

Military Slavery in the Islamic World: 1000 Years of a Social-Military Institution

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In 2006, a volume entitled *Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age* and edited by Philip Morgan and Christopher Brown was published by Yale University Press. The wide variety of papers in this book shows that military slavery has been a phenomenon in human society for thousands of years in just about every continent. Yet, with all due respect to the presence of armed slaves in various cultures, regions and times, in none of them does this institution take on the importance, geographical extension and longevity as it has in the Islamic world. From its first clear appearance in the early ninth century of the Common Era, to the extinguishing of its last embers in the nineteenth century, military slavery has played a significant – even decisive role – in the military, political, economic, social and even cultural history of the region from Central Asia to Egypt, and perhaps beyond. Can we say that with regard to any other cultural tradition?

At the same time, I will not claim that there is anything particularly Islamic about this institution, beyond that it took root and developed in the Muslim world. In the Qur'an and other sources of Islamic law there is nothing, explicit or otherwise, about military slavery, although slavery is of course permitted by the Shari`a. True, Islam from its beginning was a militant religion, spreading its political power by the force of arms, but here again we find little if anything in the activities and developments of these first “heroic” generations that might lead us to think that the highest authorities of the state, some century and a half after the first wave of conquests, would develop something along the lines of military slavery. I have therefore chosen my title carefully: not Islamic military slavery, nor even military slavery in Islam, but rather this specific form of slavery in the Muslim countries. If it is Islamic, it is because it happened to Muslims and developed in Muslim societies. Having commenced and taken root, it remained a potent force for a millennium.

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The story of the birth of military slavery in the Islamic state is fairly well known, not the least because of the recent book by the American scholar Matthew Gordon. During the caliphate of the al-Ma'mun, who ruled from 813 to 833, his younger brother Abu Ishaq began putting together a large unit of slave soldiers, invariably of Turkish provenance. This development was most probably abetted by the Caliph, or at least tacitly permitted by him. In any event, this regiment helped Abu Ishaq gain power at his brother's death, and he became the caliph al-Mu'tasim, ruling until 842. Now the slave soldiers, or *ghilman*, as they were then usually called, became the mainstay of the army, and the caliph built a new capital, Samarra', to house them. This is not the place to follow the fortune of the slave soldiers or their commanders, many also of slave origin, but I will mention that by 861 some of them were involved in the successful plot to assassinate the then caliph al-Mutawakkil, for his perceived anti-slave soldier policies. We can see that military slavery in the Muslim world was not just a military matter, but one with political implications, and it might be suggested it also had economic and social ones too.

It appears that the main initial impetus for the creation of this guard corps of Turkish slave soldiers was that the loyalty of already existing military formations could no longer be trusted. By the end of the eighth century, the Arab tribal element in the Caliph's armies had all but been eliminated, and the mainstays of the military were units from Khurasan – northeastern Iran – of various provenance. While these Abna' Khurasan – literally the “sons of Khurasan”, had brought the `Abbasids to power in the mid-eighth century, and subsequently supported them, this loyalty was not as unequivocal as before. To this can be added the excellent military qualities of the Turks from the Eurasian Steppes, about which I will shortly expand. But why was the institution of slavery adopted for this new military formation?

Two approaches to this question have gained support among scholars in the last generation or so. The first is what can be called the “Central Asian Bodyguard” thesis, while the second I refer to as the “indigenous Islamic clientage” proposal. The first has been suggested in various forms by a number of scholars: Muhammad Shaban, Christopher Beckwith, Peter Golden¹ and most recently and convincingly Etienne de la Vaissière.² Basically, this claim is that the Steppe tradition of a coterie of warriors around the ruler, often themselves of noble origin, provides the precedent for this development of a Turkish guard among the Abbasid caliphs. Without denying the total validity of this thesis, to my mind two problems present themselves: Firstly how does a relatively small band of noble guards turn into a regiment of several thousand men of motley origin? Secondly, how does such a small elite guard become a corps of slave soldiers? Admittedly, this was not an issue for Muhammad Shaban, who unabashedly claims that al-Mu'tasim's guards were *not* slaves at all and were proud of their noble Central Asia origins.

