

The Fall of the Mamluks and the Rise of the Ottomans

By: Griffin Nameroff

4/15/2020

I hereby declare upon my word of honor

That I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work:

Griffin Nameroff

There have been many great Islamic civilizations throughout history. Empires like the Mongols and Timurids conquered vast stretches of Asia and the current middle east. One such great empire was the Mamluks who lasted from 1250 to 1517. During their prime, they controlled Egypt and Syria and were considered the greatest Muslim army until they were overthrown by the Ottomans. In this paper, I will explain what led to the fall of the Mamluks to the Ottomans and how it happened. I will also explain how the Mamluks rose to power and their special relationship to the Ottomans and why that relationship faded. While there are two main groups of Mamluks—the Egyptian and Syrian—this paper will primarily focus on the Egyptian Mamluks, though the Syrian Mamluks will come up later in the paper.

The origin of the Mamluks started with the Ayyubids in Egypt. The Ayyubids were founded by Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub, or Saladin, who is famous for retaking Jerusalem from the crusaders. In 1171 Saladin disposed of the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and established his dynasty, the Ayyubids. The Ayyubids used Mamluks in their armies ever since the founding of the Ayyubids. Mamluks were slave soldiers that were bought by the Ayyubids from different parts of the Islamic world.¹ However, while the Mamluks were primarily soldiers, they would become more powerful and influential thanks to the Ayyubid ruler, Al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub.² Al-Salih was the first Ayyubid to make the majority of his army Mamluks. After his ostracization from his family; Al-Salih took over the northern sections of al-Kamil's kingdom, to strengthen his forces with even more Mamluks.³ he would eventually even win the Egyptian sultanate from his brother. However, during a military expedition, Al-Salih would end up losing Damascus, this, in turn, caused almost his entire army to abandon him. Only the Mamluks and a hand full of non-Mamluk officials.⁴

1. Typically, Circassian, but mamluks could also be Turkic or Kurdish.
2. Amalia Levanoni, "The Mamluks' Ascent to Power in Egypt," *Studia Islamica* no. 72 (1990): 121.
3. Levanoni, *Mamluks Ascent to Power*, 122.
4. Levanoni, *Mamluks Ascent to Power*, 123.

Due to this desertion from his men, when Al-Salih took the throne he purged all his former military personal except for the Mamluks.⁵ During his reign, Al-Salih created more policies that empowered the Mamluks and his advisors over the over Ayyubid factions. He turned the Ayyubid government into a more centralized government that revolved around him and his close advisors. An example of one of his changes was with regard to court. According to Amalia Levanoni in her article, *The Mamluks' Ascent to Power in Egypt*, Al-Salih made it so that no one could meet with him that was of a lower station than the top officials in the government.

Such officials were not accepted by the Sultan but would discuss the requests that they had addressed to the Sultan with the courtiers, and he would sign them as confirmed by the clerks in charge of correspondence.⁶

Al-Salih made this change as a way of avoiding potential attempts on his and future sultans' lives. Al-Salih died in 1249 during the Frank invasion of Egypt. His son Turanshah was put on the throne as the new sultan after Al-Salih's death. Turanshah adopted many of his father's policies but failed to handle the many different factions as his father had. As a result of this, Turanshah would end being killed and replaced by someone else. However, at this time the Mamluks also gained more influence thanks to their defeat of the Franks who had invaded Egypt. When this victory was occurring, the Ayyubids were trying to get rid of the policies of al-Salih. The Mamluk victory gave them the influence they needed to keep the policies intact and started the basis for their title of "defenders of Islam."⁷ After the defeat of the Franks, the Mamluks began to influence who was made the sultan, by insuring whoever did become sultan, worked in favor of Mamluk interests.

5. Levanoni, *Mamluks Ascent to Power*, 124.

6. Levanoni, *Mamluks Ascent to Power*, 129.

7. Levanoni, *Mamluks Ascent to Power*, 136.

The Mamluks used others as puppet rulers, who they could control from behind the scenes, like how the Mongols controlled the Abbasid caliphate after their defeat. The first person they chose for this was a Kurdish Emir named Husam al-Din. Husam was high ranking enough that he could have a legitimate claim on the throne. However, he was also a low enough rank that the Mamluk Emirs could control him. One of the first things the Mamluks did after picking Husam ordered the arrest of some Kurdish Emirs to stomp out pro-Ayyubid support.⁸

Throughout their rule, the Mamluks used the conflict between different factions to retain their rule and promote their interest. Amelia Levanoni goes in-depth about this in her other article, *The Mamluk Conception of the Sultanate*. She also talks about how the Mamluk Emirs controlled the elected sultan.

