INTRODUCTION

Modern historical research usually divides Mamluk autonomous rule in Egypt (648–923/1250–1517) into two periods, a Turkish or Bahri period (648–784/1250–1382) and a Circassian or Burji period (784–923/1382–1517). In this it follows contemporary Mamluk sources which already contain this division. Mamluks of Turkish origin were dominant in the army and held the reins of power during the first period while Circassians formed the majority in the army and sultans were drawn from their number during the second.¹

Also found already in certain Mamluk sources and adopted by modern historians is the view that the misrule that characterized the Mamluk state especially from the beginning of the 15th century and led to its decline, started with the rise to power of the Circassians.² Circassian rule is seen as having caused the gradual deterioration of military standards in the Mamluk army which subsequently had its impact on the economy and social order throughout the state.³ Since instances of the collapse of the traditional Mamluk system are regarded primarily as belonging to Circassian rule,⁴ when signs of similar phenomena are found to occur as early as Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s third reign (709–741/1310–1341) and that of his immediate successors, these are treated as mere “sporadic manifestations”.⁵ Furthermore, even though violations of the traditional principles of the Mamluk system are widely agreed to have

¹ Historians contemporaneous with the Mamluk era perceive the rulers of the Bahri period as belonging to the Bahriyya, the mamluk unit established by al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb, and their descendants, and those of the Burji period as coming from among the Burjīyya, established by Qalāwūn (678–689/1279–1290), though none of the Circassian sultans could, of course, actually have belonged to this faction; cf. Ayalon, “Bahri Mamlūk, Burji Mamlūks”, pp. 22–24.
² See, e.g., idem, “Circassians”, pp. 144–147; Lapidus, Muslim Cities, pp. 9–11, 28–43; Ashtor, Social and Economic History, p. 301; Udovitch, “England to Egypt”, p. 120.
been rife during the Circassian period, the system itself is portrayed as having remained constant. According to David Ayalon, these principles "remained the backbone of the military servitude in the Circassian period as well." Thus, deviations are not regarded as perversions of these principles but rather seen as variations in the way they were implemented. "None of the principles on which the Mamluk system has been based was fully carried out (certainly not for long). Yet the cumulative effect of these partly carried out principles proved sufficient to ensure that unique might and longevity of the Mamluk system." 

The present study is an attempt to show that, on the contrary, the Mamluk system, while it contained certain elements that remained constant, was a dynamic one, susceptible to change throughout its history. That is to say, the pivotal place the Mamluk system occupied in the life of the Mamluk elite led, almost from the outset, to reciprocal influence. Thus, the increasing number of deviations from Mamluk principles that occurred prior to the Circassian ascent to power should be seen as stages in a process of change already set in motion.

Our main thesis is that the origins of this process are to be found in the special conditions al-Nāṣir Muḥammad created in the Mamluk army, the repercussions of which were to affect the entire range of Mamluk norms.

Chapter One describes the Mamluk system as it took shape during the formative years of the Mamluk state, the reigns of Sultans al-Ẓāhir Baybars and al-Manṣūr Qalāwūn. This description is then used, in Chapter Two, to throw into relief the changes effected in the Mamluk system by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad. First introduced into the Mamluk army, these changes are found to have had their impact on the social and political life of the Mamluk elite already during al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's lifetime. Chapter Three then traces their development from al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's death up to the end of Mamluk autonomous rule and reveals the transformation they wrought in the Mamluk code of values and Mamluk political concepts.

Chapter Four, finally, deals with the overall economic decline of the Mamluk state. After a brief outline of its various causes as found in modern historical research, viz., demographic decline,

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7 Idem, "Mamlukiyyat", p. 337.
monetary crises, and the collapse of agriculture and industry, the link of each of these with the misrule of the Mamluk government is established. Here it is the repercussions of al-Nāṣir’s expenditure policy on the economy which reveal his reign as a point of no return in that they crippled the state’s ability to withstand the crises which were to beset it during the second half of the 14th century. Underscored, too, is the connection between the norms that came to prevail among the Mamluk military elite following al-Nāṣir Muḥammad’s death and the worsening of the economic crisis.

A few words on methodology. Unlike earlier periods of Islamic history, the Mamluk era is well documented. Contemporary Mamluk sources contain a wealth of information on the Mamluk system itself, the changes that occurred in it and the effect these had on Mamluk rule throughout the Mamluk period. A number of difficulties arise, nonetheless. Firstly, nowhere do Mamluk sources offer us a “systematic theory” on Mamluk training and advancement systems, and thus the way these were organized has to be pieced together from information scattered—often widely—throughout them. Somewhat more detailed descriptions—but, again, far from containing a complete picture—are two passages found in the works of the historian Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442), a relatively late historical source on the period of Baybars and Qalāwūn. Secondly, as soon as signs of the decline of the state began to appear—in the course of the second half of the 14th century—contemporary Mamluk chroniclers increasingly came to depict the first sultans as the founding fathers of the state and tended to hold up the period of their rule as the ideal for their own and future generations to emulate. Al-Maqrīzī, for example, praises them as “rulers who ruled kingdoms and commanders who fought the Holy War”, while he decries the Royal Mamluks of his own time as “the most contemptible, indolent and despised among men, most deprived spiritually, utterly ignorant of the ways of the world, and deviating from the true faith.”

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8 Khīṭat, 2, pp. 213–214; Sulūk, 2, pp. 524–525.
10 Khīṭat, 2, p. 214.
11 Ibid.
A salute to that time and its people! How excellent were their deeds, how becoming were the ways in which they considered the education of their young and the honour which they extended to their elderly. Because of this they ruled the land and the people yielded to them. They won the hearts of their subjects and gained high office. But our times are the exact opposite of theirs, commanders are backward [in their ignorance] and the young evil-minded ... [li-lâhi darru dhâlika al-zamân wa-ahlihi mât kâna ahsana tadbirahum wa-aśwaba hadsahum min jawdat tarbiyat ṣâghirihim wa-ta’zîm kabirihiim hattâ malakû al-bilâd wa-dânat lahum al-‘îbâd wa-istajlabû khawaṭîr al-ra’iyya fa-nâlû al-rutab al-saniyya, wa-ammû zamânînâ hâdhâ fa-huwa bi-khilâf dhâlika kulîhi fa-l-muqaddam mu’âkhkhar wa-l-sâghîr mutanâmîr ...].

Are these the usual regrets of laudatores temporis acti or can we read such passages as representative of their authors’ own time? In order to overcome these and similar difficulties inherent in Mamluk sources and to allow confident use of the information they contain I scanned the writings of Mamluk historians contemporaneous with the reigns of Baybars and Qalâwûn and could only conclude that they wholly corroborate the descriptions found in the later sources. Throughout this study I have availed myself of contemporary and retrospective historical chronicles, encyclopaedias and socio-geographical writings. Modern literature based upon these sources, in particular when dealing with the structure of the Mamluk system and the social and economic history of the Mamluk era, have furthermore proved of invaluable help.

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12 Nujûm, 8, p. 228.
13 For details, see Chapter 4, Introduction.