Episode Book

EPISODE #5802

The Mamluks: From Slave Market to Sultan's Throne

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SYNOPSIS

In 1250, a group of manumitted slave-soldiers assassinated the Ayyubid sultan and founded one of the most unusual regimes in history. For the next 267 years, the Mamluks — men literally "owned" — ruled Egypt, the Levant, and the Hejaz, defeating both Crusaders and Mongols along the way. This episode traces the full arc: the steppe recruitment system that manufactured a self-replicating military caste, the strange paradox of manumission as the mechanism of loyalty, the battles that stopped the Mongol advance and ended the Crusader presence, and the Jerusalem monuments that still stand today. We also examine a contested claim about gunpowder at Ain Jalut, the role of a volcanic eruption in the battle's outcome, and why the Mamluks never managed to found a lasting dynasty despite centuries of power.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a doorway on the west wall of the Haram, and the man who built it spent twenty-eight years accumulating one of the great fortunes of the medieval world. Then he was arrested, shipped to Alexandria, and executed. His building is still standing.



Herman

And that's the Mamluk story in one arc, honestly. Slave to viceroy to corpse to landmark.



Corn

Daniel sent us something on this. He lives in Jerusalem, he walks the Old City, and he keeps running into the Mamluk layer — the madrasas, the fountains, the gateways — without ever having a proper grip on who put them there. His honest framing is that he knows the outline. Enslaved soldiers who became a military ruling class, a sultanate based in Egypt, controlling the Levant from the thirteenth century to the early sixteenth. What he wants is the mechanism underneath that outline, the lived reality, and the contradictions — and he wants names and buildings he can actually recognize on his next walk.



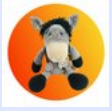
Herman

That's a good instinct, because the outline sound-bite is almost misleading. It makes it sound like a one-time event — slaves overthrow masters, the end. It's actually a system, running for two and a half centuries, that was designed from the ground up to reproduce itself.



Corn

So let's start with the strangest part of the whole thing. How do you get from a slave market to a sultan's throne?



Herman

You get there through a word. Mamluk means "owned." That's it. That's the whole paradox sitting in the name.



Corn

Daniel called it a remarkable premise — an elite military institution composed of people originally brought into slavery, becoming the governing establishment of a major regional power.



Herman

And the premise gets stranger the closer you look, because this wasn't a plantation system with a military wing. It was a deliberate machine for manufacturing an elite.



Corn

Let's lay out the shape first. The Sultanate runs from 1250 to 1517. Two phases.



Herman

Bahri first, 1250 to 1382 — mostly Kipchak Turks, and the name comes from the Bahriyya, quartered on the Nile, the river, bahr. Then Burji from 1382 to 1517, the Circassians, named for the towers, the burj, where they were housed at the Citadel.



Corn

Capital in Cairo. Reach across Syria, the Levant, the Hejaz. And Jerusalem.



Herman

And contemporaries didn't even call it a dynasty in the usual sense. They called it dawlat al-atrāk — the reign of the Turks. Mamluk writers themselves almost never foregrounded their own slave origins. The chronicles mostly don't dwell on it, which tells you something about how normal the system had become.



Corn

Three threads, then. The mechanism — how this actually worked and how enslaved men ended up ruling. The lived reality — what Mamluk Jerusalem was, and why they poured money into a city they didn't govern from. And the ending — what happened in 1516 and 1517, and what survived.



Herman

The third one is the one people get wrong, incidentally. The Mamluks didn't disappear with the sultanate. But that's later.



Corn

Mechanism first. Where do the boys come from?



Herman

Outside the Islamic world, almost by definition. The system required recruits with no local kin, no tribe, no faction to fall back on. So the sourcing was the Eurasian steppe — Kipchak Turks first, then Circassians from the Caucasus. Bought as boys, brought in, converted to Sunni Islam, taught Arabic, trained in martial arts, court etiquette, Islamic sciences. Then freed.



Corn

Freed, but expected to stay loyal to the man who bought them.



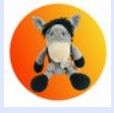
Herman

Exactly that. The manumission is the point, not the contradiction. You free the man so he can hold office, own property, command troops — none of which a slave can do. But you free him into a relationship of personal dependence on his master, and that dependence is supposed to outlast the legal status.



Corn

So the loyalty isn't enforced by law. It's enforced by the fact that the only person in the world who is yours is the man who bought you.



