

## Introduction

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In 784H/1382CE, North African historian and political philosopher Ibn Khaldun (d. 808/1406) arrived in Alexandria, Egypt's Mediterranean port, ostensibly on his way to pilgrimage in Mecca but in fact as a refugee from political controversy in the Maghrib. Ibn Khaldun's fame had preceded him, and the reigning Sultan, al-Zahir Barquq, appointed him senior judge of the Maliki school of Islamic law in Cairo, the first of several prestigious offices he would hold as a jurist and scholar. Ibn Khaldun spent the rest of his life in the city revising his monumental history of North Africa and the central Islamic lands, *Kitāb al-ʿibar*. Ibn Khaldun is known to the modern world primarily for his analysis of social structures in a volume titled *al-Muqaddima fi'l-taʾrīkh* (Introduction to History), which he wrote as an explanatory preamble to his larger work (cf. Chapter 6). While the *Muqaddima* overshadows the *Kitāb al-ʿibar* in contemporary scholarship, Ibn Khaldun expressed in the latter his esteem for the regime that, ironically, would grant him sanctuary years later:

When the [ʿAbbasid] state was drowned in decadence and luxury and donned the garments of calamity and impotence and was overthrown by the heathen Tatars [the 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 reluctant to rally in their defense, and had stripped off the skin of 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 Muslims in the Egyptian realms (*al-diyār al-Miṣriyya*), preserving the order and defending the walls of Islam. He did this by sending to the Muslims, from this Turkish nation (*al-ṭāʾifat al-turkiyya*) and from among its great and numerous tribes, rulers to defend them and totally loyal helpers. They were brought from the House of War to the House of Islam under the rule of slavery (*riqq*), which hides in itself a divine blessing. By means of bondage they learn glory and blessing and 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 (*akhlāq badawīyya*) 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 (*al-qaṭān naḥwa al-mawārid*), and

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government buyers have them displayed for inspection and bid for them, raising the price above their value. They do this in order not to subjugate them, but to intensify loyalty, increase power, and strengthen zeal. They choose from each group, according to what they observe of the characteristics of the race and the tribes. Then they place them in a government barracks where they give them good and fair treatment, educate them, have them taught the Qur'an and kept 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 skills become firmly rooted. When the masters know that they have reached the stage of readiness to defend them, even to die for them, they double their pay and increase their grants (*iqṭā'*), and impose on them the duty to improve themselves in the use of weapons and horsemanship, and so also to increase the number of men of their own races (*ajnāsīhim*) in the realm for that purpose. Often, they place them in service to the state and appoint them to high offices. 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 succeeds 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.<sup>1</sup>

Ibn Khaldun's praise for this cadre of slave-soldiers was not meant as effusive acclaim of utopian guardians or gratitude for sanctuary offered to a refugee. He credited these individuals for providing security to the Islamic heartland from conquest by unbelievers and salvation from moral decay on the part of indigenous Muslims themselves. The characteristics Ibn Khaldun attributed to these slave-soldiers encompass the qualities he found requisite to the revitalization of Islam as a religion and the endurance of the polity necessary for its fluorescence in his own day.

The survey that follows examines these qualities in the context of the regime in which they achieved their fullest development: the Sultanate that ruled Egypt, Syria, and the Arabian hinterland along the Red Sea from 648/1250 to 922/1517. The institution of Mamluk military slavery had its origins centuries earlier in the centralized Caliphate during the formative era of Islamic history in regions known today as the Middle East (Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia). The traits Ibn Khaldun emphasized have received attention in many contexts of scholarly inquiry for more than a century. In the past several decades, they have been subjected to revisionist approaches reflective of analytical currents prevalent in disciplines of the humanities and social sciences at the present time. The survey also takes stock of these shifting currents to indicate how they are reshaping the field of medieval Islamic history itself.

