

## 2. The Mamluk society of the 13th and 14th centuries AD

### 2.1. Political situation

After the death of the Ayyubid sultan al-Mu‘azzam Tūrān-Shāh, the military commanders took power in Egypt 648/1250. The Ayyubids had followed the example of previous rulers in the Islamic world in forming their own troops of slave soldiers—the Mamluks. The slave soldiers were well trained and disciplined and, what was most important, absolutely loyal to their master, the ruler. The Ayyubids had purchased slaves from Central Asia. The Turkish tribes in the area were heathens and that made their enslavement legal according to Islamic law. The Mamluks were trained in military skills and Islam was introduced to them. During their training they converted to Islam and were probably manumitted. As loyal servants to their master, the Mamluks advanced in their military career and attained high offices within the army. They also reached positions of confidence in the royal court. Gradually the recruitment of slave soldiers increased in relation to free soldiers and the ruler’s dependence on his Mamluks increased accordingly.

al-Mu‘azzam Tūrān-Shāh’s father al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb had recruited unusually large numbers of Mamluks and when he died in 647/1249, the weakness of the Mamluk system became apparent. The Mamluks were extremely loyal to their master, but they did not usually transfer their loyalty to the son after the father was dead. In order to secure himself the services of loyal Mamluks, al-Mu‘azzam Tūrān-Shāh had purchased and trained his own Mamluks, whom he wanted to place in important positions while at the same time getting rid of his father’s Mamluks, in whose loyalty he could not trust. al-Šāliḥ Ayyūb’s Mamluks did not take kindly to this change in their position, but conspired against al-Mu‘azzam Tūrān-Shāh and finally murdered him in 648/1250. Now the Mamluks ruled, first as vice-regents for minor puppet-sultans, then as sultans themselves. The rivalries between the Mamluk amirs did not end, but the power struggle between the various factions continued for the following decade until Baibars al-Bunduqdārī was enthroned in 658/1260.

Baibars consolidated his power by reviving the caliphate. The last caliph in Baghdad had been killed by Mongols in 656/1258 and the caliphate had ceased to exist. Even though the caliph had lost his actual political power during the previous decades, the office of the caliph was still juridically important. According to the law, the caliph was the absolute ruler, but he could delegate his authority. Therefore only the caliph could legitimize a sultan’s rule. When a member of the ‘Abbasid family arrived in

Cairo to claim the caliphate, Baibars formed a committee of jurists to study his credentials and after they had given their approval, the claimant was installed as caliph in 659/1261. Now Sultan Baibars gave the new 'Abbasid caliph his oath of allegiance and the caliph in turn delegated his authority to the sultan. Since then, for more than two centuries the caliphal seat was in Cairo. The 'Abbasid caliphs of Cairo never gained political power, but their presence was nevertheless indispensable to legitimize the sultan's rule.

Mamluk rule has traditionally been divided into two periods, the rule of the Turkish Mamluks from 648/1250 to 784/1382 and the rule of the Circassian Mamluks from 784/1382 to 923/1517.<sup>1</sup> The Turkish Mamluks were mainly Kipchak Turks from southern Russia and the Crimea. The recruitment of Circassian Mamluks from the eastern coast of the Black Sea began during the reign of Sultan al-Malik al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn 678/1279-689/1290. During the whole period of Mamluk rule, the purchasing of new Mamluks continued. They were, as in the Ayyubid period, converted to Islam and received, in addition to military training, instruction in religious sciences and Arabic. At some point in their career they were usually manumitted.

In the early decades of Mamluk rule the state was threatened by two external enemies: the Crusaders and the Mongols. The Crusaders had launched an attack against Egypt in 647/1249 and advanced towards Cairo. In spite of the power struggles after the death of al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb a few months later, the Muslim army under Mamluk command succeeded in defeating the Crusaders, who had to withdraw completely from Egypt the following year. In 690/1291 the Mamluks expelled the remaining Christian Crusaders from Palestine, thus gaining the final victory over them.

The Mongols had conquered Baghdad in 656/1258 and advanced westward capturing Aleppo and Damascus. Syria was not then ruled by the Mamluks, but was divided into independent principalities. However, the victories of the Mongols in Syria made the Mamluks feel threatened and they marched against them. The Mamluk army met the Mongol army in the decisive battle at 'Ain Jālūt in 658/1260 and forced the Mongols to withdraw from Syria, which was subsequently annexed to the Mamluk sultanate. The Mongols continued to be a threat to the Mamluk empire, occasionally attacking Syria until they were finally defeated in 702/1303.

The Muslim population of Syria and Egypt recognized the Mamluk achievement on the battlefield and credited them for saving Islam from the pagan Mongols. The Syrian chronicler Abū Shāma (d. 665/1267) expressed his admiration in verse:

The Tatars conquered the lands and there came to them  
From Egypt a Turk, unmindful of his life.  
In Syria he destroyed and scattered them.  
To everything there is a bane of its own kind.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Ayalon has shown that these two terms are the ones used in the Mamluk sources, whereas the frequently used terms *Baḥrī* and *Burjī* are only used as names for Mamluk *ṭawā'if*, factions, in these sources (Ayalon 1990, pp. 3-24).

<sup>2</sup> The verse is from Abū Shāma's al-Dhail 'alā al-rauḍatain. It has been quoted and translated in Haarmann 1988b, p. 181.

Also Ibn Khaldūn considered the Mamluks as saviours of Islam:

... it was by the grace of God, glory be to Him, that He came to the rescue of the True Faith, by reviving its last breath and restoring in Egypt the unity of the Muslims, guarding His order and defending His ramparts. This He did by sending to them (i.e. to the Muslims), out of this Turkish people and out of its mighty and numerous tribes, guardian amirs and devoted defenders who are imported as slaves from the lands of heathendom to the lands of Islam. This status of slavery is indeed a blessing ... from Divine Providence.<sup>3</sup>

The Mamluk rulers themselves wanted to stress their position as protectors of Islam. Sultan Baibars al-Bunduqdārī received the key of the Kaʿba, and assumed the title of *khādim al-ḥaramain al-sharīfain* (servitor of the two august sanctuaries), which his successors continued to use. Later the Mamluk sultans' exclusive right to provide the *kiswa* (curtain) for the Kaʿba was acknowledged.<sup>4</sup> The Mamluks were also known for their generous support to religious institutions.