This last cited claim has been completely negated in a cogent way by Matthew Gordon,³ and the slave status of these first Turkish guards has been established beyond doubt. Still the question of the Inner Asian precedent cannot be ruled out. This being said, I think that the “indigenous Islamic clientage” explanation, advanced in various ways by David Ayalon, Patricia Crone, Daniel Pipes,⁴ and most recently Gordon, has much to commend it. Briefly, clientage in Arab tribal society has a long tradition, even before Islam. I might mention parenthetically, that its ancient Mediterranean origins are worthy of discussion and comparison, but that will be left for another occasion. Early in the Islamic period, a non-Arab individual could become a Muslim only by becoming a *mawlā*, or client, to an Arab tribesman. As the number of converts increased in the first generations after the conquest, this became less practical, but at least for a while, a new convert was referred to still as a *mawlā*, or *mawālī* in the plural. During the early `Abbasid period, this usage faded with the every growing amount of converts. In one particular field, however, it remained in usage for some time: these were the free slaves and prisoners of war, often of Iranian and even Central Asian provenance, who came to serve the Caliphs and various grandees as household clients. At times, these particular *mawālī* could even go and fight with their patrons, an entourage of armed freedman of foreign origin. Might we not see them as precursors to the military slaves?

To illustrate my last remark, let us look at an example taken from the civil war between the caliph al-Amin and his brother al-Ma'mun, who emerged victorious in 813 as the undisputed ruler of the state. The former's governor in the province of Ahwaz in southwest Iran, one Muhammad b. Yazid al-Muhallabi, found himself in a losing battle, and told his *mawālī* to flee. They refused, replying: “By God! If we do so, we would cause you great injustice. You have manumitted us from slavery, and elevated us from a humble position and raised us from poverty to riches. And after all that, how can we abandon you and leave you in such a state. Oh no! Instead of that we shall advance in front of you and die under your steed. May God curse this world and life altogether after your death.” The *mawālī* thereupon hamstringed their horses (so that they could not change their mind) and fought together with their patron until they were all killed.⁵ What are these fighting *mawālī* but proto-military slaves by another name? While the Central Asian precedent may have also played a part, it still seems that it was grafted onto a more fundamental basis: the institution of clientage with its military overtones that already existed in the Muslim world. I would like to stress that I do not see that this clientage system is something inherently Islamic, but rather something that has developed among Muslims, especially Muslim rulers, and is mainly in this sense “Islamic.”

Another question remaining is why al-Mu'tasim chose Turks, not the least since he never served on the “eastern front” as a governor or commander before assuming the caliphate in 833; in any event, the slave guard was established many years before his gaining the throne. An earlier generation of historians attributed his pre-

dilection for Turks to the fact that his mother was herself a Turk. Without totally negating this reason, taken by itself it reflects a naïve, pre-modern approach of personalizing or even trivializing historical processes, reducing them to one particular individual trait or incident. More important was the encounter of the early Muslim armies and leaders with the peoples of the Eurasian Steppe. At the end of the seventh century, the still mainly Arab armies learned to appreciate the warlike qualities of these tribes, invariably referred to as *al-turk* or *al-atrāk*, the Arabized plural of this name. The Turkish tribal warriors were well known for their many outstanding military qualities: fortitude, discipline, horsemanship and archery. The Turks, relatively recent arrivals in this part of the Eurasian Steppe, were heirs to a centuries-long military tradition, going back to the Scythians and beyond, which combined mobility with “firepower.” The former was directly derived from their lifestyle of nomadic pastoralism, which had been facilitated by the domestication of the horse. Inhabitants of the Steppe were by definition cavalymen. “Firepower,” anachronistic as it may initially appear, accurately describes the effect of massed and disciplined archers using the composite bow to great effect. This combination of cavalry and archery had made nomads from the Eurasian Steppe – including those who came before and after the various Turkic groupings – the scourge of much of the adjacent sedentary world: China, Iran, Asia Minor and Europe. The introduction of the stirrup in the early medieval period certainly contributed to the effectiveness of Eurasian mounted archery. To this can be added the advantage that the Turks were then still pagans and thus could be enslaved with legal ease from the point of view of the Shari`a. Evidently they were also available in relatively large numbers.

