

THE SULTAN AND THE COMMON PEOPLE

Irmeli Perho

According to Sunni political theorists, such as Nizām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), the highest authority in Islamic society was invested in one person, the ruler – be he the Caliph or the Sultan to whom the Caliph had delegated his power. Nizām al-Mulk wrote in his *Siyāsat nāme* that ‘God (be He exalted) has created the king to be the superior of all mankind.’ (Nizām al-Mulk 1960: 192.) The ruler – *imām* – was appointed by God and therefore had to be seen as God’s representative on earth. This is illustrated by Nizām al-Mulk with a story where Caliph al-Mu‘taṣim (ruled 218/833-227/842) is reported to have said ‘[...] a man who does not fear God (to Him be power and glory) will not be afraid of me.’ (Nizām al-Mulk 1960: 61.)

The view of one supreme ruler was shared also by the later theorists Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328) and Ibn Jamā‘a (d. 733/1333) both of whom lived after the abolition of the universal Caliphate. More explicitly than their predecessors they presented the actual wielder of power as the *imām*, the lawful ruler of the Muslims. Ibn Taymīya wrote that all those who had power (*wilāya*) were God’s representatives (Laoust 1939: 299). Similarly Ibn Jamā‘a held the opinion that the Sultan was the Shadow of God upon earth and he accepted the Sultan as the direct link between the people and God (Lambton 1981: 140).

The view that the ruler was God’s representative entailed that opposition to the ruler was actually rebellion against God and as such the gravest of sins. However, the ruler was not identical with God but a human being and prone to error. Therefore the scholars limited the obedience to the ruler with the hadith ‘There is no obedience in sin.’ Only a ruler who respected the *sharī‘a* should be obeyed, not a ruler who demanded something illegal. In this way the demand for obedience was balanced with a demand of justice. Whereas the ruler was permitted to ask for obedience, the ruled were entitled to a just ruler.

These mutual obligations were described by Ibn Jamā‘a as rights (*ḥuqūq*). Apart from obedience and respect the Sultan had also the right to demand guidance from the population. The people should be prepared to advise him and help him to carry out his duties (Lambton 1981: 142; Laoust 1939: 312). They were also expected to protect the Sultan ‘with their words, deeds, possessions and lives.’ (Lambton 1981: 142.)

As for the people, they had the right to demand protection of the lands of Islam against the attacks of enemies. The Sultan was also expected to support the scholars, see that *sharī‘a* was implemented and take care of his administrative duties (Lambton 1981: 143).

Ibn Taymīya described the ideal situation for an individual in a state as cooperation, not submission: each member of the society had to participate in the state affairs either by

showing obedience to the ruler or giving him advice. The right to give advice to the ruler was not limited to a certain class of people, but was in, Ibn Taymīya's opinion, the duty of each individual (Laoust 1939: 312, 316).

In this article I intend to study the practical application of political theory in Mamluk society. I will try to see whether the mutual obligations were fulfilled in the Sultan's relationship with the common people, i.e.: did the Sultan receive the obedience he was entitled to and did the population feel that they had a just ruler, who took care of his duties? An interesting question is whether there was any indication that Ibn Taymīya's view on every Muslim's duty to advise the ruler was applied to the common people. If they had the opportunity advising the ruler, they also had political influence.

1. THE SOURCES

In order to describe the relationship between the Sultan and the common people I have studied the texts of two Mamluk historians, al-Maqrīzī (766/1364-845/1442)¹ and Ibn Taghrībirdī (ca. 812/1409(10)-874/1470)². I have limited the study to the occurrences in the capital where the Sultan resided and have excluded those that happened in the provinces where the Sultan was represented by a *nā'ib*. Apart from the sectarian strife in the year 755/1354 all the incidents discussed below occurred during the lifetime of al-Maqrīzī.