The distinctive feature of Mamluk rule was that the ruling military elite consisted only of purchased Mamluks. Their descendants, called *aulād al-nās* (the sons of the people), were not slaves but free-born Muslims. They were wealthy and well educated but excluded from a career in the Mamluk military hierarchy. They could join the troops of free soldiers (*ḥalqa*), but their prospects of a military career were limited to achieving the lowest level of commandership, because the higher positions were given only to Mamluks. The descendants of the Mamluks had an alternative, which many of them welcomed. They could become scholars and in that way assimilate into the non-Mamluk society.

The only high office in the Mamluk hierarchy open to the descendants was the office of the sultan. During the period of Turkish Mamluks, seven sultans were Mamluks and seventeen were descendants.<sup>5</sup> The Mamluk sultans tried to form dynasties by nominating their sons as their successors, but the dynasties were often short-lived. The longest dynasty was that of the Qalawunids, who reigned for over a century. Several of the Qalawunids were, however, rulers in name alone. The actual rulers were the most powerful Mamluk notables, who enthroned and dethroned puppet-sultans at will.

One of the few real rulers of the Qalawunid dynasty was al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn. Usurpations divided his reign into three periods. During the first two periods he was just a puppet of the leading Mamluk amirs. He was enthroned for the first time in 693/1293, when he was only seven years old. The previous sultan, al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's brother, had been murdered as a result of power struggles between Mamluk factions. al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was a suitable compromise for the rival Mamluks, because the population of Cairo preferred a ruler from the Qalawunid family<sup>6</sup> and because his age made it possible for the Mamluk amirs to

<sup>3</sup> This passage of Ibn Khaldūn's *Kitāb al-ʿIbar* is translated in Ayalon 1980, p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> Holt 1986, p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.

rule in his name. The real rulers were the leaders of the two competing factions: al-‘Ādil Kitbughā of the Turkish Mamluks and Sanjar al-Shujā‘ī of the Circassian Mamluks. The arrangement was temporary and meant to last only until one of the factions gained the majority and could appoint their leader to the throne. The struggle ended in Kitbughā’s victory, and he was enthroned in 694/1294. al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was deposed and kept in the Citadel. Kitbughā reigned for two years, but could not ensure his position and in 696/1296 another Mamluk amir, Lājīn al-Manṣūrī, usurped the throne. During his reign al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was sent to the fortress of al-Karak, east of the Dead Sea. Lājīn’s rule was also short: he was murdered in 698/1299. A compromise sultan was again needed and al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was put back on the throne. The empire was once more ruled by his vice-regents, Sālār representing the Turkish Mamluks and Baibars al-Jāshnikīr the Circassians. al-Nāṣir Muḥammad had, however, attained majority and expressed an interest in ruling independently. The conflict between him and his vice-regents ended with Baibars al-Jāshnikīr usurping the sultanate in 708/1309. al-Nāṣir Muḥammad returned to al-Karak. Baibars’ reign lasted only a year, during which al-Nāṣir Muḥammad gained supporters and was able to take power, when Baibars had to give up ruling for the lack of support. al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was enthroned in 709/1310 and started his third reign, which lasted more than thirty years until his death in 741/1341.

The length and stability of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s third reign indicates his political skill and ruthlessness in dealing with the various Mamluk factions and in eliminating potential contenders. The stability of his rule is illustrated by the fact that he left his capital three times to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, an act which very few of the Mamluk sultans were able to do.<sup>7</sup>

The Mongols were finally defeated during al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s second reign, after which no foreign enemies threatened the sultanate. Freed from external enemies, the sultan could concentrate on internal affairs. He was able to renew the fiscal system of the Mamluk establishment. The income of the Mamluk amirs was based on land revenues. The sultan gave farming lands as assignments (*iqṭā‘*) to Mamluk amirs. They did not gain the ownership of the land, but received the tax the landowner otherwise would have paid to the government. Since the Ayyubid period, one sixth of the agricultural land formed the royal treasury and five sixths provided for the maintenance of the amirs and the troopers. After al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s reform the share of the royal treasury increased to five twelfths and the share of the amirs and the troopers was reduced to seven twelfths. In enforcing the reform al-Nāṣir Muḥammad improved the economic status of the sultan, and the sultan’s treasury became the principal treasury of the state.<sup>8</sup>

During al-Malik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s third reign Egypt and Syria enjoyed peace and prosperity. Damascus was the administrative centre of Syria and the second capital of the realm. The city had suffered severe damage during the battles against

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147.

the Mongols, but the prosperous period after the defeat of the Mongols made the rebuilding of the city possible. The long tenure of Governor (*nāʾib al-salṭana*) Tankiz (712/1312-740/1340) is especially known for extensive construction work on and improvements of the city. Damascus also became a centre of scholarly activity. Since the early Mamluk period Damascus had received refugees from Mesopotamia, who fled from the advancing Mongols. In addition to merchants and craftsmen, there were also many noted scholars among them. These scholars helped to make Damascus a centre of learning in the early Mamluk period.<sup>9</sup>

Economically the early Mamluk period, the 13th and 14th centuries, was prosperous. In Egypt the economy was primarily based on Nile agriculture; transit trade from India to Europe was another important source of income.<sup>10</sup> Syria produced enough to be able to export fruits and luxury goods to Cairo. In compensation Syria received grain shipments from Egypt. In spite of the long-term prosperity, there were from time to time shortages caused by weather conditions, political disturbances, distribution problems and speculation. These and currency fluctuations led to occasional popular protests.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2. Social hierarchy

The Mamluk empire was ruled by a military elite, which formed an exclusive group which only renewed itself by purchasing new slaves. The civilian section of society could not enter its ranks. At the top of the social hierarchy were the ruler, the Mamluk sultan and the highest ranking amirs. They formed the imperial elite (*al-khāṣṣa*).<sup>12</sup> Below them were the rest of the military or the Holders of the Sword (*arbāb al-saif*)<sup>13</sup> and the civilian society both with their own hierarchies.

