

# On the Uniqueness of Military Slavery of Medieval Islamic World

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**Abstract:** Military slavery prevailed in medieval Islamic world. In this system, military slaves served the rulers as full-time military forces, many of whom even became elites and entered the ruling class. While the practice of using slaves to fight and using slave soldiers was not unusual in the world history, it was only in medieval Islamic world that this practice was so popular. And only in medieval Islamic world did a large number of military slaves become elites and enter the ruling class, some of whom even became rulers. The prevalence of military slavery in medieval Islamic world is a unique and strange phenomenon, the reason of which is worth pondering.

## 1. Introduction

Slavery is the cruelest exploitative system in human history. In Greco-Roman slavery society, the situation of slaves, who were called “living tools”, is very miserable, which is universally recognized. However, during the period of some one thousand years from the early 9th century to the early 19th century, the Islamic world generally adopted a special sort of slavery, namely, military slavery. Under this system, military slaves served the rulers as full-time military forces, many of whom even became elites and entered the ruling class. Military slavery was a prominent feature of the Islamic regimes in the Middle Ages as well as an important political phenomenon, which deserves the attention of historians.

While David Ayalon argued that military slavery (mamlūk military institution) was a phenomenon exclusive to Islamic civilization, [1]Christopher Leslie Brown believes that military slavery, though common in Islamic states, was not unique to them, for it also developed in several societies beyond the reach of Islam, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Russia, Korea and the Caribbean. [2]Brown’s point of view may make sense, since the practice of using slaves in warfare is not unusual and many examples can be found outside the Islamic world, but it was only in medieval Islamic world that this practice was so popular. And only in medieval Islamic world did a large number of military slaves become elites and enter the ruling class, some of whom even became rulers. It is generally believed that the military slavery in medieval Islamic world came into being during the reign of the Abbasid caliphs al-Ma’mūn (r. 813-833) and al-Mu’tasim (r. 833-842), but in fact it has already appeared in Emirate of Córdoba under the rule of al-Ḥakam I (r. 796-822). Military slavery reached its peak in the age of Mamlūk Sultanate, which was the most glorious era of this institution.

By comparing the practice of slave troops in the Islamic world with those in other civilizations, it can be found that the uniqueness of military slavery of the Islamic world is mainly based on two aspects, namely, institutionalization and elitism.

## 2. Institutionalization

Many practices of slave troops outside the Islamic world were temporary in nature, for example:

The ancient Greeks not only used slaves as rowers in navy and carriers of their hoplite owners’ shields and armors, but also used slaves as infantry with the promise of freedom in emergency.

During the American Revolutionary War, Britain used African slaves to fight due to insufficient military manpower. After the war, some slave soldiers were transferred to the Caribbean, forming the embryo of the British West India Regiments. Obviously, the use of slave soldiers was only a temporary expedient taken by the British to get rid of the predicament of insufficient manpower.

In 1795, Britain created the West India Regiments composed of a large number of African slaves in the Caribbean, which presented the most elaborate use of slave soldiers outside the Islamic world. However, they were created for the Napoleonic Wars and were disbanded after the war. They, temporary in nature and not a part of the conventional military system, were established and disbanded according to the specific needs of the Napoleonic Wars.

It is no surprise that many soldiers of slave origins fought for the United States army against the Confederacy in the American Civil War, since they fought against slavery in this way; what's hard to explain is the fact that they also fought for the Confederacy, which was to help perpetuate slavery. As the South increasingly faced a shortage of manpower, the Confederate Congress passed the "Negro Soldier Law" in March 1865, stipulating that the "president" had the right to require slave owners to provide able-bodied African slaves for military service. This law did not even offer slaves freedom for their service. Obviously this was an emergency measure, which had met with great opposition within the Confederate Congress. Less than a month after this law took effect, the South capitulated.

