

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Caliphate moves to Istanbul

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The Battle of Chaldiran (1514) changed the balance of power in West Asia in favor of the Ottomans. Thereafter, the Safavids were contained within Persia, while the Ottomans held sway in the eastern Mediterranean. Selim I did not press his advantage after the battle and pursue Shah Ismail. The harsh winter in Azerbaijan and the mountains of eastern Anatolia presented serious problems and there was unrest in his army. After briefly camping in Tabriz, Selim I withdrew. Soon thereafter, Shah Ismail returned to the city and re-occupied it.

The territories of West Asia lay where the mutual interests of three powerful dynasties—the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mamlukes converged. The mutual interactions among these three empires determined the course of further developments in Islamic history. The Mamlukes, a Turkish people who had settled in the Nile Delta, came to power around the year 1250, displacing the Ayyubids. Izzaddin Aybek, a Turkish general, was the first of the Mamluke rulers. We have come across his name in connection with his marriage to Shajarat al Durr, the first and only Muslim queen of Egypt (1249-1250).

The Mamlukes were European and Central Asian slaves who were captured by Viking raiders in north and eastern Europe and sold to Muslim merchants in the bazaars around the Caspian Sea. Brought to Muslim courts, they were trained in the military academies, given instruction in Islam, and inducted into the armed services. They proved to be the bravest and the most loyal of soldiers in the service of the Sultans. Since the army was the vehicle for advancement, many of the Mamlukes rose to be general officers, married princesses of the courts, and went on to establish their own dynasties.

Soon after the Mamlukes came to power in Egypt, Baghdad was captured and destroyed by Hulagu Khan (1258), and the Abbasid Caliphate came to an end. The Mongols trampled most of the Abbasid princes to death, but one of them escaped to Cairo. There he was welcomed as the last scion of the Abbasids and installed as the Caliph (1261). The Caliphate was the vortex of Islamic social, political and religious life. Only the caliphs could bestow legitimacy on a Sultan. And the caliphs were the theoretical custodians of the shrines in Mecca and Madina. The presence of the Caliphate in Cairo after 1261 bestowed enormous prestige on that city and on the Mamlukes who ruled from there.

A second element in the prestige of the Mamlukes was the resistance they offered the Mongols. It was the Mamlukes of Egypt under Sultan Baybars who brought a halt to the westward advance of the Mongols. Their victory over a combined Mongol-Crusader force at Ayn Jalut (1261) confirmed their pre-

eminent position as the protectors of Mecca and Madina. Similarly, it was the Mamlukes of Delhi, who stopped the advance of the Mongols at the River Indus, in a series of campaigns lasting fifty years (1220-1270).

By the year 1515, the Mamlukes had been in power in Cairo for over 250 years. Court intrigues and political infighting had sapped their energies, although their political control still extended over all of Egypt, the Sudan, Eritrea, eastern Libya, Arabia, Yemen, and Syria. It was in the northern reaches of the Syrian frontier that the mutual interests of the Ottomans, the Safavids and the Mamlukes overlapped and collided. After the Battle of Chaldiran, Sultan Selim proceeded to consolidate his hold on Kurdish territories. The district of Mosul fell to the Ottomans in 1516. The Ottomans reorganized these territories bestowing a large degree of autonomy on each district. This was most welcome to the Kurds who had chafed under the autocratic rule of the Aq Qyunlus. It was about this time that Ottoman conflicts with the Mamlukes began.

During his march to Persia, Sultan Selim had requested Alauddaulah, Mamluke Governor in northern Syria to refrain from giving aid to the Qazilbash who were harassing the advancing Ottoman contingents. Alauddaulah gave a polite reply but continued to provide covert aid to the Safavid Qazilbash. The Mamluke Sultan Kansuah al Ghauri had hoped that the Safavids would triumph over the Ottomans at the Battle of Chaldiran and had instructed Alauddaulah to assist the Persians. Unfortunately, for the Mamlukes, the outcome was the opposite. After his decisive victory at Chaldiran, Salim turned his attention to northern Syria. Alauddaulah was captured and slain. Even at this late stage, neither the Ottomans nor the Mamlukes wanted a final showdown. Envoys were exchanged and messages sent. Political maneuvers and military posturing continued. Kansuah hoped that a show of force on the frontier would deter any further Ottoman advance, since Salim was still concerned about a Safavid attack to the rear. He ordered his forces to begin a campaign on the frontier, and he himself advanced towards Syria in April 1516.

The Mamlukes were in a difficult economic and political position. The Portuguese, who sailed around the coast of Africa in 1498, had by the year 1515 devastated the Muslim trading centers in East Africa, occupied Goa (India), Hormuz (Persia) and the Straits of Malacca (Malaysia). The profitable spice trade, which had previously flowed through Cairo, was now in the hands of the Portuguese. With the loss of their eastern trade, revenues decreased and Egypt was in dire financial straits. To contain the Portuguese, the Mamlukes had commenced naval activity in the Red Sea and further out into the Arabian Sea, which caused a further drain on the treasury. When Kansuah advanced towards Syria, so concerned was he about the remaining state treasury that he took it with him and had it buried in Aleppo. The financial condition of Egypt was not unknown to Sultan Salim, who was undeterred by the Mamluke military posturing.

The two dynasties now moved towards a military collision. More envoys were exchanged seeking to avoid a confrontation but it was too late. Selim moved through Konya, reinforced his troops with contingents from Kurdistan, Rumilia and Trebizond. The two armies met at Marj Dabik on the outskirts of Aleppo in August 1516. Each side had about sixty thousand men under arms. The battle was joined in the classical pattern with the center, left flanks and right flanks facing each other. Two important factors gave the advantage to the Ottomans. First, they had total superiority in cannons and artillery. The Mamlukes, locked up as they were with the technology of the past, considered it unmanly to fight with a gun rather than a sword. Second, the Governor of Aleppo, Khair Beg, was in secret collusion with the Ottomans. In the thick of battle, he spread the rumor that Kansuah had been slain. The Mamluke lines broke, and the battle ended in total victory for the Ottomans.

Sultan Selim now pressed his advantage. Advancing deeper into Syria he occupied Damascus and Palestine. Word was sent to Tuman Bey, son of Kansuah, who had ascended the throne of Egypt, to submit to the rule of Istanbul. When the answer was negative, the Ottomans advanced towards the Mamluke capital. The Battle of Cairo was joined towards the end of January 1517. Tuman Bey and the Mamlukes fought desperately but were finally overcome. Tuman Bey himself was captured and was executed in Cairo the following April.

The conquest of Egypt meant that the Ottoman Empire now included Syria, Egypt, the Sudan and Arabia, in addition of all of Anatolia and southeastern Europe. It had become the pre-eminent land power in Eurasia. Most important, the Ottomans controlled the cities of Mecca and Madina, and were considered the custodians of the two cities throughout the Islamic world. To sanctify this newfound position, Sultan Selim had the last of the Abbasid caliphs brought to Istanbul where he was made to abdicate the title of caliph in favor of Salim. Thus, in the year 1517, the Caliphate, that singular pole around which much of Islamic history revolves, moved from Cairo to Istanbul. The Turkish Sultan was now the temporal as well as the religious leader of all Sunni Muslims and was duty bound to assist and protect Muslims around the globe. The Ottoman Sultans discharged this responsibility for 400 years until modern times, with exceptional devotion, zeal and dedication, often at a great sacrifice to the Turks themselves.

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