1.2. al-Maqrīzī's and Ibn Taghrībirdī's 'āmma

The word 'āmma (common people) describes the civilian population that did not belong to the elite. It was used as a counterpart to the term *al-khāṣṣa* (the elite or people of significance). Mamluk society was broadly divided into three social layers: imperial elite, civilian elite and the common people. The 'āmma could be further divided into three subsections, the highest of which was formed by the respectable professionals such as physicians, shopkeepers, craftsmen and workers. The second group were the disreputable, i.e. those engaged in trades offending religious law or dealing with impure objects. They were the usurers, moneychangers, wine sellers, butchers, tanners, etc. The lowest group consisted of the criminals, prostitutes, beggars, vagabonds and others who lived on the fringes of organized society.³

The problem with the term 'āmma is that it covers a very large and varied section of the society. The sources do not usually specify what part of the 'āmma they refer to and both al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī seem to use the term interchangeably with terms such as *ghawghā' al-'āmma*, *arādhil al-'āmma* and *awbāsh al-'āmma*, which clearly refer to the lowest strata of the society. As Ira Lapidus (1967: 175) has noted, it is diffi-

¹ See bibliography: al-Sulūk.

² See bibliography: al-Nujūm.

³ Lapidus (1967: 80–85) describes various groups belonging to the 'āmma.

cult to say whether these terms actually define the group participating in an incident or they just indicate the way these people acted. In connection with riots, the historians very often used the more pejorative words *ghawghā'* or *awbāsh al-‘amma*, but this does not necessarily mean that the participants were exclusively from the lowest social groups. Similarly when the historians report that the *‘amma* looted the residences of some Amirs, the looters may or may not have included respectable commoners.

Zu‘ar is another term used by the historians and it seems to refer to the lowest social groups. According to Lapidus, the *zu‘ar* of Mamluk Damascus were fairly well organized paramilitary groups that offered their services in exchange for payment to the various Mamluk factions. The *zu‘ar* of Cairo do not seem to have been as well organized as their counterparts in Damascus (Lapidus 1967: 154, 177). W. W. Clifford has recently suggested that disaffected members of the Mamluk auxiliary troops, *ḥalqa*, may have offered their services to the *‘amma* and maybe formed part of the organized *zu‘ar* (Clifford 1997: 181).

The term *nās* (people) refers in its most narrow sense to the Mamluks and more broadly also to the civilian elite. But the historians use the word also in its basic meaning, people, and in this sense it may also denote the common people and be at least partially synonymous with the word *‘amma* (Lapidus 1967: 81). At least on the occasions where the historians mention that *nās* assembled below the Citadel demanding that the Sultan should act against the *zu‘ar* (al-Sulūk III.2, pp. 622, 650), the word must refer to the common people in general because the members of the Mamluk or civilian elite had other ways of influencing the Sultan. Sometimes the people who gathered below the Citadel to make demands are specified as *‘amma* (al-Sulūk III.1, p. 219) or *awbāsh al-‘amma* (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 875).

Similarly *nās*, who assembled in thousands in Būlāq during a food shortage and threatened to loot the whole city (al-Sulūk IV.1, p. 332), were hardly members of the elite. Neither was the elite among *nās* used as forced labour (e.g. al-Sulūk IV.1, p. 496). On one occasion in order to punish the *‘amma* for threatening the market inspector, the Sultan had people (*nās*) randomly arrested and ordered their noses and ears cut off. These persons were described by al-Maqrīzī as respectable people (*min al-mastūrīna*) and he stated that among them were *sharīfs* and merchants (al-Sulūk IV.2, p. 698).

Regarding the words *‘amma* and *nās*, the historians do not use the words very precisely and therefore only the context lets us understand which population group is intended. In this article I will be referring to occasions where either the words *‘amma*, with or without qualifications, *nās* or *zu‘ar* are used and when it is necessary I will try to specify which group of people the words on each occasion refer to.

2. THE PATERNAL SULTAN

According to the Sunni political theorists, the rulers had the highest authority in worldly affairs. They were the protectors of the Muslim community, upholders of social order and the guarantors of justice. In a sense the ideal Sultan was like the father of all the Muslims, a person to whom they could turn in distress. The scholars who acted as advisors to the rulers instructed them to follow the example of the first Caliphs.

In his book addressed to his master Malikshāh, the ruler, Nizām al-Mulk told a story about Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and a poor woman. In the story ‘Umar saw a woman cooking in the middle of the field while her children were sleeping. He heard her say: ‘O Lord, assist me to get justice from ‘Umar; he has eaten his fill while we are hungry.’ When ‘Umar asked the woman what was the matter, she told him that she had only water to cook and her children were crying from hunger. The Caliph hurried to help her and said: ‘O woman, be kind and do not curse ‘Umar any more, forgive him for he did not know that you were in distress.’ (Nizām al-Mulk 1960: 147f.)

