

"It Has No Root Among Any Community That Believes in Revealed Religion, Nor Legal Foundation for Its Implementation": Placing al-Maqrīzī's Comments on Money in a Wider Context

I

It is certainly nothing new to state that the works of al-Maqrīzī have been one of the most important sets of resources used by scholars of the economic and monetary history of the medieval Middle East in general, and for the Mamluks in particular. His short treatises *Ighāthah* and *Shudhūr* are well known for their focus on economic matters, and his chronicle the *Sulūk* and topographical work the *Khiṭaṭ*, among others, also reflect the author's concern with these issues.¹ As a result, one can scarcely pick up an article or chapter about Islamic money without finding the obligatory reference to Sauvaire's nineteenth-century compilation of monetary and metrological citations, which contains more references to the works of al-Maqrīzī than any other author.² When it comes to the history of Mamluk Egypt, the reliance is even greater. This is clear if we examine the nuts and bolts of Mamluk monetary research. Citations to al-Maqrīzī's many works are common in the "Currency" section of William Popper's *Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghrī Birdī's Chronicles of Egypt*.³ Paul Balog, the author *Coinage of the Mamlūk Sultans of Egypt and Syria*, relied primarily on French translations of some of al-Maqrīzī's major texts for much of the historical context which he included in his works

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¹Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb Ighāthah al-Ummah bi-Kashf al-Ghummaḥ*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo, 1940); *Shudhūr al-'Uqūd fī Dhikr al-Nuqūd*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Sattār 'Uthmān (Cairo, 1990), and many other editions; *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āshūr (Cairo, 1934–72); *Al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Bulaq, 1270).

²Henri Sauvaire, "Matériaux pour servir à l'histoire de la Numismatique et de la Métrologie Musulmanes," *Journal Asiatique*, 7 serie, 14 (1879): 455–533; 15 (1880): 228–77, 421–78; 18 (1881): 499–516; 19 (1882): 23–77, 281–327; 8 serie, 3 (1884): 368–445; 7 (1886): 124–77, 394–468; 8 (1886): 113–65, 272–97, 479–536. It is also worth noting that Isaac de Sacy had translated al-Maqrīzī's *Shudhūr al-'Uqūd* at the end of the eighteenth century.

³William Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans, 1382–1468 A.D.: Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghrī Birdī's Chronicles of Egypt*, University of California Publications in Semitic Philology, no. 16 (Berkeley, 1957), 41–73.



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about Mamluk numismatics.⁴ Jere L. Bacharach, the first scholar to combine systematically the exploitation of Mamluk numismatic evidence with information derived from the many chronicles and other written sources, counted more than 850 references to money and prices in the *Sulūk* for the period from 1382 up to the end of the chronicle alone.⁵ These citations have been the grist for many other studies.

Yet as any recent text on historical methods would point out, and as many of the papers of this conference have emphasized, using al-Maqrīzī's oeuvre is not a simple matter of looking up what he says and plugging that into our work. As Cahen wrote, "the very remarkable merits of this author are incontestable; but . . . it must be kept in mind that for the early periods he is, in the final analysis, in the same position as ourselves, and that his opinion cannot, therefore, bear the validity of formal testimony."⁶ The topic of al-Maqrīzī's use of earlier sources has been much discussed and does not directly concern us here.⁷ There is more to the question of al-Maqrīzī's reliability and historical approach than chronology, however. What is also relevant are the prisms through which al-Maqrīzī viewed those economic matters both prior to and contemporary with him. As is clear to anyone who has read the *Ighāthah* and the *Shudhūr*, al-Maqrīzī was not an impartial observer of the events he described.

For example, al-Maqrīzī had much to say about the disastrous effects he concluded were the result of the Mamluks having put large numbers of *fulūs* into circulation. The following passage appears in his *Ighāthah* (written in 808/1405):

Know—may God grant you eternal happiness and felicity—that the currency that has become commonly accepted in Egypt is the *fulūs*. They are used in exchange for all sorts of edibles, all types of drinks, and other common goods. They are accepted for payment of land taxes, the tithe on the profits of merchants, and other imposts

⁴Paul Balog, *Coinage of the Mamlūk Sultans of Egypt and Syria* (New York, 1964). Cf. Balog's "History of the Dirham in Egypt From the Fatimid Conquest Until the Collapse of the Mamlūk Empire, 358/969–922/1517," *Revue Numismatique*, 6 serie, 3 (1961): 109–46.