Many contemporary (or near contemporary) Muslim sources waxed effusively about the martial qualities of the Turks. Several examples would be helpful to understand these characteristics and how they were perceived by a few contemporary and slightly later Muslim observers. The tenth-century geographer al-Istakhri wrote: “And the Turks constituted [the Caliph’s] armies because of their superiority over the other races in prowess, valour, courage and intrepidity.”⁶ Al-Jahiz, a ninth-century belletterist from Baghdad writes: “[The Turks] became to Islam a source of reinforcement and an enormous army, and to the Caliphs a protection and a shelter and an invulnerable armour as well as an innermost garment worn under the upper garment.”⁷ Another tenth-century geographer, Ibn Hawqal says of the Turks: “The most precious slaves are those arriving [in Khurasan] from the land of the Turks. There is no equal to the Turkish slaves among all the slaves of the earth.”⁸ The last passage is short on details regarding the advantages of the Turks, but it does provide a further indication of the value with which they were held.

I would like to bring another passage from al-Jahiz, from his essay on the “Virtues of the Turks” that was cited above. Here the Turkish warrior is compared *inter alia* to the Arab Kharijite rebel:

[The Turk] shoots [with his bow], while he lets his mount go at full gallop, riding backwards and forwards, right and left, going up and down. He lets off ten arrows, before the Khariji can lift even one arrow [to his bow string]. The Turk rides his mount down off the hill or down into the valley better than the Khariji can do on flat ground. The Turk has four eyes: two in the front and two in the back ... [The Turk] hits with his arrow when he faces backwards, as he does when he faces forward ... The Turk on a raid has with him everything that he will need for himself, his armor, his beast and the apparatus of his beast. His endurance for riding and continuous travel, for night long journeys and crossing the country are truly amazing ... And if – at the end of a Turk's life, one were to calculate his days, one would find that he sat on the back of his mount more than he had spent sitting on the earth.⁹

Of course, we should remember that this from a polemical text, part of the discussion in mid-ninth century Iraq about the role of the Turks there, and there is no question of the pro-Turkish perspective of the author. But although there may have been questions about the contributions of the Turkish slave troops to the political instability of the capital (as well as resentment from other military elements at their power and prestige), there is no doubting their military abilities. We can thus see why the Turks, of all peoples, were picked to serve as military slaves in Iraq. Their almost complete differentiation from the local population – in language and customs, meaning that they had no local loyalties – must surely have added to their attractiveness to their patron. Their separation from their natural milieu, family and tribe, and thus their loss of their old identities and loyalties, certainly played a significant role.

The British historian of early Islam, Hugh Kennedy, has suggested that actually the fact that the members of the Turkish guard corps were slaves is really not very important.¹⁰ To his mind, the significant matter is that they were drawn from the periphery. As stated just before, this was indeed a major consideration. But, if slave-status was so unimportant, why go to the trouble of initiating, let alone keeping it in succeeding generations? Furthermore, slavery clearly institutionalized the whole process of procuring, transporting and distributing these young Turks, destined for service in the caliphal guard. Finally, I can suggest that the status of slave given to these guardsmen clearly defined legally the relationship between patron and client. With all attention fostered on the Turkish guardsmen by the caliph or his representatives, at the end of the day they were slaves, and clearly his property to dispose of as he wished.