The story illustrates that it was seen as the ruler’s duty to take care of all the individual members of the society. On the other hand, the ruler could not be expected to know about a person’s problems if he was not told. Therefore it was necessary that the ruler hold an open reception where the people could approach him with their petitions. Holding regular court – two times a week – was listed by Nizām al-Mulk as one of the ruler’s duties. On these occasions the people could talk to their ruler without intermediaries.

This practice was upheld by the Mamluk Sultans and they held open court where their subjects could present their petitions or grievances to the Sultan in person. These receptions also indicated the stability of the Sultan’s power and sometimes it was necessary to let the criers announce that the Sultan’s court was again open for the people after crisis (e.g. al-Sulūk IV.2, p. 615f). If the Sultan was a minor, the person the people could approach was the most powerful Amir (*Amīr kabīr*), who was the de facto ruler. This was specifically told to the people.⁴

The opportunity given to the people to get access to the Sultan was not only a gesture but the complaints were actually dealt with and wrongs were redressed. al-Maqrīzī informs us that the members of the elite were sometimes worried about the possible complaints delivered to the Sultan:

On Wednesday the 29th [of Šafar in 792/1390] the Sultan sat in the square below the Citadel to review misdeeds and to pass judgments as was his custom. People (*nās*) rushed to him with a lot of complaints. The members of the nobility (*al-‘akābir*) were anxious and terrified. They feared that the people would complain about them. (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 709.)

However, these weekly sessions were obviously not efficient enough, because the people occasionally felt the need to assemble in large crowds below the Citadel to convey their opinion to the Sultan by shouting and clamouring. They obviously felt it was their duty to

⁴ E.g. al-Nujūm XI, p. 378 (Amir Buṭā); al-Sulūk IV.2, p. 567 (Amir Ṭaṭar).

inform the Sultan when they thought that the authorities had acted unjustly or neglected their duties. In a way they were fulfilling their share of Ibn Taymīya's idea of co-operation: the people were giving their advice to the Sultan and thus performing every Muslim's duty to 'promote good and forbid evil'. The Sultans' reaction to this loud way of advising varied from acceptance to rejection.⁵

The common people could also send delegations to meet the rulers. In 755/1354 the Muslim populace was getting irritated by the dhimmīs. Under the leadership of a *sharīf* they formed a delegation that was sent to tell the rulers that the dhimmīs had to be reminded of their inferior status. The Amir, whom they went to see, was Amir Ṭāz, one of the three most powerful Amirs. The people in the delegation seem to have belonged to the group of respectable commoners, because al-Maqrīzī describes them as 'good people' (*ahl al-khayr*) (al-Sulūk III.3, p. 922).

Amir Ṭāz promised the Muslims justice and took the matter to Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ṣāliḥ and the two other leading Amirs, Ṣarḡhitmish and Shaykhūn. They all agreed that the Covenant of 'Umar should be once again enforced more rigidly. The decision was made public and was welcomed by the Muslim populace.

The reason why Amir Ṭāz acted so promptly can be found in the political situation of the day. The three Amirs had formed a ruling junta with the Sultan as their puppet in 752/1351, but now the joint rule of the Amirs was getting strained. Ṭāz struggled to keep al-Ṣāliḥ Ṣāliḥ in power, whereas his competitor Ṣarḡhitmish wanted to depose the Sultan in favour of the Sultan's brother al-Nāṣir Ḥasan. It seems that Amir Ṭāz wanted to strengthen his position by gaining popularity among the common people.

The Muslims were allowed to attack those dhimmīs who did not follow the rulings of the Covenant. The attacks increased to looting churches and homes of wealthy Christians and Jews. There was no serious attempt to stop the people from looting and it was actually announced that dhimmīs should not resist the Muslim activities. (al-Sulūk III.3, p. 925; al-Khiṭaṭ II, p. 499.)

Also Ṭāz's rival, Ṣarḡhitmish, wanted his share of the public favour and without any prompting from the Muslim populace he ordered a Christian relic to be destroyed. The issue was taken up when the worst of the looting and demolishing of churches seems to have finished. The public burning of the relic, an occasion attended by the Sultan and the leading Amirs, was thus a kind of climax of weeks of anti-dhimmī actions. (al-Sulūk II.3, p. 926.)

