Late Mamlūk Military Equipment: Travaux et Études de la Mission Archéologique Syro-Française Citadelle de Damas (1999–2006), by David Nicolle. Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2011. 3 vols. 396pp., \$68. ISBN–13: 9782351590454.

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This learned book written by David Nicolle, a well known expert in medieval Islamic arms history, is concerned with important finds relating to arms, armour and equipment in the citadel of Damascus. It is the first of a series of seven volumes dedicated to the excavations carried out from October 1999 to December 2006 by a Syrian-French archaeological mission, a cooperative venture between the Syrian General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums and what is now the Institut Français du Proche-Orient. The book design is extremely clear and logical, a well illustrated reference book that is of importance not merely to Islamic scholars but also to those interested in arms and the spread of technology across the known world from Christian Europe to China. In the citadel the archaeologists found objects that are possibly Ayyubid or early Mamluk but for the most part the items date from the late Mamluk and early Ottoman period, a key moment of transition in the region when the dominance of the Near East was being decided. They are described by David Nicolle as “amongst the most important recent discoveries where the history of late medieval arms and armour as a whole is concerned” and “even more significant for the history of Islamic military equipment.”

Before the publication of this book David Nicolle had already started work on another larger and potentially even more significant cache of medieval Islamic military equipment from a different part of the Citadel of Damascus. Dating from the early Mamluk Sultanate, it was found in Tower 4 and included horse-harness as well as armour and weapons fragments. It is held by the Conservation Department of the Syrian National Museum and although Dr. Nicolle’s work on this material was interrupted by the current conflict in Syria, he hopes to continue his study as soon as circumstances permit. It was not customary in the Islamic world to bury a dead warrior with his weapons and equipment so a major means of finding and dating objects elsewhere in the world is not available in this culture. It should not be forgotten that throughout history the manufacture of arms attracted the very best technology available to a dynasty and that foreign weapons tended to be written about by observers who describe the unfamiliar with unusual detail. Literary sources provide terminology that is difficult to relate precisely to the pictorial sources available, particularly as the same name could be applied to a changing set of military equipment over a lengthy period. Moreover there is a shortage of actual surviving weaponry and for these reasons the material found in the citadel offers a unique chance to make real progress in this difficult subject.

I recall David Nicolle as a hard working fellow student at SOAS in the 1970s and recognise facts and theories from our discussions then that here reach their maturity. His whole life has been a preparation for such a challenge, one that he manages with great erudition. Waves of

Keywords: Mamluk weaponry, Damascus, *ghaddara*

facts like Mongol hordes rise up and assail the reader who is expected to be extremely knowledgeable in general terms about the Islamic world. Take for example his survey of the armour. The fruits of forty years of intense research marches inexorably across the pages giving a survey that few could equal, arguably none better. This begins with "Scale armour," of great importance in the Near East and is followed a meticulous catalogue of the finds, rivets and scales mainly. This is followed in the same format by "Separate Limb Defences," "Soft Armour," "Hardened Leather and Laminated Armour" and "Horse Armour."

After this comes "Bows." Nicolle rightly draws our attention to the fact that this subject has had greater attention from scholars than any other weapon and very properly is not drawn into a lengthy history of the subject, possibly because there are only two items relating to parts of a bow, neither of much importance. On Islamic, Chinese and European crossbows he has considerably more to say and this is particularly interesting. Objects found in rooms within the citadel that appear to have been workshops rather than stores include elements of various types of armour including horse armour, archery material including bows, pellet bows, crossbows, quivers, bow cases, and assorted arrows. There are powder horns and their component parts and bullets. There are also dagger blades and parts of scabbards; assorted leather belts, applied decorative plaques, textile fragments, harnesses and tools. These items are mostly small and few are intact but it is part of Nicolle's skill that he can not only take a rivet and from it tell you all about the armour it was once part of but also put it into historical and geographic context. One feels that as a guide he is a great deal more knowledgeable than the original occupants of the room who kept these articles of kit in good order for the troops in the tumultuous years of the late fifteenth century.

The empires of Asia relied for their success upon the horse and their weapons. The workshop finds in Damascus are the result of a great pool of experience acquired over millennia of a form of mounted warfare that stretched overland as far as China. The Mamluk tradition looked East and had its roots in Asia while the Ottoman Turks who came from the same roots looked to the West. The Italians developed firearms and supplied the Christians of the Balkans with arms and technology in a futile effort to prevent the Ottomans from taking control of the region's valuable military assets of population and iron and silver mines. The Turks overran the Christian Balkans and in the process gained hugely in terms of being open to new ideas which their own energy and discipline harnessed effectively in the interests of the state. The finds in the citadel include a large number of parts of powder horns, suggesting that at this late stage prior to the Ottoman invasion the importance of gunpowder weapons and the need to change traditional attitudes was belatedly understood by the Mamluks..

The book also notes the transfer of Chinese craftsmen and technology along the southern or sea route to the Arab world but ignores the old debate about how Chinese advances in technology failed to take root in India which might suggest that the bulk of these transfers passed along the Silk route in the north. The importance of India steel to Mamluk arms making is acknowledged and the commercial contacts between the Mamluk Egypt and Syria and Western India are known but the military consequences and the effect on arms development remains largely unexplored and this book is probably not the place to attempt this. While raw material travelled west from India Mamluk expertise and men travelled East to join the Bahmanids and their Deccani successor states or the Delhi Sultans. We even have a weapon that is unique to these two regions that must have a shared ancestry. The Mamluks called it a *ghaddara*. "Besides

the mace, emirs and soldiers used to keep a steel staff (ghaddara) in the saddle, a weapon strong enough to cut off a man's arm. On 9th July, 1512, Qânsûh al-Ghauri forbade its use, and the Amir Mughulbay, the armourer (*zardkâsh*), was ordered to prohibit the workmen from making such staffs for the Mamluks" (Mayer 1952, 47). Sixteenth century examples of this weapon are still in the Rajput armouries where it is called a chhadi.

By the end of this book one is left with a strong sense of the workers in the castle closing the doors of their workshops and stores and the door of history shutting behind the Mamluks whose knightly skills and values deserved better than to be defeated by crude Ottoman firepower in defiance of the Sunna of the Prophet (PBUH), a breach that nevertheless allowing the Ottoman Sultan to become Caliph.

Two points regarding this publication strike me as odd. At the back of the book there is a section entitled Captions of Drawings and Photographs. Since these have already appeared in their usual place under the appropriate photograph this serves no discernible purpose. These pages would have been better used to provide an index. The lack of this is the only blemish on an otherwise excellent publication.

Reference

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