Before moving on, just a word about nomenclature. The most common term for a military slave in these first centuries of the existence of the institution is *ghulām*, in the plural, *ghilmān*. This word literally means “youth” (*cf.* the Hebrew word *‘elem*), but almost invariably at this time connoted a military slave. Sometime after the eleventh century we find more and more the increased use of another term for a

soldier of slave status or origin: *mamlūk*, or in the plural, *mamālīk*. Even earlier, it is occasionally found in this usage. Literally, it means “owned” or “controlled,” but almost always it refers to a white military slave. By the early thirteenth century *mamlūk* has unequivocally replaced *ghulām* in this sense. The latter term has been relegated to grooms and other lowly servants of the men that really counted, the Mamluks. It is the last term by which we know the polity ruling Egypt and Syria for over a quarter millennium starting in 1250. Contemporaries, however, referred to the Sultanate as *dawlat al-turk* or *dawlat al-atrāk*, clearly still associating the institution of military slavery and the state that embodied it with the Turks. This was surely not a coincidence, but reflects the dominant role of officers and soldiers from the various Turkish peoples and tribes in the Sultanate.

In an important paper published in 1994, Jürgen Paul from Halle has drawn attention to the difficulty of generalizing on the subject of Islamic military slavery, given the dearth of detailed studies on specific periods. More specifically, he warns us from applying in an anachronistic manner insights derived from the period of the famous Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt and Syria, due to the rich sources available particularly from that period.¹¹ This being said, I think that we can suggest a convincing model for military slavery in Islamic societies that will work from the ninth century at least up to the beginning of the sixteenth, as follows:

1) *Ghilmān* / *mamālīk* were brought at a young age (ca. 10± years) from the “wild” lands of the north, mainly the Steppe regions, whose inhabitants were mainly infidels.

2) These young *mamlūks*, as we shall henceforth refer to these slaves for simplicity’s sake, underwent years of military and religious training.

3) With the completion of their training (ca. 18 years old), they were enrolled as mounted archers in the units of their patrons, be he a ruler or senior officer.

4) In principle, and generally in reality, the *mamlūks* demonstrated great loyalty to their patrons (sing., *ustadh*) and to each other. A sort of extended, artificial family had been created.

5) This military class was one generational. In general, the sons of *mamlūks* did not themselves serve as *mamlūks*, although these might end up in inferior units. The sons of *mamlūks* had neither their fathers’ nascent military skills nor their undivided loyalties. The desire for a continually replicating military (and sometimes political) elite necessitated the ongoing trade in young *mamlūks*, a complicated but realizable affair.

Time constraints prevent me today from following in a systematic way the history and development of military slavery after its initial development in Iraq. I will just say that subsequently Turks military slaves often became a major if not the dominant force in the military and political life of the various countries in the Muslim world from Egypt to the East, and occasionally also to the west. At this point, I will jump ahead to the Mamluk Sultanate to which I have already alluded.

This was first established in Egypt in 1250, and its rule was extended to Syria a decade later. As is well known, the Sultanate lasted until 1517 when it was eradicated by the Ottoman Empire that annexed its territory. The Mamluk Sultanate saw the rare – perhaps unique – phenomenon in pre-modern Muslim history: the long-term identity of state and army. On the whole the higher command of the army was also the ruling group of the state, and the sultan was usually drawn from its ranks. This was certainly an interesting twist in the history of military slavery and in fact slavery in general, and not just in the Muslim world I suspect.