Several overviews of the Mamluk institution and its manifestation as an autonomous state centered in Cairo have appeared since the emergence of this field as a distinctive branch of premodern Islamic historiography. Notable among these in English are by Robert Irwin,<sup>2</sup> Linda Northrup,<sup>3</sup> Jean-Claude

Garcin,<sup>4</sup> and Amalia Levanoni.<sup>5</sup> Similar outlines have appeared in Arabic, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese, and Turkish. So, what justifies the publication of this survey? To date, no endeavor to depict the evolution of the Mamluk State beyond a summation of its political trajectory has appeared in a single volume. Given this regime's complexities and the range of studies devoted to its development, no analysis of this scope can credibly claim to be comprehensive. The current bibliography is vast, its subjects varied. What this work attempts to do is revisit the qualities Ibn Khaldun attributed to this cadre from the perspective of recent scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. Ibn Khaldun's own opinions about the Mamluks constitute a special aspect of historiographical inquiry into his broader worldview. As the reader will observe upon perusal of the following work, these qualities have prompted a wide range of reactions that embrace diverse approaches in several fields. Beyond historiography, the disciplines of anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture, gender and literary studies, education and pedagogy, politics, political economy, and religious studies are evident in the scholarship cited. While the author's own views are apparent, the survey's overriding objective has been to suggest how this scholarship has reshaped contemporary understanding of Egyptian and Syrian History during the late medieval and early modern period – and continues to do so.

The survey is presented in seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides a synopsis of events from the Sultanate's founding to the Ottoman occupation in 922/1517. Chapter 2 considers the regime's identity and sense of heritage in the era following the Mongol conquests throughout the region. It outlines procedures of training for Mamluk cadets in the Islamic religion and military arts, the hierarchy of positions held by senior officers, and the competitive ethos that pervaded the military elite's ranks. Chapter 3 addresses the Sultanate's interaction with other polities in the central Islamic world, East and South Asia, Mediterranean Europe, and Africa beyond its borders (Takrur, Abyssinia, and the Maghrib). Chapter 4 examines the Sultanate's administration, the bureaucracy that managed it, the civil judiciary and scholastic classes that presided over litigation and education, and the agents of religious service who upheld a stance of distinction from their learned counterparts. Chapter 5 appraises issues of political economy: agriculture and land use, taxation, interregional and local commerce, commodity prices, salaries and wages, and procedures of revenue extraction (formal and clandestine) imposed by the regime to address cash shortfalls. Chapter 6 considers the Sultanate's cultural legacy, its sponsorship by the military elite, the evolution of literary production (poetry and prose), and the dramatic growth of historiography. Chapter 7 examines the rural setting, issues surrounding its lack of visibility in sources, gender relations, the status of religious minorities (Christians and Jews), and diversity in religious practice, especially as measured by popular identity with Sufism.

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Matters of chronology, events, persons, locales, and institutions are cited initially according to their listing in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second and third editions (*EI2/EI3*), as first lines of reference to a source with internationally recognized standards for accuracy and scope. Arabic diacritics conform to the Romanization Tables for Arabic of the American Library Association/Library of Congress. They are limited to terms or phrases in italics, when precise transliteration is indicated. Dates are listed as Hijri (H) and Common Era (CE).

Several individuals who are authorities on the history of medieval Egypt and Syria read chapters of this work during the drafting process: Li Guo, John Meloy, Adam Sabra, Warren Schultz, and Terry Wilfong. Their insights and criticisms were invaluable and are deeply appreciated; any errors of fact or interpretation are the author's responsibility. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Olaf Nelson of Chinook Design for drawing the maps that locate sites noted in the text.

