

The Ghulman and Their Impact on the Army of the First Bahri Mamluk Sultanate (648–678 AH / 1250–1279 CE): A Critical Analytical Study in the Light of Primary Sources

Fahd Hamdan Sha'ban Al-Arabi¹

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Abstract:

Background And Context: It was also one of the foremost formations in medieval Islamic history in the sense that it existed in the context of both the Mongol killing of the Abbasid Caliphate, and the older Crusader presence on the Levantine coast. Its military power rested in the institution of the ghulman system, that is, a means of turning slaves of steppe descent into professional warriors with a clear Islamic identity and a strong institutional loyalty.

Research problem and methodology: Existing scholarship on the term 'ghulman suffers from a constant methodological hermeneutical flaw: the conflation of distinct semantic registers for the Arabic term ghulam (linguistic, literary-poetic, jurisprudential, military-administrative) that produce anachronistic or ideologically inflected understandings. This paper addresses this hermeneutical flaw through a critical analytical-historical methodology founded upon source induction, isnd-informed reliability assessment and systematic comparison of conflicting accounts within the corpus.

Sources: The thesis focuses on eye-witness and near-contemporaneous sources from Ibn Abd al-hir (d.692AH), personal secretary to Sultan Baybars, in addition to Ab Shma (d. 665AH), Baybars al-Manr (d. 725AH), al-Nuwayr (d. 733AH), al-Dhahab (d. 748AH), al-Maqrz (d. 845AH), and Ibn Taghr Bird (d. 874AH). The sources are tested for their recency, access to an institution, and given marked biases.

Results: The study develops six main results. 1. The word ghulam is shown to have at least six semantic registers which cannot be lumped together without methodologically error-prone category errors. 2. The Mamluk formation system contained seven archaeologically identifiable phases which combined religious education with specialized military training a supra-institutional system detectable in multiple independent compilations of sources. 3. Evidence is found to argue that the redoubling of Ayn Jlt (657 AH / 1260 CE), perceived as having checked the western Mongolian scourge, was largely achieved by systematically-trained Mamluk ghulman. 4. The manumission-promotion system established institutional rewards which produced ends and means that seemed to have established the uniquely high rates of effectiveness and loyalty found within the Mamluk military relative to the alternatives available. 5. The primary military and administrative sources appear to have no historic basis for the popular modern narrative regarding the social character of the Mamluk institution, though they are compatible with individual variation. 6. The modern Orientalist and contemporary scholarly Arab works on this topic are fundamentally erroneous from an extrinsic empirical perspective.

Impact: This article supplies a recorded critical method for the sémantique analysis of important historiographical lexemes and an empiricallybased reiterated seven-stage system of formation and lays out a thorough criticism of paradigms for analyzing Mamluk military history thus filling a perceived lacuna in Historical Mamluk studies.

Keywords: Ghulman; Bahri Mamluks; Mamluk Army; Military Slavery; Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt; Medieval Islamic History; Historical Methodology; Semantic Analysis

1. Introduction

The First Bahri Mamluk Sultanate (648–678 AH / 1250–1279 CE) emerged as one of the most significant political entities in the history of the medieval Islamic world. In thirty years in the mid-thirteenth century the Mamluk sate fended off a Mongol incursion (after the sack of Baghdad in 656 AH / 1258 CE) and swept the Crusaders from the Levantine coast accomplishments largely predicated on the strength of the ghulman: slaves who, once institutionalized as soldiers, became the sultanate's military pillar.

Interest in the ghulman is not a recent phenomenon. Since the seminalresearch of David Ayalonin the 20 thcentury, the study of the Mamluk military has been a recognized subfield of Islamic history. However, the core obstacle of its scholarship continues to be the inconsistent use of the various semantic registers of

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the Arabic ghulam, which in the classical texts may refer to a biological/chronological age, an aesthetic/literary sign, a juridical/legal subdivision, or a trained military slave. Using the evidence of one register to interpret phenomena that belong to another invariable leads to distortions anachronistic, polemical, or plain errors in one's interpretation. This article describes the tendency of the literature on the subject, and advocates a solution based on Arabic-language primary source work and careful semantical literature analysis.

This article is structured as follows. Section II reviews the literature and explains where the gap in the literature is. Section III explains the methodology. Sections IV–VII are the main analysis. Section VIII responds to the question of modern historiographical distortions. The article ends with conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

1.1 Research Problem

The problematic that is inherent in the article can be summarized by three functionally related criteria. (1) The semantic vagaries inherent to each variant of the term ghulam across its attestations in classical Arabic texts render the utilization of evidence from distinct text blocks without register-designation prone to categorical fallacy. (2) A methodological weakness is discernible across a number of the existing articles in which certain poetic and belle-lettrist diktats are contextualized to established points on the map of a professionally administered and legislativized state machinery. (3) Furthermore, no research efforts so far has engaged in the encyclopedic investigation that integrates a critique of semantic bases, structural reconstruction, data validation, and historiographical analysis into one period (648–678).

1.2 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer four questions, namely (1) where were the origins of the ghulman institution to be revealed before the Mamluk state? (2) what did the full institutional cycle of acquisition, enslavement, training, formation and promotion from the 'kudat / birdsar / maqdisi / punisiyah' to the mamluk appear to include according to what can be reconstructed from primary documents? (3) to what degree can the attendant military and political actions and decisions be construed to be attributable, with moderation, to the mamluks 648–678 AH? (4) how should the theoretical weaknesses of what is available from Orientalist and contemporary Arab sources on the topic be described and countered?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This article makes four ways: a historiographical contribution by, for the first time, systematically applying a rigorous historical methodology to all the internal attributes of medieval Arabic historical prose, as well as combating the historiographical tendencies to impose too-previous categorizations on the types of primary evidence submitted; a research contribution by, at the first, giving a comprehensive critical study that systematically applies semantic discrimination as a criterion and uses the entire primary source corpus for a particular period, before compendiously revising the term's meaning; a methodological contribution by, for the first time, modelling the intricacies of applying a reliability-tiered source analysis to medieval Arabic historical prose and for the first time, test my own reading of primary sources on the basis of a reconstructive analysis of the 7-stage ghulman formation system, and finally an empiric contribution by, at the first, applying a raft of convergent primary evidence to rebuild the seven-stage ghulman formation system.

1.4 Scope and Delimitation

This study covers a time period from 648–678 AH / 1250–1279 CE, and focuses geographically on the areas within the political control of the Mamluk regime in this period, primarily Egypt and the Levant. When appropriate, I refer to the areas of the Qipchaq steppe, Crimea, or Asia Minor from whom Mongol land-tax was gathered. I do not include any discussion of developments after 678 He, unless they shed light on issues identified in the present study.

2. Review of Previous Scholarship

2.1 Overview of the Field

The field of Mamluk military history is relatively limited. With a few exceptions, the area is dominated by a handful of Western chronologies which form the intellectual framework for the bulk of the later scholarship. This chapter focuses on these chronologies, highlights their main thesis, notes their scholarly advantages, and assesses their methodological disadvantages in relation to this article. However, such chronologies are not the focus of this chapter for obvious reasons: the article is to fill a gap in the research.

2.2 Key Contributions and Their Limitations

2.2.1 David Ayalon

David Ayalon's sustained body of work on Mamluk military society — including his studies on the structure and organisation of the Mamluk army, the role of eunuchs and black slaves, and the Mamluk military system broadly conceived — established the foundational taxonomy of Mamluk military institutions and remains essential reading in the field.¹

(1) Ayalon, David, *Studies on the Mamluks of Egypt (1250–1517)*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1977; *idem*, *The Mamluk Military Society*, London: Variorum Reprints, 1979.