⁵Jere Bacharach, "Circassian Mamlūk Historians and Their Economic Data," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 12 (1975): 75–87.

⁶Claude Cahen, "Monetary Circulation in Egypt at the Time of the Crusades and the Reform of al-Kāmil," in *The Islamic Middle East, 700–1900*, ed. A. L. Udovitch (Princeton, 1981), 331, n. 14.

⁷Cf. Donald Little, *An Introduction to Mamlūk Historiography*, Freiburger Islam Studien no. 2 (Wiesbaden, 1970). Al-Maqrīzī's sources for earlier Islamic history and his way of utilizing them are emerging from the studies by Frédéric Bauden. See his "Maqriziana I: Discovery of an Autograph Manuscript of al-Maqrīzī: Towards a Better Understanding of His Working Method" in this volume.



due the sultan. They are used to estimate labor costs for all works, whether significant or insignificant. Indeed, the people of Egypt have no currency other than the *fulūs*, with which their wealth is measured. . . . This is an innovation and a calamity of recent origin. *It has no root among any community that believes in revealed religion, nor [does it have] any legal foundation for its implementation* [emphasis added]. Therefore, its innovator cannot claim that he is imitating the practice of any bygone people, nor can he draw upon the utterance of any human being. He can only cite the resultant disappearance of the joy of life and the vanishing of its gaiety; the ruination of wealth and the annihilation of its embellishments; the reduction of the entire population to privation and the prevalence of poverty and humiliation: "That God might accomplish a matter already enacted" (Q 8:42).⁸

What are we to do with such a jeremiad? On the one hand, it is clear to us today that there was nothing unique about the minting of copper coins in the Mamluk Sultanate. Not only are there many examples of copper coins issued by earlier Islamic dynasties, but al-Maqrīzī himself wrote about the issuance of copper coins in Egypt by the Ayyubid al-Malik al-Kāmil in the early seventh/thirteenth century (see below) and mentioned numerous other occasions of the minting of *fulūs*.⁹ There are also many surviving specimens of Mamluk gold and silver coins minted in the first decade of the ninth/fifteenth century, the period when the *Ighāthah* was written, so other currencies clearly existed, although perhaps they were not in circulation but were hoarded.¹⁰ On the other hand, it needs to be pointed out that what al-Maqrīzī seems to have been the most concerned with in this passage was the tremendous reliance on copper *fulūs* and its ubiquity in all facets of economic life—that it had usurped the roles reserved for gold and silver monies. This development was objectionable to al-Maqrīzī on two interrelated grounds; there was no basis for it in "revealed religion" nor any "legal foundation" for such a development. These reasons suggest that we need to examine the contemporary legal texts for what they have to say about money and its use if we wish to understand al-Maqrīzī's point of view.

⁸*Ighāthah*, 76. The translation is from Adel Allouche, *Mamlūk Economics: A Study and Translation of al-Maqrīzī's Ighāthah* (Salt Lake City, 1994), 77.

⁹Cf. my "Maḥmūd b. 'Alī and the New *Fulūs*: Fourteenth Century Egyptian Copper Coinage," *American Journal of Numismatics* 10 (1998): 123–44.

¹⁰For an overview of monetary developments in Mamluk Egypt, see my "The Monetary History of Egypt, 642–1517," chapter 12 of *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998).



This article thus provides a case study of a set of related issues and problems which have not been adequately discussed in the context of Mamluk monetary history. When it comes to al-Maqrīzī's comments on the money and monetary policy of the Mamluks, I believe we would be well-served to adopt an approach that places al-Maqrīzī in the intellectual milieu of medieval Islamic economic thought. In other words, we need to understand what John Meloy has adroitly termed al-Maqrīzī's "economic *sunnah*."¹¹ This article contributes to that goal by examining brief segments of al-Maqrīzī's economic writings and then comparing those segments to similar material found in contemporary and near-contemporary *ḥisbah* and *fiqh* materials. It concludes with a discussion of the repercussions of this approach and the implications for future research.