Herman

There's a technical distinction too — the mamluk versus the ghulam. The ghulam is the household slave. The mamluk is the manumitted one, trained for command. Different animal entirely, even though both words get translated as "slave" in English and that



Herman (continued)

translation does a lot of damage.



Corn

Was this a Mamluk invention?



Herman

Not remotely. Military slavery is a feature of Islamic civilization by the ninth century, under the Abbasid caliph al-Mu'tasim, who reigned from 833 to 842. He's the one who starts building the army out of purchased Turkish soldiers. And the political result, once you do that, is almost always the same — the slaves exploit the military power vested in them and seize control themselves.



Corn

So the Mamluks aren't a freak event. They're the most successful run of a pattern that had already played out several times before.



Herman

They're the completed version of it. Earlier regimes, the soldiers seize power and then get absorbed into the local elite, marry in, go native, and within two generations you've got a normal dynasty again. The Mamluks are the case where that never happens. They keep importing fresh recruits from outside, generation after generation, and stay a separate caste the whole time.



Corn

Which brings us to the immediate origin. Not the ninth century. The thirteenth.



Herman

Al-Salih Ayyub, the Ayyubid sultan, reigning 1240 to 1249, acquires about a thousand mamluks. They're called the Salihiyya, after him. And contemporaries describe Egypt as "Salihi-ridden" — the phrase is from the historian Winslow William Clifford — because this



Herman (continued)

one purchase has effectively salted the entire country with a foreign military elite loyal to a single man.



Corn

A thousand men is not a lot. That's a regiment.



Herman

It's a regiment that ends up owning Egypt. Al-Salih dies in 1249, his son Turanshah takes over, and on the second of May 1250, a group of disgruntled Salihi emirs assassinate him. That's the founding act. The Sultanate begins with a murder.



Corn

And then the widow.



Herman

Shajar al-Durr, al-Salih's widow, becomes the first ruler of the new order. A woman, ruling Egypt, in 1250.



Corn

Briefly.



Herman

Briefly, and under pressure, and the sources argue about how much real power she held. But she's the first name on the list, and that's not nothing.



Corn

What kind of state is this, though? Because "military junta" doesn't quite cover it.



Herman

The best description I've read is a semi-feudal stratocratic elective monarchy. Stratocratic meaning ruled by the army. Elective meaning the sultan is chosen by the senior emirs, not inherited.



Corn

So merit, not blood.



Herman

Merit as the emirs define it, which in practice means the man who can hold the coalition together. And when a Mamluk dies, it's often not his son who succeeds him but a slave or a mercenary of his who won distinction. That's the structural innovation, and it's unusual. Baybars tries to found a dynasty. It fails.



Corn

Why does it fail?



Herman

Because every sultan is buying and training his own mamluks, and those mamluks are the next generation of rivals. You cannot build a hereditary house when the men around your son are men you raised specifically to be better at war than he is, and who owe their position to you personally rather than to the family.



Corn

So the system is self-replicating, and the replication is the thing that kills any dynasty you try to put on top of it.



Herman

Every sultan is buying his own successor and his own assassin, sometimes the same man.



Corn

Let's get to the Crusades, because that's where the Mamluks earn their reputation.



Herman

1249, Louis IX — Saint Louis — lands in Egypt on the Seventh Crusade and takes Damietta. And on the eleventh of February 1250, the Bahriyya under Baybars beat the Crusaders at al-Mansura. Then on the sixth of April, the Egyptian army annihilates the Crusader force outright and captures Louis himself.



Corn

The king of France, in a cell in Egypt.



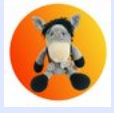
Herman

Ransomed, eventually, but yes. And that's the Mamluks' first act as a coherent force. They aren't the survivors of the Crusades. They're the ones who finish them.



Corn

Do we want to say when Acre falls?



Herman

1291, al-Ashraf Khalil takes Acre, and that's the last major Crusader stronghold. So the arc runs from al-Mansura in 1250 to Acre in 1291 — four decades, and the Crusader presence in the Levant is over.



Corn

But before Acre, there's something bigger. Because while the Mamluks are fighting the Crusaders, the Mongols are coming.



Herman

1258, Baghdad is sacked. The Caliph is killed. Then Aleppo, then Damascus. Hulagu's army is the most effective military force on earth at this point and it has not been stopped anywhere.



Corn

And Qutuz does something with the envoys.