## 1 Synopsis of Events

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### The Mamluk Institution

The regime that ruled over Egypt, Syria, and the Red Sea between the mid-seventh and early tenth Hijra / thirteenth and sixteenth CE centuries incorporated many of the political structures and cultural traditions of its Fatimid and Ayyubid predecessors. Yet, its system of governance and centralization of authority represented departures from hierarchies of power and collective rule characterizing the regimes that antedated it. The Mamluk Sultanate can therefore be regarded as an experiment in the history of state-building within the premodern Islamic world. Since the Sultanate proved durable, controlling Egypt, Syria, and the Levant for two and a half centuries – the final episode of the region’s status as an independent power in premodern times – it left an indelible imprint on its Ottoman successors and the cultural legacy of the central Arab lands.

The Mamluk institution preceded the Sultanate’s establishment by several centuries. Its origins can be traced to the caliphal empire created in provinces of the former Byzantine and Sassanid realms (Northeast Africa, Southwest Asia) conquered by Bedouin tribal armies in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. The Caliphate formally legitimated its authority to rule on the principle of successorship (ar. *Khilāfa*) to the Prophet Muhammad. Following the assumption of this office by the Umayyad governor of Damascus, Mu‘awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, in 41/661, the Caliphate in practice functioned as a dynastic monarchy that relied on loyalty from Arab Bedouin cadres stationed in garrisons strategically located throughout these territories. When opposition to Umayyad privileging of Arab ethnic hegemony coalesced around the insurrectionary movement of the ‘Abbasids in Iraq between 96/715 and 132/750, the Umayyad Dynasty faced hostility on the part of converts to Islam from non-Arab origins (the emerging majority) that proved insurmountable. The ‘Abbasid Dynasty that succeeded to the Caliphate in 132/750 lasted for half a millennium before its own demise at the hands of Mongols invading from Central Asia in the mid-thirteenth century. It owed its longevity (if not its territorial integrity) in part to the formation of military institutions that adapted to post-Umayyad ethnic diversity in the now-global Muslim community.

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The term *Mamlūk* itself is a passive participle of the Arabic root *mīm-lām-kāf* (to own/possess) and literally means “one owned.” In a military context, it referred to a slave trained specifically for martial duties. While often distinguished from chattel slaves (*‘abdl’abīd*) according to ethnicity or “race,” mamluks derived in fact from a disparate range of backgrounds and should not be envisioned on a simplistic basis of “color” (i.e., “white”). Yet, following the extension of caliphal suzerainty over western Central Asia, Turkic tribal groups assumed a pronounced place among the mamluk cadres in this institution during its formative phase. Although several Umayyad Caliphs made sporadic use of mamluk slave-soldiers, the ‘Abbasids utilized them as a prominent element of their military apparatus, in particular after the reign of Caliph al-Mu‘tasim bi’llah Muhammad (218/833–227/842), of partial Turkish origin himself.<sup>1</sup> Because descendants of the original Bedouin conquerors had largely assimilated among indigenous populations, the ‘Abbasids could not count on support from a favored regional element, as had the Umayyads. They therefore adopted a policy of reliance on cadres without ties to the original conquerors. Slaves imported from non-Muslim populations, as property of the ruling authorities were an important component of the new military order. Since in principle, these slaves owed their status and power to the ruler or oligarchy who acquired them (either by purchase or as war prisoners), their loyalty could be trusted. Such was the expected outcome in theory.

The training procedures devised for mamluk slave-soldiers were designed to emphasize their elite status in society. Their patrons sought to separate them from the indigenous population to impede their assimilation, which was presumed to stir up divided loyalties and provoke a deterioration of group solidarity. The initial rationale behind these policies of isolation from civilian society stemmed from efforts by the early Caliphs to preserve the martial spirit of their Bedouin forces by stationing them in military camps away from the conquered populace. Since the Bedouin Arabs were eventually free to settle as they wished, this objective was unsustainable. But the ideal of their pristine valor, unsullied by contact with civilian masses, remained to inspire subsequent rulers and their advisors. Distinction from the local society was more effectively achieved with corps of imported slaves.