The Amirs were quick to use the popular opinion for their own advantage, but they did not approve of the population getting too involved with high politics. This is illustrated by an incident that occurred soon after the riots. Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ Ṣāliḥ went together with the three Amirs to a field outside the Citadel and held court there for several days. The common people gathered on the walls to watch the unprecedented spectacle and because they were obviously aware of the on-going power struggle and the weak position of the Sultan they started to shout: 'Go back to your castle. This is not a good custom. Be

⁵ Positive responses in al-Sulūk III.1, pp. 219f, 314 and 395; III.2, pp. 622, 650f and 875. Negative responses in al-Sulūk III.2, p. 896.

careful and do not trust anyone.’ This irritated the Mamluk Amirs and they ordered the soldiers to disperse the crowd (*al-Sulūk* II.3, p. 927f). Although *al-Maqrīzī* expressed his opinion that the common people meddled with matters that were not their business, the people themselves obviously did not share this view, but wanted to do their duty and advise the Sultan.

3. THE SULTAN AS THE REPRESENTATIVE OF GOD

It is typical of pre-modern societies that the ruler was seen as the representative of a/the deity, as a ruler with a heavenly mandate. In the classical Sunni political theory referred to above, the Caliph and later his deputy the Sultan were viewed in this way. The Sultan’s special position became apparent in responses to crises that were considered to have divine origin.

The recurring plague was seen by the medieval Muslims as an act of God, a trial to test the faith of the believers and at the same time as a warning against immoral living and disobedience. Some theologians even considered that the plague was God’s punishment for lax living. Therefore the attempts to stop the serious epidemics consisted of renewed enforcements of Islamic law (Dols 1977: 114; Perho 1995: 88). In *al-Suluk* this is apparent in the description of the Sultan’s actions in connection with the plague of the year 841/1438. To counter the plague, the Sultan forbade women to go out of their houses. According to *al-Maqrīzī*, the scholars held the opinion that the cause of the plague was the immorality of women walking on the streets.

The Sultan asked the *qādīs* and legal scholars if there were sins that God would punish by sending the plague. Some of the scholars answered that when fornication becomes usual among the people, they are hit by the plague and now the women were adorning themselves and were walking on the streets day and night. Another scholar said that it would be the best for the community to forbid the women from going to the market places. [...] They entered a long discussion, as was their custom. The Sultan favoured the opinion that would not allow the women to go out at all. He believed that this prohibition would put an end to the plague. (*al-Sulūk* IV.2, p. 1032; cf. *al-Nujūm* XV, p. 93.)

In addition, the Sultan seems to have been able to respond to crises with his own religious acts such as prayers and fasting. In 823/1420 the level of the Nile was very low and the people started to be worried because the drought indicated future shortages in food supplies. Sultan *al-Mu’ayyad* Shaykh admonished the people to give up sin and instead show that they were faithful to God by fasting three days in the desert. The extra fast started and the Sultan also took part in it. The people gathered outside the city to pray and hear sermons. The Sultan joined them coming alone without a retinue and dressed as a Sufi. *al-Maqrīzī* reports that the Sultan performed his prayers on the bare ground lamenting and pressing his forehead to the dust.

After the prayers the common people surrounded the Sultan and expressed their wish that he would intercede with God in order to prevent drought. In doing this the common people showed that they considered the Sultan to be not only a ruler but a religious figure, who had a special relationship with God. Although the medieval scholars saw the Sultan

as the representative of God, this popular view was an interpretation that the scholars did not necessarily share. al-Maqrīzī comments that the Sultan very properly did not agree with the common people but replied: 'Pray to God, I am just one of you' (al-Sulūk IV.1, p. 532).

In connection with these occurrences, the common people showed that they believed the Sultan to be able to even work miracles. Some days after the above mentioned extra fast it was noted that the water of the Nile was rising but still remained lower than usual. The Sultan then decided to swim in the Nile and the next day the water of the Nile rose to a level above the usual. Both al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Taghrībirdī state that the common people considered that it was the Sultan's swimming in the Nile that effected the rising of the water level. According to Ibn Taghrībirdī, they said it was the Sultan's *baraka* that made the water level rise. (al-Sulūk IV.1, p. 534; al-Nujūm XV, p. 98.)