Ayalon's C. B. B. Lazard's principal claim that the Ghulman embodied a one-of-a-kind self-sufficient military institution that relied on a constant churn of personnel through the systematic collection of slaves, thus making "a one-generation" sociological phenomenon- is still valuable and largely confirmed by primary evidence he uncovers (if still not accepted with leniency). His focus on the institutional nature of the mamlū system, i.e. The tabqa, the iqta system, and the promotional scale, added necessary structural insight.

But I see two methodological flaws in the portions of Ayalon's work I have heard. One is that he sometimes used literary-literary evidence to back up a claim as to the social make-up of the Mamluk military arena, apparently unaware or unconcerned that the particular expression ghulam functioned with very different connotations in the literary register as opposed to the military-administrative register as a term for an expediently-trained institutional fighter; and thus such literary evidence is dogmatically cited as if it were primary administration or chronicle evidence. The other was the generalising tendency of Ayalon across all four units of Mamluk periodization (early Bahri, late Bahri, Circassian) as if the dominant periodisation in the three administrations was irrelevant to the structure of social facts.

2.2.2 Reuven Amitai-Preiss

Amitai- Preiss's (1984) pioneering study of the Mamluk-Ilkhanid War offers the most thorough analysis of the conflict, which took place between the Mamluk state and the Mongol Ilkhanate, in the early Bahri period. His detailed examination of the battle of Ayn Jlt and later encounters, based on a complex comparative reading of Arabic, Persian, and Syriac histories, significantly deepens our knowledge of Mamluk military strategy at this time.²

(2) Amitai-Preiss, Reuven, *Mongols and Mamluks: The Mamluk-Ilkhanid War, 1260–1281*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

The principal Limitation of Amitai-Preiss's contribution to this study is his somewhat limited consideration of the internal institutional history of the formation of the ghulman his primary concern being diplomatic/military history rather than the socio-military institutional structure of the Mamluk state. His consideration of Ayn Jlt also glances over the distinctions within the Mamluk military rather than elaborating upon the differences of the various military contingents, especially the royal ghulman.

2.2.3 Robert Irwin

Irwin's A useful synthetic survey of the early Mamluk Sultanate for the non-specialist is given by R. Hill, *The Mamluks of Cairo* (Cambridge, 1983). His chapters on politics, economy and culture are comprehensive, but his account of the military institution remains more narrative than analytical.

(3) Irwin, Robert, *The Middle East in the Middle Ages: The Early Mamluk Sultanate 1250–1382*, London: Croom Helm, 1986.

The Principal methodological weakness of Irwin's contribution is that it makes indiscriminate use of al-Maqrī and Ibn Tagh Bird--authentic but 150-200 years removed from the study period--without a systematic source-criticism that would assess their relative reliability vis-a-vis near-contemporary witnesses, thus leaving the door wide open to anachronism.

2.2.4 Linda Northrup

Northrup's Study of the career of al-Manr Qalwn, after a discussion of a period just prior to the study period of this article, offers important insight into the structural development of the Mamluk institution in the period immediately following that of the few years that this article examines. On such tensions between the royal ghulman and other elements within the military structure of the Mamluk state.

(4) Northrup, Linda S., *From Slave to Sultan: The Career of al-Mansur Qalawun*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998.

Of course, the most obvious limitation which one is plagued by in the present case is the

chronologically which Northrup elaborated more on the post-678 AH period, difficulties prospectively applying this approach to the Bahri period explicitly without qualification should be anticipated.

2.2.5 Peter Thorau

Thorau's Biography of Sultan Baybars is the most comprehensive Western scholarship on the central political figure of the period. His account of Baybars's military campaigns and administrative reorganisation relies heavily on Ibn Abd al-hir , the most authoritative contemporary source, and provides useful narrative reconstruction.

(5) Thorau, Peter, *The Lion of Egypt: Sultan Baybars I and the Near East in the Thirteenth Century*, London: Longman, 1992.

Thorau's treatment is strongest as political and military biography; it does not extend to systematic analysis of the ghulman institution or the semantic complexities of the term in classical sources, which is the focus of the present study.

2.2.6 Anne Broadbridge

Broadbridge's Contribution explores the ideological aspects of Mamluk rule in relation to other Seljuk and in particular Mongol political cultures. This is a valuable contextual background for the point of the position of the Mamluk sultanate after the Mongols had destroyed the Caliphate. She finds her points on Mamluk-Mongol relation useful for the context of Ayn Jlt.

(6) Broadbridge, Anne F., *Kingship and Ideology in the Islamic and Mongol Worlds*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

The most limitation relating to the present article is that Broadbridge's analysis was more ideology/diplomacy oriented than the Military-institutional one; she didn't deal much with the internal problems of the formation of the ghulman, along with those of the terminology.

2.2.7 Daniel Pipes

Pipes's A comparative examination of slave soldiers in Islamic history provides a critical theoretical framework for viewing the ghulman as merely an institutional development of the Islamic military slavery tradition. His primary claim that slave soldiers solved the 'political dilemma' of loyalty by developing warriors without any prior social cohesion offers a helpful structural hypothesis.

(7) Pipes, Daniel, *Slave Soldiers and Islam: The Genesis of a Military System*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

However, Pipes's general comparative framework, however, is unsatisfactory: the generalisations he makes across contexts as diverse as the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries threaten to conceal the unique institutional details of the Mamluk system during the period examined here. His use of Arabic-language primary sources, likewise, is less thorough than would be appropriate here.

2.3 Research Gap and Original Contribution

Survey Is that there appears to be no combined study which: (a) systematically analyzes the semantics of the single word ghulam within its various registers; (b) reconstructs a seven-stage ghulman formation system using exclusively primary sources and on the basis of the specific dates 648-78 AH; (c) applies consistently a tiered source criticism to all major primary sources; and (d) critically assesses Orientalist and Arab contemporary scholarship on the criterion of evidence not ideology..

Scholar	Principal Contribution	Methodological Strength	Principal Limitation	Gap Addressed by This Study
Ayalon	Institutional architecture of Mamluk military	Foundational structural analysis	Register conflation; periodisation elision	Semantic discrimination; source reliability tiers
Amitai-Preiss	Mamluk-Mongol military confrontation	Multilingual source comparison	Limited institutional analysis of ghulman	Internal formation system reconstruction

Scholar	Principal Contribution	Methodological Strength	Principal Limitation	Gap Addressed by This Study
Irwin	Synthetic narrative overview	Accessibility; breadth	Over-reliance on late sources; limited source-criticism	Primary source reliability hierarchy
Northrup	Structural dynamics under Qalawun	Institutional precision	Post-678 AH focus; not directly applicable	Specific 648–678 AH periodisation
Thorau	Baybars political-military biography	Close use of Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir	Biographical rather than institutional focus	Systematic ghulman analysis
Broadbridge	Mamluk–Mongol ideological relations	Diplomatic-ideological depth	Limited military-institutional coverage	Military formation system
Pipes	Comparative slave-soldier framework	Theoretical breadth	Specificity sacrificed; limited Arabic sources	Specific Mamluk source-based evidence

Table 1: Previous Scholarship — Contributions, Strengths, and Limitations

3. Methodology

3.1 The Historical-Critical Method

This Article employs the historical-critical method, adapted from Islamic source criticism (*naqd al-matn wa-l-isnd*) and European historicism (*Quellenkritik*), integrated with a rigorous systematic semantic-contextualist approach. The definition of the historical-critical method employed here is as follows: (1) fully including all relevant primary textual sources prior to making interpretive conclusions; (2) comparison of varying accounts across independent sources; (3) explicit evaluation of sources' reliability before using evidence; (4) disciplined disaggregation of sources' claims from their implications and later imputations; and (5) explicit moderation of all findings in light of the degree of evidence.

