

# **The Crisis and Order of Venetian Trade in Later Mamlūk Egypt**

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## **Crise et ordre du commerce vénitien en Égypte à la fin de l'époque mamelouke**

La mainmise de l'Empire ottoman sur la plus grande partie de la Méditerranée orientale au cours de la première moitié du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, en particulier l'annexion des territoires de l'État mamelouk en 1516 et 1517, a contribué à la reprise du commerce du Levant qui avait fait face à une crise au début du siècle. Cependant, le passage du règne des Mamelouks à la domination ottomane ne signifie pas qu'un changement radical allait se produire. En Égypte à la fin de l'époque mamelouke, le Sultan et les Vénitiens, même si des conflits d'intérêt avaient existé entre eux à propos du négoce du poivre, souhaitaient poursuivre leurs échanges commerciaux. Les efforts entrepris des deux côtés pour surmonter cette crise commerciale par la voie de la coopération et du compromis indiquent l'importance des privilèges commerciaux accordés aux Vénitiens. En fait, les éléments essentiels des privilèges commerciaux et le rôle du consul ont agi efficacement. Ces facteurs ont perduré et se sont même développés au cours de la période qui allait suivre. On peut en déduire que l'ordre commercial du Levant a été relancé et réorganisé dans le cadre ottoman.

### ***Introduction***

The expansion of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922) over the greater part of the Eastern Mediterranean in the first half of the sixteenth century contributed to the continuity of the Levant trade practiced by European merchants. For example, the annexation of the land of the Mamlūks (1250-1517) in 1516 and 1517 had an influence on the spice trade that connected the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea via Egypt and Syria. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the quantity of spices brought into the Levant diminished due to the activities of the

Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. It is well known that, in the middle of the century, it revived with the Ottoman Empire's stable rule in the Red Sea and its policy of counterattack against the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup> Coinciding with this process, the conditions of activity of the Venetians in Alexandria, an Egyptian Mediterranean port city, also changed. In the later Mamlūk period, the conflicting interests of Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (1501-16) and the Venetians became serious: the system that the Venetians should compulsorily purchase a certain quantity of the sultan's pepper at an official price became very contentious, and the Venetian trade in Egypt stagnated. After the Ottoman rule in this area began, the Venetians began to conflict and compete with the Jews, who had only recently become influential in financial and commercial affairs, but they were able to continue trade because the Ottoman power was adjusting the interests of both sides.<sup>2</sup> In short, the crisis relating to Venetian trade under the Mamlūk rule was overcome under the Ottoman rule.

However, the shift from Mamlūk to Ottoman rule did not mean a complete change. The Mamlūk sultan and the Venetians had the same interests, in that both sides hoped to continue trade. Although they were unsuccessful, the attempts of both sides to overcome the commercial crisis by cooperation and compromise indicate what the necessary conditions for maintaining trade were, and, therefore, suggest the lasting factors in the process by which the trade turned from stagnation to revival. The purpose of this paper is to find out these factors.

### I. *Commercial Crisis and Norms*

The commercial crisis in Alexandria in the later Mamlūk period was recorded by Ibn Iyās, a contemporary Egyptian historian, in his chronicle titled *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'i' al-Duhūr*. According to this, the conditions in the city at the time when Sultan al-Ghawrī visited to inspect fortresses from December 1514 to January 1515 were as follows:

At the time, there were no big merchants, either Muslim or Frankish, in the seaport of Alexandria. The city had gone to extreme ruin because of the injustice of the governor and the oppression of the tax collectors, who had begun to collect ten times the tithe from the merchants. The Frankish and Maghribī merchants stopped entering the seaport. The situation of the city was in annihilation and ruination, so much so that it was said that neither bread nor any other food was able to be obtained there. There were few stores open,

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1 The revival of the spice trade was emphasized for the first time in Frederic C. Lane, "The Mediterranean Spice Trade: Its Revival in the Sixteenth Century," *American Historical Review*, vol. XLV (1940), pp. 581-590, reprinted in *Venice and History: The Collected Papers of Frederic C. Lane*, Baltimore, 1966, pp. 25-34. For the relation between the expansion of Ottoman power and the India trade, see Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert (eds.), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 315-363.