In theory, any amir was eligible to become sultan, and the election of one of them by the others was understood to imply that, although the electors had put aside their ambitions for the sultanate and undertook to support his rule, the sultan was committed to safeguarding their status in return.⁹

The Mamluks also would pick another sultan when the old one died, rather than let the son of the previous sultan rule. They did this because they saw themselves as gods' instruments who put the ruler in place as a form of divine predestination. They saw this as a way of freedom from having to recognize any ruler they did not like. The Mamluks used the idea of divine predestination as a way of putting whoever they wanted on the throne by saying they were enacting God's will.¹⁰

8. Levanoni, *Mamluks Ascent to Power*, 138.

9. Amelia Levanoni, "The Mamluk Conception of the Sultanate," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 3 (August 1994): 376.

10. Levanoni, "The Mamluk Conception of the Sultanate," 378.

Besides their use of factional division and puppet rulers, the Mamluks were able to stay in power for as long as they did thanks to their prowess in combat. Each Mamluk was trained as a soldier at a very young age. As a result, by the time they became adults most Mamluks were considered exceptional fighters.¹¹ Mamluk's reputation in combat came from conflicts such as their defeat of the crusaders and their victory in the Mamluk-Ilkanid war. An example of this can be found in Cihan Yuksel Muslu's book, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks: Imperial Diplomacy and Warfare in the Islamic World*, where she talks about how the Mamluks were the ones to defeat the Mongol advancement into Mamluk and Seljuk regions. "The Mamluks were the first to obstruct the Advancement of the Mongols in the Battle of Ayn Jalut in 1260."¹² As a result of this battle, several requests came from Anatolian Seljuks asking the Mamluk Sultan—who was Baybars at the time—to come to help rid their lands of the Mongol threat. Baybars accepted and went on a campaign to defeat the Mongols. Baybars died soon after his return from the war but was able to establish an area of influence for the Mamluks that would essentially become the Mamluk-Ottoman border years later. According to Muslu, the Mamluks retained control of this newly acquired territory by, "building vassal relationships with semi-nomadic Turkoman groups in the area and by appointing their leaders as Mamluk governors."¹³ Another event to help the Mamluks status was the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258. After the fall of Baghdad, the Abbasid caliphate moved to Cairo, which also helped to enhance their reputation and prestige.¹⁴ the results of the Mamluk-Ilkanid war and the Mongol sacking of Bagdad, effectively made the Mamluks the powerhouse they were for centuries until the Ottomans conquered them.

11. Turkic Mamluks were particularly effective according to David Ayalon in his article, "The Mamluks of the Seljuks: Islam's Military Might at the Crossroads." David Ayalon, "The Mamluks of the Seljuks: Islam's Military Might at the Crossroads," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6, no 3 (November 1996): 314.

12. Cihan Yuksel. Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks: Imperial Diplomacy and Warfare in the Islamic World*, (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2014), 6.

13. Muslu, 6-7.

14. Muslu, 9.

While the Mamluks rose to power remarkably quickly and held that power for a long time, they would ultimately fall. During their decline, the Mamluks dealt with several points that would help lead to their eventual conquest. The first point is the continuous conflict between the different Mamluk factions. This conflict could help give different Emirs power and have them control the sultan within the empire. However, this constant struggle between the Emirs would mean they would potentially struggle to decide on courses of action if a stronger enemy appeared. Another point that would be a downside to their system is the sultan. If the sultan is a puppet for the Emirs, then they are effectively powerless. If the Emirs could not decide on a course of action, the sultan would not be able to veto and direct the nation. If a sultan tried to exert too much power over the Emirs, they were typically killed and replaced. Meaning that the sultan could not force the Emirs into action if needed for fear of being killed. The final, and possibly the biggest, reason for the fall of the Mamluks, the underestimation of the rapidly growing strength of the Ottomans.

During the beginnings of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottomans and Mamluks had good relationships and were even allies with each other at times. The Ottomans and Mamluks sent ambassadors frequently between each other with gifts and ceremonies. Muslu describes this exchange very well in her book:

When the Mamluks—the leading sovereigns of the Sunni Muslim world and the eastern Mediterranean—and the Ottomans—a minor but growing principality along the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire—initiated their earliest diplomatic contacts, they used envoys, gifts, letters, and ceremonies to disseminate and negotiate their imperial ideologies.¹⁵

15. Muslu also explains how the items brought with negotiators enhanced the non-verbal communication of the diplomats and could even complete the actual message. Muslu, 24.

