

## The Economic Decline of Circassian Mamluks in Egypt

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**Abstract:** In Islamic history, the word Mamluk means a slave, more specifically a white slave used in the military establishment. In the Ayyubid kingdom, the Mamluks served as the armies and later took the throne and appointed themselves as the sultans. For >250 years, they ruled Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. The era of Mamluk rule can be divided into two periods. The 1st period is Turkish Mamluk (1250-1381) and the 2nd period is Circassian Mamluk (1382-1517). It is widely accepted among scholars that the Mamluk sultanate reached its splendour under the Turkish sultans and then fell into a prolonged phase of deterioration under the Circassians. Therefore, the principal aim of this study is to examine the economic situation of the Circassian Mamluks in Egypt during the 50 years before the fall of the sultanate. This study finds that there were several reasons which affected the economy during the period under review such as the instability of political situation and the problems in agriculture, industry, commerce and monetary system. Another factors which disrupted the economic activities were the disturbances caused by the Julbans, the Bedouin, the Portuguese and the Frankish pirates. The study concludes that the factors which undermined the economic situation of the Circassian Mamluks in Egypt from 1468-1517 did not lead to a total collapse of the economy. Rather, the decline during this period should be understood as a further deterioration in an already weakened economic situation.

**Key words:** Economic decline, Circassian Mamluks, commerce, industry, Islamic history, Egypt

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### INTRODUCTION

There are two reasons why it is important to discuss in detail the economy of the Circassian Mamluks in Egypt during the 50 years before its extinction. Firstly, there is little coherent information on this located in the researches of chroniclers of the time. Their writings were focused more on social and political history rather than economic affairs and whatever information, they provided on this subject was typically mentioned merely coincidentally. Secondly and probably as a result of the above, modern historians have similarly largely disregarded the economic situation from 1468-1517. There are relatively few studies dealing with the final period of the Mamluk sultanate and no extensive research which discusses all of aspects of the economy. The present study attempts to fill this gap.

### THE POLITICAL SITUATION

According to the contemporary historians between 1468 and 1517, the period under review, seven individuals

were installed as sultans. Two of them (al-Ashraf Qaytbay and Qansuh al-Ghawri) ruled for a combined total of 44 years while the remaining five (Al-Nasir Muhammad, Al-Zahir Qansuh, Al-Ashraf Janbalat, Al-Adil Tumanbay and Al-Ashraf Tumanbay) reigned for a total of only 5 years. Indeed, there was a good deal of political turmoil during the reign of the latter five sultans while even under the rule of two longest reigning sultans, there were internal and external problems. One of the major factors behind this was the lack of any stable procedure for the installation of a new ruler. The post of sultan was open to the leading amirs from the dominant faction who were sometimes challenged by other factions. Thus, rivalry, rebellion and attempts to usurp the throne were common. At the same time, there were also continuous clashes and strife among the groups belonging to the Mamalik Al-Sultaniyya (the royal Mamluks), especially between the Julban (the Mamluks of the ruling sultan) and the Qaranis (the Mamluks who passed into the service of the reigning sultan from that of former sultans). This militated against the effectiveness of the armies and was another cause of disruption in internal politics (Ayalon, 1954,

1949). The activities of another social group in Egypt, the Bedouin also contributed to political instability within the sultanate. Signs of disorder among the Bedouin became more obvious in the last decades of Turkish rule and in the Circassian period, things went from bad to worse (Tsugitaka, 1997). They revolted against the central government and caused disturbances to the inhabitants of many provinces in Egypt. The Bedouin were occasionally so powerful that some sultans were unable to counter them by force and were therefore obliged to open negotiations with them (Rapoport, 2004).

The 2nd part of the 15th century also saw the emergence of a few aggressive leaders, namely Shah Suwar, Hasan al-Tawil, Isma' il Safawi and the Ottomans who challenged and posed threats to Mamluk supremacy (Har-El, 1995; Minorsky, 1955; Winter, 1998). The ensuing conflicts proved that the Mamluk sultan was at times unable to maintain his power abroad. Warfare with external enemies also disturbed international trading activities and caused the regime heavy financial burdens. The cost of military expeditions as well as payments to the armies increased and the state treasury could not cover all of the expenses. For example, in a single campaign against the Ottomans in 1490, Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay spent as much as 500,000 Dinars. This contributed significantly to the exhaustion of the Mamluk economy. This was in turn compounded by the policies of confiscation and extortion resorted to by the Mamluk sultans in order to obtain the much needed money. Not surprisingly such severe policies had a negative effect on economic life in Egypt, disrupting agricultural and industrial production, commerce and monetary affairs and in general ensuring that economic activities could not run smoothly.

