

The Catholic crusaders against the Hussites were equally critical of their opponents, as is clear from the letter written by Cardinal Henry Beaufort, a leading English ecclesiastic and politician, to the Hanse towns in 1427. Cardinal Beaufort asks this wealthy mercantile association for support for a proposed crusade against the Hussites, but when, in 1428–9, an army was gathered, it was diverted into the very English war with France which he here condemns.

My dear friends and illustrious colleagues:

Among the many disasters which Christendom has suffered in our times, we know of no other which has proved so great a hindrance to the faith and the Church as their internal divisions and factions. We cannot now understand the weakness, the inexperience of war, or the inconstancy of faith, that has changed the princes and the Catholic people into half-men, so that not just one man, but scarcely the whole lot of them in full array, would hardly have the strength to make threats or take their stand against the infidels.

By infidels, I mean especially the Bohemians, who are neither a noble people nor experienced in arms, and the sort of people whom neither nobility of birth nor intense effort in the exercise of arms could make better than anybody else.

We are weighed down with war between France and England, but when these two kingdoms have, God willing, made their peace, I shall diligently apply myself – as far as I am able and through the grace of God – to the gathering up of Catholic forces for the extermination of the Bohemian infidels. For the Most High knows of the excessively perverse types of torture which Christ's faithful have undergone at the hands of these incorrigible heretics.

Dear friends and illustrious colleagues, may the saviour in his prospering mercy deem it right long to preserve you.

The power of Mamluk sultans

In about 1421, Gilbert of Lannoy, a Burgundian nobleman, was despatched to the east on a reconnaissance mission by the duke of Burgundy and the English and French kings. As a result he wrote this vivid description of the style of Mamluk power.

It should be realized that Egypt, Upper Egypt and Syria are all controlled by one lord, namely a sultan of Cairo who rules over them all. The sultan never emerges in the normal way from among the native inhabitants of these countries, because it is said that the people are too wicked

and too weak to be able to protect their country properly; so they choose as sultan some slave emir who, by his intelligence, courage and self-control, has got on so well in the world, and acquired so much power and so many friends, during the reign of the previous sultan, that, on the death of the sultan, he himself becomes lord. The same things, power and vested interests, keep him in authority; nevertheless, he cannot rest easy and is always in danger of being overthrown by some other emir who may usurp some of his power, by betraying him or conspiring with other people.

Even if a sultan has children, and gives orders during his lifetime that one of the said children should become lord after him, and even if the great emirs all agree to this, it rarely happens. Instead, the chosen heir is often taken prisoner and thrown into gaol for life or secretly strangled or poisoned by one of these same emirs. This lordship is very dangerous and power changes hands often.

It is said that a sultan of Cairo always has, both in Cairo and in the surrounding area, about ten thousand slaves pledged to him, some with two mounts, some with more, some with less, who make up his men-at-arms and who fight for him when necessary. And it should be known that these slaves are from foreign countries, both Christian and otherwise, such as Tartary, Turkey, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slavonia, Wallachia, Russia and Greece. They are not known as slaves unless the sultan bought them with his own money, or unless they were sent to him as gifts from foreign lands.

The sultan draws his bodyguard only from among these slaves, and gives them women and castles, horses and clothing. He takes them when they are young and gradually trains them, introducing them to warfare and rewarding each, according to his merits, with command over ten lances, or twenty, or fifty, or a hundred. In this way one may rise to become emir of Jerusalem, another to become emir of Damascus, another grand emir of Cairo and so on, filling the other important posts throughout the country.

It should be known that the true Saracens, whose country it is, do not have much to do with the ruling bodies of the large towns, especially in Egypt; instead the Mamluk slaves govern them. When the sultan wages war against some rebel emir or against one of his enemies, however, none of the common people of the large towns goes to fight, nor do the men from the fields; everybody goes on with his trade or his labour, leaving those who want to become lords to get on with it. When these slaves go to war, they are always on horseback, protected only by a rather basic breastplate, covered in silk, and a little round helmet; each is armed with a bow and arrows, a sword, a club and a drum which they use when they catch sight of their enemy in battle, at which point they all beat their drums to scare the enemy horses.

Rise of the Mamluks in Egypt

From the ninth century, Muslim rulers employed Turkish soldiers of servile origin, called *mamluks* (in Arabic meaning 'owned'), in their armies. Brought as youths from the Central Asian steppe, the young Turks were converted to Islam and given intensive military training. The harsh environment of the steppe made for hardy recruits, while the nomadic society into which they were born provided them with the rudiments of horsemanship and archery. After several years' training, the Mamluks were enrolled in the army as mounted archers. Muslim rulers had learned that exposure to civilization destroyed the unparalleled military prowess of 'barbarians', and only slaves fresh from the steppes were enrolled as Mamluks: their sons were normally not allowed to join what was a continually replicating, one-generation military caste.

The last important Ayubid sultan, as-Salih Ayub, sultan of Egypt from 1240 to 1249, significantly expanded the Mamluk element in his army, the mainstay of which was the Bahriyya, a unit of some 1,000 Mamluks, named after its barracks on an island in the Nile (in Arabic, *bahr al-nil*). Its two most famous veterans were Baybars and Qalawun, both future sultans.

The Bahriyya, led by Baybars, spearheaded the successful counter-attack against the crusaders during the battle of Mansourah (1250), and soon afterwards they murdered Turan Shah, as-Salih's son and successor, believing that he was discriminating against them. The throne of Egypt, after a short interregnum, was seized by a Mamluk officer, Aybeg. In 1260, after a decade of infighting, Mamluk troops under Sultan Qutuz and Baybars met a Mongol army at Ain Jalut in the Jezreel Valley in Palestine, and dealt them a decisive blow. In the aftermath of their victory, the Mamluks gained most of the Syrian possessions of the Ayubids, whose rule had been brought to an end by the Mongols.

Soon after the battle of Ain Jalut, Qutuz was murdered by Baybars, who was proclaimed sultan of Egypt, and who organized the centralized administration characteristic of the Mamluk state. He expanded and strengthened the army and waged relentless war against the Mongols, who controlled Persia, Iraq and Anatolia. In between, he turned his attention towards the Franks in Syria, beginning the steady conquest of crusader possessions that his successors completed by 1291.

The Saracens – the true natives, especially those in Egypt – are a wretched people, who just wear shirts, with no leggings or breeches, and with a band around their heads. As for the common people of the flat country, they have very few bows, arrows, swords or weapons of any sort.

There are large numbers of Christians throughout Egypt; I mention them only briefly here because they could only be of very limited help to western Christians in this respect.

The Mamluks invade Cyprus, 1426

The Genoese continued to dominate Cyprus after their raid on Nicosia in 1373. They used all means possible to maintain their commercial interests: in 1426 they sided with Barsbay, Mamluk sultan of Egypt and Syria, when he launched a major attack on the island. Strambaldi continues with the tale of Cyprus's humiliation.