Herman

He kills Hulagu's envoys and displays their heads on the Bab Zuweila gate in Cairo. That's a deliberate, theatrical provocation. In the Mongol diplomatic code, that's not just a refusal, it's an insult of the specific kind that guarantees war.



Corn

So he's forcing the confrontation.



Herman

He's making sure there's no negotiated settlement available to him. Because he knows what a negotiated settlement with the Mongols looks like — it looks like a governor's seat under Hulagu. He wants the battle.



Corn

Ain Jalut. Third of September, 1260.



Herman

Mamluks field somewhere between fifteen and twenty thousand. Kitbuqa has ten to twelve thousand Mongols — smaller force, but Mongol quality had been roughly decisive for forty years, so the numbers were not obviously in the Mamluks' favor.



Corn

And Baybars' tactic?



Herman

Hit-and-run, then a feigned retreat. He draws Kitbuqa's force up into the highlands at Ain Jalut, and then the ambush closes. The Mongols get enveloped. Kitbuqa is killed, and his force is destroyed.



Corn

Qutuz's line, before the fighting.



Herman

He threw off his helmet and shouted, "O Islam! O Allah grant your servant Qutuz a victory against these Mongols." Which is a very particular thing for a man with a Turkic name, a purchased origin, and a career built on being an outsider to say. He's claiming the caliphate's mantle in a shout.



Corn

It's the first permanent halt to Mongol expansion.



Herman

That's the thing. The Mongols lose battles elsewhere, but this is the one where the westward line holds. Ain Jalut and then the later defeats in the Levant are where the empire stops being able to expand in this direction at all.



Corn

Now, the detail I want to push on. The cannons.



Herman

This is contested and I want to be careful because it gets repeated as fact. Ahmad Yousef al-Hassan argues hand cannons were used at Ain Jalut. David Ayalon, Iqtidar Alam Khan, Joseph Needham, Tonio Andrade, Gabor Ágoston all dispute it. Khan's position is that cannons only reached Mamluk Egypt in the 1370s.



Corn

So a hundred and ten years after the battle.



Herman

That's the argument, and I find it more persuasive than the cannon story, but I'd hold it loosely. The larger point is that someone, somewhere, wants the first gunpowder battle in the region to be a famous Mamluk victory, and that's not how the evidence reads.



Corn

There's also the volcano.



Herman

There is. A 2021 study by Di Cosmo and colleagues, published in Erdkunde, argues that a short-term climate anomaly following the Samalas eruption — that's an Indonesian volcano, big one — forced a Mongol withdrawal that contributed to the Mamluk victory.



Corn

So the battle might have been won in part by weather that nobody at the time understood.



Herman

Or by the Mongols making a rational decision about grazing and water in anomalous conditions and pulling back, which then let the Mamluks fight a smaller detachment. It's a striking counter to the pure-military narrative.



Corn

What's happened to Qutuz in all this?



Herman

On the way home from Ain Jalut, he's assassinated. Conspiracy led by Baybars, and Baybars becomes sultan in October 1260.



Corn

So the man who won the most important battle in the dynasty's history is killed by the man standing next to him, before he reaches the capital.



Herman

And that's not a scandal in this system. That's the system operating as designed. The sultan is chosen by merit, and Baybars has decided his merit is now higher, and the emirs agree. There's no legitimacy argument that stops it.



Corn

Which also means — the thing that made them strong is the same thing that makes them structurally unstable. Baybars now has to worry about exactly what he just did, from every ambitious mamluk in his own household.



Herman

Forever. For the whole two hundred and sixty-seven years. Every sultan lives with the knowledge that this is how you become sultan.



Corn

What does Baybars build, militarily?



Herman

He expands the army from ten thousand cavalry to forty thousand, with a four-thousand-strong royal guard. And the numbers of men purchased are the real index here. Baybars buys four thousand mamluks. Qalawun buys six to seven thousand. By Khalil's reign the total is around ten thousand.



Corn

So each sultan is buying and training the next generation of potential rivals, at scale.



Herman

That's the whole system in one sentence. You cannot stop. If you don't buy new mamluks, your army ages out and your successor has nothing. If you do buy them, you're funding your own opposition.



Corn

Alright. So that's the mechanism. Slave market to sultan's throne. But what does that system actually look like on the ground in Jerusalem?



Herman

This is the part where living in the city actually puts Daniel ahead of most of the scholarship. Because the buildings are right there and nobody points at them.