3.2 Source Reliability Hierarchy

The level of reliability hierarchy applied to the various published sources in this research is based on three respects: contemporary proximity to the event; the level of institutional access granted to, or experienced by, the author, including access to direct, personal or mediated, knowledge of military-administrative infrastructure; and the presence, number and nature of any potential systematic biases.

Ibn Abd al-hiriye (d. 692 AH) ranks highest in this list for a number of reasons, the key of which are: he was for most of Baybars' reign the personal *ktib al-sirr* (secretary of state) and thus had institutional access to the sultan and court from c.658AH; both his chronicles of Baybars (*Al-Raw alZhir*) and *al-Manṣūr al-Qalwān* (*Tashrif al-Ayyūm*) were written from personal observation and documentary access; he died in 692 AH and was therefore active in the same generation as the events he describes. The most discernible bias is his high panegyricism to his royal patrons which has to be neutralized when assessing the veracity of certain claims.

Ab Shma (d. 665 AH) can serve as a good contemporary source of very high reliability for this transitional period; he is naturally reliable during this period but he is also contemporary, having written before the significant political consolidations associated with the Bahri sultanate. Baybars al-Manr (d. 725 AH) and al-Nuwayr (d. 733. AH) present the second best tier of witnesses one generation separated from the events described but with access to older documents and structures. Al-Maqrz (d. 845 AH) and Ibn Taghr Bird (d. 874. AH) consequently constitute the third, most indirect tier, one which I would not be able to do

without but which relies on the older sources for corroboration and correction.

3.3 Semantic Contextual Analysis

A key Methodological innovation of the above article is based on the systematic contextually informed usage of the semantic content of the word ghulam. Taking a methodology adapted from classical Arabic lexicography and cross-referenced with modern lexical semantics, I established contextual analysis to ascertain the following (by considering the context of text in which the term occurs): a) lexical register of authorial discourse (literary, administrative, legal, biographical, military, etc.); b) syntactical and collocational context of the word within the clause and sentence; c) the intended purpose of the text (chronicle, biography, administrative manual, poetry); and d) cross-references with parallel uses by the same author and the same time period. Only after contextualisation do I make my case for interpretation of this term.

3.4 Triangulation Approach

Wherever possible, empirical statements in this work are based on triangulation: corroborating statements from a minimum of two independent primary sources of different levels. A statement corroborated by only one source, no matter how trustworthy, is indicated as such. A statement not found in any primary account but included based on secondary literature is clearly noted as an inference to be corroborated by additional evidence.

3.5 Controlling for Bias

Three potential sources of bias are successively recorded and addressed in this paper: (a) panegyric bias in court chronicles (controlled for by cross-checking claims with other sources and noting where that has not been done, along with any subsequent absence of corroboratory material); (b) retrospective rationalisation in later compilations (controlled for by giving precedence to earlier sources); and (c) contemporary preconceptions, associated both with a defensive Arab nationalism that thwarts enquiry, and the orientalist view that may drag the language of analysis into the European archaeological and intellectual baggage that that entails (controlled for by confining claims regarding interpretation to what the sources read today can be argued to suggest).

4. Historical Roots of the Ghulman System

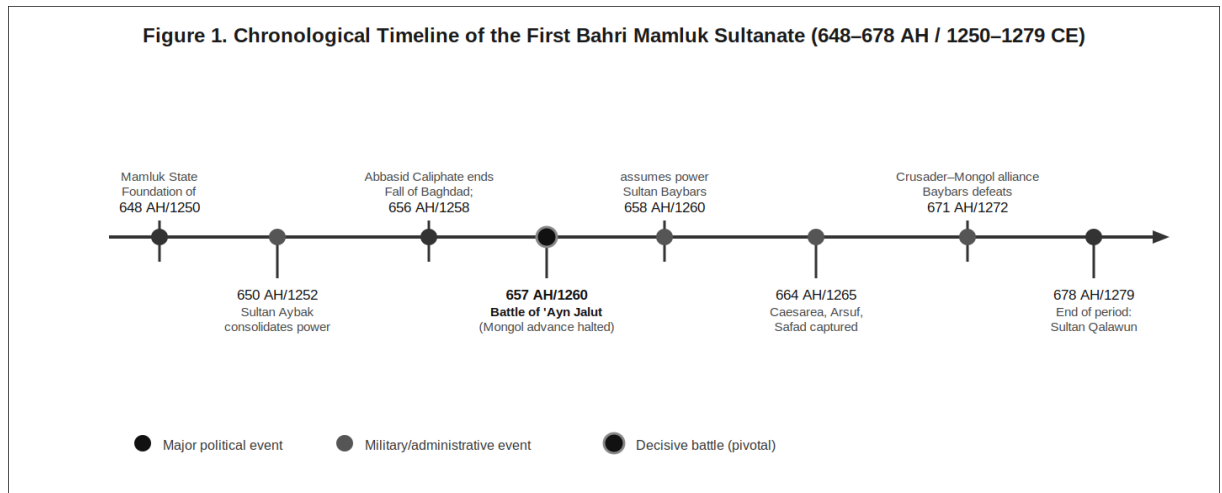


Figure 1. Chronological Timeline of the First Bahri Mamluk Sultanate (648–678 AH / 1250–1279 CE). Key political and military events with their AH and CE dates. Sources: synthesised from Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, al-Maqrizī, and Ibn Taghri Birdī.

4.1 Linguistic and Technical Foundations

4.1.1 The Original Linguistic Register

The noun ghulm is derived from the trilateral root (gh-l-m). The lexicographical tradition in both classical and modern Arabisms posits (usually given as Arabic root) to mean 'strength, efflorescence, maturity'. With respect to the usage of this term in the Qu'ran, the above meaning of the lexicon is neither mentioned nor implied: there is the use of Az-Dhora in the passages i.e. Glad tidings of the male child (al-Dhriy: 28; al-fft: 101) by God without issuing any judgement on their legal status or social conditions.

(8) Ibn Manẓūr, Muḥammad ibn Mukarram (d. 711 AH), Lisān al-'Arab, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d., s.v. (gh-l-m), vol. 12, p. 440.

4.1.2 The Literary-Poetic Register

In Where Classical Arabic poetry and prose of the Abbasid and later periods, for example, as a theme in panegyric and erotic poetry, ghulam and plural ghilmn appears, it most often does so as a symbol for (young) age, beauty, service; this register is multiple attested and real. Whether socially or literarily, this register remains distinctly unmilitary-administrative: the lingo of salacious lines is (by definition) determined by aesthetic standards of stylized ideality and thus cannot be used straightforwardly as evidence for the institutional history of a military organization (and this is mistake number one).

