From the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt in 1798 until the Present Day

Chapter 1. Egypt

With the waning of Ottoman power over Egypt from the end of the 18th century onward, the Mamlūks, who had never been completely subdued, regained their previous strength. But 300 years of dependence had done nothing to improve the political understanding of the Beys. As such, they only used their power in order to mercilessly extort the people, which not only affected the local population, but the many foreigners who had come to settle in the country too. This was the excuse for Napoleon's campaign to Egypt in 1798 that ended the Mamlūks' dominion. The Egyptians could hardly ignore the superiority of European culture, as it interfered in the Orient for the first time during this episode. A typical example of this is al-Jabartī's (III, 35/6) lively description of the sciences and the technology that were at the service of the supporting units of the occupation army, while his admiration for the orderly proceedings against the murderers of Colbert is no less (ibid. 117). Yet the French expedition was not able to ensure the permanent influence of European culture. While it is true that Muḥammad ʿAlī, who had emerged victorious from the civil unrest that followed the retreat of French, did liberate his country from a number of insignificant bloodsuckers by having about 500 Mamlūks slaughtered in Cairo on 2 Ṣafar 1226/11 March 1811 (Jab. IV, 127ff.), his over-ambitious foreign policy goals weighed ever more heavily on the country’s finances. His fiscal policies cast the fellahs—who had never had an easy life—into a state of abject poverty (Jab. IV, 109), and when he confiscated all pious endowments and fiefdoms in Dhu ‘l-Ḥijja 1227/January 1812 (Jab. IV, 153) he also turned large parts of the middle classes into beggars. His reckless customs policy hit imports from Islamic countries harder than European goods, and led to an unbearable rise in food prices (Jab. IV, 124, 156, 313). Despite this, these measures were not enough to cover the expenses of his government, and the ever-increasing need for currency forced Muḥammad ʿAli to degrade the coinage (Jab. IV, 139, 206, 312).

2 Cf. Kremer, Ägypten 1, 251.
In order to construct his fleet, he conscripted all carpenters and construction workers to do this work and bought all the timber required at prescribed prices (ibid. 158). On the other hand, his reign did give the country a security of life and property that it had not enjoyed before. Nevertheless, under the jurisdiction of the clergy, abuse continued (ibid. 279) and, whenever he tried to implement the blessings of the West—which he certainly acknowledged—this was purely to further his own political purposes. The first centre of education that was modelled on a European example was a school for the teaching of mathematics, with the help of study-tools from England (in Dhu ‘l-Qa’da 1231/October 1816, Jab. IV, 255). The inventions of European agriculture were supposed to increase the production of his vast state farms, but since he had no experience in this whatsoever, he had to pay a large number of European swindlers before he found someone who was able to set up his factories. Nevertheless, the public works he started did open the country up to European trade.

Muḥammad ‘Alī, a Macedonian, had no understanding of Islamic culture whatsoever. Reading Turkish only with great difficulty, one could hardly expect him to promote Arabic literature. It was only the printing press, which he introduced in 1821 for practical purposes, that proved useful for intellectual endeavours. The ever-bolder sense of entrepreneurship among the publishers rendered the treasures of ancient literature, marginalised as they had been by modern compilations, once again accessible to the masses. But this renaissance, which had also been fuelled by European scholarship, was at first more profitable for the latter than for indigenous literature itself, which continued along the all-too-familiar path of scholasticism, while people with a sense of history, such as al-Jabartī, were few and far between. Muḥammad ‘Alī’s first successor, ʿAbbās, saw himself forced to dismantle the monopolies, revoke the most onerous of the taxes, and scale back the army and the navy. The people fared better under Saʿīd. Ismāʿīl on the other hand, followed the course of his grandfather without, however, being his equal in resolution or political acumen, distinguishing himself only in a negative sense by his exorbitant extravagance. Together with military imbroglios and his policy vis-à-vis the sultan, he brought the country to the brink of ruin, and his son Tawfīq was unable to prevent this from coming to pass. As such, the country was ripe for European tutelage, and from September 1882 onward Egypt was, for all intents and purposes, under British rule.

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4 In spite of this, he appears to have been quite fond of the gushing praise of Turkish poets, on which see *Qaṭāʾif al-laṭāʾif*, 37.