Corn

So what changes with the Mamluks in Jerusalem?



Herman

The city had been under Crusader control. When the Mamluks take over, what you get is a project of re-Islamization — that's the honest word for it. They invest in Jerusalem as a religious and civic statement, tied to pilgrimage, ziyarat, and to Sufi devotion.



Corn

Architecture as religious politics.



Herman

You're stamping Islamic authority back onto a city that had been ruled by a Latin kingdom for nearly a century, and you're doing it in stone, where nobody can argue with it.



Corn

And the city isn't the capital.



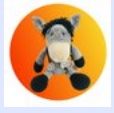
Herman

Not the capital, not the seat of government, not where the sultan sits. But that's precisely why the patronage is so heavy. Cairo is the capital. Jerusalem is where you demonstrate what kind of Muslim ruler you are. Mecca and Medina are the other two stages for that, and Jerusalem is the third.



Corn

This is where the personalities come in. Tankiz.



Herman

Amir Sayf al-Din Tankiz. Viceroy of Syria from 1312 to 1340. He accumulates a vast fortune across twenty-eight years as governor of Damascus and viceroy of Syria, and he spends a great deal of it in beautifying Jerusalem. That's not a euphemism — that's the phrase the sources use, and it's accurate.



Corn

What does he build?



Herman

The Tankiziyya, 1328 to 1330. On the west wall of the Haram. And it's not a single building. It's a complex — madrasa, a school for hadith experts, a Sufi community, a library, a khanqah, an orphan school. And then a separate ribat that housed women.



Corn

Wait. A separate endowment specifically housing women.



Herman

Specifically women, with its own endowment income, which is the part that matters. An endowment is a legal commitment, not a charitable mood. Somebody wrote it down and it became enforceable.



Corn

What's the architecture?



Herman

It's the best example of a cruciform madrasa in Jerusalem. Four iwans around a central courtyard, the classic cross plan. And the portal is described as one of the finest niche-headed doorways in Jerusalem.



Corn

Niche-headed meaning...?



Herman

The top of the doorway is a recessed niche, a half-dome or a muqarnas hood, rather than a flat lintel or a simple arch. It's a very recognizable thing once you've seen one, and there are dozens in the Old City.



Corn

There's a specific innovation attributed to this building.



Herman

The hanging madrasa. It's built atop a portico — the interior sits on top of an arcade, so you get a second floor of teaching space where there was previously just a colonnade along the edge of the Haram. That's the solution to a very specific problem, which is that the flat land around the Haram was already full of buildings by the fourteenth century.



Corn

So the innovation is not aesthetic. It's "there's nowhere left to build, so we build up."



Herman

It's exactly that. Max van Berchem described the building as exuding harmony and called it a classic example of the cruciform plan in Jerusalem, which is high praise from a man who catalogued most of what there is to see.



Corn

And then what happens to Tankiz.



Herman

He's arrested, sent to Alexandria, and executed in 1340.



Corn

Why?



Herman

The sources give us the standard reasons — court intrigue, suspicion of overreach, a sultan who's decided his viceroy has gotten too big. What matters more is the pattern. The same system that lifted a purchased boy to viceroy of Syria for twenty-eight years took him down in a single order, and nobody in the apparatus found that unusual.



Corn

So the building outlives the man by nearly seven hundred years, and the man who built it dies in a prison cell in Alexandria.



Herman

Which is the honest morale of most of Mamluk architecture. The stones are the part that stays.



Corn

The endowment. I want to push on this because it's the part that gets skipped.



Herman

The Tankiziyya's endowment included revenue from villages such as Ayn Qinya and twenty-eight shops. Twenty-eight shops in the Old City, with their rents assigned permanently to the building's operation.



Corn

So this is not a pious gesture funded once. This is an economic engine, with a revenue stream.



Herman

And it's embedded in the local economy in a very direct way. The madrasa isn't a jewel sitting on top of the city. It's a landlord. It's collecting rents from Muslim, Jewish, and Christian tenants. The scholars eating in it are being fed by shopkeepers who have no idea who Tankiz was.



Corn

It also means the building has to be administratively maintained. Somebody's counting the rent.



Herman

Somebody's counting the rent, in an endowment office, in the fourteenth century, with ledgers. It's a bureaucratic institution as much as a religious one.



