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Economic Intervention and the Political Economy of the Mamluk State under al-Ashraf Barsbāy

The economic interventions of the sultan al-Ashraf Barsbāy (r. 825–41/1422–38) have become emblematic of his reign, whether used as evidence for the impact of his character on his administration or as a means to contend with the deterioration of the Egyptian economy.¹ Barsbāy's involvement in the spice trade is often cited as the most destructive of his policies, instigating "the ruin of the upper stratum of the Levantine bourgeoisie."² Taking a different approach to this issue, Jean-Claude Garcin has argued that the sultan's spice trade policy enabled him to consolidate his political position.³ This policy involved a two-pronged strategy of securing the Hijaz to control the passage of the trade through Jedda and of invading Cyprus to control European interference in eastern Mediterranean shipping.

Barsbāy's political consolidation, however, had a paradoxical quality. In the Mediterranean, within one year of its conquest by the Mamluks in 829/1426, Barsbāy came to rely on indirect rule in Cyprus through his reinstatement of the King of Cyprus.⁴ In the Red Sea, less than two years after the installation of a Mamluk officer as co-ruler of Mecca in 827/1424, the sultan reinstated the deposed sharif as ruler of the Holy City.⁵ In the latter case, the financial gains from restrictions imposed on spice merchants were offset by fiscal concessions—although

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¹Ahmed Darrag, *L'Égypte sous le règne de Barsbay, 825–841/1422–1438* (Damascus, 1961); Harry Miskimin, Robert Lopez, and Abraham Udovitch, "England to Egypt, 1350–1500: Long-Term Trends and Long-Distance Trade," in *Studies in the Economic and Social History of the Middle East*, ed. Michael A. Cook (London, 1972), 93–128.

²Eliyahu Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1983), 280.

³Jean-Claude Garcin, "The Regime of the Circassian Mamluks," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 290–317, esp. 293–94.

⁴In Jumādā II 830 (March–April 1427); Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Ashūr (Cairo, 1956–73), 4:741, 743, 878.

⁵In Dhū al-Ḥijjah 828 (October–November 1425), Sharif Ḥasan ibn 'Ajlān resumed his position in Mecca; Taqī al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Fāsī, *Al-'Iqd al-Thamīn fī Tārīkh al-Balad al-Amīn*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fiqī (Cairo, 1959–69), 4:151; al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:700.



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the precise figures are not known—to the Meccan sharifs, who had successfully resisted Mamluk domination. The Mamluks' failure to overcome this opposition led to Barsbāy's reliance on the sharif of Mecca as his political broker in the region, to whom he was eventually compelled to relinquish part of the fiscal benefits of the trade as it passed through Jedda.⁶ The sultan's relations with Cyprus and the Hijaz are paralleled by the situation in Upper Egypt, where the amirs of the Hawwārah Bedouin won considerable autonomy from Cairo.⁷ So while Barsbāy attempted to consolidate his political position by dominating the commercial resources of the Mamluk economy, an action no doubt induced by the constrained economic circumstances described by Udovitch, the sultan ultimately had to lighten his grip on local powers. The inability of the Sultanate to impose direct control on these outlying areas and the means by which it incorporated the Meccan sharif, the Cypriot king, and the Hawwārah amir into the state apparatus are remarkable indications of both the weakness and the resilience of the Mamluk state.

In light of this paradoxical aspect of the Mamluk state's "foreign" relations, it is also worth considering Barsbāy's interventions in the domestic economy of Egypt. Just as the spice trade policy had a political dimension, in which the Sultanate's spice monopoly had to comply with the exigencies of Hijazi politics, the regime's attempts to control the domestic economy had an impact on the internal politics of the Mamluks. The contemporary chronicle sources for the reign of Barsbāy indicate that the state both imposed and attempted to impose a number of measures to control the sale and production of a variety of products. Although historians of this reign have obliquely acknowledged the tensions between Barsbāy and the political elite, the economic interventions of the sultan have generally been portrayed within a political vacuum. In general this view may be a consequence of the apparent robustness of Barsbāy's rule: he pushed the boundaries of state power during a period of protracted economic decline. More often than not, however, accounts of Barsbāy's actions fail to mention the resistance he encountered or their failure altogether. A particularly vivid example may be cited from an otherwise very illuminating article by Eliyahu Ashtor. In the case of the sugar interventions, while noting the opposition of the amirs, Ashtor concludes that Barsbāy "had recourse to other methods of extortion," and the reader infers that the sultan was driven by his "cruelty" and "greed," to use Ashtor's words, to

⁶John L. Meloy, "Imperial Strategy and Political Exigency: The Red Sea Spice Trade and the Mamluk Sultanate in the Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123, no. 1 (2003): 1–19.

⁷Jean-Claude Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale, Qūṣ* (Cairo, 1976), 477.



dominate the sugar market.⁸ To be fair, Ashtor was first of all interested in economic issues and thus did not pursue the political implications of resistance to the sultan. In addition, he quite naturally was building on the conclusions of other scholars. However, even if Barsbāy was indeed an extraordinarily unsavory character, such cursory assessments have perhaps inhibited the investigation of the political dimensions of his reign.

The most comprehensive treatment of Barsbāy's reign is, of course, that of Ahmad Darrag, although in the wealth of detail he betrays some uncertainty in determining the basis of the sultan's policy. Was it built on responses to prevailing economic problems or was it determined by his character? Both readings have been taken from Darrag's work.⁹ But when we consider these two factors, one may yet wonder where politics were in the determination of policy. Darrag's and other historians' treatment of the sultan's character cannot be examined fully here; such a study would be lengthy since this characterization is rooted in those of earlier modern historians and of the Mamluk biographers. But regarding Darrag's use of the internal monopolies in support of his view of Barsbāy's character, it is important to note that a comparison of his discussion of these interventions with the entire set of information provided by the chronicles concerning the commodities of wheat and sugar, for which we have a relatively substantial amount of data, reveals the sultan to have been less of a threat to the domestic economy than members of the military and civilian elite were. From the perspective of these chronicle reports rather than biographical assessments, we can examine the Sultanate's economic interventions in the context of competition in the political economy of Egypt.¹⁰ Examination of the entire set of evidence clarifies the nature and extent of these interventions; moreover, the evidence shows that in 832/1429 there was a shift in the regime's policy concerning these commodities, allowing an interpretation that places these actions within the broader context of the sultan's political consolidation. The resulting view casts the relations between Barsbāy and the economic elite who had vested interests in these commodities in a more nuanced light, so that his interventions are a useful opportunity to examine the disposition of state power and wealth in fifteenth-century Egypt.