Baraka is usually connected with the prophets and the Sufi saints, but it seems that some Sultans also were seen as sacred personages. According to P. M. Holt, there was a tendency to view the Mamluk Sultans not only as God's representatives but as rulers specially chosen by God and some of them gained an aura of sacredness. However, in Holt's opinion the sacredness was not inherent in the office of Sultan, but was attached to certain individuals – such as al-Muẓaffar Quṭuz, al-Zāhir Baybars and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn. Of these three, Quṭuz seemed to have been revered even after his death because his grave came to be a place of pilgrimage.⁶

What made these individuals sacred is somewhat unclear. al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh was not exceptionally pious; according to al-Maqrīzī, he was extremely stingy, which indicates that he was not magnanimous enough towards the scholars. He was also envious, lewd, a public sinner etc., the negative adjectives clearly more numerous than the positive ones (al-Sulūk IV.1, pp. 550f). al-Maqrīzī further writes as a warning example that in spite of the great wealth the Sultan possessed, there were problems in preparing his body for burial: there was no bowl to pour water over the body, no towel for drying and no cloth for covering – all items had to be borrowed from the persons present (al-Sulūk IV.1, p. 550). All this does not seem to be really fitting for a Sultan with *baraka*.

Ibn Taghrībirdī defends the Sultan against al-Maqrīzī's accusations of stinginess and quotes the words of some contemporaries who had a much more positive view of al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh. Although the quoted anecdotes describe the Sultan as a just commander of the Mamluks, they do not give any clue to the reason why the common people saw him as an individual having *baraka*.

This makes me wonder whether the sacredness was connected more to the office of the Sultan than to the person holding the office. It seems that the view of the scholars that the Sultan was the representative of God led to the assumption that the Sultan was a person closer to God than his subjects. The ruling Sultan was therefore revered as a religious figure, but only as long as he remained in office. The respect towards the office of the Sultan is also apparent in the people's feelings of loyalty towards the ruler. As I will point

⁶ Holt 1975: 245. Shaun Marmon (1995: 10) has noted that the Cairo Citadel as the residence of the Sultan had a pronounced sanctuarylike quality. The 15th century topographer, Ibn Shāhīn even compared the Citadel to 'noble Jerusalem'.

out below, the common people very quickly shifted their loyalty to the new Sultan without regretting the previous one.

al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh's own attitude to his miraculous powers can be deduced from al-Maqrīzī's description. When al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh was told about the people's reaction to his swimming in the Nile, the Sultan said: 'If I had known that the *ʿamma* would say things like that, I would not have swum in the river, lest the people (*al-ʿawāmm*) go astray' (al-Sulūk IV.1, p. 534). This is in agreement with what he said earlier to the people who asked him to intercede with God. He expressed his reluctance to accept the popular reverence in order to appease the *ʿulamāʾ* who hardly approved of it. If he had really been against such reverence, he would not have tried to play on it to gain support with the common people. It was obviously not his usual custom to swim in the Nile, at least not at the time when the people were constantly observing the water levels.

The water of the Nile had already started to rise some days prior to the swimming episode and therefore it was fairly safe to assume that the Nile would continue to rise or at least the level would remain high for some time. Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh had been recently ill and there must have been speculations about a new Sultan. By swimming in the Nile he not only wanted to show that he was a worthy ruler because of his *baraka*, but that he also was physically strong. This is noted by al-Maqrīzī, who informs that it was a cause of wonderment that the Sultan was such a strong swimmer in spite of the problems his leg was giving him (al-Sulūk IV.1, p. 533f). al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh was an ailing ruler who needed all the support he could get to remain in power. He died about five months after his swim.

4. *ʿĀMMA* AND THE DUTY OF OBEDIENCE

The scholars described it as the duty of the people to be obedient to the ruler. As mentioned above the people were also expected to protect the Sultan 'with their words, deeds, possessions and lives' (Lambton 1981: 142). In practice this meant that the population could be called to fight against foreign enemies of the Muslim state – such as the Mongols – or against the enemies of the Sultan i.e., rivals attempting to oust the Sultan.