II

While the office of *muḥtasib* was not everywhere the same across the expanse of the medieval Dār al-Islām, it is clear that a common matter of general concern of this economico-moral officer was the prevention of actions that resulted in usury (*al-ribā'*).¹² Al-Maqrīzī was twice appointed *muḥtasib* of Cairo during the period 801–803/1399–1401.¹³ With that experience, and in light of the mentions of the duties of the *muḥtasib* which occur in al-Maqrīzī's own writings, it is perhaps safe to assume that he was familiar with the *ḥisbah* manuals of the age.¹⁴ One such *muḥtasib* manual was the *Nihāyat al-Rutbah fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah* by the Syrian author al-Shayzarī.¹⁵ While al-Shayzarī was a twelfth-century author, his work

¹¹See his "The Merits of Economic History: Re-reading al-Maqrīzī's *Ighāthah* and *Shudhūr*" in this volume.

¹²See Claude Cahen and M. Talbi, "Ḥisba (i). General: Sources, Origins, Duties," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 3:485–88. Cf. Reuben Levy's edition and abridged translation of Ibn al-Ukhūwah's *Ma'ālim al-Qurbah fī Ahkām al-Ḥisbah* (London, 1938). For an overview of the position of *muḥtasib* under the Mamluks, see Jonathan Berkey's "The *Muḥtasib* of Cairo under the Mamlūks: Toward an Understanding of an Islamic Institution," forthcoming in the proceedings volume of the International Conference on the Mamlūks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society, May 14–17, 2000, ed. Amalia Levanoni and Michael Winter. Kristen Stilt's forthcoming Harvard dissertation, based upon extensive analysis of the Mamluk *ḥisbah* manuals preserved in al-Azhar, is a welcome development for those interested in the *muḥtasib* in Mamluk times.

¹³For a succinct overview of the conditions surrounding al-Maqrīzī's short-lived career as *muḥtasib*, see Anne F. Broadbridge, "Academic Rivalry and the Patronage System in Fifteenth-Century Egypt: al-'Aynī, al-Maqrīzī, and Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 3 (1999): 85–107, esp. 89–91.

¹⁴See *Khīṭaṭ*, 1:110, 463–64 for examples.

¹⁵'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Naṣr al-Shayzarī, *Nihāyat al-Rutbah fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah*, ed. al-Sayyid al-Bāz al-'Arīnī (Beirut, 1981). It has been translated by R. P. Buckley as *The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector: Nihāyat al-Rutba fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisba: The Utmost Authority in the Pursuit of*



was evidently popular among a Mamluk-era audience, as the number of surviving manuscripts known to have been copied during the Mamluk era may indicate. The two fourteenth-century Egyptian authors Ibn al-Ukhūwah and Ibn Bassām, for example, are known to have relied on al-Shayzarī's work in their own.¹⁶

The following passage comes from chapter 30 of al-Shayzarī's manual, devoted to regulation of money-changers:

It is not permitted for anyone to sell gold coins for gold, nor silver for silver, except in the same quantities and by taking immediate possession. For if the money changer makes a profit when he is exchanging the same metal, or if he and the customer part company before possession is taken, this is unlawful. As for selling gold for silver, profit is permitted here, but credit and concluding the sale before delivery is made are unlawful. It is not permitted to sell pure coinage for that which is adulterated, nor to sell adulterated gold and silver coins for other adulterated ones, such as selling Egyptian dinars for those from Tyre, or those from Tyre for the same, or Ahadi dirhams for those from Qairouan because of ignorance as to their value and the lack of similarity between them.

It is likewise not permitted to sell whole dinars for cut pieces of a dinar because of their difference in value. Nor is it permitted to sell dinars from Qashan for those from Sabur due to the difference in their composition.