⁸Eliyahu Ashtor, "Levantine Sugar Industry in the Later Middle Ages," *Israel Oriental Studies* 7 (1977): 242, 243. Ashtor also speculated on the extent of corruption in the Mamluk sugar industry, citing examples from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (p. 244); he did not mention Barsbāy in this context. He later noted the "opposition" to interventions in sugar: *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, 278.

⁹R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton, 1991), 184–85; Garcin, "The Regime of the Circassian Mamluks," 293.

¹⁰An approach adopted by Garcin, for example, in his "Jean-Léon l'Africain et 'Aydhāb," *Annales islamologiques* 11 (1972): 189–209.



Before proceeding, however, there are two weaknesses of the sources that must be acknowledged. One is that most information on this topic comes from Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī's chronicle *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*. Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad al-'Aynī, in his chronicle *Iqd al-Jumān fī Tārīkh Ahl al-Zamān*, has little or nothing to say about economic matters.¹¹ The reliability of al-Maqrīzī's information is to some extent affirmed by another important chronicle of these years, Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ḥajar's *Inbā' al-Ghumr bi-Abnā' al-'Umr*, which provides corroborating evidence for some of al-Maqrīzī's reports.¹² The chronicle of 'Alī ibn Dāwūd al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs wa-al-Abdān fī Tawārīkh al-Zamān*, and those of Ibn Taghrībirdī, particularly *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah fī Mulūk Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah*, have little in the way of details to add to al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Ḥajar for the years in question; neither do later historians like al-Sakhāwī and Ibn Iyās.¹³ While we should, of course, judge al-Maqrīzī's conclusions and assessments with circumspection, particularly his pointed views on the sultan's comportment and personality, his economic data may be considered as a useful starting point for a general understanding of particular aspects of the Mamluk political economy.

The second weakness concerns the range of commodities that we can examine. Along with spices, commodities as diverse as firewood, textiles, and foodstuffs, as well as "strategic" resources such as natron and alum, were all subject to the control of the sultan's commercial bureau (*al-matjar al-sulṭānī*).¹⁴ The state monopolies on the production of natron and alum are well established in administrative sources and go back to the Fatimid period. The extraction of these two minerals in particular was perhaps confined largely to certain localities such as the Wādī Natrun so that a state monopoly would have been sustained rather easily. As for restrictions on other, more widely available commodities during the Mamluk period, our information is unfortunately rather fleeting, so it is difficult to understand the nature of these interventions in a detailed way. However, we can reach some conclusions about a number of products that were significant enough to be mentioned fairly frequently. Of course, spices are mentioned often in the sources because of their value and, as has long been recognized, because

¹¹ Al-'Aynī, *Iqd al-Jumān*, ed. 'Abd al-Rāziq al-Taṭṭāwī Qarmūṭ (Cairo, 1985, 1989), covering the years 815–50/1412–47.

¹² Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1969–72).

¹³ Al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1970–73); Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah* (Cairo, 1963–72).

¹⁴ On the *matjar*, see: Subhi Y. Labib, *Handelsgeschichte Ägyptens im Spätmittelalter, 1171–1517* (Wiesbaden, 1965), 164–65; Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1967), 127; and Subhi Labib, "Al-Iskandariyyah," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 4:132. On special resources, see: Aḥmad al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā fī Ṣinā'at al-Inshā'* (Cairo, 1913–20), 3:459–61.



they constituted an important resource available to the Mamluk authorities. As for domestic commodities, the commodities of sugar and wheat, which have also received some attention by historians investigating other aspects of the Mamluk economy,¹⁵ are sufficient to offer some idea of the nature of the regime's interventions, the relationship between the sultan and Egypt's military and civilian elite, many of whom were large stakeholders in the economy, and the consequences of these restrictions on Egypt's political economy.¹⁶

WHEAT

Wheat was a major crop in the Nile Valley. The elite of Mamluk society, amirs and high-ranking officials in the administration, accumulated and stored their wealth in the form of grain.¹⁷ Egypt ordinarily exported wheat to surrounding regions—the Hijaz is often cited as a destination since it imported a considerable quantity of its food, but also places more fertile and further afield in the eastern Mediterranean received Egyptian grain. In times of dearth, which could occur for a variety of reasons, such as an inadequate Nile inundation, Egypt imported grain. While Popper's study shows that the failure of the Nile to reach plenitude was relatively rare during the Circassian period, that possibility nevertheless generated considerable anxiety every year.¹⁸ Even in the short term, the price of wheat was very volatile, as one can see from Popper's compilations of prices for the years

¹⁵On wheat: Ashtor, "The Wheat Supply of the Mamluk Kingdom," *Asian and African Studies* 18 (1984): 283–95; Ira M. Lapidus, "The Grain Economy of Mamluk Egypt," *The Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 12 (1969): 1–15; Boaz Shoshan, "Grain Riots and the 'Moral Economy': Cairo, 1350–1517," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10/3 (1980): 459–78; idem, "Money Supply and Grain Prices in Fifteenth-Century Egypt," *The Economic History Review* (new ser.) 36/1 (1983): 47–67.

On sugar: Ashtor, "Levantine Sugar Industry"; Sato Tsugitaka, "Sugar in the Economic Life of Mamluk Egypt," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, no. 2 (2004): 87–108; Mauritz Sobernheim, "Das Zuckermonopol unter Sultan Barsbai," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete* 27 (1912): 75–84.

On agriculture in general: Sato Tsugitaka, *State and Rural Society in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, 1997); Heinz Halm, *Ägypten nach den mamlukischen Lehensregistern* (Wiesbaden, 1979–92); Hassanein Rabie, *The Financial System of Egypt, A.H. 564–741/A.D. 1169–1341* (London, 1972); and Gladys Frantz-Murphy, *The Agrarian Administration of Egypt from the Arabs to the Ottomans* (Cairo, 1986).