### **THE ECONOMIC SITUATION**

The bases of the Egyptian economy that is agriculture, industry, commerce and monetary affairs were also in a somewhat weakened state during the time under review. Thus, the period was witness to some changes in agriculture, such as a reduction in the size of cultivated areas, a decrease in the number of villages and a diminution in the Ibra (yearly yield) and the land tax compared to the previous period. The prices of crops also showed a gradual increase. All this led to the Mamluks being obliged to import certain agricultural productions for their own consumption and for the purpose of re-export to other countries. According to Arbel (2004), only rarely were the Mamluks able to export a small quantity of their own grain. There are several factors that affected agriculture and its produce such as the problems in the Iqta (fief) system, the problems in the irrigation

system, the shortage of a productive labour force for the land, the lack of technological innovation in agriculture and the disturbances caused by climatic and biological disasters (Mujani, 2011). However, these factors did not lead to a total decline and absolute collapse of Mamluk agriculture. As Carl remarks, there were no disastrous famine or catastrophic shortages and no serious shortfalls in agrarian output. In fact, there was an excessive increase in demand for agricultural production from the rulers in order to cover military expenditure and the state budget. The profits that belonged to the peasants were sometimes seized by the Mamluks in order to cover those costs.

The period under discussion was also witness to the changes in industries where some of them were in a state of malaise and were less busy compared to the period of the Turkish Mamluks. A few of these industries ceased functioning. This further weakening can be seen from the quantity of imports and exports of certain industrial products and the number of factories which operated. Similarly, there was an increase in the importation of certain industrial products and the number of factories in operation consequently reduced.

Several factors have been identified as affecting industry and crafts during the time such as the Mamluks' attitude towards this sector. They monopolised all the industries and imposed heavy taxes on the civilian industrialists in order to cover military expenses and the state budget. In fact, the Mamluk regime displayed little concern for the welfare of craftsmen and instead sometimes oppressed them and extorted their profits. The languor in industry was also due to a lack of technological innovation. When there was no free competition or when competition had been very much weakened, there was no motivation to improve production methods.

The craftsmen had little incentive to increase their output if they faced the certainty of its expropriation. The prevailing milieu of confiscation during the period under consideration promoted the opposite; confining efforts to time-tasted methods, cloaking assets instead of experimenting with new ventures and focusing creative energies on concealing profits rather than enhancing them (Petry, 1994). This led to competition from Europe where technological innovation in many industrial sectors had been in progress from the end of 14th century. The superiority of European industrial products and their cheaper price necessarily affected Mamluk industry. The recurrences of plague in Egypt during the period under review also affected the industrial sector. The resulting depopulation caused a shortage of workers and this led to an increase in labour costs and in the prices of industrial products. As a consequence, industry in Egypt became less active.

While the activities of local and International commerce in Egypt were still in evidence during the period under review, several changes were taking place in this sector. These changes can be seen from the situation of commercial centres (such as the ports and markets in Egypt) which had previously been very active and provided the main source of income for the Mamluks and also from the volume of European and Eastern trade with the Mamluks. Some ports were in a state of relative inactivity and the markets and trade, there were not so vigorous compared to the period of Turkish Mamluks. In general, trade between the Mamluks and Western and Eastern countries also became less busy. Exports and imports of local as well as foreign goods were not so frequent and extensive as before.

Several factors may be identified as having an adverse effect on commerce. For example, the Mamluks frequently adopted severe policies such as *Ihtikar* (monopoly) and *Tarh al-Badai* (forced purchase) and imposed heavy taxes on trade and commerce in order to cover the expense of military expeditions and the army. The contribution of the Karimi (spice) merchants to the economic strength of Egypt and its stability was also affected by pressure from the government and its monopolistic policy.

