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The Rise of a New Class? Land Tenure in Fifteenth-Century Egypt: A Review Article

There is a consensus among historians of Mamluk Egypt that the fifteenth century was a turning point in the country's social and economic history. For some, the key element lies in demographics, in the failure of the Egyptian population to recover from repeated blows dealt by the arrival of the Black Death and subsequent recurrences of epidemic disease. For others, the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean spelled the end of Egypt's central role in the transit trade between the East Indies and the Mediterranean. Still others argue that Egypt's manufacturers were unable to keep pace with technological improvements taking place in Europe. Whatever one's perspective, however, it is difficult to deny that insufficient attention has been paid to Egypt's most important economic resource, agriculture. The fifteenth century saw fundamental changes in the types of land tenure and the identity of landholders.

In this context, 'Imād Badr al-Dīn Abū Ghāzī's book *Fī Tārīkh Miṣr al-Ijtimā'ī: Taṭawwur al-Hiyāzah al-Zirā'īyah Zaman al-Mamālīk al-Jarākisah* (On the social history of Egypt: the development of landholding in the age of the Circassian Mamluks)¹ helps to fill an important gap. Abū Ghāzī uses a variety of sources, including Ottoman registers that have only recently begun to be utilized by Mamluk historians, to examine changes in landholding in the last century of Mamluk rule.² Although Abū Ghāzī is a Marxist historian, he begins by setting himself up in opposition to those historians, Marxist or otherwise, who see Egypt as an example of Oriental despotism or the Asiatic Mode of Production. These historians have argued that Egypt's riverine agricultural system made it inevitable that state property would predominate over private property in agriculture.³ Here he is clearly correct. Although a series of Egyptian states were involved in maintaining the system of canals and dikes that irrigated much of Egypt's farmland, this never prevented the existence of private ownership of land or the growth of a class of landowners with substantial holdings. One need only observe the example of Roman Egypt to see

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¹Cairo: 'Ayn lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Buḥūth al-Insānīyah wa-al-Ijtimā'īyah, 2000. Reviewed by Igarashi Daisuke in *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7 (2003): 254–57.

²Nicolas Michel has used some of the same sources in his recent articles on the Egyptian peasantry in the early sixteenth century.

³Abū Ghāzī, *Fī Tārīkh Miṣr al-Ijtimā'ī*, 5.



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DOI: [10.6082/M19G5JZH](https://doi.org/10.6082/M19G5JZH). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M19G5JZH>)

DOI of Vol. VIII, no. 2: [10.6082/M12F7KHB](https://doi.org/10.6082/M12F7KHB). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/KDWH-BN42> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

that private land ownership has been prevalent in some periods.⁴

Abū Ghāzī argues that the fifteenth century saw the sale of large quantities of agricultural land by the state to private parties, and that by the end of the Mamluk Sultanate, a new class of private landowners was coming into existence.⁵ Abū Ghāzī bases these conclusions on a study of Ottoman documents, especially the *daftar*s of the *Ruznāme*. These sources detail the origins of private landholdings, *waqfs*, and *rizqahs*. Using them, he can trace sales from the Mamluk Bayt al-Māl which resulted in land being alienated by the state into private hands.

In order to understand the significance of this process, however, one must go back to the year 1315, when the Mamluk state reached its highest degree of centralization. It was in that year that the Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad instituted his famous *rawk* (cadastral survey) in Egypt. In fact, the survey began in Syria in 1313, and was not completed in Aleppo until 1325.⁶ In Egypt, the process was finished by April 1316, with the sultan reserving 10/24 of Egypt's agricultural land for himself and his mamluks. The remainder was turned into *iqṭā's* for the amirs and members of the *ḥalqah*.⁷ At this point, with the exception of limited *waqf* lands that were held over from the previous period, all of Egypt's taxable agricultural land was to be turned over to the state *dīwāns* or else made into *iqṭā'*. While it is not possible to examine all of the implications of the Nāṣirī *rawk* in this essay, the important point with regard to land tenure is that the sultan controlled almost all of Egypt's land, either for his own use, or to be distributed as temporary *iqṭā's*. Private ownership of agricultural land was insignificant and *waqf* land limited.

It appears that this centralized system was still largely in place in the year 1400. It is not clear when things began to change, but there are good reasons to believe that the alienation of state lands was limited prior to the fifteenth century. Ulrich Haarmann's study of the decline of the *awlād al-nās* as a military force shows that the *ḥalqah* continued to hold significant *iqṭā's* until 1397, but had lost almost all of them by 1480.⁸ The following table, which I have compiled based on the information from two surveys of Egypt's lands contained in Ibn al-Jī'ān's *Al-Tuḥfah al-Sanīyah fī Asmā' al-Bilād al-Miṣrīyah*, gives a sense of how significant

⁴Jane Rowlandson, *Landowners and Tenants in Roman Egypt: The Social Relations of Agriculture in the Oxyrhynchite Nome* (Oxford, 1996).