Corn

Which gets at your point about ordinary life. The sources on everyday Jerusalem under Mamluk rule are thinner than you'd want — partly because there's no dedicated article on the period, you have to assemble it from building-level records.



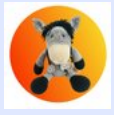
Herman

The endowment documents are some of the best windows we have into ordinary economics, precisely because they're the boring paperwork. You get prices, rents, professions. You don't get a lot of voices.



Corn

What about the non-Muslim communities?



Herman

The legal framework is the dhimmi system, which is the Pact of Umar tradition — a protected but subordinate status with a specific tax, the jizya, and legal constraints. The population is mostly Muslim, with substantial Jewish and Christian minorities. The



Herman (continued)

practical texture varies by decade and by governor, which is the honest thing to say. There's a gap between the legal framework and what the street actually looked like.



Corn

Now let's jump forward. Qaytbay.



Herman

Sultan Qaytbay, reigning 1468 to 1496. And his reign is the long, prosperous, culturally ambitious end of the story.



Corn

Twenty-eight years.



Herman

Twenty-eight or twenty-nine, which makes it the second-longest reign in the Sultanate's history, after al-Nasir Muhammad.



Corn

And the Ashrafiyya.



Herman

The Madrasa al-Ashrafiyya, 1480 to 1482. And here's the detail that makes it human. Qaytbay disliked the version his predecessor Khushqadam had built. So he tore it down and rebuilt it, and imported a team of builders and a Coptic architect from Cairo to do the work.



Corn

He imported an architect.



Herman

From Cairo, to Jerusalem, to build a madrasa on the Haram. That's how seriously the regime took the competition.



Corn

And the result?



Herman

The historian Mujir al-Din called it the third jewel of the Haram, after the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa. That's the ranking, in the fifteenth century, by somebody who knew the site.



Corn

So Qaytbay's project is basically: outbuild my predecessor on the most visible site in Islam outside the two sanctuaries.



Herman

And then in 1496, an earthquake destroys the upper floor.



Corn

The jewel gets cracked almost immediately.



Herman

Almost immediately, and the ruins of the upper story are still visible in the structure as it stands. It's a monument and a repair record at the same time.



Corn

What's the scale of Qaytbay's overall patronage?



Herman

He builds or restores at least eighty-five structures across Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Mecca, including seventeen in Cairo alone. That's a full architectural program, run for nearly three decades, funded by a state that's still solvent.



Corn

And he's not unique in this. Tankiz isn't unique, Qaytbay isn't unique. This is what senior Mamluk figures did.



Herman

Patronage is the currency of legitimacy. You cannot be a great Mamluk without leaving buildings, because the buildings are the proof that you were the kind of man God wanted in charge. And Jerusalem is where you can afford to be ambitious, because it's not the capital — you're not competing directly with the sultan's own monuments in Cairo.



Corn

You get the prestige without the political risk.



Herman

Prestige without the direct rivalry, yes. Which is also why the city ends up with such a dense Mamluk layer. Every viceroy, every senior amir, every sultan with an extra endowment wants a footing on or near the Haram.



Corn

What would a visitor actually recognize today, walking the Old City?



Herman

The cruciform plan, first — four iwans around a court. Once you know it, you can spot a Mamluk madrasa from the street. Then the niche-headed doorways, which are the signature at the entrance. Then the hanging interiors, built on top of porticoes. Then the sabils, the public fountains, which are scattered all over the city and mostly ignored by tourists because they look like street furniture.



Corn

The khans. Caravanserais.



Herman

Caravanserais, which are the commercial infrastructure — where the merchants coming up from Hebron or down from Damascus stayed, stored goods, and paid fees. Those are the economic backbone of the whole system, and they're also the buildings most often repurposed into something else.



Corn

And the concentration around the Haram.



Herman

That's the single most useful thing to know. The Mamluk layer is not evenly distributed across the Old City. It's clustered — along the western wall of the Haram, along the roads leading to it, and on the streets where the pilgrimage traffic came in.



Corn

So if Daniel walks out of the Chain Gate or the Cotton Merchant's Gate and looks left instead of right, he's in it.



Herman

He's in the middle of it. Every one of those buildings is a man's attempt to be remembered, made out of stone, with an endowment attached so that somebody would keep saying his name.



Corn

Alright. So the Mamluks built Jerusalem into a jewel of Islamic architecture. Their political system had a fatal flaw. How did it all end?



