

INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR

KNOWLEDGE, AUTHORITY, & PRACTICE IN THE MAMLUK PERIOD

REASSESSING
INTELLECTUAL LIFE
IN SYRIA AND EGYPT
(1250–1517)

HOSTED BY
**THE RESEARCH INSTITUTE
FOR LETTERS, ARTS & SCIENCES
AT WASEDA UNIVERSITY**

WASEDA UNIVERSITY, TOKYO

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University



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HOSTED BY

The Research Institute for Letters, Arts & Sciences at Waseda University

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Long marginalized in intellectual historiography in favor of the so-called classical and modern periods, the Mamluk era (1250–1517) is today increasingly recognized as a moment of intense scholarly activity and conceptual creativity. Recent scholarship has moved beyond the now outdated paradigm of stagnation, revealing a dynamic and plural intellectual world in which religious, legal, historical, and scientific discourses were constantly reformulated, negotiated, and sometimes contested (Berkey, 1992).

This seminar brings together scholars working on various aspects of intellectual life in Mamluk Syria and Egypt to examine the modes through which knowledge was produced, legitimized, and put into practice in a variety of institutional, textual, and embodied contexts. Rather than viewing this period as a mere conduit of earlier traditions, the papers will show how knowledge was actively reshaped in response to shifting political realities, social expectations, and disciplinary transformations (Chamberlain, 1994).

Special attention will be given to the ways in which scholars of the period approached questions of authority, legitimacy, and orthodoxy — whether in legal reasoning, theological debate, or spiritual practice. The seminar will also highlight the material and performative dimensions of scholarship, such as manuscript culture, the physical organization of texts, and the social spaces in which learning was transmitted and regulated. In this regard, the study of Mamluk-era Arabic manuscript collections, many of which remain underexplored, offers valuable insight into scholarly priorities, transmission networks, and the evolving structure of the book.

In this context, the “social life” of texts — how they were read, circulated, annotated, or performed — becomes central to understanding the intellectual practices of the time. Knowledge was not limited to the act of writing: reading and reception practices played a crucial role in the construction and negotiation of scholarly authority. As Konrad Hirschler has shown in his study of medieval Arabic reading practices, the Mamluk period saw a diversification of reading publics, modes of textual engagement, and forms of scholarly sociability, including among non-elite groups (Hirschler, 2012).

While many scholars operated within the framework of established legal schools (madhāhib) or theological traditions, their intellectual activity was often far more flexible and inventive than is commonly assumed. Several prominent figures developed sophisticated methodologies aimed at reconciling transmitted knowledge (naql) with rational inquiry (‘aql), sometimes challenging the established boundaries between disciplines. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), for example, combined rigorous textualism with critical reflection on legal theory, dialectics, and philosophical reasoning, articulating a complex epistemology grounded in a deep concern for authenticity and coherence (Berriah, 2022).

By addressing a wide range of disciplines — including religious sciences (theology, ḥadith, law), political thought, historiography, musicology, and the arts — the seminar highlights the plurality of epistemic traditions that coexisted and interacted in the Mamluk world. It will also explore how scholars navigated between commentary and innovation, conformity and dissent, and how intellectual authority was affirmed or challenged through writing, citation, and transmission practices.

In doing so, this conference seeks to contribute to the broader effort to reassess the Mamluk period not as a mere post-classical echo, but as a critical moment in the *longue durée* of Islamic intellectual history — one whose conceptual debates, institutional forms, and textual legacies resonated well beyond its chronological limits.

Selected bibliography

Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval Cairo: A Social History of Islamic Education*, Princeton University Press, 1992.

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Konrad Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices*, Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Mehdi Berriah, "Ibn Taymiyya's Methodology Regarding His Sources: Reading, Selection and Use. Preliminary Study and Perspectives," in Élise Franssen (ed.), *Authors as Readers in the Mamlūk Period and Beyond*, Venice: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 2022, pp. 45–81.