

The Mamluks in History

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THE MAMLUKS IN HISTORY:

There are one or two misconceptions when Mamluk history is looked at. One is that the Mamluk presence ended in 1516, and that it ended with the Ottoman victory over the Mamluks. Neither is entirely true. The story of the Mamluks begins long before 1240. Ayalon provides a very good study on their appearance, rise to power, and their whole institution.¹ The Mamluks did not disappear in 1517 as most works on them state, but long after, in the 19th, broken mostly by Muhammad Ali of Egypt, after they were weakened by the French years before.² Furthermore, as rightly pointed by Ayalon, the unique or almost unique importance, dimension, impact, vitality and durability of the Mamluk institution was, on the whole, greatly ignored. The reason for this being that no parallel worthy of its name to that institution existed in any civilization other than Islamic civilisation. Another was a negative appreciation to what it represented and to its achievements.³

Before looking at these and other aspects related to Mamluk history, one or two issues need to be cleared up first, besides looking at the Mamluk contribution in art and civilisation.

Mamluk, in the words of Humphreys, means 'one who is owned, hence a slave, but it is hardly ever used in its general sense, for which the usual word is 'abd. Instead, it functions as a technical term, referring to a soldier who had been enslaved as a youth, trained to the profession of arms (and converted to Islam) under the supervision of his master (who was either the ruler or a senior military officer), and registered as a member of the standing professional forces of the realm.'⁴ A Mamluk, once purchased, he was cut off from his land of origin, his country is Egypt; his father the master who purchased him; and his brothers: his companions in arms.⁵ These recruits came from every region bordering the Islamic world, most especially from the vast Turkic lands beyond the Oxus River, a major reservoir of military manpower for the Muslim rulers. The Turks were an esteemed military force for their toughness, their racial pride and sense of solidarity, and their uncanny skill in the art of mounted archery.⁶ In his book of government⁷ Nizam al-Mulk (the Seljuk Visier, founder of the Madrassa) singles out the Mamluks for being superior to any other form of military organisation, and so, for himself, he built a Mamluk army whose frugality; discipline; thorough training and skill, he lauds.⁸ The Mamluk great merit is also seen by Ibn khaldun who recognises that by the mid thirteenth, the Islamic state had fallen into decline and was unable to resist, and:

*'It was by the grace of God glory be to Him, that He came to rescue the true faith by reviving its last breadth and restoring in Egypt the unity of the Muslims, guarding His order and defending His ramparts. This He did by sending to them, out of this Turkish people and out of its mighty and numerous tribes, guardian amirs and devoted defenders who are imported as slaves from the lands of heathendom to the lands of Islam.'*⁹

¹ D.Ayalon: Aspects of the Mamluk phenomenon in *Der Islam*: Vol 53; 1976; pp 196-225. at p. 216.

² See G. Hanotaux: *Histoire de la Nation Egyptienne*; Paris; Librairie Plon; 1931.

Vol 5: By H. Deherain.

³ D.Ayalon: Aspects; op cit; p. 196.

⁴ R.S. Humphreys: *The Mamluks*; in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*; Charles Scribners' Sons; New York; 1980; p.68.

⁵ G.Hanotaux: *Histoire*; op cit; P. 52

⁶ R.S. Humphreys: *Mamluks*; op cit; p. 68.

⁷ N.Al-Mulk: *Book of Government*; trsltd by H.Darke; London; 1967.

⁸ D.Ayalon: Aspects; op cit. at p. 216.

⁹ Ibn Khaldun: *Kitab al-Ibar*; v; Cairo: Dar al-Tab'a al-Amira; 1867-8; pp 379-72 (from D. Ayalon) *Mamlukiyyat: Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 1980; 340.

First slaves, the Mamluk assumed power themselves, in fact, as noted by Humphreys, from its first appearance in the mid ninth century, down to the end of Abbasid independence, the Turkish Mamluk generals were among the most visible and powerful figures at the Caliphal court.¹⁰ From Egypt, between the 13th and 19th centuries they ruled over territories in India, Iraq, Syria, Arabia, Libya, and even the Sudan. The Mamluks were an institution of one-generation nobility, though, which excluded their sons. The fear was that amidst power and wealth the children would be unable to preserve the military qualities of their parents, and the latter might intervene to promote their sons to power. As a result there had to be a constant supply of fresh recruits to replenish the system.