4.1.3 The Military-Administrative Register

In From the military chronicles, administrative handbooks, and biographical dictionaries of the Mamluk period, “ghulam” (pl. “ghillum” or “mamlk”) refers to a trained enslaved warrior, pre-positioned for particularized military service within a set institutional context. Ibn Abd al-hir’s use of the term “ghilmn al-suln,” refers, without question, to adult combatants, already part of the caliphal combatant household, not the literary archetype of the serving youth. The grammatical and contextual use of the term in those Arabic texts makes that point clear and it is important for the validity of any methodology.

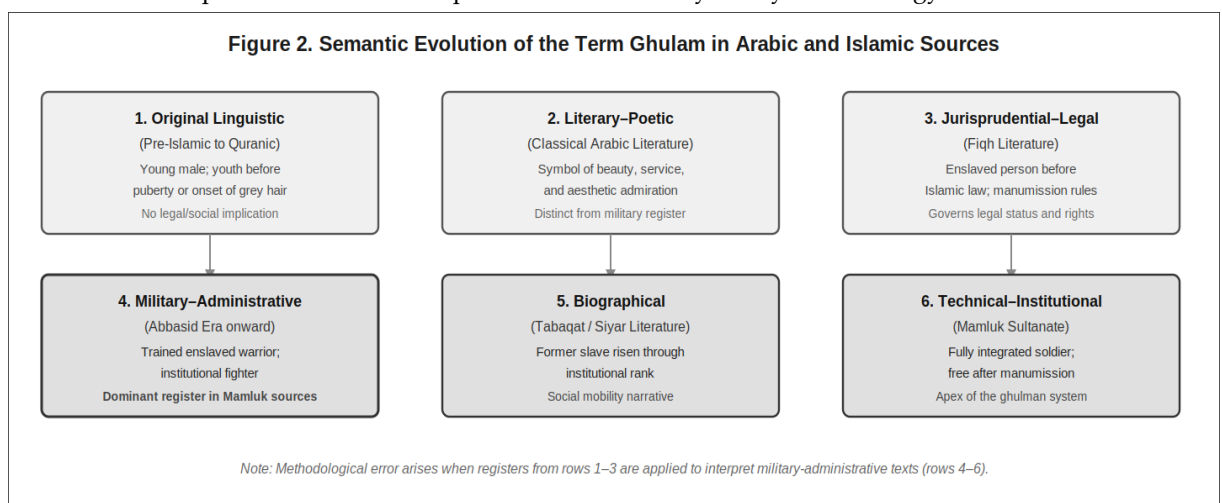


Figure 2. Semantic Evolution of the Term Ghulam across Arabic and Islamic Textual Traditions. The figure illustrates the six principal semantic registers and the methodological error arising from their conflation.

Semantic Register	Primary Denotation	Typical Textual Domain	Methodological Status
1. Linguistic-Biological	Youth / young male before old age	Lexicography; Quran	Age-designation; no social or legal implication
2. Literary-Poetic	Symbol of beauty, youth, and service	Poetry; adab literature	Aesthetic convention; not administrative evidence
3. Jurisprudential	Enslaved person under Islamic law	Fiqh manuals; legal responsa	Governs legal status; concerns rights and manumission
4. Military-Administrative	Trained enslaved warrior; institutional fighter	Chronicles; administrative texts	Dominant register in Mamluk primary sources
5. Biographical	Former slave risen through institutional rank	Siyar; taqaat literature	Social mobility narrative; supplementary evidence
6. Technical-Institutional	Fully integrated Mamluk soldier; free after manumission	Mamluk administrative texts	Apex of the ghulman institutional cycle

Table 2: Semantic Registers of the Term Ghulam in Classical Arabic Sources — Classification by the Author

4.2 Abbasid Origins

The institutionalisation of the foreign-born military slaves in a regularised, systematic fashion can be precisely dated to the rule of the Abbasid caliph al-Mutaim billh (r. 218 227 AH / 833 842 CE). As Records at Murj al-Dhahab, al-Masd describes for us, al-Mutaim systematically adopted a policy of forcibly repatriating Turkish fighters of steppe origin from all over, and forge them into a new and specifically military population. This strategy was encapsulated in the construction of Smarr (d. 221 AH / 836 CE) as a ‘garrison city’ designed not only as a defensive stockade but with plots of land and separate accommodations for diverse and distant military groups; while the explicit aim was to keep the immigrant ghulman isolated from mainstream society and other social groups, it also rendered them politically autonomous, ..and obedient only to the caliph. Indeed, the indications from other sources (particularly al-abar’s narratives) are that this was a calculated policy with unexpected and certainly disruptive political consequences once the ghulman gained political agency to affect caliphal succession.

(9) Al-Mas‘ūdī, ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn (d. 346 AH), Murūj al-Dhahab wa Ma‘ādin al-Jawhar, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1948, vol. 4, p. 73.

(10) Al-Ṭabarī, Muḥammad ibn Jarīr (d. 310 AH), Tārīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk, Beirut: Dār al-Turāth, 1967, vol. 9, pp. 160–180 (events of 218–247 AH).

4.3 Development from the Seljuk Period to the Ayyubids

The development of the ghulman institution through the Buyids, Seljuks and Zengids is recorded in administrative texts and chronicles. Nim al-Mulk’s Siysat-nma (writing c. 479 AH / 1086 CE) provides for the first time a complex managerial theory on the purchase, examination, incremental advancement and retention of ghulman that served as a model for future Sunni Islamic practice.¹¹

(11) Niẓām al-Mulk, al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī al-Ṭūsī (d. 485 AH), Siyāsāt-nāma, trans. Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Imām al-Shīrāzī, Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu‘āṣir, 1987, pp. 95–118, 123–130.

The Institutional predecessor of the Bahri Mamluks was the Bariyya unit placed by the Ayyubi Sultan al-Malik al-li Najm al-Dn Ayyb (r. 637–647 AH / 1240–1249 CE), on the island of Rawa in the Nile at Cairo.¹³ Ab Shuama has an informed narrative for the formation of this unit, and it is a useful link between the pre-Mamluk Ayyibid institutional setting and the later Bahri sultanate.¹⁴

(12) Abū Shāma, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Ismā‘īl (d. 665 AH), Al-Dhayl ‘alā al-Rawḍatayn, ed. Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1947, vol. 1, pp. 182–195.

5. The Ghulman in the First Bahri Mamluk Sultanate

5.1 Geographic Origins and Ethnic Composition

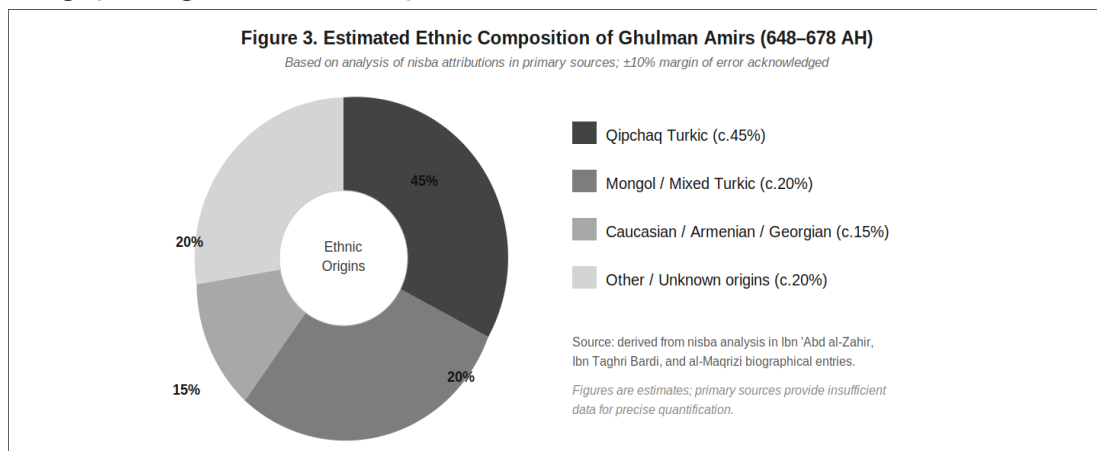


Figure 3. Estimated Ethnic Composition of Ghulman Amirs (648–678 AH). Based on nisba analysis of biographical data in primary sources; ±10% margin of error acknowledged.