The civilian society could be divided into two classes: the elite and the common people. The civilian elite consisted of the notables (*al-aʿyān, al-kibār*), who were the leading members of the various communities. They were the wealthy merchants, prominent scholars, judges, religious leaders and bureaucrats. Also outstanding members of certain professions, such as physicians and architects could be ranked as notables. This group had both wealth and political power. Its members were respected both by the common people and the rulers. They could therefore act as mediators between the rulers and the population.

The second civilian class was the broad group of common people (*ʿamma*), which could be further divided into three categories. The first of them contained the respectable shopkeepers, craftsmen, physicians and workers. Below them were the disreputable, i.e. those engaged in trades offending religious law or dealing with

<sup>9</sup> Lapidus 1967, pp. 12-14, 22 and Irwin 1986, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> Little 1983, p. 167.

<sup>11</sup> Lapidus 1967, pp. 17f and 144-147.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> The term is used by al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-aʿshāʾ*, vol. 9, p. 253.

objects considered impure. They were the usurers, money changers, wine sellers, butchers, tanners, etc. The lowest strata, the proletariat or the mob (*arādhil al-‘amma, aubāsh al-‘amma*), consisted of the menials: criminals, prostitutes, beggars, vagabonds and others who lived on the fringes of the organized society.<sup>14</sup>

This large group of common people had only limited economic resources and very marginal opportunities to influence the politics of the state. When the people felt that they had to get relief from economic hardship or oppression, they resorted to rioting. These demonstrations of discontent were never ignored by the ruling elite, because they contained a potential for a serious uprising against the rulers. Their response was, however, limited. Prices could be stabilized, speculation prevented and even special taxes could be temporarily rescinded. Also lesser officials, *qādīs*, or market inspectors could be removed because of popular protests, but petitions to remove powerful amirs were usually not heard, because this could easily have upset the power balance in the Mamluk court, and that was considered to be more dangerous than the discontent of the people. The riots were not always spontaneous popular reactions. There were occasions when ambitious Mamluk amirs used the common people as tools to advance their own careers by inciting riots against their competitors among the ruling elite.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.2.1. The ‘*ulamā*’

An important element within the civilian society was the ‘*ulamā*’ (sg. *‘ālim*), the scholars of religious sciences. They were the experts on Islamic law and doctrine. On the basis of their religious learning and their personal piety, the ‘*ulamā*’ were respected and seen as the guardians of the Islamic values in the society. They were expected to give moral guidance and react against anything that was not sanctioned by the teachings of Islam. The ‘*ulamā*’ formed a category that had its own internal hierarchy, where a member’s position was determined by his level of learning. The most esteemed were the jurist-scholars, whose prerogative was the interpretation of Islamic law, whereas the Koran reciters, elementary school teachers and other persons of minor learning connected to the mosques and the religious institutions, formed the other end of the spectrum.

The ‘*ulamā*’ were an open group, and in principle anyone could become an *‘ālim* by devoting himself to religious studies. He could be of humble origins like Ibn Qayyim al-Jauzīya, whose father had been the cleaner of al-Jauzīya *madrassa* in Damascus, or he could as well come from the highest echelons of the society like the many sons of Mamluks, who chose a scholarly career. There were also people who combined their scholarly interests with other employment. There were merchants and craftsmen, who studied Islamic law and transmitted hadiths without giving up their trade. In a society that valued religious knowledge, part-time scholarship also en-

<sup>14</sup> Lapidus 1967, pp. 80-85.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 81f and 144-148.

hanced an individual's status.<sup>16</sup>

The Mamluk elite was also deferential towards the *‘ulamā’* and readily gave financial support to scholarship by endowing colleges (*madrasa*) and securing stipends for teachers and students. The keen interest the Mamluks showed to religious education can be illustrated by the numbers of colleges they founded in Cairo and Damascus. During the Turkish period at least seventy-four teaching institutions in Cairo were endowed or constructed. Of these, twelve were financed by the sultans and thirty-six by the Mamluk amirs or their families.<sup>17</sup> In Damascus during the same period thirty *madrasas* were founded or underwent major reconstructions. One of these was financed by the governor and fourteen by the Mamluk amirs.<sup>18</sup>

These figures show that the Mamluks played an important role in supporting traditional Muslim learning by acting as patrons of the *‘ulamā’*. There were several reasons for the Mamluks' interest in Muslim scholarship. At least in some cases the motives were religious, although this was not necessarily recognized by the *‘ulamā’*. Within the Muslim community, the Mamluks' military achievements were appreciated, but their religious feeling was viewed with suspicion. It seems that especially the *‘ulamā’*, in order to stress their own importance as the guardians of the Islamic values, insisted on viewing the Mamluks as uncouth soldiers without any real knowledge of Islam. However, the Mamluks were during their training fairly extensively educated in the religious practice and the social norms of the Muslim community. This part of the education must have impressed the young Mamluks and many of them seem to have become truly pious. Therefore their eagerness to promote Islamic scholarship can be seen as the fulfilment of their duties as Muslims.<sup>19</sup>

Not all the reasons for supporting the religious establishments were pious ones. An important aspect of the donations was that they perpetuated the donor's name in a very concrete manner: the name of the donor was inscribed on the walls of the building. These inscriptions seem to have served as symbols of power among rival Mamluks. They could function as an indication of the favour the donor enjoyed among the most powerful: the name of a person in disgrace was erased from the walls of any institution he may have founded.<sup>20</sup> The *‘ulamā’* may not have been eager to acknowledge the piousness of the Mamluk donors, but they were quick to criticize the Mamluks for their attempt to immortalize their names. Tāj al-dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) wrote:

We have seen sultans who erect congregational mosques (*jāmi‘*) believing it to be an act that pleases God. But such a ruler must understand that the existence of two congregational mosques in one city is, according to al-Shāfi‘ī and most of the scholars, only allowed in case of necessity. If the ruler says that he got the

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 107-110.