¹⁶Lapidus, "Grain Economy," 9–10; Gaston Wiet, *L'Égypte arabe*, vol. 4 of *Histoire de la Nation égyptienne*, ed. Gabriel Hanotaux (Paris, 1931–40), 451.

¹⁷Ashtor, "Wheat Supply," 293; Lapidus, "Grain Supply," 10; idem, *Muslim Cities*, 51–52; A. N. Poliak, "Les révoltes populaires en Égypte à l'époque des Mamelouks et leurs causes économiques," *Revue des études islamiques* (1934): 261.

¹⁸William Popper, *The Cairo Nilometer: Studies in Ibn Taghrī Birdī's Chronicles of Egypt: I* (Berkeley, 1951), 209–10; Adel Allouche, *Mamluk Economics* (Salt Lake City, 1994), 11–12.



1394–96 and 1448–57.¹⁹ Under these general circumstances, with the political elite holding large grain stocks, it comes as no surprise to find in the chronicles reports of speculation in the grain market.

Al-Maqrīzī made relatively numerous and substantive comments on the wheat market, reflecting his long-standing interest in economic issues and his *muhtasib*-like preoccupation with the well being of the *ummah*. Of course, grain speculation could pose a serious problem that caused the populace extreme hardship at times, virtually eliminating wheat from the marketplace and interrupting the production of bread. To some extent, one might have been able to anticipate the occurrence of speculation since it often took place at particular times in the agricultural calendar, which of course hinged on the flooding of the Nile. The river usually started to rise from its annual low in June and peaked at Cairo in late August. In accordance with the natural cycle, wheat was sown from October to December and harvested from April to May, just before the onset of the inundation. In Upper Egypt the planting and harvesting seasons were a few weeks earlier.²⁰ To return to al-Maqrīzī, in Dhū al-Qa‘dah 836 (19 June–18 July 1433), just before the rise in the Nile’s level, wheat prices climbed 30 percent (from 100 to 130 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*). Al-Maqrīzī observed that the reason for this rise in price was that a group of people of means (*al-nās*) had made it a practice to try to set off a rise in prices by spreading rumors during the season of the increase of the Nile that it would not reach plenitude. The disinformation would then prompt the grain producers to withhold sales and the merchants to buy up what they could in order to store it, waiting for the opportunity to make a substantial profit. The ensuing rise in prices would allow dealers to sell at an artificially high price to nervous buyers.²¹ In this particular incident, other commodity prices rose as well.

A similar incident occurred in the summer of 831/1428. At the beginning of Dhū al-Qa‘dah (12 August–10 September 1428), prices, having been “low,” started to rise to the extent that wheat surpassed the price of 300 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*. Prices of other commodities rose as well. Fodder became so scarce that the amirs sent their men to the villages surrounding the city to gather it, often by force. The situation caused the sultan to take the measure of controlling the supply of fodder, monopolizing its sale at a fixed price in the square below the Citadel. It is noteworthy that al-Maqrīzī does not remark that this was unjust in any way. The following month there was still a dearth of wheat on the market even though, according to

¹⁹William Popper, *Egypt and Syria under the Circassian Sultans, 1382–1468 A.D.: Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghrī Birdī’s Chronicles of Egypt (Continued)* (Berkeley, 1957), 95–100.

²⁰Sato, *State and Rural Society*, 198, 254; W. Willcocks and J. I. Craig, *Egyptian Irrigation* (London, 1913), 163, Table 263.

²¹Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:893–94; al-Şayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, 3:261–62.



al-Maqrīzī, it was plentiful in traders' silos and storehouses since they were interested in gaining maximum profit from their transactions. Consequently, the price rose above 400 *dirham fulūs*, when finally "God looked gladly upon his faithful," and the price fell. Ibn Ḥajar's take on this incident was that the price had reached 400 before it fell, after which the silos of the sultan and others were opened so that the market's supply became sufficient.²² The rise in prices may have stopped when the Nile reached plenitude so that the speculators would have been unable to continue playing on people's fears about the viability of the crop of the following year.²³

Ordinarily, during the growing season prices would remain relatively stable. However, a rise in prices could be triggered by shortages induced by hoarding, which is what happened in Rabī' I 832 (9 December 1428–7 January 1429). From the condition of low prices at the end of 831, noted above, the price of wheat rose to 450 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*, and then to 500, along with an equally alarming rise in prices of other commodities. Al-Maqrīzī and al-Ṣayrafī noted that speculation caused the price of wheat to rise to 280 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb* in Jumādā II (8 March–5 April 1429),²⁴ until it began to decline to 220 in Rajab (6 April–5 May 1429).²⁵ The sources do not implicate the sultan in this episode of speculation. At this point, however, the sultan forced the sale of his stocks of grain on people of means (*al-nās*), raising the price from 220 to 300 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*.²⁶

Not all incidents of speculation occurred in association with the flooding of the Nile. Prices took a sharp turn upwards in early 829 (started 13 November 1425). In the middle of Ṣafar (13 December 1425–10 January 1426) of that year, the price of wheat rose again until it eventually surpassed 300 dirhams per *irdabb*. Wheat flour and bread were scarce in the markets, and by the last day of the month the crisis had reached the point where people were fighting for wheat. Al-Maqrīzī attributed this rise in price to a number of factors. First, the supply of foodstuffs to Cairo was blocked by strong winds that prevented boats from sailing on the Nile so that the quays became empty of goods. News of severe inflation came from Bilād al-Shām, where the price of an *irdabb* of wheat had reached 1000 *dirham fulūs*, and in Upper Egypt also wheat was scarce, setting off a rise in prices in Cairo. To make matters worse, an outbreak of disease among livestock caused losses to farmers to the extent that a man who owned 150 water buffaloes

²² Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:782–83; Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 3:405.

²³ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:784; on determining plenitude, see Popper, *Cairo Nilometer*, 69–70.

²⁴ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:794; al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, 3:148, who dates this to the following month, Rabī' II 832.