Throughout the exchange of ambassadors and correspondents between the two empires, the Ottomans became increasingly stronger. A good example of this occurred in September of 1396 with the battle of Nicopolis. During this battle, the Ottomans defeated a Crusader force that had a combination of European and Balkan powers.¹⁶ This was significant because it was the first instance of the Ottomans facing a threat from Crusaders and winning. It also allowed them to start saying they were the defenders of Islam. When emissaries were sent to the Mamluks from the Ottomans telling them of their victory, the Mamluk sultan—who was Barquq at the time—hosted a feast in celebration of the news. However, while Barquq did host a feast to celebrate, the news worried him. The title of being the warriors of Islam was an essential piece of the Mamluk's power. According to Muslu, the Ottoman's victory at Nicopolis seemed to intrude on the Mamluk's beliefs and power. “Bayzid’s military success in the Balkans seemed to almost infringe on the Mamluk sultan’s spiritual domain.”¹⁷ This battle was also the first time the Mamluks took the Ottomans seriously. Before Nicopolis, the Mamluks did not consider the Ottomans a threat because they did not think the Ottomans were strong enough. However, the effect of Nicopolis acts like a light switch in the Mamluks—specifically the sultan, as seen previously—because if the Ottomans became the warriors defending Islam, then the Mamluks would not be needed.

While the Mamluks were figuring out how to deal with the aftermath of the Ottoman's victory, two more threats emerged that would tip the balance in favor of the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Portuguese. According to Jane Hathaway and Karl K. Barbir in their 2008 book, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1800*, during this time the Safavids had taken control over both Iraq and Iran from the Akkoyunlu and turned the religion of the area into Twelver Shiism.¹⁸

16. Muslu, 81.

17. Muslu, 82.

18. Jane Hathaway and Karl K. Barbir, *The Arab Lands Under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1800*. (United Kingdom, Pearson Education Limited, 2008), 37.

The Safavids posed a direct threat to the Ottomans, due to both their religious differences as well as their military strength. The Ottoman sultan—who at the time was Selim I—engaged in a vigorous campaign to stop the Safavid expansion. The Ottomans would come out of the conflict victorious, but they would also learn of a defense pact between the Safavid leader—Shah Ismail—and the Mamluk sultan at the time, Qansuh al-Ghuri.¹⁹ The other threat, the Portuguese, while not directly threatening the Ottomans, were enough of a problem for them to be concerned. The Portuguese launched naval attacks against Yemen in the early sixteenth century. The Mamluks were a terrifying force on land, however, they were ineffective to naval attacks. As a result, the Mamluks and the Ottomans entered a joint defensive force against the Portuguese in 1509. They pushed the Portuguese back, and the Ottomans ended up running Yemen, despite it not being part of the Ottoman empire.²⁰ This was probably due to the Mamluks not being able to protect Mecca and Medina from threats like the Portuguese. According to Hathaway and Barbir, the combination of the Safavid-Mamluk pact and the ineffectiveness of the Mamluks against naval threats played a considerable role in the decision for the Ottomans to conquer the Mamluks.²¹ Add to these two factors, the internal issues within the Mamluks discussed previously, and constantly growing to the Ottomans; it is almost impossible to see a scenario where the Ottomans did not attack the Mamluks.

In August of 1516, the Ottomans attacked the Mamluks at Marj Dabiq near the Turkish-Syrian border.²² The Mamluk army was outmatched by the Ottomans in both firepower and cavalry strength and defeated the Mamluks at Marj Dabiq. The Ottomans took Aleppo with no issues, and conquered Damascus that October, and then Cairo in January of 1517.²³

19. Hathaway and Barbir, 38.

20. Hathaway and Barbir, 38-39.

21. Hathaway and Barbir, 38-39.

22. Hathaway and Barbir, 39.

23. Hathaway and Barbir, 39-40.

Selim over the next few months would destroy the Mamluk sultanate and his son Suleyman I would later conquer Iraq, Yemen, and parts of North Africa.²⁴

However, while the Ottomans would conquer the Mamluks, they would not completely wipe them out. In his 1987 article, *The end of the Mamluk Sultanate: (Why did the Ottomans Spare the Mamluks of Egypt and Wipeout the Mamluks of Syria?)* David Ayalon explains that the Ottomans kept the Mamluks because of their already established government and military prowess. “Of all the military elements which they subdued in their far flung drive into the Islamic countries, the Mamluks were the most suitable for incorporation in the Ottoman army.”²⁵ The Ottomans had a history of keeping institutions and systems of conquered regions already in place and incorporate them into their own. In her 2008 book, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*, Karen Barkey explains that the Ottomans were capable of this incorporation and grew stronger because of it. “Rather than attempt to impose new or uniform forms of rule, they built upon on and took advantage of systems already in place. The Ottomans were institutionally omnivorous.”²⁶ This method the Ottomans used meant that they were able to quickly enact control over conquered regions simply by using their systems to impose their laws. This was needed because of the sheer size of the Ottoman Empire at the time, as Karen Barkey explains further. “The Ottomans understood well the limits of their rule, in terms of both the geographical reach of their control and their limited manpower.”²⁷ Due to this philosophy and the strengths the Mamluks would bring to the Ottomans, it made sense why the Ottomans were so eager to begin incorporating the Mamluks into the Ottoman military as fast as possible.