<sup>17</sup> Berkey 1992, pp. 128f.

<sup>18</sup> Lapidus 1967, Appendix B, pp. 199-203.

<sup>19</sup> Haarmann 1988a, pp. 82-84 and Berkey 1992, pp. 146f.

<sup>20</sup> Berkey 1992, p. 133.

permission from a group [of jurists], we say to him: you must first accomplish what everybody sees as your duty and then you may do the things some consider permissible. But if you commit sins and leave undone what God has commanded you to do, and then want to construct a mosque with funds taken from the people so that it would be called "the Mosque of so and so", be assured that God the most high will never accept the deed.<sup>21</sup>

A further reason, also recognized by the medieval scholars,<sup>22</sup> seems to have been the character of the donations as pious foundations (*waqf*). The personal wealth of the Mamluks was never secure. The constant intrigues and power struggles usually ended up with the losers executed and their fortunes confiscated. In order to ensure that at least some of their wealth was passed on to their children, the Mamluk notables established pious foundations in favour of a *madrasa* or other religious or charitable institution. The confiscation of these foundations was practically impossible at least during the Turkish period.<sup>23</sup> If the donor's purpose was to ensure a steady income for his children, he had to take care that the revenue of the endowment was enough not only to cover the upkeep of the institution founded but also to produce surplus. This surplus could then be divided among his heirs. Many of the *waqf* deeds of colleges contained stipulations of regular payments to the founder and his descendants.<sup>24</sup>

Among the '*ulamā*' the most influential were the jurist-scholars, whose prerogative was the interpretation of the Islamic law. Their *fatwās* (authoritative legal opinions) were indispensable for the legitimization of the government's actions. When the state required extraordinary taxes, the rulers got the '*ulamā*' to attest the legality of the tax. When the *qādīs* and scholars, known for their learning and piety, had sanctioned the tax, the population could not refuse to pay. The authority of the '*ulamā*' was also needed to incite the population to defend the community. There were times when the '*ulamā*', on the sultan's request, called the population to fight against rebels, invaders or heretics threatening the peace of society. On most serious occasions the scholars themselves learned to shoot and fight and even opened the mosques and *madrasas* for military exercises.<sup>25</sup>

The old ideal was that the '*ālim*' was independent of rulers and could, if need be, even criticize them and exhort them to obey Islamic practices. The chroniclers mention some occasions when the '*ulamā*' sided with the dissatisfied population and became leaders of demonstrations.<sup>26</sup> They could therefore be seen as a competitive authority to that of the actual rulers, but the threat they posed to the established authority was a minor one. In fact, it was not only the Mamluk regime which needed the '*ulamā*', but also the '*ulamā*' which needed the regime. The continued existence of an orderly society was a prerequisite for the fulfilment of religious duties. The opposite

21 al-Subkī, *Kitāb mu'īd*, p. 32.

22 Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, vol. 2, p. 435.

23 Later, in the Circassian period, the sultans found ways to confiscate these funds, too. See Ayalon 1958, pp. 289-292 and Petry 1981, p. 25.

24 Berkey 1992, pp. 134f.

25 Lapidus 1967, pp. 93 and 134f.

26 *ibid.*, pp. 140f and 150-153.



of an organized state was considered to be anarchy, where there was no ruler to impose the ordinances of the *sharīʿa* on the people. In such a situation no-one could remain a true Muslim. The character of the government was not so important, as long as the ruler confessed Islam and respected the *sharīʿa*. Bad government was an ordeal that should be endured. Even though the *ʿulamāʾ* occasionally participated in or led demonstrations, they usually preached obedience and patience to the people, because their conviction was that revolution only led to anarchy and lawlessness.<sup>27</sup> The *ʿulamāʾ* usually refrained from actively opposing the government knowing that, apart from uncontrollable rioting, they did not have effective power to force their views on a determined ruler. Their major strength was their moral authority, which could be exercised when the ruler was disposed to discuss his decisions.

The *ʿulamāʾ* were eager to exert their influence on the rulers, but the sultans and amirs did not always seek the company of scholars. This attitude was criticized by the *ʿulamāʾ*. Tāj al-dīn al-Subkī wrote:

It is strange that the most noble amirs employ a physician in all their fortresses. They allow him to escort them on their travels and this at the treasury's expense. But they do not engage the services of a jurist, who could teach them in religious matters. This only shows that their bodies are dearer to them than their souls.<sup>28</sup>

If an *ʿālim* got a position as a teacher or advisor of the ruler, it gave him a good opportunity to do his duty and 'command the good and forbid the evil'.

When the ruler was willing to listen, the *ʿulamāʾ* were in fact able to influence state policies. The career of the Hanbalite scholar, Ibn Taimīya (d. 728/1328) serves as an example. Like many earlier Hanbalites Ibn Taimīya was politically very active and agitated for the closer adherence to Sunna and *sharīʿa*. In his opinion the ruler had to promote virtue and forbid evil by respecting the *sharīʿa* and preventing the formation of a gap between the actual practice and the letter of the law. The goal was to establish a society that in its final form would devote itself solely to the service of God.

For some time Ibn Taimīya managed to make the sultan himself listen to his views and accept some of his ideas. When Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir resumed power in 709/1310, he invited Ibn Taimīya, who had condemned the usurpation of the sultanship by Baibars al-Jāshnikīr, to discuss political issues several times. On one occasion the issue was the dress restrictions imposed on Christians. The Christian community was even willing to pay an extra tax if they could be freed from the dress code. Ibn Taimīya protested vehemently against the suggestion and was able to convince the sultan that the rules should remain unchanged.<sup>29</sup> On another occasion, in 711/1311, Ibn Taimīya intervened on behalf of two preachers who had been arrested in Damascus,

<sup>27</sup> Lapidus 1967, p. 134. Medieval political theorists, such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn Jamāʿa and Ibn Taimīya, preferred submission to revolution: cf. E. I. J. Rosenthal 1958, pp. 38-61.