2 Yutaka Horii, "The Mamlūk Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī (1501-16) and the Venetians in Alexandria," *Orient*, vol. XXXVIII (2003), pp. 178-199; *idem*, "Venetians in Alexandria in the First Half of the Sixteenth Century," *Annales of Japan Association for Middle East Studies*, vol. XX, part 2 (2005), pp. 131-144.

while the others were dilapidated and not opened.<sup>3</sup>

Although the trade in the city had stagnated, it is not appropriate to consider the tyranny of the Mamlūk officials toward the merchants as the only reason for this. Reports from Egypt recorded in the *Diaries (I Diarii)* of Marino Sanuto, a contemporary Venetian historian, shed light on a more complicated situation. A part of serious problems for the Venetians was that the traditional commercial norms, which had sustained their activities in Egypt, failed to function effectively. When al-Ghawrī visited Alexandria at the end of 1514, Tommaso Venier, a Venetian consul residing there, showed him the old decrees (*comandamenti*) concerning the Venetians and had him issue new decrees to the authorities in Alexandria and Damietta that reasserted the Venetians' rights. A decree issued for Alexandria on January 3, 1515, contains rules for enabling the Venetians to have smoothly running commercial activities. This included the prohibition of demanding gratuities, the freedom of buying and selling with registering their transactions in the weigh-house (*doana de gaban = dīwān al-qabbān*), set carriage fees for loading spices to galleys, the liberty of choosing weighers, and the prohibition of demanding merchants unreasonable brokerage fees.<sup>4</sup>

At the time, the Venetians needed to confirm their rights, and the sultan issued decrees in answer to the consul's request. This shows that the Venetians' rights, which they had been granted by the sultans, were indispensable for maintaining their trade in the area. Therefore, the documents showing the commercial privileges that were granted to their nation must be analyzed.

## ***II. Commercial Agreements and Their Limitedness***

In 1507 and 1512, the Mamlūks and Venice made diplomatic negotiations and wrote up mutually agreed-upon documents that presented solutions to commercial problems. The document of 1507 presents the rules that Taghrī Birdī al-turjumān, an interpreter dispatched as a sultan's envoy to Venice when the regular galleys from Venice interrupted from 1505, agreed with the Venetian authorities.<sup>5</sup> The document of 1512 shows the rules which Domenico Trevisan, a Venetian envoy dispatched to Cairo when all Venetians in Egypt were taken into custody because of diplomatic problems, agreed with the sultan.<sup>6</sup>

The greater part of the rules in these documents relate to specific matters occurring in the process of bringing precious metals and goods into Alexandria, paying customs duties,

3 Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'i' al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, 5 vols., Wiesbaden, 1960-1975, repr., Cairo, 1982-1984, vol. IV, p. 424.

4 Marino Sanuto, *I diarii*, 58 vols., Venice, 1879-1902, repr., Bologna, 1969-1970, vol. XX, coll. 168-174.

5 John Wansbrough, "A Mamluk Ambassador to Venice in 913/1507," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. XXVI (1963), pp. 503-530.

6 Maria Pia Pedani-Fabris, "Gli ultimi accordi tra i sultani mamelucchi d'Egitto e la Repubblica di Venezia," *Quaderni di studi arabi*, vol. XII (1994), pp. 49-64, doc. IV and V.

purchasing spices, loading goods into galleys, and making departures. The agreement of these rules reflected a certain cooperative relationship between the sultan and the Venetians. Some of the rules show the Mamlūk administration's cooperation with Venetian trade. For example, both documents prescribe that goods such as spices should be dealt with properly according to the register in the weigh-house,<sup>7</sup> and that spices bought by the Venetians should be sieved and weighed correctly, and the sieves should be examined and sealed by the consul or the sultan.<sup>8</sup>

The most peculiar rules in these documents relate to the conditions of purchasing the sultan's pepper, which led to conflicting interests between the sultan and the Venetians. The document of 1507 prescribes that the Venetians, according to custom, would accept 210 *sporte* of pepper at the price of 80 ducats for 1 *sporta*.<sup>9</sup> The document of 1512 mentions that it was agreed that the Venetians would not be forced to purchase pepper for three years on the condition that they pay 5,000 ducats annually.<sup>10</sup> These agreements were not actually practicable. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the market price of pepper rose considerably and became higher than the customary official price, 80 ducats per *sporta*. For example, the market price by March 1507 was 120 ducats per *sporta*.<sup>11</sup> The sultan obviously made an impractical compromise in reopening trade in 1507. The obligation of paying compensation which was agreed upon in 1512 made it very difficult for the Venetians to continue their trade in Egypt. Galleys from Venice were interrupted from 1513 to 1515. At the end of 1515, above-mentioned consul Venier tried and failed to negotiate with the sultan to have the payment obligation abolished.<sup>12</sup> Although the sultan and the Venetians hoped to continue trade, they did not have effective means to overcome their conflict of interests.