24. Hathaway and Barbir, 40-44.

25. David Ayalon, “The end of the Mamluk Sultanate: (Why did the Ottomans Spare the Mamluks of Egypt and Wipe out the Mamluks of Syria?),” *Studia Islamica* no. 65 (1987): 127.

26. Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 70.

27. Barkey, 70.

However, while the Ottomans were quick to acclimate the Mamluks into their ranks, this did not come without risks. According to Ayalon, the Ottomans decided to leave the mamluks in both Egypt and Syria and leave Mamluk Viceroys in charge of both.²⁸ However, this would prove unwise because shortly after the Mamluks would try and consolidate their power and overthrow the Ottomans. Seeing that rebuilding the Mamluks in both Egypt and Syria would be too dangerous, the Ottomans decided to focus the rebuilding in Egypt. Ayalon explains that the Ottomans chose Egypt, not just for its significance, but also for it being easy to retake. “Egypt, being a flat and narrow country, could be easily dominated from the sea and the sea-shore deep inland.”²⁹ The Egyptian Mamluks, for the most part, remained relatively quiet during Ottoman rule, however, the Syrian Mamluks were a different story.

Soon after the death of Selim I a Syrian Mamluk named al-Ghazali would lead a revolt against the Ottomans. The revolt had been planned out long before Selim’s death, but his death became the opportune moment. Al-Ghazali named himself sultan and gave himself the name al-Malik al-Ashraf Abu al-Futuh, or “The father of conquests.”³⁰ Al-Ghazali decided to first liberate Aleppo and then march towards Egypt. Al-Ghazali’s revolt would be put down a mere three months after it began by an Ottoman force near eastern Anatolia.³¹ After the revolt, the new Ottoman Sultan, Suleyman wiped out the Syrian Mamluks and forced all the remaining Mamluks to remain in Egypt. He also stopped the policy of nominating Mamluk viceroys to be in charge of the other Mamluks.³² The results of the al-Ghazali rebellion effectively ended any more major rebellions by the Mamluks, both due to the loss of lives and because of the new restrictions.

28. Ayalon, “End of Mamluk Sultanate,” 132.

29. Ayalon, “End of Mamluk Sultanate,” 133

30. Ayalon, “End of Mamluk Sultanate,” 138.

31. Ayalon, “End of Mamluk Sultanate,” 139.

32. Ayalon, “End of Mamluk Sultanate,” 141-142.

The Mamluks were a massively influential empire throughout the Islamic world for centuries. They were considered some of the best warriors in the Islamic world and overthrew the Ayyubids and take control of Egypt and Syria from them. They wielded their status as the defenders of Islam to spread their influence and power. However, despite their accomplishments, the Mamluks were using the continuous conflict between their factions to one-up each other. This would lead to times of indecision and could also lead to a weak sultan who could not reign in Mamluk Emirs during times of crisis. They also were not able to fully grasp how quickly the Ottomans were rising in power until they took the Mamluks mantle of defenders of Islam; and proved stronger militarily, particularly with naval combat. All of this would cumulate in the Ottomans taking over the Mamluks and destroying any chance of rebellion. Perhaps if the Mamluks were able to deal with their internal issues, they might have been able to withstand the Ottomans takeover.

Bibliography

Ayalon, David. "The End of the Mamluk Sultanate: (Why did the Ottomans Spare the Mamluks of Egypt and Wiped out the Mamluks of Syria?)," *Studia Islamica*. no.2 (1987): 125-148.

Ayalon, David. "The Mamluks of the Seljuks: Islam's Military Might at the Crossroads," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 6, no. 3 (November 1996): 305-333.

Barkey, Karen. *Empire of Difference The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Cambridge university Press, 2008.

Hathaway, Jane., and Karle K. Barbir. *The Arab Lands Under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1800*. Great Britain:Pearson Education Limited, 2008

Levanoni, Amalia. "The Mamluk Conception of the Sultanate." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 3 (August 1994): 373-392.

Levanoni, Amalia. "The Mamluk' Ascent to Power in Egypt." *Studia Islamica*, no 72. (1990): 121-144

Muslu, Yuksel Cihan. *The Ottomans and the Mamluks Imperial Diplomacy and Warfare in the Islamic World*. London: I.B & Co.Ltd, 2014.