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The Knights of Islam: The Wars of the Mamluks

James Waterson

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The Mamluks were, at one distinct point in history, the greatest body of fighting men in the world and the quintessence of the mounted warrior. They were slave soldiers, imported as boys into the Islamic Empire from the pagan Steppes, but they became its savior, bringing defeat to the Mongols and forming the machine of jihad that ultimately destroyed the Crusader Kingdoms of Palestine and Syria. They entered the Islamic world as unlettered automatons and through a total application to the craft of the warrior they became more than soldiers. After a bloody seizure of power from their masters, the descendants of Saladin, they developed a martial code and an honor system based on barracks brotherhood, a sophisticated military society that harnessed the state's energies for total war and produced a series of treatises on warfare that more than compare to SunZi's Art of War in their complexity, beauty of language and comprehensive coverage of the bloody business of war. Their story embraces many of the great themes of medieval military endeavor. The Crusaders and the deadly contest between Islam and Christendom, the Mongols and their vision of World Dominion, Tamerlane the Scourge of God and the rise of the Ottoman Empire whose new slave soldiers, the Janissaries, would be the Mamluks' final nemesis.

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