It is also not permitted to sell a dinar and a garment for two dinars [emphasis added]. Some money changers and cloth merchants occasionally practice this usury in another way. They give the buyer a dinar as a loan and then sell him a garment for two dinars, so that he owes them three dinars for a specified period when they will ask for it all back. This is unlawful and it is not permissible to do it with this condition because it is a loan bringing profit. If they had not loaned him the dinar, he would not have bought the garment for two dinars.¹⁷

Ḥisba, by 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Naṣr al-Shayzarī, *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement* 9 (Oxford, 1999). Very little is known about this individual's life or career. Al-Shayzarī's *madhhab*, for instance, is as yet undetermined.

¹⁶See Buckley, *The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector*, 14.

¹⁷This excerpt from R. P. Buckley's translation of al-Shayzarī's *Nihāyat al-Rutbah fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah*, 94–95. The passage appears in pp. 74–75 of the Arabic edition. A similar yet briefer passage occurs in Ibn al-Ukhūwah, p. 36 of the abridged translation and pp. 178–79 of the Arabic text.



The passage is concerned with eliminating practices that could lead to usurious and therefore illegal profit by forbidding transactions involving more than one type of coinage made from the same metal. The market manual thus condemns what was likely among the most common features of the contemporary marketplace: in a market where coins of multiple provenance, age, weight, and purity were in use (as both the Geniza and hoard evidence indicates was the case), it is hard to imagine transactions above the most petty day-to-day type always involving coins that were exactly the same type.¹⁸ While neither the common folk nor the ulama may have been fully cognizant of the differences and variables amongst the circulating coinages, it is safe to assume that moneychangers and successful merchants were. It was, after all, a primary job of the *sayrafī* to determine value. While the dichotomy is not absolute, passages such as this one seem to represent an incongruity between the competing ideals of the moral economy of the jurists and the market economy of the moneychangers and merchants.

For my purposes, it is useful to compare the just-cited *ḥisbah* regulations about using multiple coinages in purchase transactions with the following passage from the *Ighāthah*. This story was related by al-Maqrīzī as the reason why the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil Muḥammad caused copper coinage to be "introduced" into Egypt in 622/1225. In order to understand this passage, it needs to be stated that in 622/1225, silver dirhams of multiple alloyage were present in Ayyubid Egypt. One type was the *dirham wariq* (or *waraq*).¹⁹ Another type was the silver coin issued under al-Kāmil, and therefore known as Kāmilī dirhams. Both the Kāmilī and *wariq* dirhams were low silver coins, of one-third silver content or less.²⁰ There were also higher quality silver coins still in circulation (from the reign of Saladin in particular).

The reason behind their mintage for the first time in Egypt during
the reign of [Sultan] al-Kāmil was the following: a woman stopped

¹⁸S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1, *Economic Foundations* (Berkeley, 1967), 229–72; and idem, "The Exchange-Rate of Gold and Silver Money in Fāṭimid and Ayyūbid Times: A Preliminary Study of the Geniza Material, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8 (1965): 1–46. For the evidence derived from Mamluk-era silver hoards, see my "The Circulation of Dirhams in the Bahri Period," forthcoming in the Proceedings of the International Conference on the Mamlūks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society.

¹⁹For an overview of the monetary uses of the term "*wariq/waraq*," see Michael L. Bates, "Wariq," *EF*, 11: 147–48.

²⁰Al-Maqrīzī's error in stating that the Kāmilī dirham contained two-thirds silver is discussed by Andrew Ehrenkreutz, "Contributions to the Knowledge of the Fiscal Administration of Egypt in the Middle Ages," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16 (1954): 504. Cahen suggests the reason for al-Maqrīzī's error was his reliance on an incorrect report in al-Nuwayrī. See Cahen, "Monetary Circulation," 330, n. 46.



the *khaṭīb* [preacher] of the mosque of Old Cairo, who then was Abū'l-Ṭāhir al-Maḥallī, and asked him for a legal opinion: "Is it legally permitted to drink water?"

He answered: "O slave of God, what forbids the drinking of water?"

She said: "The sultan has struck these dirhams [i.e., the Kāmilī dirhams], and I buy a waterskin for half a dirham. I hand the water carrier one dirham and he gives me back half a dirham in *wariq*. Therefore it is as if I bought water and half a dirham from him for a dirham."

