CHAPTER FIVE

THE PHARMACIST IN THE MARKETPLACE

This chapter will attempt to place the pharmacist in a commercial-economic context, using a variety of texts that present an outsider’s view of the profession. After a brief overview of the spice trade during the Mamlûk period, in which the pharmacist was the last link in the chain between the original producers and the ultimate consumers of some spices, in the domestic context, I will consider the references to pharmacy and pharmacists, broadly construed, in two types of writings: legal works and popular literature. Finally, I will discuss the few references to pharmacists scattered throughout a selection of Mamlûk-era chronicles and chancery manuals.

The reverse side of the pharmacists’ link with medicine was their link with the spice trade: many of the raw ingredients that the pharmacist used or sold reached Egypt from Yemen and India, and today would more likely be defined as spices, rather than drugs per se, e.g. pepper and ginger.1 The spice trade was a major source of revenue for Egypt (at first for its commercial classes and later for its rulers) during the Mamlûk period. Commerce between the Mamlûks and the Italian mercantile cities, banned by the popes after the fall of Acre in 1291, resumed in 1345, and by 1395 the volume of spices reaching Venice via the major Mediterranean ports of Alexandria and Beirut dwarfed that coming via the Black Sea port of Tana (today Azov, then under the control of the Golden Horde).2 It is common to see the rise and fall of the Egyptian economy in terms of the rise and fall of the Red Sea trade route, and of the Kârimî merchants who used this route. According to Petry, ‘the significance of commerce in Mamlûk society is amply demonstrated by the

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1 In contrast, in the Middle Ages, ‘[t]he term “spices” (spezerie) was frequently deployed in a wider sense to embrace all the products of the East. Even in its narrower sense, it subsumed dyestuffs, drugs and gums in addition to culinary additives, and thus comprised pepper, ginger, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, sugar, indigo, brazil-wood, aloes, shellac, galangale, mace and “dragon’s blood”. Of these commodities, pepper was the most important.’ (Jackson, The Mongols and the West, p. 298.)

2 Ibid., p. 302.
frequency of trading ventures in biographical sources that did not single out men of affairs for special attention.\(^3\)

The Kārimī merchants, or Kārimiyya, were a group of wholesale merchants who specialised in spices, although these were not their exclusive article of trade. They were the great international merchants of their day, trading between Egypt, Yemen and India.\(^4\) They were most prominent during the fourteenth century, gradually coming under the control of the government, as the sultans, starting with Barsbāy (r. 721–738/1422–1438), began to monopolise more and more of the spice trade.\(^5\) Following the important article by Lopez, Miskimin and Udovitch on the long-distance trade in spices and other luxury goods,\(^6\) it is now accepted that this policy was the result of a long-term decline in the population of the Sultanate caused by the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of plague.\(^7\) The decline in population in its turn brought about a decline in income from agricultural iqtāʿāt (revenue producing land allocations),\(^8\) causing the Mamlūk leadership to search

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\(^5\) But see now R. Mortel, “The mercantile community of Mecca during the late Mamlūk period,” *JRAS* 4 (1994), pp. 15–35, for the possibility that merchants bearing the title khwājā, usually taken to be slave merchants, were in fact the successors to the Kārimiyya. For khwājā as the title of slave merchants, see D. Ayalon, *L’esclavage du Mamelouk* (Oriental Notes and Studies, 1. Jerusalem: Israel Oriental Society, 1951), pp. 1–4. For a positive view of Barsbāys’ policies, see J.-C. Garcin, “The regime of the Circassian Mamlūks,” in *CHEg* I, pp. 293–294.


\(^8\) The iqtāʿ system, which in early studies of the medieval Middle East was equated with the feudalism of the Latin West (e.g., A.N. Poliak, *Feudalism in Egypt, Syria and the Lebanon, 1250–1900*, London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1939), differs from the latter in various ways. For example, the iqtāʿ-holder was granted usufruct of the land involved for as long as the sultan pleased. Such grants were not usually heritable, and could be revoked at the sultan’s whim—unlike the case of European fiefs, which