Many aspects of Mamluk art and history can be found in the Encyclopaedia of Islam. The two entries on the Mamluks in such Encyclopaedia provide excellent information, as well as a dynasty tree of Mamluk rulers from 1240- 1517.¹¹ The term "dynasty", however, as Humphreys rightly notes,¹² is actually a misnomer, for few of the major sultans in this long sequence were blood relatives. The leading emirs, he explains, from among whom the sultans were typically chosen, were almost always men who in their youth had been military slaves hence the name of the dynasty). Having been manumitted by some previous sultan on the completion of their training, they were then promoted by him to high military and executive office. In a real sense, therefore, the army was the state; soldiers determined policy and directed administration, while the senior officials of the realm retained not only military rank but also active field command. In the Mamluk state, civilian officials were mere functionaries, working under close military supervision and control.¹³ And Ibn Khaldun comments that the Mamluks could be appointed to high offices of state, and that

Even sultans are chosen from them who direct the affairs of the Muslims, as has been ordained by the Providence of Almighty God and out of His benevolence to His creatures. Thus one group of Mamluks follows another and generation succeeds generation and Islam rejoices in the wealth.... Which it acquired by eons of them and the boughs of the kingdom are luxuriant with the freshness and verdure of youth.¹⁴

This system, as recognised by Ayalon, even if it had its drawbacks and limitations, it was far superior to any other conceivable socio-military system and far more beneficial to Islam¹⁵ (this will be confirmed by historical developments below.)

The Mamluks were not just rulers and fighters, both features that will be further developed in great detail below. They were masters of great art and civilisation. The Mamluks were renowned for their patronage of the arts. Atil provides an excellent summary of Mamluk art,¹⁶ which continued to influence Islamic art up to the twentieth century. Hundreds of edifices were erected in Cairo, the capital, as well as in the provinces. The buildings were lavishly decorated with carved stone, stucco, and marble mosaics and panels, and had metal and wood furnishings, inlaid with precious materials. Some outstanding features of Mamluk architecture are soaring tiered minarets, massive carved domes and entrance portals, and marble mihrabs. The distinct Mamluk character is obvious in the elaborate floral and geometric patterns of carved stone-

¹⁰ R.S. Humphreys: Mamluks; op cit; p. 68.

¹¹ P.M. Holt : Mamluks: Encyclopaedia of Islam; Vol 6. 2nd ed; Leiden; Brill; pp 321-331; at pp 328-9.

¹² R.S. Humphreys: Mamluks; op cit; p.70.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ In D.Ayalon: Mamlukiyyat; op cit; p. 346.

¹⁵ D.Ayalon: Aspects; op cit; p. 196.

¹⁶ E.Atil: Mamluk art; in Dictionary of Middle Ages; op cit; p. 70.

work. Mamluk patrons also donated Korans to religious establishments, with exquisite calligraphy and dazzling illuminations, bound in leather and with stamped, tooled, and filigreed decorations. Also celebrated in Mamluk art were brass bowls, basins, ewers, trays, and pen boxes inlaid with silver, gold, and copper. Artists also created remarkable mosque lamps, bottles, bowls, and goblets. Mamluk textiles and rugs were in great demand in the West, and wool carpets with geometric designs, dating from the end of the fifteenth century, are among the oldest extant rugs.

The Mamluk defence of Islam is the basis of their whole ideology. In the Mamluk view, Humphreys explains:

*'the sultan (theirs) is designated by the caliph to be his executive agent in all matters pertaining to the well-being of Muslims in this life and the next. The sultan is first of all a warrior in the path of God. As such, he defends Islam against the foreign infidel and strives to extend its sway; he also tramples down heresy and rebellion within his domains. To ensure that his subjects know and obey the divine commandments, the sultan must uphold sound religious scholarship and orthodox doctrine, which he accomplishes through close supervision and lavish patronage. It is the sultan's duty, finally, to bring justice to all who live in his dominions by the energetic enforcement of the Shari'a (sacred law), by whose provisions all receive their due; and the weak are protected from oppression. The Mamluk sultan claims to be the preeminent king of his age, superior to all others in status and power; therefore he must show himself to be the very model of Islamic kingship.'*¹⁷