In studying the relationship between the Sultan and the common people, the most interesting crisis situations are the ones that arise between the Sultan and his rivals. There the common people are obliged to protect the Sultan, but if a rival appears to be stronger than the ruling Sultan and is able to take power, the common people have to change their loyalties quickly and support the new Sultan.

4.1. Civil war of 769/1367

In 769/1367 there were two occasions where the Sultan was threatened. First the mamluks of Amir Yalbughā al-Khāṣṣakī's household threatened to kill Sultan al-Ashraf Sha'bān and put someone else in his place. The second occurred only a few days later, when Amir Asandamur and Amir Ibn Qawṣūn announced that they wanted to dethrone the Sultan.

When a battle between the Yalbughāwīya mamluks and the Sultan became inevitable, the Sultan's mamluks were called to fight but they amounted to only 200 men whereas the rebels had 1500. The auxiliary troops and the common people were then called upon to defend the Sultan. Even though the odds in terms of numbers of trained mamluks were clearly against the Sultan, the common people obeyed the call to fight. As was usual, they were armed only with stones and slings against the arrows of the rebels. At some point the Sultan's mamluks withdrew from the battle but even then the common people persevered alone to fight against the rebels. Later the mamluks returned and the battle ended with the Sultan as the winner. (al-Sulūk III.1, pp. 150f.)

On the following day the battle resumed, now between the Sultan's supporters and Amirs Asandamur and Ibn Qawṣūn. The common people again actively took part in the battle, where the rebels were soon defeated. (al-Sulūk III.1, pp. 152f.)

al-Maqrīzī does not specify which groups of the common people took part in the battle. The term he uses most often here is the general word *'amma*, but once he also uses the word *'amma al-nās* (al-Sulūk III.1, pp. 152), which, according to Lapidus (1967: 82), refers to the *'amma* proper' i.e., the respectable traders and workers. al-Maqrīzī especially stresses that there was no looting after the battle, but instead the people celebrated the victory (al-Sulūk III.1, pp. 153). It can therefore be assumed that the participants represented the respectable commoners and not the marginalized or *zu'ar*, who usually tended to loot at every opportunity.

4.2. Civil war of 791/1389

The next *fitna* to be discussed occurred in 791 between Sultan Barqūq and Amir Yalbughā al-Nāṣirī. Yalbughā and his supporters approached Cairo from Syria in order to challenge the Sultan. In Cairo preparations for war were made and the Sultan sent a crier to the city to remind the people to be obedient to the Sultan. According to al-Maqrīzī, the people (*nās* and *'amma*) were apprehensive concerning the coming war but not the *zu'ar* and other disreputable people (*du'ār*), who were waiting for the *fitna* to start so that they could loot (al-Sulūk III.2, pp. 603f).

The Sultan dealt out money to the Amirs and mamluks to keep them on his side. The *zu'ar* and the *'amma* also got money, which was meant to strengthen their morale.⁷ There had been talk that the Sultan would be defeated in the battle and when the rebels

⁷ al-Sulūk III.2, p. 608 (*zu'ar*); p. 612 (*'amma*).

were approaching Cairo, the soldiers and Amirs started to flee from Cairo to join them. The common people still remained loyal to the Sultan and gathered around him when he rode with the rest of his army through the town. The Sultan tried to keep the remaining Amirs with him by giving them large gifts but did not succeed. The common people started to lose their faith in the Sultan, but the soldiers and the locked gates forced them to stay in the town. There was total chaos: the *zu'ar* and escaped prisoners were looting, whereas the rest of the population were trying to prevent them. The Sultan's soldiers were shooting arrows at those of the common people who tried to escape from the city. Finally the Sultan escaped and the rebels entered the Citadel. (al-Sulūk III.2, pp. 612–615.)

Even before the Amirs had agreed on who should be the new Sultan, the people of Cairo gathered below the Citadel to complain about the continuing looting by the *zu'ar*. The people did not complain in vain: the leader of the rebels, Yalbughā al-Nāṣirī sent mamluks to the city to arrest the *zu'ar* and stop the looting. It seems that the population took it for granted that anyone who took possession of the Citadel was also responsible for the security of the city. This attitude was obviously shared by the Mamluk Amirs as well because they responded to the people's demand. (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 622.)