Their commercial activities were disrupted and they lost their privileged status. When the *Diwan* (treasury) ran short of cash, the Karimi merchants faced the same pressure for funds as their counterparts in the craft industries. Thus, their role in developing Mamluk commerce was somewhat limited during the period under consideration. Some of them entered the sultan's service and were known as *Tujjar Al-Sultan* or *Tajir Khawaja* (Labib, 1978; Goitein, 1958). The recurrence of plague is another important factor which led to a number of problems including a lack of labour, scarcity of goods and the resultant high prices. As for the Mamluk monetary system during the 50 years before the fall of the kingdom, this was frequently in an unstable situation.

Numismatic evidence attests to the fact that the rulers reduced the weight and fineness of coins and manipulated the exchange rates. One of the main reasons for this was the increasing financial need of the government authorities who had to cover various expenses including some for their own personal benefit. Not surprisingly, this manipulation of the monetary system caused difficulties for the merchants and shopkeepers and therefore, affected economic activities. The markets were often inactive in buying and selling because of the new coins. There were also riots and protests from the populace against the re-minting of new currency (Balog, 1964; Schultz, 1999).

## **OTHER DISRUPTIONS TO THE MAMLUK ECONOMY**

The last 50 years of the Mamluk sultanate witnessed the adverse economic effects of changes in the regime's domestic and international situation. One development that took place the kingdom was the increasing anarchy of the *Julban* concerning whom there are frequent reports of their disruption of economic activities (Ibn Iyas, 1960). Among the reasons that caused them to revolt were factional ambitions and the regime's failure to meet their demands. These disturbances were compounded by the fact that the sultan was often forced to put pressure on the populace in order to cover the expenses of the *Julban*. The Bedouin tribes in Egypt also undermined the Mamluk economy and threatened its policies. There were number Bedouin tribes which were involved in the conflicts with the Mamluks and caused problems to the economy during the period under consideration. Among them were the *Banu Sad*, *Banu Wail*, *Banu Hiram*, *Banu Atiyya*, *Banu Nuayim*, the tribe of *Ibn 'Umar*, *Banu Hawwara*, *Banu Ahamida* and *Banu Azzala*.

These Bedouins took advantages of the disorder and the weaknesses of some sultans to disturb economic activities. Their marauding increased during the period under consideration due to the inability of the sultans to control them. As the government's internal troubles increased, the Bedouin tribes intensified their activities and weakened the Mamluk sources of revenue by disrupting the economic activities of local inhabitants. With little concern for the regime's responses, they disturbed grain supplies and seized a considerable quantity of crops from some of Egypt's wealthiest districts. They moved through the fertile central districts, disrupting husbandry and business, looting riverboats and launching attacks into the capital itself. The military campaigns which the Mamluks sent to crush them only served as a further weight on the already overburdened economy.

During the period under review, shifts in the world order also manifested themselves rather disturbingly. The Mamluk regime encountered multiple challenges from sea based competitors who heightened their encroachments and undermined the economy of Egypt. One of these opponents was the Portuguese who arrived in the Indian ocean as the 1st western power to contest the Mamluk monopoly of spice trade. Mamluk attempts to avert the Portuguese menace were in vain. In addition to the cost in money and resources in protecting Mamluk interests, the aggressive commercial activities of the Portuguese served to undermine the role of Egypt as middleman in the spice trade between east and west and the sultanate was

deprived of an indispensable source of revenue (Fuess, 2001). Meanwhile, the Frankish corsairs who had constantly harassed Mamluk shipping in the Mediterranean, since the 2nd half of 13th century, intensified their assaulting and pillaging of Mamluk shipping and ports during the period under consideration. The merchants and inhabitants of coastal cities were left helpless against the threat posed by the Frankish corsairs since no active steps were taken to prevent them. Indeed, the Mamluks were unable to do this since, they never had a permanent navy, placing instead more emphasis on the cavalry. There was no continuity or foresight in the programmes of naval development and ships were only built on an ad hoc basis for certain campaigns. As a result, the Mamluks were unable to protect their coastal territories or guarantee the security of the economic activities in their ports from the raids of Frankish pirates.

### CONCLUSION

It is important to stress that notwithstanding the earlier observations, the factors which affected and undermined the economic situation of the Circassian Mamluks in Egypt from 1468-1517 did not lead to a total and absolute collapse of the economy but rather added further damage to an already weakened economic situation.

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