A major difference between military slavery of Islamic world and the above practices lies in the former's institutionalization. So what is "institutionalization"? Samuel P. Huntington defined institutions as "stable, valued, recurring patterns of behavior" and defined institutionalization as "the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability". [3] In short, institutionalization means normalization and stability. The following three aspects of military slavery are the embodiment of institutionalization.

## 2.1 A Stable Supply of Slaves

The acquisition of military slaves was an important part of military slavery. From the beginning of the first half of the 7th century to the middle of the 8th century, Muslims conducted a large number of conquest wars which brought them large numbers of slaves, so no special efforts were needed to acquire slaves. Victorious commanders sent large numbers of captives to caliphs, because one-fifth of the spoils, including prisoners of war, should be turned over to the *Umma*, of which the caliphs were the representatives. Unlike the Umayyads, the Abbasids had hardly conquered any land, as a result they always had to pay for their slaves. The Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn initiated the practice of mass purchase of slaves to form troops. In addition to the purchase of slaves, another source of military slaves was prisoners of war who were paid tribute by local governors to the central government. For example, in 211-212 A.H. (826-828 C.E.), the tax that 'Abd Allah ibn Ṭāhir the governor of Khurasan should turn over to abbasid central government included 2,000 Ghuzz captives priced at 600,000 dirhams. [4] Sporadic wars on the northeastern border of the Caliphate might provide some young captives, but these were instable sources, and a permanent mechanism must be established to ensure the steady supply of the reserve forces of the Caliphate's slave troops. [5]

A supply system based on independent trade (but with the Caliphate's funding) was soon established, and this system relied on the cooperation of the steppe society. The princes or tribal leaders on the steppe could provide a large number of young male slaves by plundering the population of other tribes. [5] There were families and tribes selling their own boys too, usually in difficult times such as famine. The geographer Yāqūt (d. 1229) wrote: "If a man from Kimak tribe gives birth to a son, he will raise and take care of him until puberty. Then, he will give his adolescent son a bow and some arrows and then drive him out of the house, telling him to support himself. From then on he treats his son as a stranger and a foreigner. Some Kimak people sell their children for their livelihood." [6]

Rulers or dignitaries took exceptional care on selecting military slaves, who were expected to possess two qualities: military potential and malleability. Military slaves were expected to be more capable and bear graver responsibilities than ordinary slaves. In order to acquire the most qualified military slaves, the masters were willing to pay high fees for them and preferred slaves of noble origin. [7] Nizām al-Mulk, the vizier of the Seljuk Empire, wrote: when Alptigin, the founder of the Ghaznavid Dynasty, who himself had a military slave origin, was still a commander of Khurasan

army of the Samanids, he promoted the slave guard Sabuktigin, who had been bought for only three days, to tent-leader, because he believed that Sabuktigin was of noble birth and would be favoured by fortune and have a great career. [8] Geographical origin was also a big consideration in the selection of military slaves, for some areas were known for producing better soldiers than others. Thus while Indian slaves were generally not used as soldiers, male slaves from Central Asia always served as soldiers. [7]

Besides the above qualities, loyalty is also critical. While ordinary slaves could be forced to work (even including some military tasks), military slaves had to be persuaded to do their job. Since they always took on heavy responsibilities and enjoyed considerable freedom of action, the personal relationship between masters and military slaves mattered greatly. Masters ensured strong relations by acquiring slaves both young and foreign. Masters tended to buy children for they were more malleable than adults. Boys around the age of twelve were preferred, since at this age they were highly amenable to training but were already familiar with military skills of their own peoples. Bringing ready-made skills to their masters' armies was one of the main benefits of military slavery. In contrast, masters tended to choose ordinary slaves among young adults because they were at the peak of the labor force. Masters tended to buy foreigners because their foreign origins also increased their plasticity. Masters could isolate them by cutting off any ties between them and their immediate family members, forcing them to rely entirely on their masters and fellow slaves. Slaves, who came to a place where the language was completely impenetrable, could easily be isolated. [7] One of al-Mu'tasim's aims in moving the capital to Samarra might have been to isolate his guards, hoping that they would not be "contaminated" by local Arab residents. [5]