Abū'l-Ṭāhir disapproved of this. He met the sultan and discussed this matter with him. Hence [the sultan] ordered the minting of *fulūs*.²¹

What are we to make of this anecdote? One option would be to take it at face value as an accurate account of what really happened. That is how the account was treated by Hassanein Rabie.

Al-Maqrīzī stated in *Ighatha* that the main purpose of striking large numbers of copper *fulūs* was to put a coin in circulation that would facilitate daily shopping for household items worth less than one *dirham* or part of it. He tells the story of a woman who asked Abi Ṭāhir al-Maḥallī, the *Khaṭīb* of the mosque of Miṣr [Fusṭaṭ], if drinking water was legal. When he asked her in turn what prevented her from drinking it, she said that the sultan had coined *dirhams* (she may have had Kāmilī *dirhams* in mind) and she bought a waterskin at 1/2 *dirham*, paid the water-carrier one *dirham*, and received 1/2 *dirham waraq* change. This obviously means that she had obtained from him water and 1/2 *dirham waraq* in exchange for one (Kāmilī) *dirham*, and was plagued by remorse that she had underpaid the water-carrier who was, perhaps, unaware of the difference in the value of the two coins of the same denomination. It is possible that al-Maḥallī knew nothing of transactions of this kind, either because it was wrong to give the water-carrier a Kāmilī *dirham* with its poor silver content instead of a *dirham waraq*, or because he feared that might lead to usury. Thus he consulted Sultan al-Kāmil, who ordered *fulūs* to be issued. This story indicates

²¹This translation found in Allouche's *Mamlūk Economics*, 68–69.



that *fulūs* fulfilled a real need, as there were no half or quarter Kāmilī *dirhams* in existence.²²

Rabie accepted the story as true, and then proceeded to provide a moral explanation for the woman's question—she felt remorseful at the possibility that she had cheated the water carrier. His further explanation of al-Maḥallī's possible reasons for taking the action he did, however, is built upon a misunderstanding of the circulatory value of the *dirham wariq* which was of similar "poor silver content" as the Kāmilī. Moreover, his "obvious" conclusion is built upon a series of speculations (chief among them identifying which specific dirham type was used at each stage of the story) which, while plausible, reads a degree of specificity into the source that just is not there. Finally, his suggestion that the issuance of copper *fulūs* would fulfill the need for small change, while sound, ignores the situation that there was an inexact correlation between the actual silver coin objects (whether *wariq* or Kāmilī) and their unit of account (Rabie uses the term denomination). The surviving coins of both *wariq* and Kāmilī types are very irregular in weight, and it is most probable that both types were valued in direct proportion to their weight.²³

Another alternative would be to consider the anecdote as apocryphal and to dismiss it as an after-the-fact attempt to provide a single causation explanation for the complex monetary events of al-Kāmil's reign. Admittedly, this was my reaction when I first encountered the passage some years ago. However, that view now strikes me as not particularly useful or insightful for it ignores some interesting features of the account. First of all, the general context of the anecdote—one of many dirhams in circulation—does match the situation described in the Geniza and other non-normative sources—that many different types of silver coins were in circulation, and that all were called dirhams.²⁴ (The lack of specificity in identifying coin types is also what one typically encounters in the contemporary sources.) Secondly, regardless of whether the conversation between the woman and the *khaṭīb* took place or not, the anecdote allows us to explore how al-Maqrīzī understood what happened. In the account, the woman said "it is as if I bought water and half a dirham from him for one dirham." This is a situation where silver was being exchanged for silver and merchandise, and is analogous—in all but the metal of

²²Hassanein Rabie, *The Financial System of Egypt* (London, 1972), 182.

²³It is thus more useful to think of the actual coins as fractional rather than as individually matching up with units of account like the quarter, half, or full *dirham*. For a succinct overview of the wider monetary context in which al-Kāmil's new coin issues took place, see Michael L. Bates, "The Function of Fātimid and Ayyūbid Glass Weights," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24 (1981): 63–92.