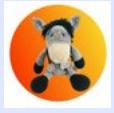
Herman

Marj Dabiq, the twenty-fourth of August, 1516. The Ottomans under Selim I meet the Mamluks, and Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri is killed in the battle. Syria falls to the Ottomans immediately.



Corn

And the second battle?



Herman

Ridaniya, the twenty-fourth of January, 1517, near Cairo. The Mamluks lose again, Tuman Bay is captured and hanged at one of Cairo's gates, and the Sultanate is over.



Corn

The casualty figures are grotesque.



Herman

Something on the order of eighty-eight to a hundred and sixty thousand Mamluk-side casualties including civilians, against Ottoman losses in the twenty-six to twenty-nine thousand range. That reflects that this wasn't a battle of armies. It was a sack of a whole society's military structure.



Corn

And the specific technological failure?



Herman

The Mamluks disdained firearms. There's a strong cultural preference for cavalry, for the skills a mamluk was trained in from childhood, and a real contempt for handguns as a weapon for peasants. Which was defensible while everyone else felt the same way. It stopped being defensible in 1516, when Ottoman arquebuses and cannon were on the other side.



Corn

What did it look like on the field?



Herman

The chronicles say it directly: the blasts of the Ottoman cannons and guns scared the Mamluk horses. Which is the whole failure mode in one sentence. The system that trained the best cavalry in the world for two hundred and sixty-seven years was defeated by the horses being terrified.



Corn

It's not even that the Mamluks were worse fighters. It's that they brought horses to a gunfight.



Herman

That's the shape of it, and there's something tragic in it, because the Mamluk insistence on cavalry was rational given their entire training and identity. Reforming it would have meant dismantling what it meant to be a mamluk.



Corn

So the system works so well that it can't be changed, and that's what kills it.



Herman

That's the honest reading. The machine was perfect for the wars it was built for. It had no capacity to become a different machine.



Corn

And after 1516?



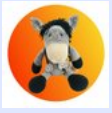
Herman

This is the part that surprises people. The Mamluks didn't disappear. The Mamluks are defeated as a sovereign state, but Mamluk culture and social organization persist at a regional level, and the hiring and education of Mamluk slave-soldiers continues under Ottoman rule.



Corn

So the institution outlives the state.



Herman

Cairo becomes an Ottoman province, but the local elite is still substantially Mamluk in organization and identity, and it stays that way for centuries. By the eighteenth century you've got Mamluk households running large parts of Egypt's internal affairs within the Ottoman framework.



Corn

And the end?



Herman

Cairo stays in Ottoman hands until Napoleon's conquest in 1798, and Napoleon — in one of the great understatements of military history — claimed to eliminate the Mamluks. The Ottoman reconquest follows, and then Muhammad Ali in the early nineteenth century finishes the job properly.



Corn

So the system ran for two hundred and sixty-seven years as a state, and then another three centuries as a persistent caste within somebody else's empire.



Herman

Which is a much better answer to Daniel's question than "the Mamluks ended in 1517." They didn't end. They got demoted.



Corn

Here's where Daniel's prompt gets at the interesting thing, though. He uses that phrase — the historical contradictions. Enslaved men who become enormously powerful. A military elite governing populations it stays socially distinct from. Rulers based in Cairo who leave their mark on Jerusalem.



Herman

All three of those are the same contradiction, seen from different angles. The system was designed to prevent the mamluks from becoming local. That's why boys were imported from outside, brought up apart, and given a loyalty that ran to a person rather than a place.



Corn

So the social distinctness isn't a flaw. It's the design intent.



Herman

It's the design intent, and it works for two and a half centuries, and the cost is that the elite never has a stake in the population it rules. There's no moment where the mamluks look at the Egyptians and say "these are my people." They look at the other mamluks and say "these are my people."



Corn

Which also explains why the system can't produce a hereditary dynasty. Inheritance implies a family, and a family implies a place, and a place implies becoming local.



Herman

It's the opposite of what a normal aristocracy does. A normal aristocracy spends three generations trying to become rooted. The Mamluks spend every generation trying to stay uprooted, because that's where their power comes from.



Corn

And the architecture? How does that fit?



Herman

It's the counterexample that proves the rule. The buildings are the one place the Mamluks did put down roots. That's the whole point of an endowment. You write your name into a legal document, you attach it to a building, and you make it permanent. The stone is the one thing that can't be transferred away from you by a sultan's order.



