THE SYSTEM OF PAYMENT IN MAMLUK MILITARY SOCIETY

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No great religion in human history has ever been so intimately connected with and so much dependent upon military might as Islam has been from its very inception. Yet our knowledge of Muslim armies and military societies, especially in the Middle Ages, is extremely meager. This is partly due to the fact that the study of the subject has been greatly neglected by the orientalists; but, in my opinion, this is not the main reason. The main blame for such a gloomy state of affairs should be laid at the door of the Muslim sources themselves, for though these sources deal so much and so often with wars, campaigns and battles they say very little about the structure, organization and functioning of the armies involved. In this respect the sources of the Mamluk sultanate (1250-1517) constitute an outstanding exception, for they contain information on the Mamluk army and military society which far surpasses in richness, variety and accuracy anything of the same kind which can be found in other Muslim Medieval sources. This fact is of extremely great significance, for the Mamluk army was not a force of secondary importance in comparison with other Muslim armies. In its heyday it was the strongest army in Islam and one of the strongest in the world. 

1) This paper deals with the various kinds of pay which the mamluk received, except his income from his feudal fief. The paper is a chapter of a work, originally written in Hebrew, on the Mamluk military society and army. The complete work has not yet been published. Parts of it were published either in book form or as articles.

2) There is no doubt that a much better and more reliable picture can be drawn of the army and of the military society of the Ottoman Empire than of those of the Mamluk sultanate, but this is true only of the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth century onwards. Our knowledge of that empire in the Middle Ages is much inferior to our knowledge of the Mamluk sultanate. As for the technical military treatises as a source for the study of the history and organization of the Muslim armies of the Middle Ages, they can be safely used only after exhaustive scrutiny and with the greatest caution. Some of the limitations and defects of those military treatises were pointed out in my work “Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom”, London, 1956, pp. XI-XIII, XV-XVII.

3) Ibn Khaldūn, who spent many years in the Mamluk sultanate, states in unequivocal language that the center of power in the Muslim world passed from the Abbasid caliphate to Egypt owing to the Mamluks. In a passage which throws a most clear light on the Mamluk system of servitude and which deserves special attention and study (Kitāb al-‘Ibar, V, p. 371, ll. 4-27) he pays a glowing