A member of the Qalawunid family al-Ṣāliḥ al-Manṣūr Ḥājjī was chosen to be Sultan, but the actual ruler was the Sultan's protector Amir Yalbughā al-Nāṣirī. Yalbughā was not able to consolidate his rule and was soon faced with a rival, Amir Miṭāsh. In the ensuing feud the common people sided with Miṭāsh. Before the actual war started, Yalbughā sent two of his Amirs to order the people (*nās*) to loot Miṭāsh's mamluks. These two were beaten by the Miṭāshīya and the call for looting was not obeyed (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 642). al-Maqrīzī does not report that there were any commoners fighting on Yalbughā's side.⁸ Maybe he was not popular enough to get the support of the common people or, for some reason, did not want to enlist their help.

Yalbughā had problems with establishing order and al-Maqrīzī mentions that the looting *zu'ar* and Turkmen were a menace. The political instability was also indicated by the fact that the Amirs and soldiers continued to bear arms in public. It was perhaps this continuing uncertainty that made the common people side with Miṭāsh when he challenged Yalbughā's rule. al-Maqrīzī does not specify which segments of the common people joined Miṭāsh in the ensuing battles, but only says that they were a big crowd. As to their motives, al-Maqrīzī says that Miṭāsh approached the common people, flattered them and gave them money to get them on his side (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 642; al-Nujūm XI, p. 334). Were these recipients of money identical with the *zu'ar* to whom al-Maqrīzī refers later, when he mentions that Miṭāsh had organized the *zu'ar* into troops and given them an amount of money (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 650) – obviously as a kind of salary? It remains unclear.

The payments and the opportunity to loot were at least for the poorest people a valid reason to side with Miṭāsh, but the commoners must also have seen that his party was steadily growing stronger and therefore worth backing. According to Lapidus, Miṭāsh also enjoyed support among the respectable part of the common people. While the *zu'ar*

⁸ Lapidus (1967: 165) also mentions only the call for looting Miṭāsh prior to the actual battles.

robbed and looted, the respectable people fought for Miṅṭāsh (Lapidus 1967: 174). Their motive may have been that they considered Miṅṭāsh a more efficient ruler than Yalbughā, who had not been able to re-establish normal circumstances. They may also have appreciated Miṅṭāsh's announcement that his adversary was not the Sultan but Amir Yalbughā (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 644), because this kept them loyal to the Sultan even when siding with Miṅṭāsh in his battle against Yalbughā.

In the actual battle the *ʿamma* were very active. In addition to throwing stones, they collected arrows and brought them to Miṅṭāsh's soldiers. al-Maqrīzī said that they exaggerated their eagerness to help Miṅṭāsh and described how one of them actually jumped to catch arrows when they were still in the air. They suffered a lot of casualties when the soldiers made them the targets of their arrows. In the streets of Cairo the common people stopped Mamluk soldiers – al-Maqrīzī says Turks – and asked them whether they supported Miṅṭāsh or Yalbughā. If they said they supported Miṅṭāsh, they were escorted to Miṅṭāsh and asked to join the battle. If they said they were for Yalbughā, they were disarmed and taken as prisoners to Miṅṭāsh (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 646). Miṅṭāsh won over Yalbughā, but his term as the Sultan's protector was short. Barqūq, the former Sultan, fought his way back to the throne and ousted both Miṅṭāsh and Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ al-Manṣūr Ḥājji.

Barqūq had been imprisoned in Karak, but Miṅṭāsh wanted him dead and sent a man to kill him. One of Barqūq's servants was from Karak and he roused the local poor (*awghād al-madīna*) to prevent the murder. They ended up in releasing Barqūq and encouraging him to fight Miṅṭāsh. al-Maqrīzī does not explain the motives of the liberators, he only says that they did not approve of the idea of murdering Barqūq (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 657). It is difficult to think that the Karak poor felt a deep attachment to him and therefore it is likely that they were rewarded for their pains. At least they were taken into Barqūq's service and fought together with his soldiers (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 666), probably as a kind of auxiliary army.

