

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra, 200-275 AH/815-889 CE*. Suny Series in Medieval Middle East History, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001. xx + 303pp.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7f99q387>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 20(0)

Author

Schull, Kent F.

Publication Date

2004

Copyright Information

Copyright 2004 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Book Reviews

Matthew S. Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra, 200-275 AH/815-889 CE*. [Sunny Series in Medieval Middle East History] Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2001. xx + 303pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliographical references. \$79.50 (Hard). ISBN: 0791447952

In *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, Matthew S. Gordon provides a badly needed social and political history of the Turkish soldiers bought, trained, and utilized by the 'Abbasid Caliphs al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim. Combing through all of the available source material, which includes traditional sources such as al-Tabari, al-Mas'udi, al-Ya'qubi, and al-Jahiz plus the ingenious use of archeological reports and numismatics, Gordon provides a detailed interpretation of the caliphate's transfer of its capital from Baghdad to Samarra and the subsequent rise of these Turkish military slaves to political and military power over the 'Abbasid Empire.

The main thrust of Gordon's argument concerns the composition and characteristics of these Turkish soldiers. He argues that the Turkish soldiers were military slaves originally purchased or captured in Central Asia. In fact, Gordon argues that there were two main types of Turks in this elite 'Abbasid military institution, Baghdadi and 'steppe' Turks. The Baghdadi Turks were the leaders of this military institution who had been assimilated and indoctrinated to Islamic norms while living in Baghdad over a number of years. In contrast to the Baghdadi Turks, the 'steppe' Turks were recent imports captured or purchased from Central Asia and who were only nominally Islamicized. By calling these Turks 'slave soldiers' Gordon is arguing that they were *mamluk*. According to Gordon, these Turks were the beginning of the powerful and influential Islamic Mamluk military institution.

Gordon's argument concerning the Mamluk institution is very problematic because it is unclear whether or not these Turks were actually slaves, plus the term used to refer to them in the sources is never *mamluk* but *muwali*. The use of the term *muwali* implies that they were free Muslims and not the pagan military slaves that

Gordon argues. In addition to this the Turkish soldiers, and their children, were given salaries in exchange for their services and held high positions of political power. What would have been much more useful to Gordon's argument would have been a detailed analysis of slavery and slave status. Also Gordon would have benefited from a more detailed discussion of what a *muwali* was according to his sources and then compare the Turks with other non-Arab groups designated as *muwali*.

Also, Gordon's use of the term 'Islamic tradition' in reference to how the Turks were only nominally Islamicized is very problematic. Gordon falls into the trap of so many other scholars of this period by treating Islam as if it were a solidified dogmatic tradition in the ninth century. He never defines what the Islamic tradition is, nor does he give any sense to what it means to be nominally converted or truly converted to Islam in this period. According to W. Montgomery Watt's *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, a normative Islam was still being developed at this very time and would not concretize for almost another century. In fact the very title of this book *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords* and his claim that this was a pagan tradition brought to Samarra by the Turks reveals Gordon's problematic conception of paganism and Islam.

Although Gordon is to be commended on his broad use of sources, both primary and secondary, his lack of critique of al-Tabari, or any other sources he utilizes, is disturbing. For the most part, he simply culls all of the available facts and information from these sources, sifting out erroneous or obviously fabricated accounts and assembles them together in a very dry narrative. He never discusses who these scholars were or their historical, social, political, or cultural background and context. He treats them as mere conveyors of facts and not as intellectuals with their own axes to grind, tacit assumptions, and prejudices. Even a simple discussion concerning how the Turks were treated as an 'other' in the sources would have been beneficial.

On a different but related point, how can Gordon write a political and social history of the Turkish military guard in Samarra and not discuss its relationship to the *mihna* and other political and religious developments that raged during the reigns of al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim? Gordon appears to be so narrowly focused on only what the sources have to say about Turks that he forgets to place the Turks and the establishment of Samarra with its broader socio-economic, political, and cultural context. This

broader context of economic decline, civil war, religious solidification, purging, and general upheaval would truly enrich and deepen his argument concerning the Turks' rise to power politically and militarily.

Kent F. Schull, C.Phil.

University of California, Los Angeles

William Beik. *Louis XIV and Absolutism: A Brief Study with Documents*. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 247 pp. \$10.50 (paper). ISBN: 031213309X

The name of Louis XIV (1638-1715) is traditionally linked to the concept of absolutism. It is precisely this stereotype that William Beik attempts to decipher in his book, *Louis XIV and Absolutism: A Brief Study with Documents*. Beik's book is another excellent volume in the highly acclaimed Bedford Series in History and Culture, and as such, it is primarily intended for the student. This document-based text, however, is very useful for every scholar of this period and for any person who is interested in this subject. This collection of documents with commentary explores the meaning of absolute monarchy by examining how Louis XIV became one of Europe's most famous and successful rulers.

Within traditional historiography has Louis XIV is viewed as an all-powerful and absolute monarch, who triumphantly neutralized the greatest obstacle to absolutism, the nobility, at his grand court in Versailles. Recent historiography, however, has been inclined towards the redefinition of absolutism. These studies have challenged this older narrative by arguing that the king worked in conjunction with various groups in a corporative society in order to secure the proper functioning of his government. A central premise of this revisionist scholarship on absolutism is that the centralizing monarchy and the traditional nobility shared interests and sought mutual understanding. Louis XIV's need to negotiate with other groups, institutions, and factions in French society has been stressed by revisionist historians, such as Roger Mettam, William Beik, and Pierre Goubert. Overall, scholars have succeeded in revising the established image of French absolutism, by concluding that the French monarchy in the seventeenth century did not achieve truly absolute power. Although Louis XIV built a very