²⁴See notes 18 and 23.



the coin—to the example cited by al-Shayzarī where two dinars were exchanged for one dinar and a dress. It seems to me that this would have struck al-Shayzarī and al-Maqrīzī, or any other *muḥtasib*, as a forbidden transaction fraught with the possibility of usury.²⁵ If we still care to read remorse into the woman, it would thus be due to her having participated in a usurious act rather than cheating the water seller. Moreover, from the perspective of a *muḥtasib*, the primary value derived from this issuance of *fulūs* would not be from the convenience of providing small change for small transactions but from their reducing the possibility of wrongful transactions taking place involving different types of dirhams. This is also speculative, but I believe it reflects an aspect of the economic *sunnah* which al-Maqrīzī must have shared.

III

What is missing from this discussion, however, is the fact that the rich *fiqh* tradition produced before al-Maqrīzī's life had taken into account the existence of multiple coin types in the marketplace. Indeed, by the thirteenth century, as Brunschvig demonstrated, *fiqh*, "established in an age of pluralism and monetary fluctuation, commanded that coins not be taken at face value, but according to weight (allowing for alloyage), in order to insure honesty, as one would deal in any other form of merchandise."²⁶ Al-Maqrīzī did not acknowledge this tradition in the *fiqh* in either of his two monetary treatises. While we know that al-Maqrīzī's maternal grandfather was of the Hanafī *madhhab*, his father was a Shafī'i and al-Maqrīzī "opted for Shāfi'ism in early manhood."²⁷ Udovitch has detailed that the Hanafī *madhhab* had generated many regulations for commerce that permitted transactions involving types of coins of the same metal.²⁸ The Shafī'i tradition, meanwhile, tended to be more restrictive of commercial practices than the Hanafī, and al-Maqrīzī may thus have regarded some of those regulations which permitted the use of multiple coin types in one transaction as *ḥiyal*, which were more common within the Hanafī *madhhab* than the other schools.²⁹ *Ḥiyal* were intended to bridge the gap between legal theory and practice in order to expand the area in which commercial and other practices would be within the realm of shari'ah. In short, Hanafī law tended to recognize the needs of the marketplace.³⁰ While it is

²⁵The usury explanation was raised by Rabie but not developed.

²⁶Cited by Cahen, "Monetary Circulation," 326. Cf. Robert Brunschvig, "Conceptions monétaires chez les jurists musulmans (VIIIe–XIIIe siècles)," *Arabica* 14 (1967): 113–43.

²⁷Franz Rosenthal, "Al-Maqrizi," *ET*², 6:193–94.

²⁸Abraham L. Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam* (Princeton, 1970), especially 40–60.

²⁹Joseph Schacht, "Ḥiyal," *ET*², 5:510–12.

³⁰Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 42–43.



admittedly speculative, al-Maqrīzī's silence on these matters would seem more fitting of his Shafī'i leanings.

Al-Maqrīzī's attitudes toward the reprehensible copper coinage seem to support this. In addition to the passage cited in the first section of this article, al-Maqrīzī included longer rants against *fulūs* at two other points within the *Ighāthah*.³¹ As Allouche has pointed out, underlying al-Maqrīzī's blanket condemnation of *fulūs* is the Shafī'i corpus condemning copper coinage in general, although again, al-Maqrīzī does not mention these Shafī'i prohibitions explicitly.³² It should be pointed out that one stream of thought within the Hanafi *fiqh* tradition was willing to accept currently circulating copper *fulūs* as capital suitable for the forming of partnerships.³³

The extent to which the legal instruments allowed in commerce by any of the *madhhabs* were utilized in the Mamluk-era marketplace will likely never be known due to the non-survival of archival sources.³⁴ But while we have no Mamluk court records analogous to those from the late sixteenth century recently exploited by Nelly Hanna, those later records clearly indicate that the institutions and processes set up within the *fiqh* tradition to govern pecuniary affairs in a properly Islamic manner were at work slightly more than a century after al-Maqrīzī's death.³⁵ Whether we posit their existence in the earlier Mamluk era is of course subject to our own judgments and methodologies. In any case, it seems safe to assess al-Maqrīzī's view of the marketplace as being implicitly shaped by normative assumptions about moral economic behavior current at the time.