The consequences of separation for these slaves did not promote the unequivocal dependence and reliability initially envisioned, however. The competitiveness drilled into mamluk cadets combined with their sense of isolation to encourage simultaneous feelings of disdain for civilians and vulnerability as a minority to animosity from the majority. Discouraged from identifying with local masses, mamluks often came to consider themselves a privileged caste who could lay claim to an outsized share of a state’s fiscal assets in return for the security they provided. Once entrenched in a political system, their behavior soon confirmed that the implementation of a military

monopoly led to political manipulation at high levels, and even to outright control. Few regimes succeeded in restricting their slave-soldiers solely to military functions that served their patrons' interests. The histories of several regimes witnessed the effective supplanting of the ruler's independent political authority. In some instances, he became a figurehead exploited by his own slaves to mask their actual supremacy.

### Ayyubid Origins (521/1127–647/1249)

The institution of mamluk slave-soldiers did not supplant alternate systems of military recruitment, especially following the political disintegration of the 'Abbasid Caliphate into an array of autonomous principalities emerging across Northeast Africa and Southwest Asia. In particular the rise of the Saljuk Sultanate throughout the Iranian regions during the tenth and eleventh centuries CE promoted the salience of free-born soldiers, again frequently of Turkic origin. These either served princes as officers or struck out on their own to found self-governing polities. When the so-called Great Saljuk empire in Iran (431/1040–590/1194) devolved into a network of polities formally subordinate but autonomous in practice, they were often controlled by individuals formally installed as *atābaks* or governors ruling in the name of the distant Sultan. Among these polities, the regime established in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul in the twelfth century CE was destined to attain hegemony over greater Syria and the Nile Valley, and to set in motion forces that would lead to formation of the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria.

The principality in question was founded by an officer (*amīr*): 'Imad al-Din Zangi, Atabak of Mosul (r. 521/1127–541/1146).<sup>2</sup> Zangi carved out an autonomous dominion inclusive of northern Iraq (*al-Jazīra*) and Syria as an offshoot of the Great Saljuk empire. He appointed a son, Nur al-Din Mahmud (r. 541/1147–569/1174), as governor of Damascus. Nur al-Din was concerned over the vulnerability of the Fatimid Shi'i Caliphate in Egypt (297/909–567/1171) during its final decades due to internal restiveness, manipulation of the ruling dynasty by aggressive viziers, and the threat of invasion by European knights in the aftermath of the First Crusade (491–92/1098–99). He therefore sent several adjutants, of Kurdish origin, ostensibly to aid the current vizier and create a unified front against subsequent Crusades but in reality to explore the feasibility of occupying Egypt. The officer in charge was Asad al-Din Shirkuh ibn Shadhi. His nephew, Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub (the Crusaders' Saladin), assumed command of the Syrian army in Egypt upon Shirkuh's death in 564/1169.<sup>3</sup> Salah al-Din deposed the last Fatimid Caliph in 567/1171 and proclaimed the restoration of Sunnism as the official practice of Islam in Egypt. The Azhar Mosque, formerly center of worship for the Isma'ili Shi'i Mission (*Da'wa*), was converted to Sunni orthodox service.

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Salah al-Din founded a dynasty, named for his own father Najm al-Din Ayyub (Shirkuh's brother), that linked Egypt to several principalities in Syria and the Jazira as an imperial federation ruled by his descendants. During his reign (564/1169–589/1193), Salah al-Din exploited this empire to confront the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. He granted strategic garrison towns to members of his family as appanages while retaining the office of Sultan in Cairo for himself. The Ayyubid Dynasty projected an aura of unity over Egypt and Syria that lasted to the mid-seventh/thirteenth century. Salah al-Din scored several victories over the Crusaders (in particular at *Ḥaṭṭīn*, 583/1187), after which Muslim rule was restored to Jerusalem. But Salah al-Din failed to dislodge the Crusaders from Syria, and his successors in Cairo eventually adopted a policy of *détente* with remaining Crusader strongholds on the coast and interior. Salah al-Din presided over an ambitious building program in Cairo that included construction of the Citadel (*al-Qal'a*) as the seat of government on the Muqattam Heights overlooking the city, and its surrounding walls. Cairo's medieval architectural profile dates from his reign.