As can be seen from the above, the specific criteria for selecting military slaves were: ability (physical strength and intelligence), specific origin (e.g. Turkic, preferably with an aristocratic background), foreign status, youth, etc. Among the many qualities required in military slaves, youth is undoubtedly the most important. Noble origins, great potential and being foreign were all helpful, but youth mattered most, because this quality alone was enough to ensure the success of their training. [7]

The long-term demands of slave trade raised another important issue. Al-Mu'tasim apparently intended to mate Turkic military slaves with Turkic women, thus creating a self-propagating group of military slaves. He bought slave girls for them and let them choose wives among them. He forbade them to marry or to become related through marriage to assimilated people. Even when their children grew up, they could only intermarry within this group. Female slaves were also paid a fixed salary and were registered in *Dīwān*. None of the Turkic soldiers could divorce or separate from his wife. However, this idea was soon abandoned (though not during the reign of al-Mu'tasim): the Muslim political and military elites clearly knew that the sons of slave soldiers did not have the qualities of their fathers. Growing up in the capital far from the steppe, they were not hardy enough to acquire the basic skills of horse riding and archery. Perhaps more importantly, no matter how hard the rulers tried, the sons of slave soldiers cannot be cut off from the locals, and their family relationship might damage loyalty. What happened to the descendants of slave soldiers? Perhaps most of them were integrated into society, some of whom even became religious scholars. It was also possible for them to join the army, but usually not in the elite units. Some talented or well-connected sons of individual military slaves, especially senior generals, might hold high administrative or military posts, but these were individual achievements instead of representative of this group. The rulers soon realized that the best way to maintain military slavery was not to rely on descendants of slave soldiers, but to constantly introduce fresh recruits from the steppes, which made the above-mentioned slave trade system necessary. [5]

## 2.2 Systematic Training

In order to make more effective use of slaves, masters generally did not enroll military slaves in the army directly, but let them learn first and establish new loyalty (as opposed to loyalty to their native lands). This process of learning was a transitional period, turning them from wayward foreign boys into skilled and loyal soldiers. Their capability, youth and isolation, which the

selection process had already ensured, combined with thorough training and education to ensure this change. [7]When discussing Turkmens serving as guards, Nizām al-Mulk wrote: during serving in the army, they would learn to use weapons and become well-trained, and then they would settle down with others; with their growing devotion to their work, they would cease to resent settled life and be naturally integrated into it. [8]

Training is the core of military slavery, for it shaped their whole life. While untrained slaves had limited skills and loyalty and were only suitable for limited military missions, trained slaves could do any job. The training took five to eight years and had twofold goals: to develop skills and instil loyalty. Newcomers acquired skills through intensive physical and mental training, the former being emphasized, including games, competitions, hunts, etc. [7]There was a huge arena in Samarra for training slave soldiers in horsemanship, which involved archery attacking in small tactical units and coordination among the units. Eunuchs played an important role in the training of young slave soldiers. In addition to serving as training sergeants in slave troops, many eunuchs continued to serve in the harem, thus in court politics eunuchs acted as intermediaries between military slaves and the harem, especially at times of political turmoil. [5]Besides skills, the training of discipline and etiquette mattered too. According to Nizām al-Mulk, after a guard was bought, he was not allowed to ride horses and could only serve riders in the first year, and in the future he could enjoy more rights year by year, which reflected the hierarchic difference as well as institutionalization. [8]

Years of training produced well-trained and disciplined soldiers. If a slave showed promise in intelligence, he could receive further education and be prepared for governmental work. Training has another purpose: to transform the identity of newcomers. They came as pagan foreigners with loyalty only to their own people; years later they became Muslims, familiar with the manners of the new country and devoted to their masters and fellows. In many cases, they were their masters' most reliable and loyal troops. [7]