IV

Such an assessment recognizes that al-Maqrīzī's discussions of economic events are, to paraphrase Bonner, discourses on history and the economy inextricably bound up with and part of the discourse on the norms of religious law.³⁶ We know that al-Maqrīzī was partial, but we must also recognize that he was viewing and recording events through a prism shaped by normative concerns as well as a desire to preserve an account of what happened. This prism—one he was unlikely

³¹ *Ighāthah*, 47, 66.

³² Allouche, *Mamlūk Economics*, 20.

³³ Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 52–55.

³⁴ To the best of my knowledge, the study of commercial and pecuniary regulations found in the Mamluk-era *fiqh* materials remains an under-developed topic, cf. M. Bernand, "Mu'āmalāt," *EI*², 8: 255–57.

³⁵ Nelly Hanna, *Making Big Money in 1600* (Syracuse, 1998).

³⁶ Michael Bonner, "The *Kitāb al-Kasb* attributed to al-Shaybānī: Poverty, Surplus, and the Circulation of Wealth," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001): 412.



to acknowledge—had, in the cases discussed above, significant problems meshing what should be (an ideal pure coinage of standard weight in circulation everywhere) with what actually was. But the desire to describe one of the prisms through which al-Maqrīzī viewed his world establishes the necessity of acknowledging the prisms through which we view him and his work.

For example, al-Maqrīzī has been called the “most vocal critic of Circassian monetary policy.”³⁷ And it is true that he frequently placed blame for the economic decline of Egypt at the feet of the Mamluks in general, and specific individuals in particular. There are numerous examples of this in his works. A particularly illustrative case is that of Barqūq’s *ustādār* Maḥmūd ibn ‘Alī, whom al-Maqrīzī fingered as the man responsible for the explosion of *fulūs* in circulation at the end of the eighth/fourteenth century. Al-Maqrīzī mentioned this case in the *Ighāthah*, *Shudhūr*, the *Sulūk*, and the *Khīṭaṭ*.³⁸ What I find most interesting about al-Maqrīzī in this and other such passages is his assumption of control. He was in effect saying “this individual did these things and bad things resulted.” Now many have argued quite effectively that in economic matters, particularly as they relate to sources of precious metals and therefore currency supplies, the Mamluk Sultanate cannot be separated from regional and even hemispheric developments.³⁹ I am not interested here in dismissing al-Maqrīzī explanations of complex economic conditions by resorting to blaming specific individuals as reflecting the “simplicity of [his] medieval mind,” as Ashtor put it,⁴⁰ but I am curious as to whether some of us moderns have not fallen prey to such “simple” mindsets as well.

Take, for example, assertions that the Mamluks had official monetary policies, or that they had official metallic standards (whether mono-, bi-, or tri-metallic), which the Mamluks consistently manipulated for their gain, or that they engaged in economic warfare through their coinage. All of these may be found scattered throughout the scholarship. Many scholars now argue that these assertions—and the degree of control they imply—are untenable, as I have discussed elsewhere.⁴¹ All share a common assumption of Mamluk control over monetary matters. This is not surprising, since these assertions spring from economic theories derived and

³⁷ Allouche, *Mamlūk Economics*, ix.

³⁸ See Schultz, “Maḥmūd b. ‘Alī and the New *Fulūs*,” 130–31.

³⁹ Cf. Boaz Shoshan, “From Silver to Copper: Monetary Changes in Fifteenth Century Egypt,” *Studia Islamica* 56 (1982): 97–116; Robert Lopez, Harry Miskimin, and Abraham Udovitch, “England to Egypt, 1350–1500: Long-term Trends and Long-distance Trade,” in *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, ed. M. A. Cook (London, 1970), 115–28.

⁴⁰ Eliyahu Ashtor, *A Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1976), 305.

⁴¹ For an overview of these issues and essential bibliography, see my “Monetary History of Egypt,” 319–24.



delineated in an age when states and central banks could control the money circulating within set borders. But did the Mamluks, or any other pre-modern dynasty for that matter, in fact have this control? There was no Mamluk Central Bank, nor was there a Mamluk Greenspan-Dār presiding over a Mamluk Federal Reserve Board, yet like al-Maqrīzī's attempts to pin problems on officials such as Maḥmūd ibn 'Alī the *Ustādār* or others, some continue to explain developments as if there were.