⁵Abū Ghāzī, *Fī Tārīkh Miṣr al-Ijtimā'ī*, 10.

⁶Sato Tsugitaka, *State and Rural Society in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, 1997), 135.

⁷*Ibid.*, 142–43.

⁸Ulrich Haarmann, "The Sons of Mamluks as Fief-Holders in Late Medieval Egypt," in *Land Tenure and Social Transformation in the Middle East*, ed. Tarif Khalidi (Beirut, 1984), 141–68.



the alienation of state lands in the fifteenth century became.⁹

Table 1: Villages containing *waqfs*, private estates, and *rizqahs* in 1376 and 1480

Year	<i>Waqf</i>	Private Estates	<i>Rizqah</i>
1376	66	49	?
1480	885	607	1425+

What this table clearly shows is that the Mamluk state was alienating lands at a furious rate during the fifteenth century. By the latter part of the century, *waqf*, private, and *rizqah* land were present throughout the Egyptian countryside. In the cases of *waqf* and private estates, the increase in the number of villages containing these types of tenure was more than tenfold. Since Ibn al-Jī'ān counted 2,163 villages in Egypt, not counting some villages in Giza that were under the control of the royal *dīwān*, we can calculate the percentage of villages in Egypt containing these types of land tenure at these two dates:

Table 2: Percentage of Egyptian villages containing *waqf*, private property, and *rizqahs* in 1376 and 1480

Year	<i>Waqf</i>	Private Property	<i>Rizqah</i>
1376	3.0%	2.2%	?
1480	40.9%	28.0%	65.8%

Unfortunately, Ibn al-Jī'ān's numbers are not specific enough for us to calculate the exact amount of land that fell into each category. While he does give figures for the amount of *rizqah* land in each village, there was clearly *rizqah* land whose extent he did know with precision. The total amount of *rizqah* land that he counted was 78,975.5 feddans, or an average of 55.4 feddans per village containing *rizqah*

⁹Cairo, 1974. The data is presented in raw form in Heinz Halm, *Ägypten nach den mamlukischen Lehensregistern* (Wiesbaden, 1979).



land. This amounts to less than two percent of Egypt's total agricultural lands in 1315. Despite the incompleteness of our evidence, and even if we assume that Ibn al-Jī'ān's information was better for 1480, when he wrote his survey, than it was for 1376, one cannot avoid concluding that all three types of tenure were spreading very quickly.

One thing that we cannot learn from Ibn al-Jī'ān's work is exactly when these changes were taking place. Here, Abū Ghāzī's work is very helpful. He has examined 40 original deeds of sale from the Bayt al-Māl from the Mamluk period, and another 530 deeds he identified in the Ottoman archives in Cairo.¹⁰ He believes that these are only a fraction of the original documents, but they give him a substantial sample from which to work. Having compiled these deeds, Abū Ghāzī can identify the periods in which most of the sales of lands from the Treasury occurred. He finds that the periods 853–72 (1449–67) and 903–22 (1498–1517) saw the greatest number of sales, comprising 40.1% and 36.7% respectively of the total.¹¹ These periods correspond to the reigns of a number of mid-fifteenth century sultans and that of the final twenty years of Mamluk rule, especially the reign of Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghūrī. The first large group of sales occurred in the reign of Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbāy (1422–37), and the reign of al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy (1468–96) also saw a significant number, although not as many as one might expect given his long reign.¹²

The timing of these sales is curious. As Abū Ghāzī points out, the justification sometimes cited in the documents, that the sales are necessary to raise money to fund a war, is not convincing. The chronology of the sales does not correspond to the periods of greatest military threat to the Mamluk empire, which Abū Ghāzī identifies as the years 800–20 (1397–1418) and 880–900 (1475–95), when the Mamluks were at war with Tamerlane and the Ottomans, respectively.¹³

For Abū Ghāzī, the explanation for this phenomenon lies not in military necessity, but in economic crisis. He proceeds to recite the usual list of weaknesses of the fifteenth-century Egyptian economy: demographic decline, decline of the transit trade, the failure of the state to control the Nile floods, bedouin raids in the countryside, exorbitant taxation of the peasantry, monetary crisis, etc. Following Fernand Braudel's analysis, he concludes that while the West was able to recover quite quickly from the Black Death, the "East" did not.¹⁴ While he puts his finger on a number of key aspects of fifteenth-century Egyptian economic history, his

¹⁰Abū Ghazī, *Fī Tārīkh Miṣr al-Ijtimā'ī*, 11, 16.