### 2.3 Long Career

After the training was finished, military slaves joined the army as registered full-time soldiers. Their salaries are paid directly by their owners, so they could devote themselves wholeheartedly to military service. From about 820 onwards, military slaves served full-time, received regular salary, wore distinctive uniforms and lived in special quarters. They had to serve all year round, otherwise they could not have become al-Mu'tasim's commanders, retinue, elite guards and governors, let alone the mainstay of the armies. Al-Ma'mūn and al-Mu'tasim purged Arabs from the military register *Dīwān* and at the same time filled in Turkic slaves. [7]Military slaves also have a system of rank promotion. According to Nizām al-Mulk, The rank of the guards was gradually promoted with the increase of their service time and establishment of merits. Therefore, after a bodyguard was bought, for the first year he had to serve on foot in front of a rider's stirrup, wearing a Zandaniji cape and boots; in the first year he was not be allowed to ride a horse, and if he was found to have ridden he would be punished...Every year his uniform and decorations were improved, and his rank and duty were increased, until he became a commander of an army, and so on until he became a chamberlain. [8]For example, Alptigin, the founder of the Ghaznavid Dynasty, had ever been a slave of the Samanids, and then gradually became the commander of the Khurasan army of Samanids.

In short, the regular pattern of introduction, training and employment from 820 onwards produced a large number of well-trained professional military slaves.

### 3. Elitism

If institutionalization alone is not enough to demonstrate the uniqueness of military slavery of the Islamic world, elitism proved it thoroughly.

Slave troops outside the Islamic world were almost all auxiliary forces, for example:

It is mentioned above that the ancient Greeks used slaves in war, but the core of the ancient Greek city-state army was hoplites composed of free men. The primary role of slaves was to serve as rowers in navy and carriers of their hoplite owners' shields and armors.

The pre-Islamic Mecca often used slaves in fighting, but the main force of Arabian army was tribesmen, so the slave soldiers were only auxiliary.

In Muscovy, although the government did not recruit slaves as soldiers, individual soldiers would mobilize their own slaves to fight. Nobles were obliged to bring retainers to battlefield, sometimes including slaves. In the 1550s, slaves accounted for about three-quarters of the Muscovite cavalry. Slaves also served as masters' substitutes in the army. Unless they are good archers, they all carry firearms. Even slaves were better equipped than nobles in general. This practice may be a result of Ottoman Empire's influence. Slaves went to war as retainers and substitutes for their masters, so their role was undoubtedly auxiliary.

As mentioned above, Britain used African slaves to fight in the American Revolutionary War, and the South planned to recruit African slaves in the American Civil War. However, these practices both encountered great opposition. British's practice of using African slaves as soldiers aroused strong opposition from white slave-owners. Arming of slaves was considered to contradict the alleged inferiority of blacks and also to undermine the legitimacy of slavery. Soldiers were supposed to have honor and courage, while slaves were the most disgraceful. [9]The British use of slaves as soldiers caused many white colonists in regions such as Virginia, which depended heavily on the plantation economy, to turn to the side of patriots. During the American Civil War, the South also encountered great resistance to the use of African slave soldiers. It took a lot of trouble for the Confederate Congress to pass the "Negro Soldier Law", but less than a month after this law took effect, the South capitulated. In North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, the prevalence of racism made it difficult for African slaves to even become auxiliaries of the military, let alone the mainstay.

As for the British West India Regiments, Daniel Pipes argues that they were special, for they shared some characteristics with military slavery in Islamic world. The first is systematic acquisition. Before the abolition of slave trade in 1808, Britain bought slaves from Africa and transported them to the Caribbean every year, and consciously selected them from the most warlike groups to meet certain standards (such as height). The second is professionalism. African soldiers wore the same uniform and enjoyed the same salary as white soldiers. The third is isolation. Slave soldiers were isolated from ordinary slaves and had minimal contact with the outside world. The fourth are competence and loyalty. The West India Regiments again and again carried out difficult tasks and accomplished them brilliantly, playing an important role in maintaining the plantation slavery system in the West Indies. Nevertheless, the West India Regiments were far from the mainstay of British troops. First, they existed only because the British could not bear tropical diseases of the Caribbean and had to find substitutes. As long as Europeans could survive there, they would never arm their slaves in such an organized way. Second, British only used slave soldiers who had minor importance for the whole British Empire in remote regions. Third, due to racism, white people discriminated against Africans and thought that it was a gift for them to serve as soldiers. Many white officers were absent from work just because they hated working with Africans. [7]