I think our assessment of Mamluk monetary history in its entirety, from the issuing of new coin types to attempts at recall of old, from the use of "foreign coins" to attempts to manipulate exchange rates, all of it, needs to be looked at from a different starting point. One that views "official" Mamluk governmental economic activities as essentially and primarily reactive in nature. One where the initial assumption is that the Mamluks could only react to economic developments; they could not control them in the long run—any more than they could control the wider regional trade and economic developments. They could, of course, perhaps hope to benefit in the short term from their reactions to these developments, but that is the extent of their control. What I am proposing here is analogous to that which Udovitch argued that in the seminal article "From England to Egypt," that while Mamluk policies likely exacerbated Mamluk economic decline, the long-term underlying factors—such as the plague, shifts in regional trade patterns and goods, etc.—were not under their control.⁴²

This perspective changes everything. We need to consider, for example, that the Mamluks could not control the bullion (in the form of coins) that circulated in their domains—not because I say so but because there is no evidence that indicates that they could. There were no active gold, silver, or copper mines in Egypt in the Mamluk period, as far as can be determined. All bullion thus had to come in trade, from booty (an obvious example is Armenian silver), or from existing stocks. If instead we accept at face value what the sources also tell us about the Mamluks' constant need and demand for money, then it should be readily apparent that they had no vast reservoir of specie that they could use to manipulate monetary markets. When the Mamluks accepted and used whatever coin they could find of gold and silver, terms like "official money" become meaningless. This is not simply saying that the market is king, although clearly the relative supply and demand of specie at any instance could have a tremendous effect on exchange rates. It is saying that just as we must examine al-Maqrīzī's operating assumptions, we need to re-examine the assumptions underlying our explanatory theories. Since there is no evidence that the Mamluks could control the money circulating in their domains, all those explanations based on the rules which need that assumption, such as those that

⁴²"From England to Egypt," 120–28.



invoke Gresham's Law, are rendered problematic.⁴³

As a final example, we can look at what Allouche has to say about the events of 806/1403-4, which al-Maqrīzī stated was the starting point of the "current situation" he described in the *Ighāthah*.⁴⁴ Citing from the *Sulūk* account of that year, Allouche places great emphasis on two events said to have taken place.⁴⁵ The first was a declaration that copper coins were to pass henceforth by weight, and not by count. The second was a declaration that the *darāhim min al-fulūs* was ordered to be the basis of the monetary system. Two objections to Allouche's interpretation of these events need be raised. With regards to the first, there was nothing unusual about the declaration to accept *fulūs* by weight rather than count.⁴⁶ In fact it was a relatively common occurrence in the first half of the eighth/fourteenth century.⁴⁷ Weighing *fulūs* appears to have been a tactic used to control the valuation of copper coinage whenever there were large numbers of *fulūs* in circulation, which there most certainly were in 806. Second, the passage in the *Sulūk* says nothing about a fundamental reordering of the Mamluk monetary system. All it says is that the *Qādī al-Qudāh* ordered that the rates paid for various things be written in *fulūs* and not in dirhams.⁴⁸ It makes more sense to me to see this as reflecting the contemporary prevalence of copper in the marketplace and acknowledging its widespread use for payment. If we are to read anything into this development, it is that copper was now accepted for payment of fees owed to the Mamluk regime, not that it was henceforth the "official money" of the sultanate.

⁴³For a study describing the limitations of the traditional Gresham's Law from the perspective of two economists, see Arthur J. Rolnick and Warren E. Weber, "Gresham's Law or Gresham's Fallacy," *Journal of Political Economy* 94 (1986): 185–99.

⁴⁴Allouche, *Mamlūk Economics*, 16–19.

⁴⁵*Al-Sulūk*, 3:1111–17.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 1112.

⁴⁷See my "Mamluk Egyptian Copper Coinage Before 759/1357–58: A Preliminary Inquiry," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 5 (2001): 25–43.

⁴⁸*Al-Sulūk*, 3:1117. Significantly, the terminology used is *bi-al-fulūs*, and not *bi-al-darāhim min al-fulūs*.

