Slaves, Wealth and Fear: 
An Episode from Late Mamluk-Era Egypt

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In the spring of 1446 a group of African slaves gathered in the fields of Giza, outside of Cairo, and set up their own imitation Mamluk court. These slaves appointed their own sultan, as well as governors, wazīrs, and other court officials. They built a tent and throne for their sultan, and engaged in factional fighting just like the Mamluks, even going so far as to cut at least one member of a dissenting group of slaves in half. In addition, the slaves seem to have had a sizeable amount of gold coin. These are the basic details on which the major 15th-century chroniclers, al-ʿAynī,1 Ibn Taġrī-Birdī,2 al-Sakhāwī,3 and Ibn Iyās4 agree.

As for the other details of this story, the chroniclers provide somewhat differing accounts. Al-ʿAynī claims that the slaves had, literally, “a pile of gold”5 and relates that a royal Mamluk went to the African slaves’ encampment to retrieve his own runaway slave. The story finishes when the rebellious slaves cut the runaway slave in half before the eyes of his master, who is terrified both by the act of violence and the sight of so many slaves gathered in one place. Another chronicler, Ibn Taġrī-Birdī, states that the slaves set up an imitation Mamluk court merely for their own amusement, and when spring ended, the slaves disbanded and went on their way.6 Yet another version of events is

6 Ibn Taġrī-Birdī, Ḥawādith al-duḥūr, p. 20, lines 4-6.
provided by Ibn Iyās, who claims that not only did the slaves build a tent for their sultan, but they hung a banner on it — a sign of rebellion — and also raided the countryside and taxed the surrounding landowners. Furthermore, Ibn Iyās’ version is also the only one in which the Mamluk sultan retaliated against the slaves by breaking up their rebellion and arresting them.

While there are four versions of this story, they all hint at the same idea, that there was unrest among the African slaves of Cairo and its hinterland in the mid-15th century. This raises many questions about politics, wealth, and slavery in the late Mamluk period, an era wracked with problems ranging from endemic plague that decimated the population, to economic crisis, Bedouin revolts, popular protest, in addition to internal Mamluk turmoil, particularly among the julbān, or new recruits. In this context, it seems necessary to ask how this episode, a possible slave rebellion, or at least unruly and violent behavior among the African slaves, fits into the larger picture of 15th-century Mamluk Egypt, and also why, in three out of the four chronicles studied here, the slaves received no retribution for their actions.

Two more questions arise from this story of the slaves’ rebellion. The first is whether this story is merely a literary trope employed by the chroniclers to present a veiled criticism of the Mamluk court and its weak hold over the countryside and even over the capital city of Cairo itself. The second issue that ought to be addressed is that of the rebellion’s relation to popular Egyptian culture, in particular to the festival of Nawruz. There are strong elements of a Nawruz or almost carnival-like atmosphere in this episode, with the normal order of things mimicked or turned on its head. The suggestion is not impossible that the slaves were engaged in some rite or festival related to the beginning of spring that got violently out of hand. Or perhaps the slaves did attempt a rebellion that the Mamluk authorities interpreted as an unruly popular celebration because they did not have the time or resources to deal with a slave revolt. But in order to answer these questions, we should first examine the logistics of this episode and establish whether it bears some relation to events that occurred or is a trope employed by the chroniclers.

Feasibility of the Episode

First, it is important to establish who the African slaves were, who owned them, and how they came to be in the fields of Giza during the spring season. According to Ibn Tağrī-Birdī, the slaves were minding their masters’ horses in

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7 Ibn Iyās, Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr, p. 253, lines 8-9.