Under the last Ayyubid Sultan, al-Malik al-Salih Ayyub (r. 637/1240–647/1249) ibn al-Malik al-Kamil Muhammad (r. 615/1218–635/1238), internal quarrels between branches of the Ayyubid Dynasty throughout Syria and ethnic tensions among factions of the army stationed in Cairo induced al-Salih to import upward of 1000 mamluk slave-soldiers from the Qipjaq Turkish Steppes in western Central Asia as his personal bodyguard. Housed in a garrison on the Nile, several units of these mamluks were subsequently known as Bahri or "Riverine." In the aftermath of al-Salih's death, a power struggle led to a coup, and foundation of a new regime, destined to preside over Egypt's final epoch as a regional power before modern times.

**From Junta to Sultanate: A Tumultuous Decade  
 (647/1249–658/1260)**

Sultan al-Salih Ayyub had named the regiment of mamluks purchased and trained as his personal guard the *Ṣālihiyya* after himself. Al-Salih's final year (647/1249) was marked by an invasion of the Nile Delta by King Louis IX of France. The French Crusaders initially occupied the city of Damietta (*Dumyāt*) but were subsequently defeated by competing mamluk units, who exploited the crisis to advance their own interests. The French monarch was captured and held for ransom. Following al-Salih's death, his son and heir, al-Mu'azzam Turan Shah, departed his own base in al-Jazira to claim the Sultanate in Cairo. Turan Shah manifested his intent to supplant with his own trusted adjutants the Mamluk officers who had risen to prominence in the oligarchy surrounding his father. Alarmed over the prospect of demotion following their successful repulsion of the French, these officers assassinated Turan Shah (28



Muharram 648/May 2, 1250). Effectively presiding over a junta, the officers initially weighed offering the Sultanate to reigning Ayyubid amirs in Syria – in particular al-Nasir Yusuf ibn al-‘Aziz Muhammad of Aleppo and Damascus. But their ultimate choice devolved upon a unique claimant – al-Salih’s widow, a former concubine of Armenian descent named Tree of Pearls (ar. *Shajar al-Durr*).<sup>4</sup>

The officers’ decision was motivated by Shajar al-Durr’s support for several subunits within the Salihī regiment, in particular the band known as “Riverine” (*Bahriyya*), noted above. Having received lucrative land allotments (*iqṭā’*s) granted by her, the Bahriyya were prepared to acknowledge Shajar al-Durr’s leadership. But rival units contended that a valid succession was limited to a legitimate member of the Ayyubid Dynasty. Thus, when a senior officer named al-Mu‘izz Aybak, head (*atābak*) of the Salihīyya regiment, was finally acclaimed as Sultan, he was compelled formally to share the office conjointly with a grandson of the former Ayyubid ruler al-Kamil, al-Ashraf Musa, along with al-Salih’s widow, whom Aybak married. Aybak’s reign (648/1250–655/1257) was plagued by factional insurgencies, intensified by the arrival in Cairo of mamluk squadrons defecting from their Ayyubid masters in Syria to seek their fortunes in Cairo. His assassination in 655/1257 was rumored to have occurred at Shajar al-Durr’s instigation, when she became alarmed over the prospect of abandonment for a spouse more suited to Aybak’s ambitions: a daughter of Badr al-Din Lu’lu’, Atabak of Mosul (the principality that had sponsored the Ayyubid Dynasty). Within the following week, Shajar al-Durr was herself murdered, allegedly by members of Aybak’s faction. Aybak’s adolescent son, al-Mansur ‘Ali (r. 655–57/1257–59), was installed as nominal Sultan, while one of Aybak’s colleagues in the Salihīyya regiment, Sayf al-Din Qutuz, exercised actual authority.<sup>5</sup>