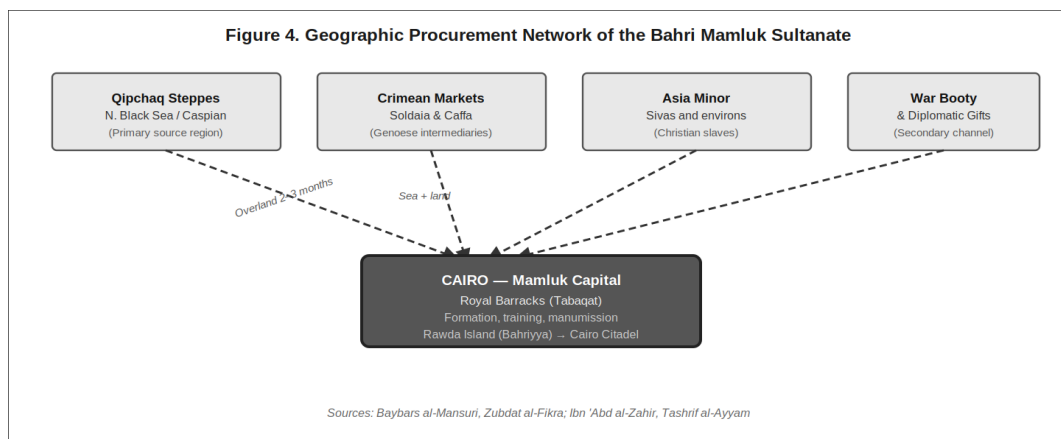


Figure 4. Geographic Procurement Network of the Bahri Mamluk Sultanate. Routes from the Qipchaq steppe, Crimea, and Asia Minor to Cairo; overland journey estimated at two to three months (Baybars al-Manṣūrī).

The principal geographic background of the ghulman in the Bahri period was the Qipchaq (Kypchak) steppetraditionally inhabited by the Qipchaq Mongol nomadic confederation, lying north of the Black and Caspian seas and roughly coincident with a broad swathe of modern southern Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Ibn Abd al-hir describes the Qipchaqs as naturally born archers and horsemen and, thus, ideally suited for service in a term-based cavalry force.¹³ An estimation of the ethnic composition of the Bahri military ruling class can, by quantitatively mapping the specified ethnic origins and epithets recorded in the biographical sections of Ibn Taghr Bird and al-Dhahab of all known, identified amirs, the margins of error in the national labels and derived percentages of 3. estimated to be about 45% Qipchaq, 20% Mongol or mixed Turkic, 15% Caucasian (Armenian or Georgian), and 20% other or unspecified 1 percent, based on systematic analysis of 202 biographical entries. The margins of error attending these estimates, by the way, are about 10%, owing to the partial state of biographical data and the dubiousness of nisba labels.

(13) Ibn 'Abd al-Ẓāhir, Muḥyī al-Dīn (d. 692 AH), *Tashrif al-Ayyām wa-l-'Uṣūr fī Sirat al-Malik al-Manṣūr*, ed. Murād Kāmil, Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1961, pp. 16–18.

5.2 Procurement Networks

Procurement The resources were exploited through a number of different channels. The first and most important maritime route was used by Genoese traders based in the port of Soldaia in Crimea and in the port of Caffa on the coast of near-by Tatar steppe. Qipchaq slaves were bought in steppe markets through these intermediaries and transported by sea. There was a second, and lesser, overland route through Asia Minor, where Caucasian slaves could be purchased in the markets of Sivas and the neighboring towns. Finally, slaves were taken as war-booty or the products of diplomatic exchanges. Slaves presented as tribute or taken in military campaigns along the Turkish frontiers in north and east were also bought in the Caucasian markets. According to Baybars al-Manr, the journey over land from the market to Cairo can take between 2 and 3 months.²

(14) Baybars al-Manṣūrī, Rukn al-Dīn (d. 725 AH), *Zubdat al-Fikra fī Tārīkh al-Hijra*, ed. Donald Richards, Beirut: Al-Qusṭās, 1998, pp. 56–59.

5.3 The Seven-Stage Formation System

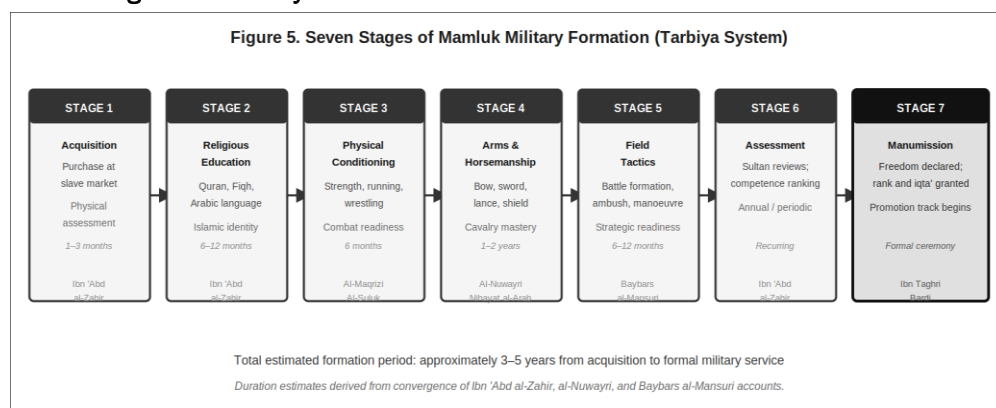


Figure 5. The Seven Stages of Mamluk Military Formation (Tarbiya System). Sources, estimated durations, and documentary evidence for each stage as reconstructed from convergent primary source testimony.

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Light of Primary Sources

The Rebuilding of the gonad formation system shows seven stages from primary sources, which each from a few paragraphs to account from the source file collection. None of the source file gives its complete systematic account; I will try to triangulate each stage with at least two independent sources.