²⁵ Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:796, 799, 800.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 801.



lost all but four of them.²⁷ The situation may have been exacerbated by poor administration: al-Maqrīzī stated that the *muḥtasib* of Cairo, Amir Īnāl al-Shishmānī, was especially severe in dealing with the grain traders so that many were inclined to abandon their occupations.²⁸

Whatever the real causes, under these extreme circumstances of dearth, al-Maqrīzī commented that the notables became “avaricious.” When the price of wheat in Egypt reached 250 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*, a number of amirs of a thousand refused to sell their stocks of wheat, reputedly saying that they would only sell when the price reached 300 dirhams. The sultan himself made no attempt to sell from his stocks, fearing that his small supply would be unable to ameliorate the problem, which of course led people of means (*al-nās*) to suspect his complicity in the matter. The result was that it came to be said of the market inspector (*mutawallī al-ḥisbah*), even though all of this was beyond his capacity to rectify, that “the calamities were heaped on one individual.”²⁹ A day later, the first day of Rabī‘ I (11 January–9 February), it would seem that the hoarders could hold out no longer since speculation stopped and bread was again available in the bakeries. In addition, the sultan began to distribute it to the poor on a daily basis, perhaps an indication of a stable market.³⁰

Barsbāy’s administration undertook some effort to stop speculation in the wheat market. In Dhū al-Qa‘dah 830 (24 August–22 September 1427), the price of wheat rose to more than 200 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*, after it had reached a low of 80 dirhams in Rajab (28 April–27 May),³¹ which accompanied an increase in the price of other commodities. Anticipating an opportunity to make a killing, traders began to buy quantities of the grain. In order to prevent speculation, the sultan forbade purchases of more than ten *irdabbs* of wheat at a price of 150 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*.³² Al-Maqrīzī does not mention how the incident ended, but the Nile reached plenitude just weeks later and the market probably stabilized.³³

The regime also tried to interdict hoarding in Dhū al-Ḥijjah 829 (4 October–1 November 1426) and again the following month in Muḥarram 830.³⁴ In these

²⁷This outbreak is not documented by Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1977), 310, Appendix 1; on plague epizootics, see 156–60.

²⁸Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:710–11; on Īnāl al-Shishmānī, see Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Manhal al-Ṣāfi wa-al-Mustawfā ba‘da al-Wāfi*, ed. Nabīl Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (Cairo, 1985), 3:207–8.

²⁹Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:711.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 712.

³¹*Ibid.*, 744.

³²*Ibid.*, 750–51.

³³*Ibid.*, 752.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 729, 735.



decrees the sultan ordered the amirs and the notables to suspend the practice of protection (*al-ḥimāyah*) by removing their personal insignias (*runūk*) from their mills, shops, and presses. This order was probably designed to prevent hoarding and speculation through the practice of privatized protection, in which powerful members of the military and civilian elite (*al-ḥumāt*) would protect individuals from taxation and forced sales, for which the protectors would receive a payment.³⁵ This practice, which Ibn Taghrībirdī described as being “the greatest of the causes of the ruin of Egypt and its villages,”³⁶ in effect reduced not only the state’s access to economic resources but also the state’s ability to control the marketplace. The effect of these measures may have had an immediate effect, but it is unlikely that it had any long-term preventative value since speculation continued to occur unabated, as mentioned above, in the following years.

While the sultan’s efforts to stop hoarding and speculation may have been for naught, starting in mid-832 (mid-1429) his interventions became very aggressive. He used his power to halt the conduct of commerce while forcing wholesalers to buy from his stocks—in effect cornering the market for a short period of time—and at the same time he tried to prohibit the use of privatized protection, which would otherwise diminish the resources available in the economy. In Rajab of that year (6 April–5 May 1429), in an incident cited above, the sultan’s commercial bureau forced the sale of a number of commodities so that the price of grain rose from 220 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb* to 300.³⁷ Since the preceding month, the price had fallen from a high of 500 *dirham fulūs*,³⁸ an unusually high price that al-Maqrīzī attributed to speculators.³⁹

In Rabī‘ I 833 (28 November–27 December 1429), the sultan was able to force the sale of wheat at a price of 360 *dirham fulūs* because the *muḥtasib* of Cairo (Īnāl al-Shishmānī, mentioned above) prevented the grain ships from docking at the quays of Miṣr and Būlāq, in order that the bureau could empty its stocks at the expense of the millers. It is not known what the price was prior to this intervention, but in Shawwāl of the previous year (4 July–1 August 1429), the price had risen to 250 *dirham fulūs*.⁴⁰ Shoshan interprets this episode as a failed

³⁵Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Khalīl al-Asadī, *Al-Taysīr wa-al-I‘tibār wa-al-Tahrīr wa-al-Ikhtibār fīmā Yajibu min Husn al-Tadbīr wa-al-Taṣarruf wa-al-Ikhtiyār*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad Ṭalaymāt ([Cairo], 1968), 134-46, esp. 144; on the practice of *ḥimāyah*, see John L. Meloy, “The Privatization of Protection: Extortion and the State in the Circassian Mamluk Period,” *The Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 47, no. 2 (2004): 195-212.

³⁶Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah*, 16:160.

³⁷Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:801; cf. Darrag, *Barsbay*, 152.