On 3 September 1260, the Mamluks under Qutuz defeated the Mongols at `Ayn Jalut in northern Palestine, and this led to the advent of Mamluk control over most of Syria up to the Euphrates and its integration into a relatively centralized state based in Cairo. It also was the beginning of a sixty year war with the Mongols. At the same time, it brought the Mamluks into direct contact with the Franks of the Syrian coast, an encounter with profound implications for the latter. The demise of the Frankish presence in the Levant in the aftermath of the Mamluks conquests of the 1260s, 1270s and 1280s, culminating in the taking of Acre in 1291, is familiar to all present today. I should add, however, that even with the removal of the Franks from the Syrian coast the danger from the west had not disappeared. Certainly the Mamluk leadership feared a renewed crusade, possibly even in conjuncture with the Mongols. Thus, besides its origins among the Turkish military slaves, the Mamluk state was born and developed in almost continual, certainly long-term struggles against enemies perceived as presenting existential threats against the state itself and even Islam as a whole. The Mamluk Sultanate was a militaristic and military state *par excellence*.

The Mamluk ruling class was composed mainly of Turkish-speaking officers who had come up the ranks of the army, many in units of royal Mamluks, i.e. the personal Mamluks of successive sultans. As youngsters, these Mamluks had arrived at the slave markets of Egypt and Syria, transported mostly from the steppe regions north of the Black Sea, through the activities of Muslim merchants and Genoese shippers, with the connivance of the Mongol authorities in the Golden Horde of southern Russia and Ukraine and with the agreement of the Byzantine emperor who controlled the Bosphorus. As some of you may know, this trade in Turkish slaves is a major part of the research project recently undertaken by Dr. Christoph Cluse and myself, and financed by the German Israel Foundation for Scientific Research.

In the time allotted to me today, I would like to touch upon four matters related to the slave nature of the Mamluk military-political elite. The first is how the military slave phenomenon in general and the Mamluk state in particular were perceived by one of the great luminaries of Muslim culture in the later Middle Ages. I am referring to the justly famous North African savant and statesman, Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), who towards the end of his life moved to Egypt where he found

work as a judge and teacher. Ibn Khaldun is well known for his sociological approach to human history that found expression in the *Muqaddima*, or Introductory Volume of his *Kitab al-`Ibar*, a seven volume history of humankind, albeit with a heavy emphasis on the Muslim part of it. In any event, in volume five of this work, having arrived at Mamluk Sultanate, which tellingly he refers to as *dawlat al-turk*, he provides us with a useful and illuminating summary of the history of military slavery in the Islamic world, bringing it up to the establishment of the Sultanate. It remains an open question whether Ibn Khaldun wrote this passage, or at least its inner core, while still in North Africa or only after his arrival to Cairo. If the former, it would show that the fame of the Sultanate and its essence had reached him while still far away. I will skip here the part of the passage about the introduction of the Mamluks in the ninth century, and proceed to the relevant text:

When the [ʿAbbasid] state was drowned in decadence and luxury and donned the garments of calamity and impotence and was overthrown by the heathen Mongols, who abolished the seat of the Caliphate and obliterated the splendor of the lands and made unbelief prevail in place of belief, because the people of the faith, sunk in self-indulgence, preoccupied with pleasure and abandoned to luxury, had become deficient in energy and courage and the emblem of manhood – then, it was God’s benevolence that He rescued the faith by reviving its dying breath and restoring the unity of the Muslim in Egypt, preserving the order and defending the walls of Islam. He did this by sending to the Muslims, from this Turkish nation and from among its great and numerous tribes, rulers to defend them and utterly loyal helpers, who were brought from the House of War (i.e., the non-Muslim world) to the House of Islam (i.e., the Muslim countries) under the rule of slavery, which hides in itself a divine blessing. [The Turks] are exposed to divine providence; cured by slavery, they enter the Muslim religion with the firm resolve of true believers and yet with nomadic virtues unsullied by debased nature, unadulterated with the filth of pleasure, undefiled by the ways of civilized living, and with their ardor unbroken by the profusion of luxury. The slave merchants bring them to Egypt in batches, like sand-grouse to the watering places, and government buyers have them displayed for inspection and bid for them, raising the price above their value. They do this not in order to subjugate them, but because it intensifies loyalty, increases power, and is conducive to ardent zeal. They chose from each group, according to what they observe of the characteristics of the race and the tribes. Then they place them in government barracks where they give good and fair treatment, educate them, have them taught the Qur’an and keep [them] at their religious studies until they have a firm grasp of this. Then they train them in archery and fencing, in horsemanship in hippodromes, and in thrusting with the lance and striking with the sword until their arms grow strong and their skills become firmly rooted. When the

