

The “Mamluk/Ghulam Phenomenon”—Slave Sultans, Soldiers, Eunuchs, and Concubines

They were brought to Egypt “... like sandgrouse to the watering places.”

IBN KHALDUN



1 Slave Sultans and Soldiers

The emergence in Egypt of the Fatimid Caliphate, followed by the triumph and short-lived success of the Ayyubid Dynasty, also in Egypt, marked the end of the era that saw the broad decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, based in Baghdad. The era of the Abbasid decline simultaneously provoked a “worldwide diffusion of Islamic societies.”¹ A number of events precipitated this decline and diffusion, including the disintegration of Abbasid imperial structures into a significant number of independence-asserting mini-caliphates and sultanates. There was also a pervading decadence and foreboding sense of aimlessness and corruption that began enveloping the caliphate and the “Round City” in the tenth century CE. These conditions continued until Baghdad ingloriously fell to Helagu Khan and his Mongol invaders in 1258 CE.

Ibn Khaldun argued that in the midst of the decadence that became the hallmark of the later Abbasid Caliphate, providence restored the “glory and the unity” of the Islamic faith by sending the Mamluks: “...loyal helpers, who were brought from the House of War to the House of Islam under the rule of slavery, which hides in itself a divine blessing.”² His expression of the idea that slavery, considered to be a degrading social condition to be avoided at all costs, might contain “a divine blessing,” was the most articulate expression of

¹ Lapidus, *History of Islamic Societies*, 239.

² ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun, 5 *Kitab al-‘ibar wa-diwan al-mubtada’ wa-l-khabar* (Bulaq, 1284/1867), v, 371, trans. Bernard Lewis, *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople, 1: Politics and War* (Oxford, 1987), excerpted in Linda S. Northrup, “The Bahri Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1390,” in *Cambridge History of Egypt*, 1: 242–243. Ibn Khaldun was obviously speaking of the involuntary transportation of enslaved Turks from the Central Asia steppes (“the House of War”) to Baghdad or Cairo (“the House of Islam”).

Muslim thinking on slavery since the early days of Islam. Ibn Khaldun's general observation about the paradoxical nature of slavery brings to mind Hegel's reflections on the subject some five hundred years later. The great philosopher observed that, in many instances, it is the slave who ultimately gains the independent consciousness and power to become the actual master of his or her owner.³ The Mamluk/Ghulam Phenomenon is a good historical example of this paradox.⁴

Ibn Khaldun translated his general observations into specific descriptions of the Mamluk Sultanates (1250–1517 CE) in Egypt. His descriptions convey the fact that, even in the eyes of a fourteenth-century observer, there was an important irony and a number of profound lessons to be learned from the fact that a slave imported into Egypt and struck off for public sale under the hammer of an auctioneer could eventually rise to become head of state and military commander:

By means of slavery 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 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 sandgrouse 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 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

3 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, rev. 2nd ed., trans. J.B. Baillie (London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: Macmillan, 1949), 234–237.

4 I will use the terms "Mamluk" and "Ghulam" interchangeably as, in practice, they meant the same thing, e.g., an enslaved soldier or other enslaved military or administrative or concubinal personage owing complete and total loyalty to the caliph or sultan. Both words also have an ordinary meaning in the Arabic language, "mamluk" meaning "one who is owned" and "ghulam" meaning "boy" or "page" or "lad," but these meanings have been swallowed up by the overarching caliphal and sultanic practices of elite slavery. It is these practices that I describe in this chapter as the "Mamluk/Ghulam Phenomenon."