³⁸Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:796, 799.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 783.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 804.



attempt at monopolization. However, the evidence does not indicate the imposition of permanent restrictions on sales but rather that it was a successful attempt to corner the market.⁴¹ While the sultan, of course, gained in the short term, it is noteworthy that Ibn Ḥajar and al-Maqrīzī did not express their disapproval of this action, noting instead the benefits that ensued since it ultimately resulted in the lowering of the price of grain; al-Maqrīzī commented: "Praise to God, perhaps the body will recuperate after the malady."⁴²

In Shawwāl 835 (1–29 June 1432), the sultan's bureau bought rather than sold grain. Wheat was cheap and the sultan ordered his agents to purchase while imposing a moratorium on all other transactions until the bureau's stocks were full. No doubt this meant a loss for the grain dealers, but al-Maqrīzī noted that the effect was salutary since the market had been stagnant and this generated sales.⁴³ Another report indicates that the sultan's participation could have unintended consequences. In Jumādā II 840 (11 December 1436–8 January 1437), the sultan ordered his *matjar* to purchase 30,000 *irdabbs* to store in the royal granaries. People feared a rise in prices and began to buy up wheat, barley, and broad beans.⁴⁴

While the sultan's *matjar* no doubt intended to make a profit, and from 832 clearly used the sultan's coercive power to dominate the market, the prevailing impression one gets from these reports is that a major threat to the economy was the predatory behavior of the economic elite. The sultan was successful in cornering the market in wheat at particular moments but he was much less successful in curtailing the manipulation of the market by the amirs and notables who traded in wheat. In an incident involving broad beans rather than wheat, in Šafar 838 (6 September–4 October 1434), the sultan forced the sale of 10,000 *irdabbs* of it at the unit price of 175 *dirham fulūs*. Al-Maqrīzī observed that the sultan ordered that anyone who enjoyed high rank (*jāh*) would not be protected from this decree. He also remarked that this order was not realized since those who held high rank or benefited from the protection of those with high rank were nevertheless able to escape the decree while those who did not were subject to it. Consequently, he stated, people of means (*al-nās*) had to bear losses, not from the rise in price, but

⁴¹Shoshan, "Grain Riots," 468.

⁴²Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:820; Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 3:436; al-Šayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, 3:180–81.

⁴³Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:872; al-Šayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, 3:239; cf. Darrag, *Barsbay*, 152.

⁴⁴Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:1004; al-Šayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, 3:378. Darrag (*Barsbay*, 152–53) also notes that the price rose from 100 to 140 *dirham fulūs* per *irdabb*, and that the sultan made the purchase with the intention to profit; when people panicked, the price rose. He cites here al-Maqrīzī, whose information is very brief, and Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, whose report I have not been able to check.



rather from the fees (*kulaf*), referring to the protection fees that they had to pay to avoid the sultan's interventions.⁴⁵

The reports of these aggressive interventions are, however, relatively few, although Darrag cited them without fail in his discussion of the interior monopolies. In fact, Darrag's concluding remarks are a bit ambiguous on the issue of a monopoly, but it is clear that he regarded the sultan's actions as consistently predatory. The sum of the evidence on wheat, however, indicates that the interventions of the Mamluk elite in general were a serious or perhaps even greater problem for the populace than those of the sultan; certainly the elite were the greatest impediment to the state's ability to regulate, much less monopolize, the market. Speculators were, as one would expect, individuals of means who were members of the upper echelons of the military, amirs of a thousand for example, or members of the civilian elite, denoted only as "notables" (*a'yān*). The sultan, for his part, could ultimately do little to establish the administration's fiscal control of the wheat market, except use his political power to enforce his priority in the trade, which he started to do after 832. Even in this regard, Barsbāy had to exert special efforts to prevent grain dealers from taking refuge within their own status or in the protection of their patrons. However, these efforts were apparently not successful. The evidence also suggests that his participation in the market was little more than occasional. After all, the profits from the wheat market were not as lucrative as those from other commodities, like sugar.

SUGAR

Barsbāy's administration undertook a series of interventions in the sugar market. The nature and extent of these interventions has remained ambiguous. These took the form of decrees prohibiting the sale and the cultivation of sugar and then immediately the abolition of those orders leaving, as both Darrag and Ashtor have noted, an uncertainty about the situation.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Darrag concluded that Barsbāy continued the sugar monopoly throughout his reign. Ashtor maintained that the last attempt at monopolization occurred in 836/1433, and that forced purchases were conducted as late as 839/1435.⁴⁷ Lapidus also argued for 836/1433 as the last monopolization. Lapidus called Barsbāy's interventions "a system of forced purchases in the form of a *gabelle*," referring to a practice used in eighteenth-

⁴⁵Note the typographical error in Darrag's rendition of this incident—he states that it was 100,000 *irdabbs* (Barsbay, 152); al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:933; Asadī used the expression *kulfah* (pl. *kulaf*) to refer to protection payments (*Al-Taysīr wa-al-I'tibār*, 136).

⁴⁶Darrag, *Barsbay*, 150–51; Ashtor, "Levantine Sugar Industry," 242–43; idem, *Levant Trade*, 278.

⁴⁷Ashtor, "Levantine Sugar Industry," 243.



century France where the General Farm would force a community to purchase its salt at a higher than market price.⁴⁸ While this assessment goes some way in helping us understand the sultan's actions, it is important to acknowledge that the nobility, clergy, and other privileged members of *ancien régime* society were exempt from the *gabelle*. In the case of Barsbāy's interventions, communities of commoners were not the only targets of his interventions. He eventually had to abandon intervention in the sugar market since it struck too close to the interests of the military and civilian elite who were his competitors in the market.

It is helpful to understand this series of decrees in the context of the agricultural calendar. Since sugar cane cultivation exhausted the soil, in Mamluk Egypt it was planted for two consecutive years before the land was left fallow.⁴⁹ There were minor differences in the growing seasons of the two crops (respectively, *al-ra's* and *al-khilfah*) but in general, the cane was planted in February and March and was harvested in November and December, possibly continuing into the first months of the following year.⁵⁰ Sato Tsugitaka has observed that the cultivation of cane required not only relatively new farming technology, such as a heavy plow, but also the equipment and labor used in turning sugar cane into sugar—processing plants, where the cane is prepared, pressing factories to produce the juice, and refineries where the juice is repeatedly boiled and filtered, finally producing different grades of sugar and molasses.⁵¹ All of this involved capital investment that only the political and economic elite could provide.

The first decree, dating to Dhū al-Qa'dah 826 (6 October–4 November 1423), ordered the closure of all sugar refineries (*maṭābikh*), just before the harvest would take place. In addition, the decree forbade the sale of all sugar and sugar products except from the sultan's stocks, managed by an office (*dīwān*), presumably within the sultan's commercial bureau.⁵² According to Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, the sultan imposed this restriction on the advice of an influential merchant named Nūr al-Dīn al-Ṭanbadī, and they made a great deal of money. The embargo was lifted three months later, in Ṣafar 827 (4 January–1 February 1424), when the inspector of the army (*nāẓir al-jaysh*), who one would surmise had his own interests to

⁴⁸Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 56–57.

