



## Some notes on the Portuguese & Frankish pirates during the Mamluk period (872-922AH./1468-1517AD.)

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### ABSTRAK

*Artikel pendek ini bermatlamat untuk menyoroti hubungan antara sebuah kuasa Islam yang besar pada Zaman Pertengahan iaitu Mamluk dengan Portugis dan kumpulan lanun Eropah dalam tempoh setengah abad sebelum kejatuhan kerajaan Islam tersebut. Ia juga bertujuan untuk melihat sejauh mana hubungan tersebut mempengaruhi urusan dan kedudukan ekonomi Mamluk. Secara umumnya, artikel ini mendapati bahawa hubungan antara Mamluk dengan kedua-dua pihak tersebut sentiasa dalam keadaan tegang dan genting. Mereka dilaporkan kerap kali menggugat aktiviti perdagangan dengan menyerang serta merosakkan kapal-kapal dagang dan pelabuhan-pelabuhan Mesir di samping mengakibatkan kerugian kepada para peniaga dan pedagang Mamluk. Selain mengganggu kelicinan aktiviti perdagangan, mereka juga menyebabkan kerajaan Mamluk terpaksa memperuntukkan sejumlah dana yang besar untuk menampung kos-kos tertentu seperti membaiki kerosakan pelabuhan, mendirikan benteng-benteng pertahanan dan menyediakan ekspedisi-ekspedisi armada laut yang mana perbelanjaan tersebut secara tidak langsung telah menjejaskan perbendaharaan negara.*

### INTRODUCTION

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 in the armies and later took the throne and appointed themselves as the sultans. For more than two hundred and fifty years they ruled Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. The era of Mamluk rule can be divided into two periods. The first is from 648AH./1250AD. until 783AH./1381AD. and is known as the 'Turkish Mamluk' period. The second period covers 784AH./1382AD. to 922AH./1517AD. and is known as the 'Circassian Mamluk' period. It is widely accepted among historians that the Mamluk kingdom reached its zenith under the Turkish sultans and then fell into a prolonged phase of deterioration under the

Circassians. Between 872AH./1468AD. and 922AH./1517AD., the period under consideration, seven individuals were installed as sultans. Two of them (al-Ashraf Qaytbay and Qansuh al-Ghawri) ruled for a combined total of forty-four 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 five years. Indeed, there was a good deal of political turmoil during the reign of the latter five sultans. Even under the rule of the two longest reigning sultans, there were internal and external problems.

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 in the fifteenth century as the first western power to contest the Mamluk monopoly of the spice trade. The Mamluks recognised the immediate effects of this threat and tried vainly to avert the Portuguese menace. The Portuguese navigators disturbed the flow of spices from Calicut to Egypt and looted the fleets of merchants bound for the Red Sea. They disrupted business contacts between India and the Far Eastern countries and the Mamluk territories, Egypt, Syria and Arabia. These events weakened the role of Egypt as the middleman in the spice trade between the East and the West and the sultanate was deprived of an indispensable source of revenue, a condition which further undermined its economy. Indeed, the Portuguese incursion not only posed a serious threat to Mamluk trade but also caused a rise in the cost of protecting that trade.

Meanwhile, the Frankish corsairs who had constantly harassed the Mamluk shipping in the Mediterranean since the second half of thirteenth century, intensified their disruptions during the period under consideration and assaulted and pillaged the Mamluk cargos and ports. In reaction to this, the sultans frequently detained the Frankish consuls and merchants as well as their goods, these being freed if the pirates released their captives and sent back the merchandise. No permanent solution was found, however, and the merchants and inhabitants of coastal cities were helpless against the constant menace of the Frankish pirates on their towns and their businesses. Such a state of affairs clearly had serious negative effects on economic activities in the Mamluk sultanate.