Only the slave soldiers of Muslim world could act as the mainstay of armies and rulers' bodyguards. When discussing the difference between military slaves and ordinary slaves, Pipes points out that the former, different from humble slaves engaged in domestic labor or coolies, enjoyed the dignity and power. Although slaves, they were members of the ruling elite; they carried arms, had access to the rulers, held important positions, and enjoyed the benefits of wealth and power. Indeed, they even enjoyed many benefits not available to free men, so their slave status became an honor rather than shame. Slavery, in an unusual reversal, became access to power and status beyond the reach of even free men. The freemen, far from despising it, envied this status, and slaves jealously guarded it. [7]

The Abbasid Caliphate did not benefit much from military slavery, for it disintegrated soon after that. The practice was largely followed by separatist Muslim regimes, thus, although native freemen did not disappear from Muslim armies, from the mid-9th century to the 19th century, at least in sedentary Muslim states the elite troops were composed of slave soldiers. [10]It was only after the

dissolution of the Abbasid Caliphate that the great fighting capacity of slave troops emerged. The Seljuk Empire arose from the strength of the Turkmen tribes, but the Seljuk rulers were not satisfied with the role of the leader of the steppe tribal alliance, which gave a great deal of autonomy to the lower tribal units, and tried to impose a relatively centralized bureaucratic system. This system, preventing unbridled plundering and grazing, restricted the freedom of nomads and caused tension between the rulers and the Turkmen tribes. Later, the migration of Turkmens into Azerbaijan adjacent to the Byzantine Empire eased the conflict. As Turkmens moved away, the Seljuks had to build another kind of military force, so they inherited military slavery from the Ghaznavids, forming elite slave troops. The Seljuk slave troops made their mark in 1071 at the Battle of Manzikert against Byzantines in eastern Anatolia. In the battle, some 4,000 slave soldiers remained with sultan Alp Aslan after most of his army deserted him. In the end the Seljuks won outright and captured the Byzantine emperor, leading to the permanent occupation of Anatolia by Turkmens and the eventual Turkification of Asia Minor. Professional cavalry, most of whom were slave soldiers of various origins, accounted for a large proportion in forces of Saladin. [5]The event that really made military slavery famous was the 1260 Battle of Ain Jalut when the Mamlūk Sultanate's army defeated the Mongols. After that, the Mamlūk Sultanate's army also defeated Ilkhanate's Mongols several times, and eventually drove the Crusaders out of the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, saving the Islamic civilization. The Mamlūk Sultanate was the summit of military slavery, a series of brilliant victories of which were the result of years of development of military slavery.

Military slaves in medieval Islamic world possessed powerful fighting capacity, so the rulers relied heavily on them, not hesitating to reward and promote them to the ruling class. Excellent and loyal military slaves could be promoted to emir in charge of a province, and al-Mu'tasim was said to have promoted many military slaves to governors. [8]The expansion of military slave officers' power resulted in the coup of 861, when the caliph al-Mutawakkil was murdered by a group of senior Turkic generals, most of whom were slaves. This event led to political instability in the capital and Iraq and eventually the gradual disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate. Military slaves were no longer satisfied with merely being elites, and some generals of slave-origins even became rulers, such as Alptigin, the founder of the Ghaznavid Dynasty, who was a slave general of Samanids at first. By the age of Mamlūk Sultanate, the ruling of military slaves had become the norm and an institution, and military slavery had not only reached its peak in military, but also reached an unprecedented height in politics. The Ottoman Empire also inherited military slavery. Its military slavery was called *Devshirme*, forcibly recruiting soldiers and bureaucrats from among the children of their Balkan Christian subjects. Unlike the previous system, which imported slave soldiers from abroad, *Devshirme* system acquired slaves from within the Ottoman Empire. From the 15th to the 17th centuries, this system produced all the grand viziers, whose position was the second most powerful after the sultan, as well as most of the Ottoman provincial governors and generals.