### III. Basic Rights and the Role of the Consul

In the later Mamlūk period, the commercial agreements between the sultan and the Venetians were limited by the actual situation. However, this was partially as a result of malfunction rather than simply disagreement, as the basic commercial privileges of the Venetians functioned even

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7 The 12th clause in the 1507 document (Wansbrough, "A Mamluk Ambassador," p. 523); the 6th and 21st clauses in the 1512 document (Pedani-Fabris, "Gli ultimi accordi," pp. 63-64).

8 The 15th clause in the 1507 document (Wansbrough, "A Mamluk Ambassador," p. 523); the 7th clause in the 1512 document (Pedani-Fabris, "Gli ultimi accordi," p. 63).

9 The 2nd clause in the 1507 document (Wansbrough, "A Mamluk Ambassador," pp. 521-522). In the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth century, 1 *sporta* was equivalent to 700 to 720 *libbre sottili* in Venice, i.e. about 211 to 217 kg (Eliyahu Ashtor, "Levantine Weights and Standard Parcels: A Contribution to the Metrology of the Later Middle Ages," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. XLV (1982), pp. 475-476).

10 The end of the 1512 document (Pedani-Fabris, "Gli ultimi accordi," p. 64). According to the report of Trevisan, this compensation would be paid from the *cottimo* (the common fund of the local Venetian community) to the Mamlūk *dhakhīra* (royal storehouse, "*dachieri*" in Italian) (Sanuto, *I diarii*, vol. XV, coll. 204-205).

11 Horii, "The Mamlūk Sultan Qānshūh al-Ghawrī," pp. 188-189.

12 Horii, "The Mamlūk Sultan Qānshūh al-Ghawrī," pp. 191-192.

while their trade was stagnating.

Since the beginning of the thirteenth century when their consul started residing Alexandria, the Venetians in Egypt had obtained from the Ayyūbids (1169-1250) and the Mamlūks various rights necessary for engaging in trade smoothly.<sup>13</sup> Their basic customary rights, which do not appear in the above-mentioned documents of 1507 and 1512, can be found in decrees (*marsūm*) issued by the sultans to recognize the rights of Florentines in 1489, 1497, and 1507.<sup>14</sup> These decrees, in answer to the request of the Florentine government who hoped to promote their trade in the Mamlūk land in the same way that Venice did, were made to reflect the rights that the Venetians had already obtained. Most of the rules in the decrees of 1489 and 1507 were general, and were already customary for the Venetians. The decree of 1497 contains both general rules and rules on specific matters; most of them were applications of rules that had been agreed between the Mamlūks and the Venetians in 1442.

The most basic rights granted to the Venetians and the Florentines can be extracted from these documents as follows: each nation could organize their own community in the Mamlūk land and be allotted their own factory (*funduq, fondaco*) in Alexandria. The consul represented the community, had exclusive jurisdiction within the community (consular jurisdiction), and had the right to negotiate with the sultan. The merchants had the right to request the sultan's judgements in quarrels with Muslims, and also the right not to be imposed with collective responsibility for the problems of a person belonging to the same nation.

The Venetians in the later Mamlūk period, supported by these basic rights, continued to live in Egypt. The consul in particular seems to have played an important diplomatic and administrative role in maintaining the Venetians' lives and trade. As in the above-mentioned example from 1515, the consul could attempt to improve their situation through negotiating with the sultan. Moreover, the consul's control over his own community was related to both the Venetian and Mamlūk administrations. The detail of consul's duties at the time can be seen in the instructions (*commissione*) given by the Venetian doge to Girolamo Tiepolo, who was appointed as consul of Alexandria in 1498.<sup>15</sup> The rules in the instructions concerning the

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13 At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Venetians gained permission from the Ayyūbid sultan to have a *fondaco* in Alexandria. Their consul started residing there by 1238. See Maria Pia Pedani-Fabris, "The Oath of a Venetian Consul in Egypt (1284)," *Quaderni di studi arabi*, vol. XIV (1996), p. 216. For a general view of the commercial privileges granted to the Europeans in the medieval Islamic-Mediterranean area, see John Wansbrough, "Imtiyāzāt, i," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., vol. III, Leiden, 1971, pp. 1178b-1179a.