masters know that they have reached the point when they are ready to defend them, even to die for them, they double their pay and increase their land grants (*iqtā'*), and impose on them the duty to improve themselves in the use of weapons and in horsemanship, and so also to increase the number of men of their own race in the service for that purpose. Often they use them in the service of the state, appoint them to high state offices, and some of them are chosen to sit on the throne of the sultans and direct the affairs of the Muslims, in accordance with divine providence and with the mercy of God to His creatures. Thus, one intake comes after another and generation follows generation, and Islam rejoices in the benefit which it gains through them, and the branches of the kingdom flourish with the freshness of youth.¹²

I think that the author's positive view of slavery in this particularly context, i.e. military slavery, is quite clear: both the Mamluks themselves and the Muslims in general benefited greatly from this arrangement, and it was the former who saved the latter. This is, in my opinion, at least *prima facie* evidence, that military slavery in the Muslim world was more than "social death" as suggested by Orlando Patterson as the condition for slaves in general.

Some more details of the education of the young Mamluks can be seen in a passage from the fifteenth century Egyptian historian, al-Maqrizi (d. 1444), when describing the changes enacted in the way these youngsters were prepared for their future careers during the third reign of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun (r. 1310-1340). Actually, al-Maqrizi was somewhat of a chronic complainer, often harping on the sorry state of his own times compared to the good old days at the beginning of the Mamluk regime. I thus take his criticism of the decline of the Mamluk system with a grain of salt. Having said this, his description of the method of educating young Mamluks is instructive:

Al-Nasir imported many mamluks and slave-girls. He called the merchants [to come] to him, and paid them money, describing to them the beauty of mamluks and slave-girls [that he desired]. He sent them off to the country of Özbek (i.e., the Mongol Golden Horde), to Tabriz, Anatolia, Baghdad and elsewhere. When a merchant brought him a batch of mamluks, he gave him a large sum for them. From the beginning, he bestowed upon the mamluks splendid clothes, golden belts, horses and gifts in order to impress them. This was not the custom of those kings before him. When a mamluk was brought to them, they ascertained his ethnic group, then they handed him over to the commanding eunuch, and attached him to [the members of] his ethnic group. He was educated with a *faqīh* (legal scholar), who taught him manners, proper behavior and respect. He was trained in using the bow and arrow, lance-play, riding the horse and types of horsemanship. His costume was from Baalbeki cotton cloth, and medium weight flax cloth. The mamluk's pay was increased

from three dinars to five to seven to ten. When he joined the ranks, he held an appropriate position or positions, learning there what was necessary from proper behavior when he was young. Then the mamluk was gradually promoted. When the mamluk reached an important position and a high rank, he knew its value.¹³

Some of this passage reinforces what we learnt from the evidence cited from Ibn Khaldun: Mamluk education entailed both a “civilian” and a military component. In al-Maqrizi’s passage we also see the important role of the eunuchs in the upbringing of the Mamluks, a significant point that I cannot go into now. We also get an indication of the accepted route of the young Mamluk as he worked his way up the ranks. There were plenty of perquisites and wealth to be accrued along the way, but in the early Mamluk period at least, at the beginning of a mamluk’s career, modesty and a frugal lifestyle were the norm.