<sup>28</sup> al-Subkī, Kitāb muʿīd, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Ibn Kathīr, al-Bidāya, vol. 14, p. 54. Little 1976, p. 559.

because they had led a demonstration against the non-Islamic taxes imposed by the new governor. Ibn Taimīya took the matter to the sultan who subsequently ordered the governor arrested, and a few months later the new taxes were cancelled.<sup>30</sup> The following year (712/1313), when Ibn Taimīya had returned to Damascus, the sultan sent letters to the Syrian governor instructing him to apply retaliatory punishment in accordance with the *sharīʿa* and further to take into account a person's moral behaviour when appointing him to public office. According to Ibn Kathīr, both of these letters were inspired by Ibn Taimīya and they do in fact reflect what Ibn Taimīya expressed in his political treatise *al-Siyāsa al-sharʿīya*. Ibn Taimīya's influence was also evident in the fiscal adjustments made by the sultan in 714/1314. Ibn Taimīya's influence lasted only for some years, and in 726/1326 Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir forbade Ibn Taimīya to issue *fatwās* and ordered him imprisoned in the citadel of Damascus. He was never released and died in prison two years later.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from occasionally succeeding in influencing the rulers, the major concern of the *ʿulamāʾ* was to educate the common people in religion. It was the duty of the *ʿulamāʾ* to assure that the members of the community knew enough religious doctrine and practice to adhere to Islamic norms in their daily lives. The natural places of public education were the mosques, but the *madrasas* were also expected to keep their gates open to a wide audience. It was not unusual for a college to employ persons especially to teach the Koran and the art of writing to the common people. The more advanced teaching was conducted by the readers, *qāriʾ al-kursī*. They were usually minor scholars but sometimes also renowned professors who devoted part of their time to instructing the general public.<sup>32</sup>

Tāj al-dīn al-Subkī described the reader as one who sits on a chair in a mosque, *madrasa* or Sufi hospice (*khānqāh*) and reads exhortations (*raqāʾiq*), hadiths and exegesis (*tafsīr*) to the common people. Tāj al-dīn al-Subkī advised the readers to choose texts that the listeners could understand easily. Among the books he recommended was al-Nawawī's hadith compendium *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn* (Gardens of the pious) and Ibn al-Jauzī's collections of sermons. He also considered al-Ghazālī's massive and profound work *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (Revival of the religious sciences) suitable for public instruction.<sup>33</sup>

The readers usually only read the texts without commenting on them, but in the Mamluk period it became usual that the reading was complemented with comments and explanations. The commenting was the duty of the *shaikh* of session (*shaikh al-mīʿād*) or the reader of session (*qāriʾ al-mīʿād*).<sup>34</sup> These positions required both a thorough knowledge of the subject matter and solid teaching experience. Most holders of these positions were therefore prominent scholars and renowned educators. The sessions were held between the noon and afternoon prayers sometimes even four

<sup>30</sup> Laoust 1942-43, pp. 147f.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 148, 151 and 157.

<sup>32</sup> Berkey 1992, pp. 202-206.

<sup>33</sup> al-Subkī, *Kitāb muʿīd*, pp. 162f.

<sup>34</sup> The word *mīʿād* means literally 'the appointed time' i.e. in this context 'the session hour'.

times a week. In many *madrasas* and mosques the sessions were held on Friday afternoons, immediately after the congregational noon prayer. The prominence of Friday afternoons as the scheduled time for the teaching sessions shows that the aim was to get as many of the general public as possible to listen to the lectures.<sup>35</sup>

The teaching offered to the common people was not restricted to the sessions within the mosques and *madrasas*. The needs of the people who seldom or never attended these sessions were taken care of by the narrators, *quṣṣāṣ* (sg. *qāṣṣ*). They were scholars who sat in the streets and market places reciting the Koran, hadiths and stories of the pious ancestors from memory. Their lessons were more exhortations than formal instruction on the religious sciences. The narrators were expected to concentrate on simple matters of religious practice and avoid complicated theological issues that would confuse the audience.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.2.2. The *dhimmīs*

The Mamluk society did not only consist of Muslims but included Christians and Jews as religious minorities. Both communities had existed in Egypt and Syria at the time of the Muslim conquest and thereafter held *dhimmī* status. The *dhimmīs*, the protected people, accepted the domination of Islam and were in response granted the protection of the Muslim state. Both the Jewish and Christian communities had their own leaders who were appointed by the sultan. The leaders were the Patriarchs (*baṭrak*) of the Melkites and Copts and the Head (*ra'īs*) of the Jews.<sup>37</sup> The leaders had legal authority over their communities and were expected to judge them according to their own sacred texts. They also had to assure that all the members of the communities paid the poll tax (*jizya*).<sup>38</sup>

There were special rules concerning the *dhimmīs*. These rules were based on the so-called covenant (*shurūṭ*) of 'Umar, according to which the *dhimmīs* were allowed to practise their own religion, but they were not allowed to proselytize or build new churches or synagogues. There were also rules pertaining to their dress, dwelling and behaviour. The principle of these rules was that the *dhimmīs* should be easily recognizable and that they should not behave or live in a manner superior to the Muslims.<sup>39</sup>

The general opinion of the '*ulamā*' was that the *dhimmīs* should not be employed in the state administration. In spite of this, the Mamluk rulers continued the practice of the preceding dynasties by allowing the Copts to play an important role in the bureaucracy as scribes, secretaries and tax officials. The rulers possibly preferred

<sup>35</sup> Berkey 1992, pp. 206-210.

<sup>36</sup> al-Subkī, *Kitāb mu'īd*, p. 162. Berkey 1992, pp. 204f.

<sup>37</sup> al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā'*, vol. 9, p. 259.

<sup>38</sup> Bosworth 1972, pp. 201 and 210. Fattal 1958, p. 286.