Pipes argues that the analysis of the British West India Regiments clarifies many differences between military slavery and other slave soldier phenomena, for in addition to the temporary and auxiliary nature of the West India Regiments, the discrimination faced by African slaves would not be encountered by slave soldiers in Islamic world. [7]It is questionable that Pipes confined military slavery to the Islamic world and excluded the West India Regiments from military slavery, but there is no doubt that the military slavery of the Islamic world is unique. There is no non-Islamic civilization in which slaves were consciously raised to be elites and mainstay of armies; and there is no non-Islamic civilization in which so many slaves had access to the upper and even ruling class.

#### **4. Reasons for the Uniqueness of Military Slavery in Medieval Islamic World**

Why was military slavery only prevalent in the Islamic world? Why were slaves regarded as elites only in Islamic civilization? The reason should be that only Islamic civilization satisfied two points at the same time: one is a less harsh general slavery system, which is the prerequisite for the emergence of military slavery; the other is the tension between the religious ideal of theocracy and the political reality of separation of religion and state, which created the realistic need for military slavery.

#### 4.1 Prerequisite: a Less Harsh General Slavery System

The premise of Islamic military slavery is the general slavery in the Islamic world, so it is necessary to study military slavery in the framework of the whole Islamic slavery. In pre-modern Islamic societies, slaves were treated much better than their Greco-Roman counterparts, who were the typical slaves in our minds. Slaves in Islamic societies were treated as objects as well as human beings. As objects, they were, like all slaves, property that could be bought, sold and inherited. As human beings, they were allowed to enjoy certain human rights: first, a male slave could marry up to two women with the permission of his master, and both male and female slaves could marry free persons other than their masters/mistresses; second, in principle slaves were not allowed to own property, but were allowed to save money for emancipation; third, both male and female slaves had the right to learn knowledge, and some female slaves were well educated; fourth, slaves and free people had the same rights in faith, and slaves have fewer religious obligations than free people (For example, slaves could be exempted from practicing Friday prayer, pilgrimage to Mecca and *Jihad*. In addition, the punishment of slaves for their crimes was less severe than that of free Muslims, except in the cases of theft and apostasy). [11]

Medieval Islamic society is characterized by being kind to slaves. The Qur'an stipulates: "Do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need...and what your right hands possess." (4:36) [12] According to the *Hadith*, Muhammad said: "Your slaves are your brethren upon whom Allāh has given you authority. So, if one has one's brethren under one's control, one should feed them with the like of what one eats and clothe them with the like of what one wears. You should not overburden them with what they cannot bear, and if you do so, help them." [13] In addition to treating slaves well, manumission of slaves is encouraged too. The Qur'an stipulates: "It is righteousness to believe in God and the Last Day and the Angels and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your substance out of love for Him for your kin...and for the ransom of slaves..." (2:177) [12] Manumission of slaves was not only a good deed, but also a punishment. The Qur'an stipulates: "Never should a Believer kill a Believer; but by mistake. If one kills a Believer, it is ordained that he should free a believing slave, and pay compensation to the deceased's family, unless they remit it freely." (4:92) [12] Many military slaves were also manumitted.