With the above as a background, this article seeks to explore the nature of the international relations between the Mamluk and other foreign powers i.e. the Portuguese and Frankish pirates during the half-century before the fall of the Mamluk sultanate. It also examines how these relationships might have influenced the Mamluk economy. The article finds that the relations between the Mamluk and these powers were always tense. Each of these powers in their own way upset the normal flow of the Mamluk international trade and commerce. They terrorised, intimidated and caused losses to those involved in commercial

affairs; distracted the Mamluk authorities from more productive activities and placed increasingly onerous financial demands on the government treasury.

### THE MAMLUK & THE PORTUGUESE

The system of state monopolies and the imposition of high taxes during the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay (826-842AH./1422-1438AD.) and his successors were among the factors that encouraged the Europeans to look for direct all-water routes to East Asia (Salih 1981: 134).<sup>1</sup> By the end of the ninth fifteenth century, the government of Portugal had taken the lead in the search for new routes to India and Vasco da Gama discovered a new, though long, route to India and the Far East via the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa (Lane-Poole 1968: 350). Their main objective was to control the spice trade by occupying strategic islands and ports and by regulating navigation in the Indian Ocean. Thus, the Portugese successfully established bases in India and developed direct trade between that country and Europe (Ibn Tulun 1973: 16).

The emergence of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean disturbed the flow of spices from Calicut to the Red Sea and caused a rise in the cost of protecting that trade (Lane 1968: 596). The Mamluks recognised the immediate effects of these events, and, urged into action by the Venetians who also suffered from this development, tried by diplomacy and then by war to avert the Portuguese threat (Inalcik & Quataert 1994: 319).<sup>2</sup> However, their efforts were fruitless. The Portuguese fleets were better structured and were able to defeat the Egyptian naval force and systematically destroy Arab merchant shipping in the Indian Ocean (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 156; Shalabi 1990, 5: 263). In fact, the Portuguese had produced a fleet of ocean-going, cannon-heavy sailing ships possessing great range, mobility and fire power; and capable of functioning the whole year round far from home (Fuess 2001: 57).

Thus, the discovery of the sea route to India undermined the economy of the Mamluk kingdom. The Portuguese pillaged the fleet of pilgrims and merchants bound for the Red Sea and cut commercial relations between India and the Far Eastern countries and the Mamluk territories which include Egypt, Syria and Arabia. In this way, the Mamluk sultans were deprived of the heavy taxes from Jedda and Alexandria, the transit ports for oriental goods. The commercial balance tilted in favour of Europe, and Lisbon became the centre of the international spice trade instead of the Mamluk cities (Winter 1992: 6; Tarawnih 1994: 132).

Vasco da Gama's first spice cargo arrived in Lisbon in 907AH./1501AD. and the Portuguese became a supplier of spices to the European markets at a price less than that in Alexandria and Damietta. After the discovery of the new

route to India via the Cape of Good Hope, the price of one Qintar of spice in Alexandria was still eighty Ducats, while in Lisbon it was sold at about forty Ducats (Inalcik 1960: 138).<sup>3</sup> This situation weakened the role of Egypt as the middleman in the spice trade between the East and the West. From that time onwards, the Venetians could no longer find sufficient supplies of spices in Egypt, and did not bring in valuable metals (Lapidus 1967: 41). The spices supply dwindled in the markets of Alexandria and Beirut and the Venetians sometimes had to go to Lisbon to buy them. Meanwhile, war with the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean put an additional strain on Egypt's tottering economy ('Ashtor 1976: 301-331). Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri's failure to defeat the Portuguese meant that this mature kingdom finally lost its monopoly in the spice trade (Ashur 1977: 363). From the tenth sixteenth century on, the transit trade to Europe through the Red Sea ports and the ports of Alexandria and Damietta never regained its medieval prominence (Petry 1981: 34).