¹¹Ibid., 28.

¹²Ibid., 20–22.

¹³Ibid., 61.

¹⁴Ibid., 67–69.



explanation is not convincing. Indeed, it is not really an explanation so much as a laundry list of economic woes which are assumed to have reduced the income of the Mamluk state, which then compensated by selling off state lands that had been assigned as *iqṭāʿ*'s.

There are several problems with this analysis. First of all, in many cases, the buyer of state lands was the sultan himself. This is particularly true of Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghūrī, who used a combination of purchases from the Bayt al-Māl and "exchanges" (*istibdāls*) of property with existing *waqfs* to build his massive endowment. Indeed, as Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn and Carl Petry have shown, the size of many royal *waqfs* was so large that the revenues generated were too great to be intended to fund the *waqf* itself.¹⁵ It is likely that the sultans were setting aside sources of revenue for themselves and their progeny, and in this sense, acting much as most founders of endowments did.

Furthermore, if one examines the chronology of major economic crises in the fifteenth century, it is not clear whether it would correspond to the periods in which the Bayt al-Māl was doing most of its business in land sales. Although it is very difficult to assess the rise or fall of revenues from trade, it is clear that the worst agricultural crises of the Mamluk period occurred in the period 1373–1404.¹⁶ Although later crises did occur in 1415–16, 1449–52, 1469–70, and 1486–87, these dates do not match up well with the data collected by Abū Ghāzī. Furthermore, later crises do not seem to have had the impact that the great crises of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century did. Clearly it is true that Egypt's agricultural revenues declined in the fifteenth century, but to what degree did this result from agricultural decay or from the alienation of state lands into private hands?¹⁷

I have argued elsewhere that the sudden rise in the number of *waqfs* in the mid-fifteenth century should be understood in the context of the changing character of the Mamluk elite.¹⁸ It is at this very time when Haarmann shows that the military role of the *awlād al-nās* was in serious decline that the number of *waqfs* established by the descendents of mamluks increases considerably. While some of

¹⁵Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, *Al-Awqāf wa-al-Ḥayāh al-Ijtimāʿīyah fī Miṣr, 648–923/1250–1517* (Cairo, 1980), 72 ff; Carl F. Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians?: The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt's Waning as a Great Power* (Albany, 1996), 199.

¹⁶Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517* (Cambridge, 2000), chapter 6.

¹⁷For the opinion that widespread decay overcame Egypt's irrigation system in the fifteenth century, see Stuart J. Borsch, "Nile Floods and the Irrigation System in Fifteenth-Century Egypt," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 4 (2000): 131–46. For a discussion of village desertion see Nicolas Michel, "Villages désertés, terres en friche et reconstruction rurale en Égypte au début de l'époque ottomane," *Annales islamologiques* 36 (2002): 197–251.

¹⁸Sabra, *Poverty*, 93.



these *waqfs* were funded by urban properties, others were based on the donation of rural estates. The large increase in the number of *waqfs* in the fifteenth century should be seen as part of a process by which members of the Mamluk elite and their descendents privatized state resources, especially agricultural land, for their own benefit.¹⁹ The tide of centralization which had reached its height in the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was now receding, and at an increasingly swift pace.

Abū Ghāzī identifies three consequences of this process of the privatization of agricultural lands.²⁰ First, he argues that a change in land tenure was taking place; the *iqṭā'* system was collapsing. Second, the shift of resources into private hands was fundamentally changing the social structure of the country at the expense of the Mamluks. Finally, the corruption which had taken hold of many aspects of the Egyptian economy, evident in the sultans' monopolies over certain commodities, now extended to the land market, since the land sales were frequently made to the sultan's retainers.²¹ Based on his study of the Ottoman *daftars*, Abū Ghāzī²² can identify 275 villages in Egypt and Syria where lands were sold to private parties. The prime beneficiaries of these sales were Mamluk amirs, who were the buyers in 40.6% of sales, the *awlād al-nās* (23.6%), bedouin chiefs and village shaykhs (8.4%), state bureaucrats (6.1%), jurists and judges (5.1%), and sultans and their families (2.5%).²³ Obviously, the fact that some purchases must have been significantly larger than others means that the role of rulers and their families was probably much larger than these statistics indicate. He does not identify the gender of the buyers, but my own study of *waqfs* by the *awlād al-nās* found that up to 50% of the founders in that category were women.²⁴ One may also suspect that the role of bedouin shaykhs may have been larger. As the research of Jean-Claude Garcin has shown, the bedouin were of increasing significance as landholders in fifteenth-century Egypt, especially in the province of Sharqīyah and in Upper Egypt.²⁵

¹⁹There are some interesting parallels between the privatization of the state in fifteenth-century Egypt and a somewhat similar process that occurred in the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century. See Ariel Salzmänn, "An Ancien Régime Revisited: Privatization and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *Politics and Society* 21 no. 4 (December 1993): 393–423.