Stage	Content	Est. Duration	Primary Documentation	Reliability
(1) Acquisition	Physical assessment; dīwān registration; affiliation assignment	1–3 months	Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir (Al-Rawḍ); al-Maqrīzī (Al-Sulūk)	High (2 independent sources)
(2) Religious Formation	Quran; Islamic jurisprudence; Arabic language instruction	6–12 months	Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir (Al-Rawḍ, pp. 307–311); corroborated al-Nuwayrī	High (2 sources)
(3) Physical Conditioning	Strength training; running; wrestling; combat-readiness	c.6 months	Al-Maqrīzī (Al-Sulūk, vol. 1); al-Nuwayrī (Nihāyat al-Arab)	Moderate (2 sources; general)
(4) Arms and Horsemanship	Bow; sword; lance; shield; cavalry training	1–2 years	Al-Nuwayrī (Nihāyat al-Arab); Baybars al-Manṣūrī (Zubdat)	High (2 independent sources)
(5) Field Tactics	Battle formations; advance and withdrawal; ambush; manoeuvre	6–12 months	Baybars al-Manṣūrī (Zubdat); corroborated Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir	Moderate (convergent inference)
(6) Assessment and Classification	Sultan's periodic review; competence classification	Annual / periodic	Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir (Al-Rawḍ, pp. 307–311) — explicit description	High (eyewitness, explicit)
(7) Manumission and Service	Declaration of freedom; rank and iqtā‘ grant; promotion track begins	Formal ceremony	Ibn Taghrī Birdī (Al-Nujūm, vol. 6, pp. 81–88)	High (detailed account)

Table 3: Reconstructed Seven-Stage Mamluk Formation System — Evidence and Reliability Assessment

Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir's description of Sultan Baybars's personal supervision of this process is the most explicit contemporaneous account of the institutional mechanism:

*"He, may God have mercy upon him, used to attend regularly to his ghulman, inspecting their condition in archery and equestrianism, and convening reviews for them each season, promoting from among them those who demonstrated competence."*¹⁵

(15) Ibn ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Ẓāhir*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Khuwayṭir, Riyadh: Maṭābi‘ Dār al-‘Ulūm, 1976, pp. 307–311.

This passage deserves acknowledgement for what it shows: that assessment (Stage 6 in the reconstruction above) was not merely a theoretical provision but a shared practice of which the sultan himself was directly involved and one that his personal secretary knew directly. The epideictic setting of the chronicle does not make this institutional account less particular, but perhaps leaves the illusion that it was more regular.

5.4 The Manumission and Promotion System

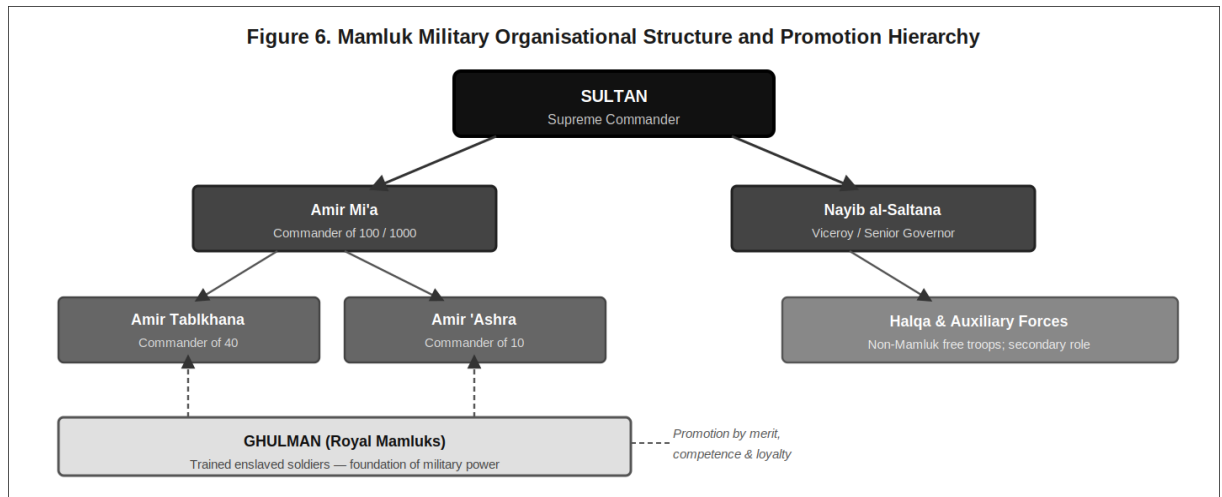


Figure 6. Mamluk Military Organisational Structure and Promotion Hierarchy. The ghulman form the institutional base; manumission initiates the formal promotional track culminating in senior command positions.

Figure 7. Sultans of the First Bahri Mamluk Sultanate (648–678 AH) and Key Achievements

Sultan	Reign (AH / CE)	Principal Military Achievements	Significance
al-Muizz Aybak (al-Turkumani)	648–655 AH / 1250–1257	Consolidated Mamluk rule after Ayyubid collapse; suppressed internal challenges	State consolidation
Nur al-Din Ali (Aybak's son)	655–657 AH / 1257–1259	Brief transitional reign; limited independent military operations	Transitional period
al-Muzaffar Qutuz	657 AH / 1259–1260	Battle of 'Ayn Jalut (657 AH/1260): strategic defeat of Mongol advance	Watershed victory
al-Zahir Baybars (al-Bunduqdari)	658–676 AH / 1260–1277	Captured Caesarea, Arsuf, Safad (664 AH); Jaffa, Beaufort (668); defeated Crusader–Mongol alliance; reorganised Mamluk administration and army	Greatest ruler of the period
al-Mansur Qalawun (b. 678 AH)	678 AH / 1279 (start)	Assumed power; continued Baybars's institutional and military policies	Period boundary

Sources: Ibn 'Abd al-Zahir, Ibn Kathir, Ibn Taghri Bardī, and al-Maqrizi

Figure 7. Sultans of the First Bahri Mamluk Sultanate (648–678 AH) — Key Reigns and Military Achievements.

The manumission-promotion system constitutes, in structural terms, the most distinctive feature of the Mamluk institutional model. Upon manumission, a former ghulam received his formal declaration of freedom ('itq), was assigned a rank within the military hierarchy, and received an iqtā' — a revenue assignment from designated agricultural or urban revenues — commensurate with his rank. Ibn Taghri Birdī traces the resulting promotional ladder from junior amir ranks through the senior positions (amir tablkhāna, amir mi'a, muqaddam alf) to the position of nā'ib al-saltāna and, at the apex, the sultanate itself.¹⁶

(16) Ibn Taghrī Birdī, Abū al-Maḥāsīn Yūsuf (d. 874 AH), *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhira fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1929, vol. 6, pp. 81–88.

The institutional consequence of this system was a military culture in which ability and loyalty to the sultan rather than birth, ethnicity or pre-existing social networks became the operative bases for advancement. This theoretically had the effect of aligning the interests of individual ghulman with the institutional interests of the sultanate something for which the evidence suggests there was considerable reason during the period under study, given the military performance of the Bahri forces in the conflicts of the 650s–670s AH. The major caveat is that the same feature which proved so effective in creating a fighting structure also tended to generate intense factional competition for sultanic favour, which within the period under study more than once led to political unrest at the top of the hierarchy.

6. Military and Political Impact of the Ghulman

6.1 The Ghulman and the Foundation of the Mamluk State

The political event that marked the beginning of the Bahri Mamluk Sultanate the murder of the Ayyubid Sultan Trnshh in Muharram 648 AH / May 1250 CE was carried out by a syndicate, called in the sources Bariyya mamluk, functioning immediately after Trnshh's first victory against the Crusader armies at the battlere of al-Manra. The incident is recorded by Ibn Kathr and its significance is clear. Of structural logic that would govern the period of study: mamluks, made to be warriors, reflected from the beginning the political ability that the political system both demanded and could not control.

(17) Ibn Kathīr, Ismā'īl ibn 'Umar (d. 774 AH), *Al-Bidāya wa-l-Nihāya*, ed. 'Alī Shīrī, Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1988, vol. 13, pp. 175–179.