⁴⁹Sato, *State and Rural Society*, 216–20, 254.

⁵⁰Ibid., 190, 199; Marius Canard, "Ḳaṣab al-Sukkar," *EF*, 4:683; Willcocks and Craig, *Egyptian Irrigation*, 375.

⁵¹Sato, *State and Rural Society*, 215 ff.; idem., "Sugar in the Economic Life of Mamluk Egypt," 91 ff.

⁵²Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:647, 654; Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 3:309; cf. Sobernheim, "Das Zuckermonopol," 81.



protect in the sugar refining industry, returned from the pilgrimage and thwarted al-Ṭanbadī's plans.⁵³

During almost every year from 828 though 832, decrees similar to that of 826 were issued and revoked. The only one not issued during the cane harvesting season was that of Sha'bān 828 (18 June–16 July 1425), when the sultan prohibited all but his own agents' transactions on sugar.⁵⁴ There is no mention of this embargo being lifted but it is likely that it was not effective since in Dhū al-Ḥijjah 829 (4 October–1 November 1426) and again in Ṣafar 830 (2–30 December 1426), in reports cited in the previous section, the sultan subsequently ordered members of the elite to remove their personal insignias from their sugar presses, among other facilities—again just prior to or at the start of the harvest.⁵⁵ This decree was probably not intended to appropriate sugar stocks, as I have interpreted it before, but rather intended to stop hoarding and speculation through the practice of *ḥimāyah*.⁵⁶

Barsbāy took more drastic measures in Ṣafar 831 (21 November–19 December 1427), at about the time of the harvest and also just before the planting season. Not only did he prohibit the production of molasses and sugar, but he also prohibited the cultivation of sugar cane. Again, the same report states it was immediately abolished.⁵⁷ The following year, in Rabī' II 832 (8 January–5 February 1429), both al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Ḥajar reported another decree announcing an embargo on sugar transactions, but not stating anything about cultivation. Again, this decree was abolished.⁵⁸

Concerning this report, Ibn Ḥajar supplies additional information, stating that Nūr al-Dīn al-Ṭanbadī took 60,000 dinars from the sultan to engage in commerce. Al-Ṭanbadī invested it in sugar and the sultan prohibited all others from trading in

⁵³Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 3:309; note that Ibn Ḥajar mentions this in his account of Dhū al-Qa'dah 827, when the plan was implemented. Al-Maqrīzī, and not Ibn Ḥajar, mentioned the annulment of the decree the following Ṣafar, just after the pilgrims usually returned from the pilgrimage (*Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:657; cf. Sobernheim, "Das Zuckermonopol," 82); cf. Darrag, *Barsbay*, 147.

⁵⁴Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:691; cf. Sobernheim, "Das Zuckermonopol," 82.

⁵⁵Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:729.

⁵⁶Asadī, *Al-Taysīr wa-al-I'tibār*, 144; Meloy, "On Sugar and Spice: Mamluk Intervention in the Economy" (paper presented at the 36th Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Washington, D.C., November 2000).

⁵⁷Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:766; Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 3:398; cf. Sobernheim, "Das Zuckermonopol," 82–83.

⁵⁸Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:795; Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 3:423; al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, 3:149; cf. Sobernheim, "Das Zuckermonopol," 83; cf. Ashtor, "Levantine Sugar Industry," 243, who neglects to mention that this decree was abolished.



it without his permission. Ibn Ḥajar further remarked that “he engaged in disgraceful affairs so that the imprecations against him increased. Many officials (*ahl al-dawlah*) remonstrated against him about this state of affairs, which continued to the end of the year.” Thus the restriction evidently continued through until the end of September. However, it is noteworthy that Ḥasan Ḥabashī, the editor of *Inbā’ al-Ghumr*, states that his manuscript *hā’* negates the last verb: “which did not continue.”⁵⁹ This alternative reading may support the brief statements of al-Maqrīzī and Ibn Ḥajar, the latter of whom makes a statement at the end of his account of the year’s events that a decree was issued and then rescinded. While the sultan may have been able to monopolize sugar through the remaining eight months of the year, the sultan’s restriction on the sugar market was not sustained the following year. It would seem that the opposition of the amirs and the *a’yān* was not negligible.

While there is no detailed evidence for speculation in the sugar market on the part of the economic elite as there was with wheat, there is evidence for their intervention. A case occurred in Jumādā I 833 (26 January–24 February 1430), when the majordomo Āqbughā al-Jamālī attempted to force the purchase of sugar on merchants. This was well timed since a severe outbreak of the plague had occurred the previous month—what Ibn Taghrībirdī later called “The Great Extinction.”⁶⁰ Since sugar was used for medicinal purposes, the price had just risen; indeed, the majordomo had only been appointed to the office a month before as well, and probably thought he could use the weight of his new position to take advantage of the market.⁶¹ However, his attempt failed when merchants refused to open their shops.⁶² By the end of the year, he was removed from his post and imprisoned for a few days until he handed over the funds he owed to the sultan (*al-kulaf al-sulṭānīyah*), after which he was released and appointed inspector of bridges.⁶³

A decree in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus dated Dhū al-Ḥijjah 836 (19 July–17 August 1433) announced the abolition of interventions in sugar.⁶⁴ Lapidus

⁵⁹Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā’ al-Ghumr*, 3:419, n. 1.

⁶⁰Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah*, 14:338.

⁶¹Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā’ al-Ghumr*, 3:436; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Al-Nujūm al-Zāhirah*, 14:337, 346.

⁶²Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:824; al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat al-Nufūs*, 3:185; cf. Sobernheim, “Das Zuckermonopol,” 83; cf. Ashtor, “Levantine Sugar Industry,” 243, who states that action was carried out for the government and neglects to mention that it was opposed.

⁶³Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā’ al-Ghumr*, 3:436.