²⁰Abū Ghāzī, *Fī Tārīkh Miṣr al-Ijtimā'ī*, 103.

²¹Ibid., 80.

²²Ibid., 104.

²³Ibid., 109.

²⁴Sabra, *Poverty*, 92–93.

²⁵Jean-Claude Garcin, "Note sur les rapports entre bedouins et fellahs à l'époque Mamluke," in his *Espaces, pouvoirs et idéologies de l'Égypte médiévale* (London, 1987), 147–63; idem, *Un Centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale: Qus* (Cairo, 1976), 468–511. For the role of bedouin



For Abū Ghāzī, the fifteenth century was a turning point in Egyptian history. The system of land tenure was changing from that of state ownership of the majority of agricultural lands which were doled out in *iqṭā*'s to a new reality in which private property predominated. The owners of these lands constituted a new social class who would eventually have asserted themselves politically. In fact, however, two factors prevented this social transformation. The most important, in Abū Ghāzī's view, is the Ottoman conquest. Although the Ottomans did not abolish all of the private holdings and *waqfs*, they reversed the trend towards privatization of land. As he puts it, foreign invasion "aborted" the "possibilities latent in society."²⁶ Only in the nineteenth century did private ownership of land become a permanent feature of the Egyptian agricultural economy. To paraphrase the title of Peter Gran's well-known book, the "Mamluk roots of capitalism" were uprooted by the Ottomans only to re-emerge under the khedives.

This argument is problematic in a number of ways, most obviously because it is conjectural. There is no way to test what would have happened had the Ottoman conquest never occurred. More importantly, however, there are good reasons to question whether capitalism (as we know it, anyway) could have developed out of late Mamluk society. As Abū Ghāzī himself notes, lands purchased from the Bayt al-Māl rarely remained private holdings for long. Usually they were turned into *waqf* quite quickly. Almost two-thirds of the property sold by the Mamluk treasury remained in the hands of the purchaser, his family, or his *waqf* after the Ottoman conquest.²⁷ This demonstrates that the market for land was limited. Furthermore, 63.6% of land sales were eventually turned into *waqf* lands. After the Ottoman conquest, that figure rose to 88.89%.²⁸

In short, what happened in Egypt in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century was not the formation of a class of private landowners who operated in a widespread land market. Rather the state gradually sold off much of its lands to the military elite, their children, local officials, and even to the sultans themselves. To prevent the state from reasserting its rights over these lands, the new owners quickly turned them into trusts and endowments. Since these trusts and endowments were sacrosanct under Islamic law, and since they frequently benefited various religious institutions or the poor, it was much harder for the state to recover what it had lost. Each sultan was faced with a dilemma: he needed to reward his retainers and provide for his family. He may also have wished to construct a monument to preserve the memory of his rule and to gain support from the religious scholars

shaykhs in reclaiming lands in al-Buḥayrah, see Michel, "Villages désertés," 224–29.

²⁶ Abū Ghāzī, *Fī Tārīkh Miṣr al-Ijtimā'i*, 112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.



and the ordinary people. Yet he could not seize the endowments of his predecessors without earning the condemnation of the religious classes. Furthermore, to seize others' endowments would virtually guarantee that his own *waqfs* would be seized after his death. Thus, each sultan found that it was in his best interest to leave the existing endowments alone and concentrate on building his own. In order to maintain the support of his retainers, he made sure that land was made available to them for the same purpose.

We have no way of knowing what would have happened had this process continued unchecked. Perhaps subsequent sultans would have followed the model of al-Ghūrī and built their own *waqfs* on the ruins of others'. Perhaps they would have confiscated many of the *waqfs* on the premise that sales from the Bayt al-Māl were illegitimate. They might have attempted to return to the status quo ante and reinstitute the *iqṭā'* system in full. We also do not know what an economy dominated by *waqf* would have meant for the peasantry or for industry. Contrary to what has been argued at times, *waqf* and commercial agriculture are by no means incompatible. There is no way to determine whether the *waqf* administrators would have turned into agricultural entrepreneurs or simply waited for their rents to pour in.

Despite these weaknesses it must be said that Abū Ghāzī's book is an important one. It raises significant historical questions, provides new evidence for Mamluk economic history, and brings new sources to bear on the problem. In particular, his systematic use of the Ottoman archives to answer questions about Mamluk history is an important innovation, one which will undoubtedly influence future students of Mamluk history.