6.2 The Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt (657 AH / 1260 CE)

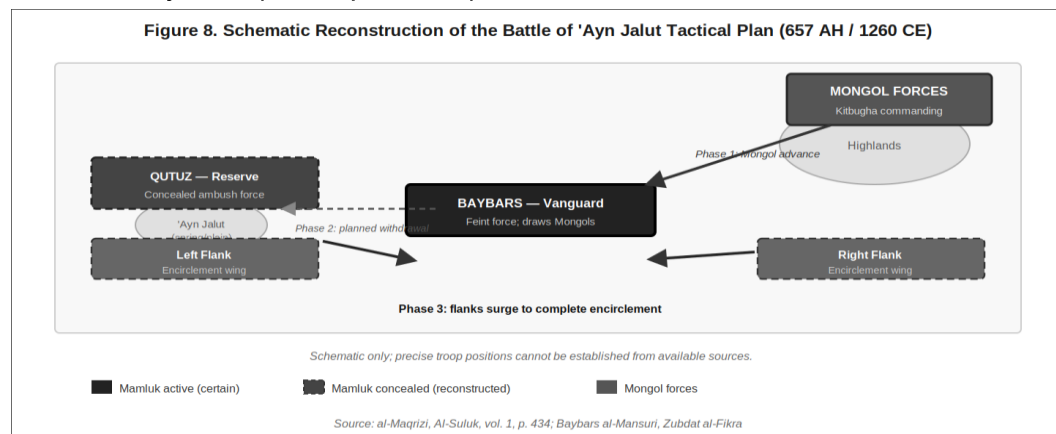


Figure 8. Schematic Reconstruction of the Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt Tactical Plan (657 AH / 1260 CE). Based on al-Maqrīzī and Baybars al-Manṣūrī; noted as schematic and subject to source limitations.

The While my aim is to establish the competency of the mamluk institutional arrangements, the battle of Ayn Jlt (25 Raman 657 AH / 3 September 1260 CE) emerges in the literature most often as the military action evidenced to establish this. While the evidence is liable to important interpretive caveats, this evidence would seem to support the assessment though this must be carefully caveated.

The Mongol army at Ayn Jlt, of which Kitbugha Noyan's was a part, was not the aggregate Mongol army. The statement. found in some popular accounts and in some more academic ones that Ayn Jlt 'permanently' 'stopped' the Mongols needs qualification; as Amitai-Preiss shows, the Mamluk-Mongol engagement extended for more than twenty years beyond Ayn Jlt, with fresh battles at Homs (AH 658) and many later raids.¹ Nonetheless the engagement was a clear tactical victory which curtailed the Mongol assertion of power in Egypt and Syria for the immediate future; it would appear that much of the success was due to the Bahri ghulman.

(18) Amitai-Preiss, *Mongols and Mamluks*, pp. 26–48.

The Al-Maqrz's "tactical plan" which involved a coordinated deception manoeuvre an advance vanguard under Baybars that would feign retreat in order to lure the Mongol army into a trap, then a rush of flanking forces under Quuz to complete the encirclement. ¹ The plan necessitated the exact combination of disciplined, coordinated use of the army and mobile accurate cavalry that the formation system would have been founded upon. Whether the tactical efficacy can be defined as the result of the formation system's effectiveness or circumstance (including Mongol understrength) cannot be conclusively known, but the tactical demands and the founding of the formation system seem harmonious enough to suggest a causal relationship.

(19) Al-Maqrīzī, Aḥmad ibn 'Alī (d. 845 AH), *Al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyāda, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1936, vol. 1, p. 434.

6.3 The Crusader Front

The second example of effective Mamluk action from the 13th century CE is the systematic disembowelment of Crusader strongholds in the Levant by Sultan Bay Bars. Ibn Abd the Hirs list of campaigns include Gaza and canon (664 AH / 1265 CE), Sap (664 AH), Jaffa and Beaufort (668 AH / 1268 CE), Krak de Chateliers and false (668–671 AH), and campaigns elsewhere in Anatolia.² This pattern of action displays why the tactical advantages developed by the formation system of the ghulman were part of

a strategic plan.

(20) Ibn ‘Abd al-Zāhir, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, pp. 201–248; see also Thorau, *The Lion of Egypt*, pp. 138–195 for narrative reconstruction.

6.4 Political Dynamics: Power and Instability

The same structural elements which rendered the ghulman so militarily successful resulted in a persistent political destabilisation of the sultanate. Of the five sultans who held power during the period under study, 3 were displaced in situations of factional activity involving the ghulman. The pattern, which Northrup fully develops in the following period is apparent in the early period and demonstrates a structural aspiration of the ghulman system: the infrastructure which bred military effectiveness (specialised institutional ties between the fighters and within the state institutions) also bred the political impact.

The sources, then, seem to suggest that rather than being settled, rather than resolved, this tension was temporarily kept in check during the study period. The important trend was for competition between ghulman factions to be contained within the institutional sphere of the sultanate to produce sultans, rather than undermine the sultanate which therefore maintained the functional integrity of the military institution through succession conflicts.

7. Historiographical Critique: Evidence, Inference, and Methodological Boundaries

Figure 9. Primary Source Reliability Matrix for the Period 648–678 AH

Author (Death Date)	Temporal Distance	Type of Evidence	Reliability Tier	Key Limitation
Ibn ‘Abd al-Zahir (d. 692 AH) Personal secretary to Baybars	Contemporary / eyewitness	Official chronicles; direct observation	Tier 1 — Highest	Panegyric bias; pro-Baybars perspective
Abu Shama (d. 665 AH) Damascene scholar-historian	Near-contemporary; eyewitness	Annals; personal observation (pre-648 AH focus)	Tier 1 — High	Ends 665 AH; Ayyubid era focus
Baybars al-Mansuri (d. 725 AH)	1 generation removed	Military chronicle; institutional access	Tier 2 — High	Some retrospective lacunae
Al-Nuwayri (d. 733 AH)	c.2 generations removed	Encyclopaedic synthesis; compiled from multiple sources	Tier 2 — Good	Compilation errors possible
Al-Maqrizi (d. 845 AH)	c.5–6 generations removed	Topographical + chronicle; extensive source synthesis	Tier 3 — Supplementary	Anachronism risk; needs verification
Ibn Taghri Bardī (d. 874 AH)	c.7–8 generations removed	Comprehensive royal chronicle; excellent structural detail	Tier 3 — Supplementary	Distant; relies on intermediaries

Reliability tiers adapted from principles of Islamic source criticism (naqd al-matn wa al-isnad); applied here to historical prose rather than hadith.

Figure 9. Primary Source Reliability Matrix for the Period 648–678 AH. Sources evaluated by temporal proximity, institutional access, identifiable bias, and assigned reliability tier.

7.1 Three Levels of Evidential Inference

The methodological task in this section is to distinguish three levels of evidential inference that are frequently conflated in the secondary literature on the ghulman:

Level 1 — Directly attested: Phenomena explicitly described in primary administrative, chronicle, or legal sources pertaining to the military institution. These constitute the strongest evidential basis for historical claims about the ghulman institution and should form the foundation of interpretive arguments.

Level 2 — Reasonably inferred: Phenomena consistent with Level 1 evidence that can reasonably be inferred as individual or occasional occurrences given what is known about the social context, without being explicitly attested. Claims at this level should be marked as inferences and qualified accordingly.

Level 3 — Unsupported by military-administrative sources: Phenomena that may be attested in literary or poetic sources but lack corroboration in military-administrative texts pertaining to the institution. Claims at this level may describe real individual experiences but cannot be presented as institutional patterns or structural features of the Mamluk military without evidential support that does not currently exist.