Thirdly, I might note that in the Mamluk Sultanate, at least, the young mamluks were officially manumitted at the time of the completion of their training before they were placed into the ranks of the regular army. This was actually performed in a public ceremony which combined graduation with manumission, and the Mamluk received a certificate to this effect. Some remarks can be made about this point: firstly, the now officially free Mamluks still overtly referred to themselves as *mamālīk*, proud of their special slave origins. Secondly, generally only someone who had gone through this route of slavery and emancipation could be a member of the elite of the army, and thus part of the ruling group of the state. One way that this identity was reinforced was the use of Turkish names, which the Mamluks jealously guarded. Their sons, for instance, were given Arabic-Muslim names, to make it clear who was a true Mamluk and who was not. Thirdly, the fact that the adult Mamluk officers and soldiers were legally free facilitated their recognition as permitted rulers by the senior religious figures. There is the famous story of Shaykh `Izz al-Din Ibn `Abd al-Salam, the doyen of the religious scholars in Cairo in the mid-thirteenth century, who only agreed to Baybars’s accession to the throne in 1260 after ascertaining that he was legally free. This appears to be more than just a pious tale: Baybars himself is reported to have said at Shaykh `Izz al-Din’s funeral in 1266 that had the Shaykh so desired he could have had him deposed. Legitimacy was something that could not be taken lightly.¹⁴

Connected to this matter is the last question that I wanted to discuss: We might ask ourselves how the rule of a Turkish-speaking military elite of slave provenance was perceived by the Arabic speaking population that it controlled? This itself would be a topic worthy of a separate lecture, and of course, we have to separate between how the elite wanted to be seen, how the learned class – the *`ulama*’ – observed them, and then, what were the long-term reactions of the larger swaths of society. The last mentioned is a real methodological challenge. In the present context, I will make due with one short citation from the still underrated, but to my

mind exceptional, Egyptian historian Ibn al-Furat, who died in 1405. In his description of the difficult fighting at al-Mansura in early 1250 between the army of Egypt and the Crusaders under Louis IX, he notes the crucial role of the Mamluk Bahriyya regiment, whose members included the future sultans Baybars and Qalawun. After fierce house-to-house fighting in the town, the Franks were beaten back. As is well known, Louis subsequently began his ignominious retreat that led to the surrender of himself and his army. This is how Ibn al-Furat sums up the great victory at al-Mansura:

Things were near to a total defeat involving the complete destruction of Islam, but Almighty God sent salvation. The damned King of France (*al-malik raydafrans < roi de France*) reached the door of the pavillion of the Sultan al-Malik al-Salih and matters were at the most critical and difficult state. But then the Turkish Bahri squadron and the Jamdaris, mamluks of the Sultan, amongst them the commander Rukn al-Din Baybars al-Bunduqdari al-Salihi al-Najmi, showed their superiority and launched a great attack on the Franks which shook them and demolished their formations ... *this was the first encounter in which the polytheist dogs were defeated by means of the Turkish lions (wa-kanat hādhahi al-waq`a awwal wāqi`a untusira fīhā bi-usūd al-turk`alā kilāb al-shirk).*¹⁵

I hope that you have noticed the nice rhyme at the end: *turk/shirk*. The latter term has extremely negative connotations in Islam, harking back to the opponents of Muhammad in Mecca and their pagan religion. The labeling of the Christians in this context is not a coincidence and more than just a desire for a proper rhyme. The Franks are associated with the worst enemies in Islam. But this is an aside. What is important for our purposes here is the Mamluks are exalted for their heroism, and recognized for their Turkishness. The latter is what enabled the former. If the price for protection against Franks and Mongols was rule by a foreign born caste of slave soldiers, so be it.

I hope that in my brief lecture today I have been able to convince you of two matters: firstly, of the singular importance of military slavery in the history of the pre-modern Muslim world. Had we more leisure, I might have continued this discussion into the early modern period. Secondly, that this military slavery was more than just a state of long-term forced labor in difficult, even inhuman conditions. Actually, it resembles in some ways the household slavery of the ancient and medieval Mediterranean world. It certainly deserves to be recognized as such and yet at the same time studied within the context of slavery in world history.