Throughout their history, the Mamluks lived to those standards and descriptions, and at various epochs. The Mamluk first and most crucial contribution in defence of the banner of Islam was the battle of Ain Jalut (1260) won against the Mongols. In a few words, that victory had saved Islam. The Mongols had devastated the whole eastern side of the Islamic Caliphate, slaughtered altogether around two million Muslims in their advance, left no city or town standing, and devastated trade and farming. Sir Thomas Arnold holds:¹⁸

'Muslim civilisation has never recovered from the destructions which the Mongols inflicted upon it. Great centres of culture, such as Herat and Bukhara, were reduced to ashes and the Muslim population was ruthlessly massacred..... Under the command of Hulagu, they appeared before the walls of Baghdad (1258), and after a brief siege of one month the last Caliph of the Abbasid house, Mustasim, had to surrender, and was put to death together with most of the members of his family; 800,000 of the inhabitants were brought out in batches from the city to be massacred, and the greater part of the city itself was destroyed by fire.'

The Mongols inflicted the same treatment onto Syria, and turned West, aiming to break the last barrier of Islam: the Mamluks, and advancing as far as Morocco west. Surrender was alien to the Mamluks. Fighting was not. At Ain Jalut they crushed the Mongol army. Whatever remnants of the Mongol army escaped slaying there was finished off in their flight. The Mamluks, unlike Salah Eddin al-Ayyubi, for instance, were not known for their clemency to invaders.

¹⁷ R.S. Humphreys: Mamluks; op cit; p.70-1.

¹⁸ T. W. Arnold: Muslim Civilisation during the Abbasid Period; In *The Cambridge Medieval History*; Vol IV: Edited by J. R. Tanner, C. W. Previte; Z.N. Brooke, 1923. Cambridge University Press, 1922 (1936 reprint); pp 274-298. at p.279:

Ain Jalut was only a start. The Mamluks, led by Baibars, literally wiped off all enemy forces of Islam. In the space of three decades after Ain Jalut, the last of all Ismaili, Mongol, Armenians and Franks had been eliminated from castles, fortresses, towns and cities they held. Their campaigns are faithfully and remarkably well described by the Egyptian historian Ibn al-Furat. Ibn al-Furat (1334-1405) wrote his book, *Tarikh al-Duwal wal Muluk*, after the events themselves, but it includes excellent information. The treatise survives, in part, in the National Library of Vienna, and also in a part at the Vatican Library, which Le Strange described in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.¹⁹ Parts of Ibn al-Furat's work have been selected and translated by U and M.C. Lyons²⁰ in two volumes, the first of which being the Arabic text, the second its translation. Ibn al-Furat's work contains excellent extracts on the rise of, and campaigns of Baybars, and his crushing of both Mongols and Franks, and the recovery of Jerusalem, Tiberias, Ascalon, and other places from the Franks. Many events are related by Ibn al-Furat such as the arrival of the invading forces led by the Kings of France, England, Barcelona, Navarre and many more, and how Baibars conducted his wars against them, all in very minute detail. Further accounts from other historians on the Mamluks are well expressed by the example Little gives of historians who wrote on Malik an-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qala'un, about forty years of his reign (1293-1341).²¹