<sup>39</sup> Antoine Fattal presents some of the variants of the covenant. In Fattal's opinion the text of the covenant was gradually elaborated by *mujtahids* during the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. (Fattal 1958, pp. 60-69).

employing them, because, as members of a discriminated minority, they were more dependent on the ruler's favour and therefore more faithful to them.<sup>40</sup>

The position of the Copts as bureaucrats caused discontent among the Muslims, who were obliged to humble themselves before Christian bureaucrats and often even to bribe them to deal with their applications. The Egyptian scholar Jamāl al-dīn Abū Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn al-Ḥasan al-Asnawī (d. 772/1370) relates how a descendant of the Prophet, *sharīf*, explained why he had to kiss the hand of a Christian official:

I could not find any other way. I had no choice in the matter; for he is an official in a department where I had some business to transact. My case had been sent on to him, and I had to try and influence him in my favour; or he might harm me and my family. I am a poor man. I have no resources beyond those that lie in his hands. So I did it, out of necessity. My guilt rests upon him who appointed the Christian.<sup>41</sup>

The '*ulamā*' were also worried about the political influence of the Coptic officials. Their opinion was that the Christian bureaucrats did nothing to make the government respect *sharī'a* nor did they care about the welfare of the Muslim population.<sup>42</sup>

The '*ulamā*' did not only disapprove of *dhimmi* bureaucrats, but also Jewish and Christian physicians were regarded with suspicion. The Malikite scholar Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 737/1336) warned against seeking the advice of a *dhimmi* doctor. According to Ibn al-Ḥājj the *dhimmi* physicians were only looking for an opportunity to claim superiority over the Muslims. They were not interested in the health of their Muslim patients.<sup>43</sup>

Ibn al-Ḥājj also expressed a more general concern that must have been shared by other '*ulamā*' the existence of a relatively large *dhimmi* population endangered the maintenance of the Muslim norms in the society. The popular customs that Ibn al-Ḥājj described in *Madkhal al-sharīf al-sharīf* (Introduction to the august revealed law) show that certain Christian and Jewish customs influenced the Muslim population. For example, Muslim women avoided household work on Sundays like the Christians and refrained from buying or eating fish on Saturdays like the Jews.<sup>44</sup> All this was *bid'a*, innovation, and disregard of Sunna. Instead of following the example of the Prophet and the pious ancestors, the people took over *dhimmi* customs. The Muslims even took part in Christian and Jewish religious festivals and attached special importance to some of these holidays. For example Holy Saturday was considered a special day for curing illnesses, because all medicaments taken on this day were more effective than

<sup>40</sup> Cahen 1965, pp. 228f.

<sup>41</sup> The passage is from al-Asnawī's tract: al-Kalimāt al-muhimma fī mubāsharat ahl al-dhimma and was quoted and translated by Perlmann 1942, p. 851.

<sup>42</sup> Richards 1972, p. 377.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, vol. 3, pp. 89f.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 136. For a detailed presentation of the popular customs described in Ibn al-Ḥājj's *Madkhal* see Langner 1983.

usual. In Ibn al-Ḥājj's opinion the Muslims who shared the customs of the *dhimmīs* and participated in their festivals in fact glorified Judaism and Christianity and strengthened the position of these religions.<sup>45</sup> As guardians of Islam, the 'ulamā' considered it their duty to reduce the corrupting influence of the *dhimmīs* and therefore insisted on the implementation of the discriminatory rules against them.

There were some serious anti-*dhimmī* riots in the early Mamluk period. A common claim of the rioters was that the discriminatory rules should be applied strictly and that the *dhimmī* bureaucrats should be dismissed or converted. In connection with the riot in 755/1354 the *dhimmīs* were forbidden to practise medicine.<sup>46</sup>

The riots seem to have arisen from popular discontent with the wealth and influence of the *dhimmīs*, but they may have been expressions of broader social distress. In that case the violent riots could be seen as protests against an oppressive government and the role of the *dhimmīs* as that of scapegoats.<sup>47</sup> Whatever the reason, the pressure on the *dhimmīs*, especially the Copts, was very severe in the Turkish period. As a consequence, a large number of Copts converted to Islam and the Coptic population was very much diminished.

### 2.3. Traditionalism

The Mamluks created four independent offices of *qāḍī al-quḍāt* (chief judge) both in Cairo and Damascus, one for each Sunni school of law. This occurred in 663/1265 in Cairo and 664/1266 in Damascus during the rule of Sultan Baibars al-Bunduqdārī. Earlier only the Shafi'ite school had had the office of *qāḍī al-quḍāt*. There seems to have been several reasons behind the decision. It has been suggested that by having four chief *qāḍīs* of equal rank, the Mamluks weakened the position of the Shafi'ite school. Another motive may have been that the Mamluks wanted to strengthen the Hanafite school, which they themselves preferred. It could also be that the heterogeneous population of the big cities required the services of judges from more than one school. The Mamluks probably also calculated that they could more easily get a favourable legal decision when they had the opinions of four schools to choose between.<sup>48</sup>

The Mamluk elite supported the Hanafite school, whereas the majority of the population followed the Shafi'ite school, but also the smaller Malikite and Hanbalite schools had their followers.<sup>49</sup> In Syria the Hanbalite school gained strength during the Mamluk period when the number of prominent Hanbalite scholars was increased by the refugees who fled from the Mongols from Harran in Mesopotamia. Gradually Damascus and Ba'labakk became the centres of Hanbalism.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the

<sup>45</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, vol. 1, pp. 179f.

<sup>46</sup> al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-sulūk*, vol. 2, part 3, p. 925.

<sup>47</sup> Richards 1972, p. 378. Little 1976, p. 561.

<sup>48</sup> Irwin 1986, p. 43. Little 1983, p. 174. Escovitz 1984, pp. 22f.

<sup>49</sup> Irwin 1986, p. 96.

other legal schools, Hanbalites also constituted a theological school forming a part of the traditionalist movement. The traditionalists stressed the importance of divine revelation and disapproved of rationalist theology.

The major school of rationalist theology in the Mamluk period was the Ash'arite school. Ash'arism was named after Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī al-Ash'arī, who died in Baghdad 324/936. al-Ash'arī had originally supported Mu'tazilism, but had later turned towards the traditionalists by accepting the doctrines of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. He did not, however, renounce the rational methods of Mu'tazilite theology, but used them in arguments about the doctrines. This was not accepted by the traditionalists, who rejected his methods.<sup>51</sup> Ash'arism had gradually developed into a school of rational theology (*kalām*), which had supporters especially within the influential Shafi'ite legal school.

