

The Mamluks

For nearly 300 years the Mamluk sultanate was one of the great powers of Islam. The Arabic word mamluk means 'owned', and in the context of Arab history denotes a foreign military slave acquired as an elite fighter answerable only to the sultan himself. Most Mamluks were Turks and Circassians from the Caucasus who converted to Islam, and they were trained to excel in the art of war. In AH 648 / AD 1250 a power vacuum among their Arab overlords enabled the Mamluks to establish their own rule. From now on the Mamluks began to build an empire that extended from Egypt, Palestine and Syria, to the Holy Cities of the Hijaz, over which they ruled supreme until 922 / 1517. The early years saw constant threats from foreign enemies, but the Mamluks succeeded in expelling both the Mongols, after a decisive defeat at 'Ayn Jalut in Palestine in 658 / 1260, and the Crusaders in 690 / 1291. First and foremost, the Mamluks were champions of Islam. They revived the Caliphal seat in Cairo in 659 / 1261 after the first seat in Baghdad fell to the Mongols in 656 / 1258. They launched an unprecedented building programme of splendid mosques and religious endowments (waqfs) throughout the empire, each one a magnet attracting intellectual and scientific, as well as religious, endeavour. Internationally, the Mamluk sultanate built strong ties with other Muslim powers including those in the Far East, Byzantium, France, Castile, Sicily, Genoa and Venice. Cairo became the hub of world trade. Exotic goods and artefacts from the East and West were bought and sold in her specialised markets (suqs), the vitality of which inspired local artisans. Eventually, Mamluk supremacy began to decline due both to the Europeans' discovery of new trade routes around the Cape of Good Hope, and the expansion of Ottoman power, which finally terminated Mamluk rule in the early 10th / 16th century.



Towers of the Citadel of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi: Burg al-Ramla and Burg al-Haddad

Hegira 579 / AD 1184
Ayyubid
Cairo, Egypt



Mashaf (Qur'anic manuscript) of Barsbay

Hegira 825–41 / AD 1422–37
Mamluk
Islamic Museum, al-Aqsa Mosque /
al-Haram al-Sharif
Jerusalem



Madrasa al-Ashrafiyya

Hegira 887 / AD 1482
Mamluk
Jerusalem