The decline of Mamluk power is well captured by Humphreys' description.²² Indeed, soon after the thirteenth century apogee, and after the mid fourteenth in particular, began a period of progressive economic and demographic decline. This was the outcome of factors as diverse as the plague, naval attacks by Venice and Genoa, the sack of Alexandria by the crusader Kingdom of Cyprus in 1365, as well as Cypriot naval raids against the Syrian coast in the years following. The Black Death (1347-1349) spared no group of the population, but the Mamluks, who were strangers to the land were worst hit, with extremely high death rates amongst the young Mamluks.²³ The Mamluks kingdom was further wrecked by Timur (Tamerlane), who in 1400, overwhelmed Aleppo, pillaged it and put it to the torch; and so was Damascus. Following that, naval raids of Marshal Jean Boucicaut on the port cities of Syria in the summer of 1403 inflicted further damage. Egypt and Syria were bled, and never recovered the solid prosperity of the early fourteenth century.²⁴ The final period of Mamluk rule, from 1496 to 1517 was one of constant crisis, and little capacity to cope with it, partly due to poor leadership. Qansuh al Ghawri (1501-1516), the last major sultan, was too old, and faced the Portuguese who in the Indian Ocean were causing immense damage to traditional Mamluk sea trade. The rise of the Safawids also made the Ottoman sultan Selim decide to move against the Mamluk Empire so as to secure what he thought of as a unified Islamic land to face the new dangers. At Marj Dabiq, north of Aleppo, the Mamluk army was cut to pieces by Ottoman firepower in August 1516. Qansuh al Ghawri died in the course of the fighting. A new army under Tuman Bay was crushed again outside Cairo in January 1517.²⁵

However, this hardly meant end of the Mamluks, or Ottoman-Mamluk enmity. Egypt was then subject to the authority of a Turkish representative, the pasha, but actual power remained in the hands of Mameluk beys, or governors of districts or minor provinces. Instead, as Holt explains, although Selim had extinguished the Mamluk sultanate and annexed Egypt to his dominions, the degree of ottomanisation which immediately followed was very limited indeed. The Mamluks were not extirpated, nor did their recruitment cease. A kind of symbiosis

¹⁹ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol 32, 1900, p.295.

²⁰ U. and M.C. Lyons: *Ayyubids, Mamluks and Crusaders, selection from the Tarikh al-Duwal wal Muluk of Ibn al-Furat*; 2 vols, W. Heffer and Sons Ltd, Cambridge, 1971.

²¹ D.P. Little: *An Introduction to Mamluk Historiography*; Verlag; Wisbaden, 1970.

²² R.S. Humphreys: *Mamluks*; op cit; pp. 71-6.

²³ *Ibid*; p. 74.

²⁴ *Ibid*; p. 75.

²⁵ *Ibid*; p. 76.

between the Mamluks and Ottoman elements in the ruling and military elite developed over the course of the years. It is therefore less of a paradox than it might seem that Selim, the destroyer of Qansawh and Tuman Bay, appears in later Mamluk legend as something of a folk hero.²⁶ The Grand Visier reproached Selim for his favour to Khair Bey and the Mamluks saying: 'Our wealth and our troops are wasted, while you surrender their land to them!' Thereupon Selim summoned the executioner, who struck off the Grand Visier's head. Later the sultan declared: 'We covenanted with them that if they gave us possession of their land, we should continue them in it, and make them its commanders. Could we break the covenant and prove false? What if we have put their children into our army? They are Muslims, the sons of Muslims, and will be jealous of their homes.'²⁷

By the late eighteenth century, Islamic power was approaching its end; the Ottomans, attacked on all fronts, were suffering serious defeats; the treaty of Karlowitz caused them very great losses. They could no longer stand to defend the Islamic realm as they had done centuries before. By now the English were expanding further into India at the expense of the weak Mughals. The French were following suite. Egypt and its vicinity were their prime target. Power in Egypt was then in the hands of Mamluk Circasians, from Georgia, mostly. Power was in the hands of two Mamluk Beys, *the Amir al-Bilad* (Commander of the Land), responsible for law and order, and *Amir al-Hajj* (Commander of Pilgrimage to Mecca). Just prior to the time of the French invasion, the *Amir al-Bilad* was Murad Bey (from Tbilisi, originally), whilst *Amir al-Hajj* was Ibrahim Bey (from the same area).²⁸ Both were going to constitute the major force of opposition to the French.

On 1 July 1798 a French expeditionary force under the command of Napoleon disembarked near Alexandria. His proclamation for the people of Egypt on 2 July 1798 included the following:²⁹

'For very long the Beys who rule Egypt have insulted the French nation, and have covered its tradesmen with insults. Now has arrived the hour of punishment. For very long, this collection of slaves (the Mamluks), purchased from Georgia and the Caucasus has inflicted its tyranny upon the most beautiful part of the world, but God, on which all depend has ordered that their reign ends.... People of Egypt I have come to restore your rights, punish the usurpers, and more than the Mamluks I respect God, his Prophet and the Quran...'