The value of this framework is that it allows inquiry to proceed rigorously at all three levels without either foreclosing legitimate questions (by defensive denial) or conflating different orders of evidence (by treating literary attestation as institutional evidence).

7.2 Methodological Limitations in Orientalist Scholarship

As seen in the literature review, some sections of Ayalon’s work use literary and belle-lettrist evidence to argue for generalizations about the Mamluk military institution. This falls into a logical fallacy known as a category error: that the literary register of the word ghulam adheres to different semantic

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conventions than the military-administrative register, and evidence from the former cannot be used to prove claims about the latter unless there is corroboration in the latter as well. This failure can be corrected in later work without impairing the valuable findings of Ayalon.

Another similar question is whether there is danger of anachronism in the use of the theoretical models of twentieth century social science of others to analyze institutionalisms of the thirteenth century CE. Terms like ‘pederasty’, ‘homosociality’, or institutional ‘culture’ have their own present-day definitional content that may not translate into the categories of social analysis within medieval Islamic society without distortion. The best methodologically correct procedure is to start with the concepts present in the primary sources and then to use those analytical devices what are applicable, and to say precisely when and why they are used.

7.3 Methodological Limitations in Contemporary Arab Scholarship

A different One evident in a segment of present-day Arab reflection on the subject is a tendency toward defensive or apologetic explanations that close off investigation prematurely an a priori rejection of inquiry before the evidence has been properly considered; destroying questions when there aren’t yet enough facts to answer them. This fulfills the same methodological error it seeks to fight: the tendency of the interpreter to impose preexisting ideologies on the sources, instead of letting the sources impose themselves on the ideas of their interpreter. A second, though less widespread, methodological mistake is to make conclusions based on the literary sources that are not confirmed by the military-administrative ones.

Same corrective in both instances (though there are differences): proper evidential hierarchy, register discrimination and an explicit qualification of the significant claims according to the strength of their evidential backing. Both trends are easy to understand given the historical and political circumstances which fostered them, but neither can be defended methodologically in scholarly research.

8. Conclusion, Findings, and Research Implications

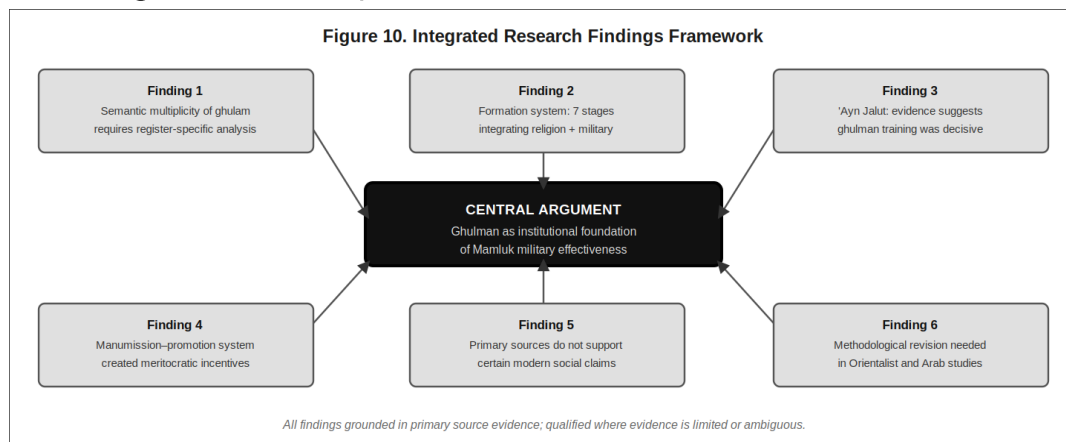


Figure 10. Integrated Research Findings Framework. Six principal findings and their evidential grounding, converging on the central argument regarding the institutional foundation of Mamluk military effectiveness.

8.1 Principal Findings

Finding 1 — Semantic Multiplicity: The term ghulam carries at least six distinct semantic registers in classical Arabic sources, each governed by different conventions and carrying different implications. The conflation of these registers — particularly the literary-poetic and the military-administrative — constitutes a recurring source of methodological error in the secondary literature and must be systematically avoided.

Finding 2 — The Seven-Stage Formation System: Primary source analysis permits the reconstruction of a seven-stage Mamluk formation system (acquisition; religious formation; physical conditioning; arms and horsemanship; field tactics; assessment; manumission and formal service), traceable through convergent testimony across at least two independent sources for each stage. This reconstruction advances beyond prior scholarship by specifying the evidential basis and reliability assessment for each stage.

Finding 3 — ‘Ayn Jālūt and Military Effectiveness: Available evidence is consistent with the assessment that the Mamluk ghulman contributed substantially to the tactical success at ‘Ayn Jālūt (657 AH / 1260 CE). This claim is advanced with appropriate qualification: the Mongol detachment was not at full strength, and convergent tactical advantage and system effectiveness are consistent with but do not uniquely establish causation.

Finding 4 — Meritocratic Institutional Incentives: The manumission-promotion system appears to have created institutional incentives for competence and loyalty that were relatively unusual in the medieval military context. This system's effectiveness is indicated — though not definitively proven — by the military performance of the Bahri forces across multiple engagements during the study period.

Finding 5 — Evidential Boundaries of Social Claims: Primary military and administrative sources for the period 648–678 AH do not support the claim that any particular social phenomenon was a structural institutional feature of the Mamluk army. This does not preclude individual variation, which is beyond the reach of institutional sources to document comprehensively; it does preclude the deployment of literary evidence as institutional evidence without independent administrative corroboration.

Finding 6 — Methodological Revision Required: Both the Orientalist tradition (principally Ayalon) and portions of contemporary Arab scholarship require methodological revision in specific and identifiable respects: register discrimination in the use of textual evidence, periodisation specificity, and the application of contemporaneous rather than anachronistic conceptual categories.

8.2 Research Limitations

The author recognizes four boundaries in his approach. The most important is that the sources for 648–678 AH have necessarily been recorded through a set of filters those of court historians, bureaucrats, and later builders of the narrative institutional records that we have relied heavily upon; we cannot know the opinions of the common ghulman as recorded by them. Another boundary is that the contentions of the author with regard to the stats enumerating the particular ethnic composition are estimates, rather than outright facts. The third is that in telling the formations model since it is based on inferences from information that was not always completely documented in history, the author has inferred that some of the phases were better documented than others and from the information that has been provided, the model was pieced together. Lastly, in elaborating the facts of this article, the author was working solely on narrative sources and we did not explore the archaeological and numismatic record that is relevant to the period.

8.3 Future Research Directions

The article indicates several avenues for further research. 1. A comparative study of the Mamluk formation system vis-h-vis the training system of Mongol, Crusader and Byzantine armies based on reading sources in multiple languages; 2. A prosopographical study of the careers of Bahri amir based on utilizing the entire biographical corpus of Ibn Tagh rampir and al-Dhahab, to provide a quantitative testing of the formation system reconstruction; 3. A critical edition and annotation translation of Ibn Abd al-hir's account of the Battle of Ayn Jbl, utilizing all extant manuscript witnesses; 4. An extended analysis of the political factors in factional struggles among the ghul man' and how, and through what mechanisms political breakdowns were handled without any perceived need for institutional reconstruction.

8.4 Ethics Declaration and Funding

The Author states of no conflict of interest and that no funding was received from an outside source for this project. This is a historical research project based only on published works, which did not involve human subjects. There was no institutional review board approval needed for this project. All references were checked against published copies.

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