Jews among the Grandees of Ottoman Egypt*

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In his first book, *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt: The Origins of the Office of Head of the Jews, ca. 1065–1126*, Mark R. Cohen shed new light on the evolution of Jewish communal leadership in Fatimid Egypt. In his most recent book, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt*, he opened a window onto the experiences of the most vulnerable members of that community. Inspired in no small part by his achievements, two of my earlier publications sought to extend this general line of inquiry into the Ottoman period in Egypt and Yemen by re-examining Jewish communal leadership in those two provinces in the context of changes in the Ottoman provincial administration and religious trends among the Muslim majority.1

Here, however, I take up an entirely different population of Jews, or at least former Jews, in Egypt: the military grandees, usually holding the rank of āghā (regimental commander) or sanjak beyi (subprovincial governor), whom narrative sources identify as converts to Islam from Judaism. Several such figures appear in various Arabic chronicles of Egypt—and, in one case, in Ottoman archival documents—between the early eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. They appear not to have originated within Egypt’s long-established Jewish communities. Although a highly placed member of one of these communities, if obliged to convert, might receive a tax farm as reward or compensation, it was virtually unheard of for such a convert to ascend to the upper echelons of Egypt’s dominant grandees.2 Rather, these grandees of Jewish

* Note on transliteration: I use Arabic transliteration for quotations from Arabic, titles of works in Arabic, names of Arabic-speaking ʿulamāʾ and authors, titles, and institutions that predate the Ottoman period. I use Turkish transliteration for titles of works in Ottoman Turkish, names and titles of Ottoman officials (except where such titles have acquired common Anglicizations, as in the case of “pasha”), and names of Egypt’s grandees, who were Turcophone. I have, however, substituted a j for the modern Turkish c; thus, sanjak beyi instead of sancak beyi.


2 A case in point is İbrahim “al-Yahūdī,” a treasury scribe, who converted to Islam after the murder of Yāsif “al-Yahūdī” in 1696 (see below) and received the tax farm of the Alexandria customs. See Aḥmad Katkhudā ʿAzabān al-Damūrdāshī, *al-Durra al-muṣāna fī akhbār al-Kināna*, London, British Library, MS Or. 1073–74, 103.
origin seem to have comprised a tiny Jewish parallel to the hundreds of Christian converts from well outside Egypt who every year joined the military-administrative elite of Egypt, other Ottoman provinces, and the imperial capital.

Since the Ottoman conquest of Egypt from the Mamluk sultanate in 1517, many, if not most, of these converts had been recruited through the devşirme, the distinctly Ottoman institution of “collecting” boys from among the Christian subjects of the Balkans and Anatolia, converting them to Islam, and training them for military or palace service. Early in the seventeenth century, however, these recruits were gradually displaced by young men from the Caucasus who were captured in slave raids and sold in the markets of Istanbul and the various Ottoman provincial capitals as military slaves, or mamlûks. Thus, the converted Jews mentioned in narrative sources must, for the most part, constitute “Jewish mamlûks.”

The Muslimānīs

While converted Jews may occasionally have joined the households of Egypt’s governors and leading grandees during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is difficult to find any trace of them in the available sources. This begins to change in the early eighteenth century, when a couple of sanjak beyis known as “Muslimānī”—apparently a common sobriquet for a convert to Islam from Judaism—appear in Arabic chronicles of the period, echoed decades later by the well-known chronicler ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (1753–1826). Both belonged to the Faqārī faction, one of two military-political blocs—the other being the Qāsimī—that dominated Egypt from roughly the 1640s through 1730. Al-Jabartī confirms that the first, Yūsuf Bey al-Muslimānī, “was Jewish by origin” (kāna aṣluhu isrāʾīliyyan) but converted to Islam, although he provides absolutely no clue as to the bey’s ethno-regional origin. As it was highly unusual for a member of Egypt’s indigenous Jewish population to become a grandee, however, he was most likely a random captive from a Jewish population in the Caucasus, or possibly in Anatolia or the Balkans. In any case, Yūsuf Bey appears to have had a relatively distinguished and untroubled career. Before being promoted to the rank of sanjak beyi, he served as commander (āghā) of Egypt’s Çerākise, or “Circassian,” regiment—which, despite its name, was open to soldiers of a variety of ethno-regional origins—then lieutenant

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