14 John Wansbrough, "A Mamlūk Commercial Treaty Concluded with the Republic of Florence 894/1489," in S. M. Stern (ed.), *Documents from Islamic Chanceries*, 1965, Oxford, pp. 39-79; *idem*, "Venice and Florence in the Mamluk Commercial Privileges," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. XXVIII (1965), pp. 483-523; *idem*, "The Safe-Conduct in Muslim Chancery Practice," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. XXXIV (1971), pp. 20-35.

15 *Commissione ducale a Girolamo Tiepolo, console in Alessandria, 1498*, Museo Correr (Venice), Cod. Cicogna 2995 (Commissione 70). It consists of 24 leaves, which contain 76 clauses and 4 laws (*parte*) decided by the Senate in 1490s. It is a collection of laws concerning the consul's duties, and, reflecting the situations of Mamlūk Egypt at the time, show the system that had been established in the

organization and management of the community systematized the consul's control. The consul had to perform administrative and judicial functions in the community through managing the Great Council (*Maggior consiglio*) of all local noblemen and the Council of Twelve (*Consiglio di XII*), whose members he elected. The instructions also prescribed that the consul had to make an effort that the clauses recognized by the sultan would be observed.<sup>16</sup> The consul's control over the community seems also to have been significant from the point of view of the Mamlūks, who needed to maintain social and commercial order.

### *Conclusion*

In the later Mamlūk period, although their interests on dealing in pepper conflicted, the sultan and the Venetians recognized the necessity of maintaining commercial privileges. The basic elements of the commercial privileges and the role of the consul actually functioned. These factors lasted and developed in the next period. After the Ottoman rule began, the Mamlūk system of the compulsory purchase of pepper was abolished. When the Ottoman sultan Selim I conquered Egypt in 1517, he issued a decree recognizing the rights of the Venetians, which they had obtained under the Mamlūks.<sup>17</sup> The basic commercial privileges that they had enjoyed under the Mamlūks were subsumed by the Ottoman capitulations, which had almost same norms.<sup>18</sup> The Venetian consul continued to reside in Alexandria, and, after the middle of the sixteenth century, this residence moved to Cairo. Moreover, the *bailo* in Istanbul and the consuls residing in the Levantine cities became part of the diplomatic and administrative network connecting Venice and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>19</sup> The order of trade that had faced crisis in the later Mamlūk period was revived and reorganized within the Ottoman framework, which covered the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean.

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community and the measures that were taken to deal with new situations. For a general view of the consuls of European trading nations in Mamlūk Egypt and Syria, see Eliyahu Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton, 1983, pp. 411-415.

16 The 25th clause of the instructions of 1498; the text is as follows: "You will find in Alexandria the clauses (*patti*) made again with the sultan. We had give the copy of them in prudence. Therefore, you will make an effort that they will be observed." (*Commissione ducale a Girolamo Tiepolo*, f. 7r.)

17 Bernhard Moritz, "Ein Firman des Sultans Selim I. für die Venezianer vom Jahre 1517," in Gotthold Weil (ed.), *Festschrift Eduard Sachau*, Berlin, 1915, pp. 422-443.

18 Yutaka Horii, "Venetian Consul and Residents in Egypt under Ottoman Conquest," in Francesca Lucchetta (ed.), *Veneziani in Levante, musulmani a Venezia (Quaderni di studi arabi*, vol. XV (1997), Suppl.), pp. 121-132.

19 Yutaka Horii, "Capitulations and Negotiations: The Role of the Venetian Consul in Early Ottoman Egypt," *Mediterranean World*, vol. XIX (2008), pp. 207-216. For the Venetian consular network in the early modern period, see Maria Pia Pedani, "Reports of Venetian Consuls in Alexandria (1554-1664)," in Michel Tuchscherer and Maria Pia Pedani, *Alexandrie ottomane*, vol. I, Cairo, 2011, pp. 61-75.