Below is a chronological account of this dramatic turnabout in the history of Egypt, focusing on the implications of the Portuguese on Mamluk economy and on Egyptian life in general:

- i) Dhu al-Qa'dah 902AH./8 July 149 AD.: Vasco da Gama embarked from Portugal heading to the west coast of Africa on his way to South Africa. The first navigation to South Africa was successfully made by Bartholomew Diaz ('Abd Rabbih 1981: 110).
- ii) Rabi' al-Thani 903AH./December 149 AD. : Vasco da Gama was successful in circumnavigating the Cape of Good Hope with three or four vessels (Serjeant 1974: 4).
- iii) Rajab 903AH./March 1498AD. : Vasco da Gama disembarked at St. John Island which was situated not far from Mozambique. On this island, he started Portuguese business with the local inhabitants. He then sailed to Malindi with the guidance of an Indian called Cana. In the same year, he reached Calicut, on the south-west coast of India with ships under his command. These were then followed by fleet after fleet of Portuguese merchantmen.
- iv) 906AH./1500AD. : An Egyptian fleet anchored at Calicut was attacked by the Portuguese. Portuguese ships were stationed at the outlet of the Red Sea to block the path of the Egyptian and Arab ships bound for the Indian trade routes (Ibn Iyas 1989: 30).

- v) Rabi' al-Thani 911AH./September 1505AD. : Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri (906-922AH./1501-1516AD.) organised a military expedition to counter Portuguese encroachments along the coast of India. A large number of soldiers were enlisted and the acquisition of equipment was actively pursued.
- vi) Jumada al-Thani 911AH./November 1505AD. : The army formed by Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri consisted of Awlad al-Nas (Sons of the Mamluks) and Mamalik Sultaniyyah (the Royal Mamluks). However, most of the soldiers were Maghrebians, black archers and Turkomen. Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri also sent masons, carpenters and labourers to build fortified towers and a wall to surround the city of Jeddah.
- vii) 6 Jumada al-Thani 911AH./4 November 1505AD. : The Mamluk troops left Cairo to travel to Jeddah by sea. They embarked at Suez. Husayn al-Mushrif commanded the Mamluks, the Turkomen and the black archers. Meanwhile, the Maghrebians were under the orders of Khawaja Nur al-Din 'Ali al-Maslati al-Maghrabi. The troops were accompanied by a number of ships loaded with supplies and arms (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 82-85).
- viii) Safar 912AH./July 1506AD.: Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri received news from the detachment that Husayn al-Mushrif had begun to build towers along the coast after he arrived at Jeddah. In this construction, he was assisted by Sunqur and Nur al-Din 'Ali al-Maslati (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 95-96).
- ix) Dhu al-Hijjah 912AH./April-May 1507AD.: The Portuguese were still creating havoc along the Indian coast and Husayn al-Mushrif with the naval force was ready to leave for Aden to attack them. Suddenly, many of the Portuguese ships were reported to have entered the Red Sea attacking the Indian merchant vessels, lying in ambush to intercept the convoys, and seizing cargo (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 109).<sup>4</sup> As a result, the import of many goods was interrupted. In this year also, the Portuguese occupied Socotra which is situated to the south of the Arabian Peninsula and was strategically important for controlling the Red Sea (al-Sawwaf & Ramadan 1981: 201-202).
- x) Sha'ban 914AH./December 1508AD.: It was learnt that the naval force sent to India under the command of Husayn al-Mushrif was victorious over the Portuguese at Chaul, south of Bombay. Husayn asked for reinforcements to counter any threat from the Portuguese (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 142).