Corn

So they can't become a dynasty, but they can become architecture.



Herman

They can become architecture, and that's exactly the trade they take. Two hundred and sixty-seven years of men who couldn't found families founding buildings instead.



Corn

Alright. What's still being argued about? Because Daniel's right that there's a lot of settled narrative here that isn't actually settled.



Herman

Three things, at least. First, the cannons at Ain Jalut — the argument I mentioned. Second, the climate theory, which is new and which a lot of military historians haven't absorbed yet.



Corn

And third?



Herman

Ordinary life. Which is the actual gap. There's no good synthetic account of what it was like to be a Jewish or Christian or ordinary Muslim resident of Mamluk Jerusalem. You have to reconstruct it from endowment records, from buildings, from travel accounts, from legal documents. The scholarship is real and it's substantial, but it's scattered across sources that no nonspecialist would ever think to consult.



Corn

And on the historical question of the Mamluks in the wider sense — Daniel asked whether they were conquerors or whether they left a deeper imprint.



Herman

Conquerors and something rarer. They're the state that finished off the Crusades in the Levant. They're the state that stopped the Mongols. And they're the state that made Jerusalem into an Islamic architectural center in the way it still is.



Corn

All three of those are on the western wall of the Haram, in a doorway with a niche at the top, and a small plaque nobody reads.



Hilbert

Does the hanging madrasa actually come from the Mamluks? Because I was told it doesn't.



Hilbert

The hanging madrasa. Built on top of a portico. Someone years ago told me the Mamluks borrowed the idea from the Crusaders, and I've been repeating it ever since, and no one has ever corrected me.



Herman

I've never seen that claim in the literature, honestly. The hanging madrasas I know of are Mamluk buildings using Mamluk structural solutions. But you're right that the Mamluks were operating in a built environment inherited from the Crusader period — they reused Crusader structures all over the coast. Whether they took a specific architectural idea from them, I don't know.



Hilbert

Well. I've been telling people that for a while. It's possible I invented it.



Corn

How did this come up?



Hilbert

I owned a piece of it. Years ago. A carved stone niche-head, from a dealer in the Old City, who told me it came out of a hanging madrasa. I kept it in the garden and used it as a birdbath.



Corn

You used a piece of medieval architectural salvage as a birdbath.



Hilbert

For about eight years. It was the right height.



Herman

Wait. Did you ever find out if it was real?



Hilbert

No. I tried to donate it to a museum. They wouldn't take it, because I couldn't prove provenance. So I went back to the dealer to sell it back to him, and he offered me less than I paid. I still have it.



Corn

Of course you do.



Hilbert

I call the birdbath Tankiz's bath. There was a particular bird used it most days, a hooded crow, and I named him Tankiz, because of where the stone came from.



Herman

You named a crow after a fourteenth-century viceroy of Syria.



Hilbert

He liked the water.



Corn

What did you pay for it?



Hilbert

Two hundred and eighty. Then I found out what they were going for at the time, which was two hundred and forty, so the real number is two hundred and forty.



Herman

Right. That's the number that goes in the record.



Corn

Alright. So the Crusader origin story for the hanging madrasa might be one Hilbert made up, and it's been in circulation for years, which is a useful reminder of how architectural history works in the Old City. Half the claims you hear come from a dealer with a story.



Herman

Which is exactly the problem with provenance. The tax authority and the museum both want the paper trail. The dealer wants the story.



Corn

If you take one thing from all this, it's this. The Mamluk system was built to prevent roots, and the one place the roots actually took was in stone — in endowments, in madrasas, in fountains, in doorways with a niche at the top.



Herman

Which means the buildings are the political document. Everything else the Mamluks did was designed to be reversed. The buildings weren't.



Corn

So the next time Daniel walks past a doorway on the west side of the Haram and doesn't stop to look at it, he's walking past the actual surviving argument of a man who was executed for being too powerful, seven hundred years ago.



Herman

And the birdbath, apparently, is still with us.



Corn

Which tells you where the stone ends up going. Tickets for the producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



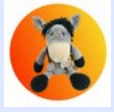
Herman

Our standing thanks to our producer, who has been sitting with us the entire time and who has, as far as I can tell, not been listening.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you've enjoyed the episode and you want to help other people find the show, leave us a review wherever you listen, and if you have a question of your own, send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Corn

Send him something he can't look up in one search.



Herman

We'll be back soon.

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