The decisive battles between Barqūq and Miṅṭāsh were fought in Syria and finally Barqūq, once again Sultan, returned to Cairo. His return was celebrated not only by his Mamluk partisans but also by the common people, who came to welcome him in large crowds (al-Sulūk III.2, p. 704). Typically, they did not seem to regret the former Sultan or his protector, Miṅṭāsh for whom they had just fought so valiantly. It was Barqūq who was now the effective ruler and the common people showed their allegiance to him.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Sultan or his protectors tried to fulfill their obligations as just rulers by taking into account the needs of their subjects. They held court and were willing to listen to the people's grievances. Their reactions to the complaints varied, but at least when it fitted their own plans they could act promptly on them as the example of the sectarian riots in 755/1354 shows. The courts were not always enough and then the people resorted to mass action: large crowds assembled below the Citadel to demand the attention of the

rulers. It is not easy to identify these demonstrators, because the historians do not specify which sections of the population took part in them on each occasion. They usually only refer to them in very general terms and leave us speculating whether the clamouring groups consisted of the urban poor or the more respectable segments of the common people.

Whoever the demonstrators were, their demands were not ignored. In quite many cases the response was positive and the demonstrators' demands were met. The rulers obviously needed the popular support and were willing to please the people, at least in situations where the interests of the population conformed with those of the ruling elite.

In crisis situations, the role played by the common people was significant. Their military efforts seem to have been a necessary support to the regular armies and even though they were only armed with stones and slings, they were not afraid to attack trained Mamluk troops. Their bravery, which sometimes was sheer foolhardiness, is often mentioned by the historians. In a war situation, their participation was either demanded as a duty or they were paid to join the battle. The permission to loot was also a form of payment but sometimes the situation got out of control and looting became, at least for the *zu'ar*, the main goal. In battle the commoners fought valiantly.

As for the common people themselves, they seem to have appreciated a powerful ruler who could ensure peace and safety. They were loyal to the ruler as long as he was worth supporting. If another Amir proved to be stronger they shifted their loyalty to him. In this they behaved very much like the Mamluks themselves with their ever-changing loyalties. The common people's loyalty was to the office of Sultan, not to the person. Whoever sat on the throne in the Citadel was considered to be the lawful ruler, in accordance with the views of the political theorists. The passing of one reign was not regretted, but the new Sultan was welcomed. It did not matter how the ruler had gained his position, but if he was able to keep it, he was respected.⁹

In *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* Ira Lapidus wrote about the civil war of 791/1389: 'The populace behaved as an amorphous mass seeking only the most immediate monetary gains, having no deep attachments to any party' (Lapidus 1967: 165). According to Lapidus, the common people did not have any goals apart from serving the one who paid the most. I think that the above analysis shows that the common people were more conscious political actors than Lapidus seems to suggest. Obviously the poorest segments of the common people – among them the *zu'ar* – were easily swayed by bribes, but the behaviour of the commoners was not always motivated by pecuniary interests. The *zu'ar* may eagerly have waited for the civil wars to begin so that they would get an opportunity to loot, however, for other members of the common people, a war situation would not have been a welcome event. It interrupted daily life and strained the economy.

⁹ In the early Mamluk period the popular views on the ruler's legitimacy may have been different. Boaz Shoshan points out that the Cairene population disapproved of Aybak because he was not born as Muslim. Six decades later they opposed to Baybars al-Jāshnikīr's rule because he did not belong to the Qalawunīd family (Shoshan 1993: 52–56). However, in al-Maqrīzī's time – the period discussed in this article – the political situation was different. There were no real dynasties and by this time the people seem to have got used to having Mamluks as their rulers because there is no indication that they despised them for being converts.

Often when a crisis began extra taxes were cancelled as a show of benevolence and an inducement for the population to fight, but the army needed money and soon the levies were reintroduced or the wealthier groups were forced to give donations. The disorder of the crisis affected all groups of commoners and therefore they were willing to back anyone who could establish order. They did their duty and supported the ruler as long as he was strong. When he lost the ability to rule efficiently, he also lost his right to rule and the population started to back the strongest new candidate.

The common people can be considered political actors, aware of the consequences of their actions. Their opportunities of influencing the military elite may have been meagre, but they tried to fulfill their share of the mutual obligations between the ruler and the ruled. They cooperated with the ruler by informing him of their needs and guiding him to make what in their opinion were correct decisions. Their political power was limited, but they participated actively whenever they felt the situation required it.

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