Napoleon added he came to defend Egypt against the rapacious Mamluks.

The reasons, though, for his intervention, were different and are considered briefly here. The French, Holt recognises, had long been perceptive of the strategic significance and commercial potential of Egypt. Many schemes had been considered since for the conquest and occupation of the country by French statesmen at intervals.³⁰ The French hoped to occupy Egypt permanently and to profit from its agriculture and trade, while 'liberating' the Egyptians from Mamluk rule.³¹ Complaints by French merchants calling for the French intervention were to serve as pretext for Bonaparte's expedition.³² They held:

²⁶ P.M. Holt: *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent: 1522-1922*. Cornell paperbacks; Ithaca; New York; 1966.p p.45:

²⁷ Chronicles of al-Ishaqi; in P.M.Holt, p. 45.

²⁸ To know more about the two figures, and comrades, see al-Jabarti: *Al-Jabarti's chronicle of the first seven months of the French occupation of Egypt*. Edt and trsltd by S. Moreh; Leiden, 1975. pp 33-5, and related bibliography.

²⁹ G.Hanotaux: *Histoire*; op cit; p. 254; for lengthy details of this proclamation see al-Jabarti op cit; pp 39-47.

³⁰ P.M. Holt: *Egypt*; op cit; p.155.

³¹ *Ibid*; p.156.

³² *Ibid*; p.155.

*It is beyond belief that in a country where the ruler is allied to France, that French citizens are treated as indignantly as this, trampling under the yoke of despotism, and only purchase goods by ruinous sacrifices and a precarious existence.*³³

The first call being unsuccessful, the residents made a new one in 1793:

*The prolongation of this scandalous situation will be outrageous for a republic which make the laws for Europe and whose name is terror for tyrants.*³⁴

They explain that the expedition will be paid for by the loot, and whatever compensation from the Egyptians, and conclude their call:

*We need urgent rescue, because our ills are at their worst.... Tell the lawmakers, so human they are, to uphold their works and listen to the suffering humanity. Tell these wreckers of tyrants that whilst they break the chains of people, some French suffer under despotism and call upon their country to give them rescue which it gives to foreigners.*³⁵

Once they landed at Alexandria, the French were met by an initial resistance which they crushed. They took the city of Alexandria, granting its population safe conduct but soon raised an impost for the upkeep of their army.³⁶ From there, they advanced on Cairo. They met and defeated a Mamluk force under Murad bey at Shubrakhit. He was again defeated in the decisive battle of Inbaba, opposite the capital (the so called battle of the Pyramids) on 21 July 1798. Al-Jabarti dwells on the episode, and shows very little kindness to the irresolute, divided Mamluk forces which explained their defeat.³⁷

The Mamluks were not finished, though. After the initial chaos, they fought back at battle of Salahieh (11 August). Here, their bravery was extolled:

*I have not seen anything like Mamluk bravery nor agility in the manipulation of arms; the same hand that fired also cut off with the sword.' Said the chief of brigade Detroye.*³⁸

So fierce was Mamluk resistance and attacks, especially in October 1798, when the French were forced to leave their wounded behind, clinging to fleeing survivors.³⁹ Mamluk resistance continued, especially as they received support of Meccans and Tunisians and Algerians in early 1799. The Mamluk allies crossed to Jedda and Yambo on boats, and landed at Kosseir; crossed the desert and joined Murad bey on the Nile.⁴⁰ The fighting now became more embittered.⁴¹

The French army was still able to move forward, taking the city of Jaffa which had surrendered to them on 7 March. The French first looted the city before massacring the population. Commandant Malus speaks

³³ In G.Hanotaux: Histoire; op cit; p. 208

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid; at p.209.

³⁶ Al-Jabarti: Al Jabarti. Op cit; pp 36-7.

³⁷ Ibid; pp 48-52.

³⁸ G.Hanotaux: Histoire; op cit; p.272

³⁹ Ibid; p.376.

⁴⁰ Ibid; p. 61 and p.379.

⁴¹ For more detailed account, see Al-Jabarti: *Al-Jabarti's chronicle*; op cit.