After a slave was manumitted, he still had to maintain a personal dependence relationship called *Walā'* with his master, in which the master and the freed slave were *Mawlās* to each other. The rights of *Walā'* belonged to the person who manumitted. It is forbidden to sell or confer on others the rights of *Walā'*. After a military slave was manumitted, his master retained control over him. Since his master needed his military services, he was still unable to leave his master, but did the same work as before. While there was a big change in status after the manumission for an ordinary slave, there was not much real change in status for a military slave, so the manumission mattered little for slave soldiers. For example, Iltutmish, the sultan of Delhi (r. 1211-1236), was probably still a slave when he became the ruler, and did not make public his manumission certificate until his opponents challenged his legitimacy on the grounds of his slavery. The manumission of slave soldiers was always overlooked and even forgotten. Freed slave soldiers were still called slave soldiers, because according to medieval Muslim habits whether a slave was in servitude or freed, or even in political power, he was simply referred to by contemporary Muslims as a slave. In medieval Islamic societies, a slave is the abbreviation of "a person of slave origin"; similarly, a military slave means a soldier of slave origin. Medieval Muslims' usage of *slave* only referred to early experience, not later status. [7]

#### 4.2 Underlying Cause: the Tension between Religious Ideal and Political Reality

One of the main reasons for the great success of Islam in its early days was the appeal to its followers of the vision of *Umma*, a society of political integrity and equality, where the Prophet Muhammad and *Rāshidūn* caliphs were examples for later generations to follow. However, since Mu'āwiya seized power by force and established the hereditary Umayyad Caliphate, the rulers were no longer undisputed religious and political leaders of *Umma*, but monarchs who ruled by force. Civil wars followed, and the Abbasids who replaced the Umayyads were no more popular than the

latter, thus the ideal community of unity was gone. Although Islam advocates theocracy, in fact the real integration of politics and religion only existed in the early days of Islam. With the gradual separation of politics and religion, the functions of the caliphs as religious leaders were gradually transferred to the '*Ulamā*' class. The caliphs were more political leaders, and the later sultans were purely secular rulers.

The disillusionment of the ideal of *Umma* has left the Caliphate government unpopular and short of cohesion. Up to now, religion still holds the greatest appeal among the masses of Muslim countries, while secular ideas can only be easily accepted by a few elites. In order to maintain the rule, the rulers sought new sources of support, and the professional military group became the pillar of royal power. Al-Ma'mūn ascended to the position of caliph after defeating his elder brother al-Amīn (r. 809-813). In the civil war, the *Abnā'*, descendants of the Khurasan people who brought the Abbasids to the throne, sided with al-Amīn. Al-Ma'mūn relied on the Khurasan general Ṭāhir ibn Ḥusayn to defeat al-Amīn. But after al-Ma'mūn ascended the throne, Ṭāhir showed separatist tendencies and could no longer be relied on by al-Ma'mūn. By this time Arab tribesmen had already been purged out of the army, and the *Abnā'* forces remained in the capital Baghdad and were not loyal to al-Ma'mūn, who had to introduce new forces from outside. Turkic slaves became al-Ma'mūn's desirable tool of rule, for the status of slavery made them absolutely obedient to their master, and their excellent military qualities made them full of combat effectiveness. After the decline of the Abbasids, the sultans and emirs in Muslim world were all secular rulers, who also faced the problem of lack of cohesion caused by the separation of religion and state, so they all adopted military slavery to maintain their rule. In Muslim countries, juntas are always proponents of secularism and a counterweight to religious force, but in the form of military slaves in pre-modern era. The essence of military slavery is a kind of secular political force used by rulers to balance the religious power in pre-modern Muslim society.

Theocracy is not unique to Islam, since Judaism, Zoroastrianism and ancient Egyptian religions all practiced theocracy. However, the societies where these religions prevailed lacked the prerequisite of slavery similar to that of Islamic societies, so they cannot produce elite military slaves.

## 5. Conclusion

Military slavery, which existed for about one thousand years, might probably have continued to exist if the independent development of Islamic civilization had not been interrupted by the West. It did not emerge with the rise of Islam, but only appeared about two hundred years after that, as a choice made by rulers to adapt to the new political situation. In the Middle Ages, most Muslim regimes adopted this system, which demonstrates that it has certain superiority and rationality, and deserves further researches.

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