The turbulence of these events depicts the fragility of a junta devoid of stable leadership and wracked by internecine strife. A threat of invasion on the part of the Mongol occupiers of Iraq exacerbated these tensions. The Mongol Ilkhan Hulegu had sacked Baghdad, fabled seat of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate, in 656/1258. In the aftermath of his victory, which shook the Sunni Islamic world, Hulegu manifested his intention to invade the Levant and subsequently Egypt. Qutuz deposed ‘Ali on grounds of juvenile incompetence in the face of a foreign menace, claimed the Sultanate, and proceeded to apprehend members of rival mamluk factions he suspected of undermining his rule. Among these members were several amirs of the Bahri unit, who had absconded to Gaza on the Sinai–Palestine border to avoid arrest as rebels. It was under these circumstances that one of the officers emerged to prominence in the historical narratives: the future Sultan, al-Zahir Baybars.

After Hulegu’s forces occupied Aleppo and Damascus early in 659/1260, Sultan Qutuz defiantly anticipated their campaign against Egypt. Upon receipt

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of the Khan's emissaries, who presented an ultimatum to submit, with emphasis on the Sultan's status as a former slave (despite belonging to the Khwarazmian Dynasty), Qutuz met their insult with his own and ordered their execution. Aware that his act would be interpreted as a declaration of war, Qutuz reconciled with Ayyubid princes who had not yielded to the Mongols, along with the rebel Bahri officers in Gaza, and assembled an army composed of seasoned mamluk cavalry, Egyptian conscripts, and Ayyubid horsemen to confront Hulegu's host. But the massive invasion did not occur. Upon learning of the Great Khan Mongke's death back in China (657/1259), Hulegu called off the invasion and returned to Azerbaijan to await the outcome of Mongke's succession. Qutuz exploited the opportunity to assert his authority over Syria. Joined by the previously disaffected Bahri amirs, Qutuz led his coalition forces into Palestine. The remaining Mongol detachments, commanded by Hulegu's adjutant Kitbugha, confronted his army on 26 Ramadan 658/September 3, 1260, at a site known as 'Ayn Jalut (Spring of Goliath).

Despite their depleted numbers, the Mongols fought vigorously. Their defeat was in large measure due to the adroit tactics adopted by several officers on the Mamluk side, in particular Baybars. The victory achieved at 'Ayn Jalut by Qutuz's forces did not terminate Mongol intervention in Syria. But its successful blockage of the seemingly invincible Mongol advance on a global scale conveyed a powerful message that enhanced the stature of those officers who pulled it off. In anticipation of rewards that included governorships and land grants in Syria, several of them were disappointed by Qutuz's apparent favoritism of individuals in his personal retinue. When Qutuz failed to award Baybars rule over Aleppo, he joined other disaffected amirs in a plot to assassinate Qutuz on his way back to Egypt via Gaza. Since Baybars allegedly inflicted the fatal wound (disputed in some sources), his coconspirators ultimately acclaimed him as Qutuz's natural successor according to Turkic customary law. Upon their acknowledgment, Baybars demanded their oaths (*buyū*) of loyalty, which were sworn only after Baybars acknowledged their own prerogatives as peers in the future ruling oligarchy. Baybars then assumed the Sultanic office on 17 Dhu'l-Qa'da 658/October 24, 1260, in Cairo with the honorific title (*laqab*) "Mastering" (in God: *al-Zāhir [bi'llāh]*).

### The Reign of al-Zahir Baybars al-Bunduqdari (658/1260–676/1277)

Baybars is regarded as the architect of the imperial state that would unite Egypt and Syria over the decades following his enthronement.<sup>6</sup> He spent his early years enlarging the Mamluk military institution, subjecting it to rigorous training, consolidating the bureaucratic apparatus that funded its expenses via *iqta'* property allotments (of land and urban real estate), and aggrandizing his personal household. During his seventeen-year reign, Mamluk contingents