The traditionalists did not call their theology *kalām*, which was based on rationalism, but rather *uṣūl al-dīn* (the sources of religion). These sources were the Koran and the Sunna of the Prophet. They rejected the use of rational methods for explaining questions of dogma. The traditionalists considered the dogmas as issues of faith and therefore no explanations were necessary.<sup>52</sup> There were traditionalists in all the legal schools, but because the Hanbalites formed a coherent legal-theological group, they were the core of traditionalism.<sup>53</sup> The Shafi'ite legal school was theologically divided between traditionalists and Ash'arites. It has been claimed that actually the majority of Shafi'ites remained traditionalist, whereas the Ash'arites formed the minority.<sup>54</sup> A Shafi'ite scholar favouring traditionalism was described in the biographical sources as a Shafi'ite in the area of positive law and a Hanbalite in the principles of religion (*shāfi'ī al-fiqh, ḥanbalī al-uṣūl*).<sup>55</sup>

An essential part of traditionalism was the adherence to the Sunna of the Prophet and the pious ancestors. Everything that was not confirmed by the Sunna, was rejected as innovation (*bid'a*), because innovations corrupted the original practice and faith. Respect of Sunna was essential for the well-being of the society. Deviations from the revealed faith aroused God's anger and led to divine punishments. Rational theology was seen as a particularly serious *bid'a*. According to the Hanbalite scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziya, God had punished the Muslims for their interest in *kalām* by allowing the Fatimids to rule over Syria, Egypt and al-Ḥijāz. The more recent occurrences such as the Christian reconquista in Spain and the attacks of the Mongols were also expressions of God's wrath about the Muslims' preference for rational theological dogmas over God's revelation.<sup>56</sup>

The attachment to the Sunna was not confined to dogmatic and ritual issues only,

<sup>50</sup> Laoust 1960, pp. 6 and 51. Lapidus 1967, p. 112.

<sup>51</sup> Watt 1985, pp. 64f.

<sup>52</sup> Makdisi 1981a, p. 264. Makdisi 1963, p. 22. Watt 1985, p. 98.

<sup>53</sup> Makdisi 1962, p. 46.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80 and Makdisi 1963, pp. 37f.

<sup>55</sup> Makdisi 1981a, pp. 263f.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziya, *Ighātha*, vol. 2, p. 265.

but was extended to the wider area of moral code. The traditionalists favoured the hadith, according to which the Prophet had said: "The believer, whose faith is the most perfect, is the one who has the best moral character".<sup>57</sup> Among the traditionalist 'ulamā' there were active preachers who exhorted the Muslims to forsake their vices and lead a virtuous life, stressing the importance of upholding Islamic moral values. The Malikite Ibn al-Ḥājj criticized various innovations practised by the population in his *bid'ā* tract *Madkhal*. Above I have referred to the customs that Ibn al-Ḥājj described as being of Jewish or Christian origin. He also attacked popular Muslim festivals such as the commemorations of the *mi'raj*, the Prophet's ascension to heaven, on 27 Rajab and of *maulid*, the Prophet's birthday, on 12 Rabī' al-awwal. These celebrations were viewed as innovations by Ibn al-Ḥājj and other traditionalists. The pious ancestors had not recognized them and therefore they were not in accordance with *shari'a*.<sup>58</sup>

The source for the Islamic norms was the hadith literature. The hadiths reported what were correct Islamic customs and were an important source of the Islamic law. The many *madrasas* in the Mamluk sultanate not only educated specialists in the study of hadiths, but also, together with the mosques and *khānqāhs*, provided a forum where specialist knowledge was shared with the common people. Popular interest in the hadiths was great. Hadith recitations were not only attended in order to gain practical guidance, they were also attended as an expression of personal piety. The reading or listening to hadiths had become a form of worship, a pious act that was believed to bring deliverance in moments of stress. Public recitations were, for example, organized when the plague struck Cairo in 790/1388.<sup>59</sup>

Apart from reciting and explaining hadiths to the public, the 'ulamā' also wrote books in which they popularized their knowledge of the Islamic tradition. These books were often formulated as exhortative *bid'ā* tracts which were intended to advise people on correct behaviour. I have already mentioned Ibn al-Ḥājj's *Madkhal al-sharīf al-sharīf*, but there were also other similar books such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jauzīya's *Zād al-ma'ād fī hady khair al-'ibād Muḥammad* (Provisions of hereafter in the guidance of the best of servants, Muḥammad). Also *al-Ādāb al-sharīya wal-minaḥ al-mar'īya* (Morals based on *shari'a* and gifts that deserve to be respected) by the Hanbalite scholar Shams al-dīn Ibn Muflīḥ (d. 762/1361) clearly belongs to the same category of texts. Both of these books discussed a variety of subjects ranging from popular festivals and the naming of children to legal and moral questions pertaining to marriage and divorce. The treatment of all subjects was supported by extensive quotations from the hadiths. They also took up medical hadiths and discussed issues of health and sickness. The medical chapters in Ibn al-Qayyim's *Zād al-ma'ād* were later published separately with the title *al-Ṭibb al-nabawī*.

The didactic nature of these types of books can be illustrated by a passage from

<sup>57</sup> "Akmal al-mu'minīn imānan aḥsanuhum khuluqan.", e.g. in Ibn Taimīya, *al-ʿAqīda al-wāsiṭīya*, p. 26 of the Arabic text.

<sup>58</sup> Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, vol. 1, pp. 142-157.

<sup>59</sup> Berkey 1992, pp. 211 and 217f.

