Migrations | Privateering and captivity in the Mediterranean | Military slaves or Mamluks

Victims of the privateering war, military slaves or Mamluks often formed elite military units in their new homeland.

Slaves obtained in raids along the Mediterranean coasts of Europe and put to military service in the Islamic world were referred to as Western Christian Mamluks. Those bought for the same purpose at Ottoman markets in the eastern Mediterranean, especially in Constantinople, came mostly from Central Asia or Eastern Europe. These slaves – Circassians, Georgians and Greeks among them – became known as Eastern Mamluks. Military slaves were trained at the courts of their overlords for whom they provided protection. Although separated from their roots and homeland, they could rise through the ranks and even strengthen their bonds with the ruling family through adoption or marriage. The Mamluk system continued in Islamic countries such as Egypt and Tunisia until the mid-19th century. After that, armies recruited the sons of the local population.

Working Number:	SP 036
Name:	A Mamluk Resting with his Horse
Holding Museum:	National Museum of Romanticism
Date:	1827
Materials:	Paper; ink; lithography
Curator Justification:	This romanticised European image of a Mamluk resting by the side of his horse belies the martial life and responsibilities of these elite military slaves. Seasoned horsemen and warriors, Mamluks could rise through the ranks to become powerful statesmen and even rulers.

Working Number:	TN 057
Name:	Khayr al-Din Pacha
Holding Museum:	Institut Supérieur d'Histoire Contemporaine de la Tunisie
Date:	19th century
Materials:	Paper
Curator Justification:	Khayr al-Din Pasha was a Mamluk of Circassian descent, raised at the court of Ahmad Pasha Bey (1837–55). He later assumed the powerful role of Great Vizier of the Regency of Tunis (1873–77), initiating many crucial policies aimed at reforming the state structure, education and the national economy.

Working Number:	TN 026
Name:	Le général Khaireddine (painting)
Holding Museum:	Musée d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine de Kassar Saïd
Date:	1852
Materials:	Canvas, wood, coloured pigments, gold leaf
Curator Justification:	Khayr al-Din, a Mamluk of Circassian descent, raised at the court of Ahmad Pasha Bey (1837–55). Grand Vizier of the Regency of Tunis (1873–77), his policy for state reform, the modernisation

of education and the stabilising of the economy all marked the history of the Regency.

Working Number: TN 016

Name: Dar Hussein

Holding Museum: -

Date: 18th–19th centuries

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Mamluk slaves often assumed great importance in the societies of their new homelands. The Dar Hassine was named after its builder, a Mamluk of Circassian descent. A close companion of General Khayr al-Din, the reformer of modern Tunisia, he also served as the first president of the municipality of Tunis (1858–65).

Working Number: TN 010

Name: Sahib el-Tabaa Mosque

Holding Museum: -

Date: 17th–18th centuries

Materials: -

Curator Justification: This mosque was built by Yusuf Sahib al-Taba'a, originally a captive of Moldavian descent. A favourite and then minister of Hammuda Pasha Bey of Tunis (1782–1814), he also served as Lord Chancellor and superintendent of taxes. In fact, he was the second most important political figure in the Tunis Regency after the bey himself.

Working Number: AT 075

Name: Muhammad 'Ali Pasha (1769–1849)

Holding Museum: Austrian National Library

Date: 1st half of the 19th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: The end of the Mamluk system came about in the mid-19th century, partly due to the abolition of slavery. In Egypt, the local Mamluk power structure and its last representatives were eradicated by Muhammad 'Ali Pasha (1805–48) with the objective of consolidating his absolute power over the country.