*of soldiers, everywhere slitting throats of men, women, children, old people, Christians, Turcs, all that had a human figure. Father thrown upon the corpse of the son; the daughter raped on the corpse of her mother; smoke from charred bodies burnt alive; the smell of blood.*⁴²

On the 8th-9th of March 1799, the Turkish defenders, 2800 men were shot in cold blood.⁴³

Further French misdeeds were in Egypt itself. They levelled off areas of Cairo that stood in the way of their fortifications, and executed eminent Islamic figures in public to instil a sense of terror to help them rule.⁴⁴ Other instances of French tyranny are narrated by a traveller Vivant Denon.⁴⁵ Poor merchants were often seen as bandits, and would be shot and their merchandise looted, and their beasts taken. Profits were generally shared by the French and their allies. The soldiers plundered. The French further imposed extremely ruinous taxes on the population, upon which Al-Jabarti elaborates:

*The French levied taxes including Khulaf (impost for the upkeep of the military) and tafarid (appointed taxes) of the country... In implementation of this they appointed tax collectors (sarrafs)... who went into the country like rulers wreaking havoc among the Muslims with arrests, beatings, insults, and ceaseless harassment in their demands of money. Furthermore they terrorized them with threats of bringing in the French soldiers if they did not pay the determined amount quickly.*⁴⁶

On 19 March 1799 the French siege of Acre began. Against all expectations the town did not fall, and Bonaparte found himself pinned down on the coast. He sought his Muslim allies (Bashir al-Shihab) and the son of Zahir al-Umar, seeking to give him support but they did not. The Ottoman fleet brought reinforcements to the city, and the siege proved very costly to the French. In retaliation for Jaffa, every French prisoner was decapitated, every French head exchanged for prize money.⁴⁷ The French raised siege after very severe losses, and began their retreat back to Egypt, burning and looting on their way, but leaving their wounded behind.⁴⁸ They entered Egypt on 13 June 1799, a short while after Napoleon left the country, leaving command in the hands of General Kleber. Kleber was assassinated by a Syrian Muslim and command went to Abdallah Jacques Menou a French convert to Islam. Further attacks on the French forced them to capitulate on 2 September 1801.

The French intervention, although ended, still had weakened the Mamluks considerably. Then, when the French departed in 1801, the Ottoman sultan appointed a new governor of Egypt: Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali was born in 1769 in the Macedonian town of Kavalla. He became Viceroy of Egypt in 1805. His rise to power was also helped by the death of Murad Bey in 1801. The Mamluks were as often divided into factions among themselves, too.⁴⁹ In 1805, Muhammad Ali began to take steps to eliminate the Mamluks. He had some leaders decapitated. Then, in 1811, he resorted to incredible treachery to eliminate all of them. He invited their leaders on 1 March 1811 to the Citadel to attend the investment of Ahmad Tusun pasha, his son. The beys and their followers were shot down as they passed in procession down a

⁴² In G.Hanotaux: Histoire; op cit; pp 406-7.

⁴³ Brigadier Detroye's Journal, in G. Hanotaux: Histoire; op cit; p. 407.

⁴⁴ In P.M. Holt: Egypt; op cit; p. 157.

⁴⁵ In N.Daniel: *Islam, Europe and Empire*, Edinburgh University Press; 1966; p. 105.

⁴⁶ Al-Jabarti: Al-Jabarti, op cit; pp 67-8.

⁴⁷ G.Hanotaux: Histoire; op cit; p.421.

⁴⁸ Ibid; pp. 425-6.

⁴⁹ P.M.Holt: Egypt; op cit; p. 162.

rocky passage. Simultaneously their houses were sacked and those Mamluks who had not attended the ceremony were hunted down, as far as upper Egypt. A small group escaped beyond the third cataract, and established their camp on the west bank of the Nile, where now stands the town of new Dongola.⁵⁰

The last Mamluk leader, Daud, in Baghdad (1816-31), had initiated some modernization policies that included clearing canals, military training, founding industries etc. His rule though was finished by a combination of flood and plague which devastated Baghdad. Soon the Ottomans reasserted their sovereignty over the country.

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⁵⁰ Ibid; p. 178.