Ibn al-Qayyim's *Zād al-ma'ād*, where he tries to correct a common misunderstanding of the principle of *kafā'a* (the equality of social status of bride and bridegroom as a condition of marriage). He first stresses that a valid marriage only requires *kafā'a* in religion, and continues:

Not Aḥmad [ibn Ḥanbal] nor any other scholar has ever said that the marriage between a poor man and a rich woman is invalid, if she is content. Neither has he or anyone else said that the marriage between a Hāshimī woman to a non-Hāshimī man or a Qurashī woman to a non-Qurashī man is invalid. I warn about this, because there are many of our contemporaries ... who pronounce divorce on the basis of social inequality. This shows neglect and ignorance of the actual rulings.<sup>60</sup>

The traditionalist scholars were concerned about practical morality and stressed the importance of following the example of the Prophet, his companions and their early successors. Texts like the three mentioned above were obviously guide-books for proper conduct and correct worship. They were clearly not learned treatises written for other scholars but popularizations for the benefit of people who were not familiar with the practical application of Islamic tradition. They were a response to the interest the general population showed in hadiths and the exemplary practices they prescribed.

#### 2.4. The Sufis

As the mystical aspect of Islam, Sufism has always been an integral part of it. In addition to following the explicit rules of Islam, the Sufis stressed the importance of the inner development of the individual and his personal experience of God. The first mystics were individuals who devoted themselves to religious contemplation, but gradually the movement developed into a system of organized brotherhoods, the members of each revering their masters as supreme authorities in religious issues. In Syria and Egypt Sufism had become an established part of the society long before the Mamluk period. There, as elsewhere in the Islamic world, Sufism had various forms ranging from popular Sufism with local saints and miracle-workers to the philosophical mysticism of Ibn al-ʿArabī appealing to the *ʿulamāʾ*. Sufism was present at all levels of the society from the masses of the people to the courts of the rulers.

The Mamluks continued the Ayyubid practice of supporting the Sufi organizations. They built hospices (*khānqāh*) and retreats (*zāwiya*, *ribāṭ*) for the Sufis, in which the Sufis received religious guidance and in which they could reside if they wanted. The Sufis were by no means confined to these residential buildings, but could enter and leave the retreats at will. The membership of a Sufi brotherhood did not demand withdrawal from the society.

The financial support the Mamluks gave to the Sufi organizations proved not only their interest in Sufism but also their desire to control them by making them at least to

<sup>60</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziya, *Zād al-ma'ād*, vol. 4, p. 23.



some extent financially dependent on their contributions. Another indication of their wish to control the Sufis was the continuance of the Ayyubid practice of appointing them chiefs (*shaikh al-shuyūkh*), who were a religious scholars, often a *qāḍī*,<sup>61</sup> who acted for the individual Sufis, whenever conflicts arose between them and the government. On the other hand the chief was obliged to supervise the retreats, and see to it that the ordinances of the *sharīʿa* were obeyed.<sup>62</sup>

Even though many of the *ʿulamāʾ* were themselves Sufis, there remained an antagonism particularly between the traditionalist *ʿulamāʾ* and some aspects of Sufism, which they considered to deviate from the teachings of Islam. The pantheism apparent in the teachings of Ibn al-ʿArabī was condemned as *bidʿa* by the traditionalists. They were also averse to the popular practices connected with Sufism such as the visiting of graves, the cult of saints and the celebration of festivals that had no foundation in the Koran or Sunna. Very severe criticism was levelled against the thaumaturgical exercises of some Sufi groups such as the Rifāʿīya Sufis, who were known for walking through fire and other spectacular activities. Some of these practices were of shamanistic origin.<sup>63</sup> The traditionalists saw them as innovations that could not be validated by the authority of the pious ancestors. Sometimes the *ʿulamāʾ* and the Sufis took their arguments to the local authorities and the amir or the sultan had to take sides.<sup>64</sup> Neither of the two parties to the conflict could be ignored. The pious *ʿulamāʾ* had authority as the experts on theological issues and the religious law. The Sufis, who encouraged the various local cults and the extravagant practices, were extremely popular among the common people. Their popularity formed a potential danger in that they could incite riots among the population, a threat that could not be overlooked. To preserve the order of the society the rulers had to strike a balance between these two antagonistic groups.<sup>65</sup>

Some of the Mamluks were themselves attracted by the popular aspects of religion. For example, Sultan Kitbughā expressed his approval of these beliefs and practices by visiting the place that was said to be the grave of prophet Hūd in Damascus and praying in Maghārat dam Qābil—the cave that was considered to be the place where Cain killed Abel.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, the Mamluks wanted to distance themselves from the more extreme forms of Sufism and especially from the groups whose contact with Islam seemed to be rather superficial. These can be exemplified by Shaikh Baraq and his hundred disciples, who arrived in Damascus 706/1306:

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61 Lapidus 1967, p. 137. Escovitz 1984, p. 207.

62 Ashtor 1958, pp. 187f.

63 Köprülüzade 1929, pp. 12f.

64 A famous encounter was that of Ibn Taimīya and Shaikh Šāliḥ al-Aḥmadī al-Rifāʿī (d. 707/1307) in the presence of the governor of Damascus, 705/1305. The argument resulted in a decree that obliged the Rifāʿīya Sufis to follow the Sunna under penalty of death. The encounter is described by Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 14, p. 36.

65 Irwin 1986, pp. 97f.

66 Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya*, vol. 13, pp. 346f.

... they all kept their chins clean shaven but let their moustaches grow, contrary to Sunna. On their heads they wore horns made of felt and carried bells, bones and wooden staffs.<sup>67</sup>

Baraq had been heartily welcomed by the Mongol Khān Ghāzān, who had recently converted to Islam. But the Mamluk ruler in Cairo, Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad declined to receive Baraq, because he considered Baraq a potential threat as he stood for Turkish and Mongol shamanism in an Islamic guise. Representing a foreign ruling elite, who claimed to be the champions of Islam, the sultan wanted to avoid contact with such a striking personality, who was easily connected to non-Islamic religious traditions and could cause alarm among the *'ulamā'* and the population.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, vol. 14, p. 41.

<sup>68</sup> Little 1983, pp. 176 and 178. The shamanistic features in the appearance of Baraq and his disciples are explained in Köprülüzade 1929, pp. 17-19.