- xi) 11 Muharram 915AH./1 May 1509AD.: The Nazir al-Khass (Chamberlain), 'Ala' al-Din, went to Tur to supervise the construction of ships intended for the Indian expedition. However, in Safar 915AH June 1509AD., information was received that the naval forces commanded by Husayn al-Mushrif had suffered a crushing defeat in the Battle of Diu. The Portuguese had wiped them out and pillaged all their ships (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 150-156).
- xii) Safar 916AH./May 1510 AD.: An ambassador from Mahmud Shah, the Prince of Cambay, asked Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri to send troops to the Indian coast, which was controlled by the Portuguese. The hostility of the Portuguese increased following their victory over Husayn al-Mushrif and his naval forces and they were willing to establish permanent bases in India (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 182).
- xiii) Muharram 920AH./February 1514AD.: No cargo was delivered at the port of Jeddah because Portuguese pirates were sailing in the Indian Ocean. It had been several years since merchandise had been unloaded at this port.
- xiv) 20 Jumada al-Ula 920AH./13 July 1514AD. : The governor of Jeddah stated that the Portugese were continuing their raids on the Yemen coast and that they had just occupied Kamaran, the trading-post for Indian merchandise on the Red Sea. The governor also urged the sultan to send reinforcements before the Portuguese occupied the entire Yemen coast. Moreover, he feared that there would be an attack on Jeddah (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 359,383).
- xv) 12 Jumada al-Ula 921AH./24 June 1515AD.: Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri formed a military expedition to be sent to India. More than six hundred soldiers were enlisted in this expedition. The sultan also decided to have some twenty ships built at Suez, and to load them with weapons, guns, and cannons, as well as with other equipments of war. Salman al-Uthmani was appointed admiral of this expedition (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 458).
- xvi) 922AH./1516-151 AD.: The fall of the Mamluk kingdom. The responsibility of the safety of the Red Sea passed into the hands of the Ottomans ('Abd al-Rahim 1981: 94).

The emergence of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea weakened the economic lifeline which linked Egypt with Southern Asia. As a result, there was a reduction in the quantity of spices going through the Middle East (Issawi 1970: 263). The sultanate was deprived of indispensable sources of

revenue, a situation which had serious adverse effects on the economy. It is noticeable that although Portuguese nefarious activities in the Indian Ocean coincided with the short reigns of five sultans, the actual struggle between the Portuguese and the Mamluks was delayed until the reign of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri. This delay was caused by the instability of internal politics in Egypt as a result of rivalry and strife among the leading amirs to usurp the throne.

### THE MAMLUK & THE FRANKISH PIRATES<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary historians frequently mention the continuous attacks of the Frankish pirates as one of the factors that undermined Mamluk economy (Ibn Shahin, Ms. 610: 237b-246b). Acts of piracy against Mamluk coasts continued during the entire period of the sultanate in spite of efforts to put a stop to this activity. The pirates took advantage of the political disorder in Egypt and its domains to assault and pillage Mamluk vessels and ports. Ships from other countries which sailed in the Mediterranean Sea were also exposed to the pirates' threat (Dumit 1980: 243). Frankish pirates had on many instances tried to invade the ports of Alexandria and Damietta and from there they attempted to proceed to Cairo. The ninth fifteenth and early tenth sixteenth centuries saw an increase in their attacks on the ports in Egypt and Sham. They captured Muslim merchants and seized their belongings. Some of the pirates who frequently assaulted Egyptian shores were from Catalonia, Cyprus and Rhodes (Ibn Shahin, Vat. Ms. 729: 17a; Ashtor 1974: 15).

In response to these hostile activities, the Mamluk government sometimes took drastic action to force the pirates to release their captives and return the loot. Thus, it arrested the Frankish consuls in Egypt and its domains and Frankish merchants were detained along with their merchandise as ransom for the release of their prisoners (Ayalon 1965: 7; Ashtor 1976: 546). This action was not, however, as effective as when the Mamluk government arrested the Christian monks and priests at Baitulmaqdis and threatened to close the Kanisah al-Qiyamah (the Resurrection Church) (Darraj 1961: 17). All these events inevitably disturbed economic activities in the Mamluk sultanate, and efforts to protect Mamluk trade and its coast from Frankish pirates in the Mediterranean exhausted the resources of the state.

