CHAPTER ONE

ANIMALS IN MAMLUK SOCIETY

A. Farm and Pack Animals

The historical sources available on the Mamluk lands largely reflect the urban society and culture. Although Egyptian society during that period was basically agrarian, and the use of oxen, camels and donkeys for plowing fields and drawing water was practised in Egyptian agriculture from ancient times, descriptions relating to the farmers' lives and ways of irrigating cultivated fields are scarcely to be found in the sources of the period.

The urban landscape of Mamluk Egypt and Syria is largely known to us thanks to descriptions by foreign travellers. In Cairo, the latter were particularly impressed by the omnipresence of donkeys. Even Mamluk sources sometimes make use of travelogues to describe their cities. Thus, al-Maqrizi (who died in 845/1441-2) uses such a text written by a certain Abū Saʿid, a thirteenth-century traveler from the Maghreb. The latter describes a donkey station situated near one of the important gates of the city, “Bāb Zwilah,” and supplied transportation services to Fusṭāṭ, the oldest district in Cairo. Abū Saʿid is quoted as remarking that he had never before seen so many donkeys in any city he had visited. He disliked the need to use a donkey as a means of transportation, describing the ride as a severe test, which was not made easier by the galloping of the donkey, spurred on by its driver. In the end he descended from the donkey in the midway and continued his journey on foot. However, a local friend who had accompanied him on this journey explained to him that riding a donkey was not considered undignified or demeaning in Egypt, for it was really common among people of high status. His friend's statement was substantiated when the Maghribi traveler saw intellectual and religious dignitaries and other upper-class people riding donkeys with no sign of embarrassment.2

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1 See for example: Robert H. Dunlop and David J. Williams, Veterinary Medicine: An Illustrated History, Mosby, St. Louis-Missouri, 1996, pp. 63-77.

Some writers also refer to the extensive use of mules as a means of transport. Mules are comfortable to ride on and therefore they were often used by women. We sometimes come across unusual references to accidents while riding mules, such as the one that happened to the Chief Cadi of the Shafi‘it stream in Damascus, Shihâb al-Dîn Muḥammad b. al-Majîd ʿAbd Allâh, when the mule he was riding crashed into a wall while crossing one of the narrow alleys of the city. However, accounts of death resulting from such “road accidents” are extremely rare, since the mule was the preferred vehicle for women and old people because it was considered so comfortable and safe.

Westerners writing about their travels in the Mamluk Empire were also impressed by the substantial presence of animals in the city streets. One traveler from the early sixteenth century writes: “Many of them would rather ride a horse than walk a quarter of a mile.” Meshulam of Volterra, who visited Egypt in 1481, remarks that only the Mamluks were allowed to use horses, adding, perhaps to console himself for having to ride a donkey, that the Egyptian donkeys were attractive. The animals used by Rabbi Ovadia of Bertinoro on his journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel were mainly camels. He writes that he and his friends hired five camels to cross the desert on their journey from Egypt to Gaza. Due to the lack of security in the area and the danger of attack by highwaymen, they chose to join an Ishmaelite caravan numbering 80 camels.

The use of animals in construction work, mainly for carrying heavy loads and preparing foundations, was widespread during the Mamluk period, which was known as one of the most glorious periods of building and developing urban infrastructures in Egypt and in the other Mamluk territories. There was hardly a sultan or emir who failed to have his name engraved on one of his building projects, whether it was a mosque, a school, a hospital, or a tomb.

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5 The Travels of Meshulam of Volterra, p. 46.