Notes

¹ M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1976), 63–65; Christopher I. Beckwith, “Aspects of the Early History of the Central Asian Guard Corps in Islam,” *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, 4 (1984), 29–43; Peter B. Golden, “Khazar Turkic Ghulams in Caliphal Service,” *Journal Asiatique*, 292 (2004), 279–309.

² This is based on conversations and personal communications with Dr. de la Vaissière. His argument is expressed in greater detail in his forthcoming book.

³ Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200–275/815–889 CE)* (Albany, 2001).

⁴ David Ayalon, “Preliminary Remarks on the Mamluk Military Institution in Islam,” in V. J. Perry and M. E. Yapp (eds.), *War, Technology and Society in the Middle East* (London, 1975), 44–58 (reprinted in D. Ayalon, *The Mamluk Military Society: Collected Studies* [London, 1979], art. no. IX); Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horseback* (Cambridge, 1980); Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam* (New Haven, 1981).

⁵ Abu Jaʿfar Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Taʾrikh al-rusul waʾl-muluk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al. (Leiden, 1871–1901), 3:853–4; translation from Ayalon, “Preliminary Remarks,” 49.

⁶ Abu Ishaq Ibrahim b. Muhammad al-Istakhri, *al-Masalik waʾl-mamalik* (Leiden, 1927), 291; translation in D. Ayalon, “The Mamluks of the Seljuks: Islam’s Military Might at the Crossroads,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser. 6 (1996), 311.

⁷ Al-Jahiz (Abu ʿUthman ʿAmr b. Bahr), *Manaqib al-atraq*, in *Tria Opuscula Auctore*, ed. G. van Vloten (Leiden, 1903), 49; translation in Ayalon, “The Mamluks of the Seljuks,” 311.

⁸ Abu al-Qasim Ibn Hawqal al-Nasibi, *Kitab surat al-ard*, ed. J. H. Kramers (Leiden, 1938–9), 452; translation in Ayalon, “The Mamluks of the Seljuks,” 312.

⁹ Al-Jahiz, *op. cit.*, 28–9; cf. the translation in C. T. Harley Walker, “Jahiz of Basra to al-Fath ibn Khaqan on the ‘Exploits of the Turks and the Army of the Khalifate in General’,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1915, 666–7.

¹⁰ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (London, 1986), 158–160.

¹¹ Jürgen Paul, “The State and the Military: the Samanid Case,” *Papers on Inner Asia*, no. 26 (Bloomington, 1994), 4–5.

¹² ʿAbd al-Rahman b. Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *Kitab al-ʿIbar* (Bulaq, 1284/ 1867), 5:371; translation (with slight changes), from B. Lewis (ed. and tr.), *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople* (New York, 1974), 1:97–99.

¹³ Taqi al-Din Ahmad b. ʿAli al-Maqrizi, *Kitab al-suluk li-maʾrifat duwal al-muluk*, ed. M. M. Ziyada and S. A-F. ʿAshur (Cairo, 1934–73), 2:524–525; partial trans. in A. Levanoni, *A Turning Point in Mamluk History: The Third Reign of Al-Nāsir Muhammad Ibn Qalāwūn (1310–1341)* (Leiden, 1995), 55.

¹⁴ See Khalil ibn Aybak al-Safadi, *Kitāb al-Wāfi bi-ʾl-Wafayāt* [*Das biographische Lexikon des Salāhaddīn Halīl Ibn-Aibak as-Safadī*], vol. 18, ed. by A. F. Saiyid (Beirut/Stuttgart, 1988), 520–22.

¹⁵ Nasir al-Din ʿAbd al-Rahman b. Muhammad Ibn al-Furat, *Ayyubids, Mamlukes and Crusaders: Selections from the Tarikh al-Duwal waʾl-Muluk of Ibn al-Furat*, trans. U. and M. C. Lyons; introd. and notes J. S. C. Riley-Smith (Cambridge, 1971), 1:27–28 (Arabic text); 2:22–23 (translation).