There are many examples of disturbances caused by the Frankish pirates. For example, in 767AH./1365AD., during the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Sha'ban, Alexandria was raided and plundered for three days by several groups of Franks from Venice, Genoa, Rhodes and Cyprus and some people were taken as captives to Cyprus. This event, in which relatively small fleets and boats of Franks had managed to invade and sack the most important harbour without

any real resistance, showed clearly the inability of the Mamluks to defend against attacks from the sea. Later, in Muharram 769AH./September 1367AD., Frankish pirates raided Tripoli, and in Shawwal-Dhu al-Qa'dah 770AH./June-July 1369AD., they once again attacked the Syrian ports and Alexandria (al-Maqrizi 1972, 3: 113,149).

In another incident, in 790AH./1388AD., the Genoese pirates seized a ship which was on its way to Egypt and arrested its passengers, among whom were Sultan Barquq's relatives. Sultan Barquq reacted to this by detaining all the Genoese merchants in Egypt. They were freed only after the Genoese released the captives and their belongings. In 796AH./1394AD., a number of ships loaded with grain were seized by a Frankish fleet while on their way from Egypt to Syria (Ibn al-Furat 1936, 9: 382). In 806AH./1403AD. and 807AH./1404AD., Frankish pirates took advantage of the political unrest to ravage Beirut and Sidon and Sultan al-Nasir Faraj took action by imposing a high fine on the Frankish merchants in Egypt in order to cover the expense of repairing the damage. Alexandria was raided again in 819AH./1417AD. by Cypriot pirates (Ibn Iyas 1963, 1: 680; Imamuddin 1980: 68).

During the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay (826-842AH./1422-1438AD.), many ships were built in Bulaq to defend the Egyptian shores and counter the attacks from the Frankish corsairs. Thus, the Mamluks achieved some success against the Frankish pirates in Cyprus. Sultan Jaqmaq (842-857AH./1438-1453AD.) also took the initiative to attack and destroy a new centre of Frankish pirate activity developed at Rhodes. However, even after three campaigns his attempts were futile (Fuess 2001, 53-55).

During the period under review, the disruption caused by the pirates intensified. Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay's attempts to eliminate the pirates were unsuccessful. In 876AH./1471AD., the Franks raided the ships in Damietta. In response, in Safar 877AH./July 1472AD., the governor of Alexandria captured several Frankish pirates who attacked the ports in Egypt and disrupted Mamluk trade and they were imprisoned by the order of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay. According to Ibn Iyas (d. 930AH./1524AD.), in Muharram 878AH./May 1473AD., the Frankish pirates once again attacked the port of Alexandria and captured nine Muslims. They also damaged the port of Damietta and plundered the shops and merchants there. After receiving the news, Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay sent Amir Qajaqmas to drive them away with some ships (Ibn Iyas 1963, 3: 5,89).

In Ramadan 880AH./December 1475AD., Frankish pirates once again attacked the port of Alexandria, this time ravaging the port and arresting several Khawaja merchants, namely, Ibn 'Ulaybah, Ibn Ya'qub, 'Ali al-Kizani and 'Ali al-Nimrawi.<sup>6</sup> Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay was shocked by the news and ordered the arrest of all the Frankish merchants in Alexandria. They were then asked to contact their kings to negotiate the release of the merchants. Finally, the Khawaja



merchants were released in Muharram 881AH./April 1476AD (Ibn Iyas 1963, 3: 114,119).

In order to defend the commercial ports, Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay ordered the construction of several massive guard towers in Egyptian coastal ports. The first at Rosetta was initiated immediately following the Frankish incursion. Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay also started the largest defence construction scheme in Alexandria, which was a tower equipped with cannons and built to protect the port of Alexandria from Frankish corsair attacks. Heavy chains were also strung across harbour entrances. The sultan invested more than 100,000 Dinars in this construction and endowed Waqfs for its upkeep (Ibn Iyas 1963, 3: 71-79,89,130).

Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri also continued to face the Frankish corsairs throughout his reign. Pillaging became a critical problem from 913AH./1508AD. to 916AH./1511AD. and this forced the Mamluks to take action against the Frankish pirates. Thus, Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri was responsible for equipping one of the few Mediterranean campaigns of the later Mamluk period following Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay's incursion of Cyprus. In Dhu al-Qa'dah 913AH./ March 1508AD., Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri appointed his associate, Muhammad Bak, to lead this armada and as a consequence Muhammad Bak was successful in detaining some of the European vessels which had plundered the ports of Damietta and Alexandria and Syrian shores. However, Muhammad Bak's efforts to stop European plundering were short-lived because in Jumada al-Thani 916AH./September-October 1510AD. his navy was severely defeated and he died following a battle with a European squadron off Ayas. Eighteen Mamluk vessels were confiscated and their store of weapons seized (Ibn Iyas 1963, 4: 129-191).

Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri took the same line of action as Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay. His agents detained merchants and consuls who were in Damietta and Alexandria and also monks at the Resurrection Church in Jerusalem. The prisoners were forced to write letters asking for the release of fleets seized by the 'vile agent' of European kings whose pirates breached their own agreement sanctioning safe passage. If Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri's demands were rejected, he would destroy the Resurrection Church and kill those he had arrested. Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri had to wait almost two years before his ships were permitted to return in 918AH./1512AD. (Petry 1994: 58). Nonetheless, the threat of the Frankish pirates continued, since no active steps were taken to prevent them.

The works of contemporary historians reveal how the disruptions caused by Frankish pirates began in the early days of the Mamluk sultanate and intensified during the period under discussion. It is not surprising that the hostile operations by these pirates in the Mediterranean Sea and their attacks on Mamluk ships and ports interrupted trade activities in Egypt and consequently

undermined the Mamluk economy (Ayalon 1965: 1-6; Fuess 2001: 45-69).<sup>7</sup> The merchants and local inhabitants of coastal cities were helpless against the constant attacks of the Frankish corsairs on their towns and businesses. For instance, there was never a permanent navy operating in Mamluk waters, but rather ships were built on an ad hoc basis for certain campaigns, and when the campaign ended, the fleets were neglected. There was also no consistent programme of ship construction and development of naval capacity from one sultan to the next. Thus, the Mamluks were unable to defend their coastal territory or protect economic activities in their ports from the raids of Frankish pirates.

## CONCLUSION

The last fifty years of the Mamluk sultanate witnessed developments in the regime's international situation which bothered its economic situation. During this period, shifts in the world order manifested themselves rather disturbingly. The above discussion clearly shows that the Mamluk regime encountered multiple challenges from sea-based competitors like Portuguese and Frankish who heightened their encroachments and undermined the economy of Egypt.

## NOTES

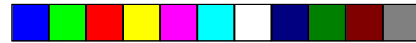
- <sup>1</sup> Like their predecessors, the Mamluks managed to stop the Europeans reaching the Red Sea. European merchants were totally prevented from passing through Egypt, and their arrival and departure at the Mediterranean ports of Alexandria and Damietta were rigidly supervised and controlled.
- <sup>2</sup> In 908AH./1502AD., Venice sent an emissary to Egypt and warned the Mamluk ruler of the terrible consequences of Portuguese success.
- <sup>3</sup> One Qintar is equivalent to 44.93 kilograms in Egypt.
- <sup>4</sup> The Portuguese had passed through the Bab al-Mandab and were commencing raids along the Red Sea coast.
- <sup>5</sup> According to Dr. Carl F. Petry, a Professor of History at Northwestern University, Illinois, Franks (Ifraanj) was a collective term for western Europeans.
- <sup>6</sup> Some of the spice merchants gave their service to the sultan and were known as Khawaja.
- <sup>7</sup> The present writer is of the same view as David Ayalon and Albrecht Fuess regarding the weakness of the Mamluk naval forces being the reason why the sultanate could not stop the recurrent attacks by the Frankish pirates. When the Mamluks launched a fleet, this was done only as a reprisal for

some severe and humiliating Frankish victory. In addition, the Mamluk military attitude which placed more emphasis on the cavalry rather than the naval forces meant that an armada could not develop in the Mamluk kingdom.

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