughout the work, the author demonstrates careful analysis, treating accounts with caution when they appear in only a single source (p. 446). He is also clear about the parameters he sets for the study, acknowledging the limitations of the book’s scope

and directing readers to related work on the Nubian frontier by modern researchers such as R. Seignobos (p. 9).

Mehdi Berriah is to be commended for producing a valuable digest of the state of the field enhanced with important critiques, interventions, and source analysis. *L’art de la guerre chez les Mamelouks* contains valuable guiding questions (p. 29, 32) and the case is presented with copious evidence in the form of source excerpts both in Arabic and in translation, as well as over 155 illustrations and maps that make the presentation both accessible and highly intelligible.

Two minor critical points remain: 1) The author frequently refers to the training and mobilization of troops, and a brief discussion of the costs involved in raising and maintaining these forces might have added further nuance to the stakes for sultans and amirs as investors in these highly prized warriors (p. 32). While the text notes that sultans sometimes drew on the *barīd* to fund additional troops (p. 48-49), a more explicit consideration of these financial pressures could enrich the discussion.

2) The book makes extensive use of Baybars as a source for examples (p. 219, 251-254, 393-396, 531-535). Given the book’s chronological focus, this emphasis is entirely warranted, particularly in the later chapters, but at times it may suggest slightly more strategic ingenuity attributed to him personally, sometimes giving the impression of attributing to Baybars alone what may well have been a collective effort.

These are, however, minor critical points as *L’art de la guerre chez les Mamelouks* makes a substantial contribution to scholarship on the period in question and will likely be consulted by researchers in the field for years to come.

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