⁶⁴Sobernheim, “Inscriptliche Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungs-Verordnungen der Mamluken-Sultane aus der Omajjaden-Moschee von Damaskus,” in *Aus fünf Jahrtausenden morgenländischer Kultur: Festschrift für Max Freiherrn von Oppenheim*, Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 1 (Osnabruck, 1967 [reprint]), note inscription no. 9, 122; idem, “Das Zuckermonopol,” 78–79, 80–81; Gaston Wiet, “Notes d’épigraphie syro-musulmane,” *Syrie* (1925): 165, 171; (1926): 154.



interprets this decree as the end of the sultan's monopoly on sugar cultivation, refining, and sales.⁶⁵ It is more likely, I would suggest, that this was an ordinance directed against amirs and notables who tried to take advantage of their own power for temporary advantage in the market—similar to the decrees mentioned above requiring the effacement of insignia and names from storehouses (in Dhū al-Hijjah 829 and Muḥarram 830). The Damascus inscription was probably an attempt by the sultan to try to prohibit strong-arm tactics carried out by Mamluk officials like Āqbughā.

After Jumādā I 833/1430, there are no other reports of interventions in the sugar industry. However, Sobernheim cited an intervention that was supposed to have occurred later that year in Sha'bān (25 April–23 May 1430), and which Ashtor observed is in fact not included in the account of that month in the manuscript Sobernheim used for his article on the sugar monopoly.⁶⁶ Ashtor noted that the information, while missing in al-Maqrīzī's chronicle, was contained in that of Ibn Ḥajar. However, it is still not certain that a decree occurred at this time. Ashtor seems to be referring to information given by Ibn Ḥajar that is presented in the context of a statement made by the Shafi'i chief judge that the embargo on sugar cultivation, except on the lands of the sultan, was one of three injustices committed by the sultan that year. Although there are a couple of differences in details, this report in fact parallels one given by al-Maqrīzī at the beginning of his account of the year 832 and the prohibition of cultivation fits the decree of 831.⁶⁷

In spite of his expressions of uncertainty, Aḥmad Darrag concluded in his study of Barsbāy's reign that the Mamluk state was able to sustain a monopoly on sugar. After a review of the more aggressive of the reports noted above, Darrag concluded that "It is probable that Barsbāy did not modify his plan [to restrict the industry], not easing his severe hold, since al-Maqrīzī relates that in Rabī' I 837/October–November 1433, the press of a mamluk was set on fire by royal order."⁶⁸ Darrag's interpretation of the episode seems unwarranted. There is no mention that this Mamluk had contravened a commercial restriction of the sultan. But more to the point, the conclusion that a monopoly was sustained seems improbable, given the string of rescinded decrees and the opposition of state officials and merchants to these interventions. In arguing his case, Darrag also cites the report that in Muḥarram 839 (27 July–25 August 1435) the sugar sellers in Damascus were moved into one area "to facilitate control."⁶⁹ Ashtor agrees with

⁶⁵Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 127.

⁶⁶Ashtor, "Levantine Sugar Industry," 243, n. 91; Sobernheim, "Das Zuckermonopol," 75–84.

⁶⁷Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:791; Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-Ghumr*, 3:439.

⁶⁸Darrag, *Barsbay*, 149.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 150.



this assessment and quotes the anonymous author of *Ḥawlīyat Dimashqīyah* about this report, explaining that it was carried out "to make the ṭarḥ of sugar easier, as all of them would be in one place."⁷⁰ The facilitation of forced purchases, however, need not be the only reason markets were consolidated. Lapidus offers a different explanation of this type of physical control: "true markets were created in which a fair and competitive price could be determined."⁷¹ During the later years of Barsbāy's reign, there is no evidence for his attempts to monopolize the sugar industry as he had tried to do earlier on. However, the sultan still resorted to forced sales. The re-organization of the Damascus sugar market indicates the state's attempt at fiscal control, but not monopolistic control.

The consistent timing of Barsbāy's interventions between 828 and 832, and possibly as late as 833, suggests that his intention was to establish his priority in sugar transactions; in other words, he repeatedly attempted to corner the sugar market. The wording of these reports is not clear enough, however, to indicate how soon after the decree was issued it was revoked, and thus whether or not he was successful. However, given the interests of individuals like Āqbughā and the anonymous *ahl al-dawlah* mentioned above, it is certain that Mamluk amirs and notables played a role in blocking the sultan's interference, as the *nāzīr al-jaysh* did in 827/1424. It may well be that the sultan successfully decreed his priority in trade when cane was harvested, his bureau completed the necessary transactions, and then the market was opened up again. Whichever was the case, the role of the amirs and *a'yān* in the market is clear and it was their collective power that renders untenable the assumption that the sultan himself had no reason to change his approach to the sugar industry. The evidence of sugar interventions indicates that a change was affected when this information is placed in the context of the regime's other interventions in wheat and spices. Eliyahu Ashtor insightfully noted that the "resistance the spice traders could offer was much weaker," implying that the state then shifted its attention from this sector of the economy to the spice trade.⁷² Indeed the state did abandon sugar for spice, but Barsbāy's regime had directed itself toward spices from the beginning of his reign only to find that there were others besides spice merchants who had a stake in the trade.

CONCLUSIONS

Historians have often depicted Barsbāy as if he had an entirely free hand in intervening in the economy of Egypt. Notwithstanding the occasional nod to the

⁷⁰Ashtor, "Levantine Sugar Industry," 243, citing p. 142 of the chronicle; I have not been able to consult this source.

⁷¹Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 100.

⁷²Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, 278.



opposition of the amirs, historians have portrayed Barsbāy's interventions as monopolies established in spite of this opposition. Of course, it is impossible to discount the financial benefit of these actions to the sultan, whether or not they constituted true monopolies. But examination of these actions should be placed in the context of the predatory economic behavior of the elite, who were just as willing as the sultan to manipulate the market.

Boaz Shoshan argues that the economy of Egypt was fundamentally paternalistic—that is, based on a system in which one of the responsibilities of the ruler was “to protect consumers and prevent hoarding and speculation.”⁷³ He also claims that there were occasional breakdowns in paternalism, one of which he argues occurred under Barsbāy.⁷⁴ Shoshan's verdict on Barsbāy, however, is stretched. He cites the incident of 833/1429 and claims that Barsbāy did so “*probably* not because of his concern about a just distribution but rather in an attempt to increase his profits.” He asserts that “Barsbāy *had to discard* his plan shortly afterwards,” which assumes that we know his plan was a permanent monopoly. He disregards Ibn Ḥajar's and al-Maqrīzī's approving comments on this event as well as on an incident that occurred in 835/1432, strong support of the sultan's paternalism.⁷⁵ The sultan's purchase of 30,000 *irdabbs* of grain in 840/1427 provoked the populace to fear inflation, but we simply do not know if his intention was to replenish the royal granaries for paternalistic purposes or for pure profit.

Shoshan's argument for the breakdown of paternalism is stronger when he refers, however only briefly, to the role of other “interest groups.”⁷⁶ As E. P. Thompson noted, paternalism, as an ideal, was quite separate from its “fragmentary real existence,” when the regime employed it for “symbolic effect.”⁷⁷ Thus a more effective test for the occurrence of paternalism is in the expectations of the masses and the compliance of other economic actors in society. This is not the place to examine the motivations of the Cairene crowd; however, concerning the latter, the evidence on wheat and sugar presented above shows that dealers in these commodities successfully competed against Barsbāy. In particular, the incident of 838/1434 mentioned earlier, in which the sultan forced the sale of beans and attempted to impose this measure on all ranks of society, indicates the ease with

⁷³Shoshan, “Grain Riots,” 459. Shoshan relies here on E. P. Thompson, “Moral Economy of the English Crowd,” *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 73-136; and Louise Tilly, “The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971): 23-57.

⁷⁴Shoshan, “Grain Riots,” 467–68.

⁷⁵Ibid., 468, my emphasis. A minor point: one of these two incidents, citing al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:801, occurred in 832.

⁷⁶Shoshan, “Grain Riots,” 468.

⁷⁷Thompson, “Moral Economy,” 88.



which influential individuals could escape the control of the state, defying the paternalistic order. Any breakdown in paternalism was thus more likely due to the sultan's failure to suppress competing patrons, rather than the sultan's own transgressions. When viewed in terms of this more complex political dynamic, the interventions of Barsbāy take on a political rather than simply material significance. Actions interpreted as the sultan's attempts to fill his treasury are more likely efforts taken to establish the fiscal control of the economy that any state would want to achieve.

When Barsbāy determined that he could not achieve control of the domestic economy, he concentrated on other assets that fell within the state's territory. By 832, sanctions against speculation in the wheat market were abandoned and the state adopted a more aggressive role in controlling the wheat market. The evidence, however, indicates that the sultan intended not to monopolize it but rather to ensure that the amirs and notables did not control it. In contrast to the situation with wheat, the regime did want to monopolize the production of sugar to varying degrees and attempted to do so up until 832. After this time, the state gave up. Why? The evidence points most clearly to the successful opposition of influential officers and notables.

Since these sectors of the domestic economy were in effect out of the sultan's reach, Barsbāy was compelled to concentrate on the commodity that the amirs and notables of Egypt did not have a secure grip on—the spice trade. Barsbāy's intervention in the spice trade was based on two modes of control in the Red Sea.⁷⁸ The first mode of control was on merchants in the spice trade with the east. The regime imposed measures in a series of four phases, which became progressively more severe and more focused on the merchants of Yemen. First, in Dhū al-Ḥijjah 828 (14 October–12 November 1425), protectionist actions were implemented that favored merchants from Cairo over those of other lands in that all merchants passing northward along the Red Sea route had to first go to Cairo where their goods would be taxed. Second, in Muḥarram 830 (2 November–1 December 1426), the sultan decreed his priority in conducting spice transactions, an order that was issued again in Muḥarram 832 (11 October–9 November 1428). The effectiveness of the sultan's engagement in the spice commerce was enhanced when, in Jumādā I 833 (26 January–24 February 1430), the sultan established a group to deal in spices on behalf of the *matjar*. This was the administration's attempt to compete more effectively against independent spice merchants.⁷⁹ Third, in Rajab 835 (4 March–2 April 1432), the sultan prohibited all transactions in spices except those undertaken on his behalf; this measure was not clearly

⁷⁸The following is discussed in detail in Meloy, "Imperial Strategy."

⁷⁹Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk*, 4:823–24.



sustainable, another instance of the sultan's inability to maintain control of the economy.⁸⁰ Finally, in Ṣafar 838 (September–October 1434), the sultan implemented a direct economic assault on Yemen, declaring that the goods of Yemeni merchants coming from Yemen would be seized.

These measures were imposed in concert with the second means of control: the extension the state's direct control in the Hijaz. However, this attempt by the state to control the political affairs of Mecca ended in failure and, in 832, after three years of political turmoil in the Hijaz, the Mamluk sultan conceded one-third of the revenues collected on the transit trade to the Meccan sharif. Almost immediately, the turmoil subsided. In short, the sultan recognized that he had to concede power to local authorities in Mecca in order to achieve stability in the region. Further concessions were made to the Sharifate in 840 (at the end of 1436).⁸¹ Mamluk actions in the Hijaz should be seen in the context of the regime's attempt to control its economy.

In the first half of Barsbāy's administration the state attempted to extend control through direct measures—domestically as well as abroad—by displacing amirs and notables who were local producers of sugar or Meccan authorities who controlled the flow of the eastern trade. These measures were political as much as they were economic. While the Mamluk state's freedom of action was more generally hampered by a stagnant economy that prevailed across the broader region, competing political forces blocked Barsbāy's attempts to exploit economic resources. The state abandoned its strategy of direct control in about 832. In both commodities of sugar and spice, the state had to compromise with "local" authorities, conceding to them the wealth that they previously had access to. Consequently, to some extent, the merchants became the sole victims of the state. After all, the traders did not hold power critical to the support of the state—the amirs could threaten coups and the sharifs were instrumental in the state's secure hold on Mecca and the pilgrimage. The regime under Barsbāy transformed its state-building strategy from one of direct control of these valuable resources, whether in the Egyptian countryside or the Hijaz, to one founded on an empire of exotic commodities.

⁸⁰Meloy, "Imperial Strategy," 8.

⁸¹Ibid., 17.

