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The Regime and the Urban Wheat Market: The Famine of 662/1263–64 in Cairo*

FAMINES AND THE CAIRO WHEAT MARKET

THE NILE'S ANNUAL CYCLE

The typology of famines in Muslim Egypt is rather simple since famines occurred either as the result of speculation, meaning the withholding of supplies, or as a result of the Nile not rising enough. When the Nile failed to reach its plenitude the effect was twofold: on the year it occurred (the current year) and, of course, the next one. It must be emphasized that the price and availability of grain in the current year were determined by the flow of the Nile in the preceding year, which might have been normal. The shortages that were likely to occur in the current year came about as the result of buying for the future or hoarding in preparation for an impending shortage. In this case the famine took place because of a disturbance in the workings of the market mechanism, and not necessarily as a result of speculation or actual shortage. These observations become clear when one examines the annual flow-regime of the Nile and the resultant availability of grain in Cairo.

The annual rise of the Nile used to begin during the Coptic month of Ba'ūnah (8 June–7 July) and intensified during Abīb (8 July–6 August). The beginning of the rise during Ba'ūnah made it possible for boats loaded with grain to sail from both Upper and Lower Egypt toward Cairo. During Misrā (7 August–5 September, to which five to six extra days are added since Misrā is the twelfth Coptic month), the rising water of the Nile made the canal of Alexandria navigable and boats began sailing toward Cairo with grain and other agricultural products such as flax and sugar cane as well as timber and iron brought to Alexandria by Italian merchants for the government. The Nile usually reached plenitude, i.e., sixteen cubits as measured at the Cairo Nilometer, during Misrā. The new agricultural year began during Tūt (11/12 September–9/10 October) when the seeds needed for the planting of wheat and barley were delivered to the *fallāḥīn* but the actual sowing only began in Upper Egypt during Bābah (11/12 October–9/10 November). The annual rise and subsequent decrease in the level of the Nile came first in Upper Egypt while, in other parts of the country, the preparation of the land for the sowing of

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grain and barley was done during Kiyahk (10/11 December–8/9 January). The harvest and threshing of the grain were completed shortly before the beginning of the rise of the Nile in Ba'ūnah.¹

If we shift our attention back to Cairo we can note two parallel events that always took place in the capital: the observation of the rise of the Nile and the arrival of freshly-harvested grain to the ports. Progress in the rise of the Nile indicated what the fortunes of the next agricultural year would be, whereas the amount of grain available was determined by the previous year's river-flow. Whatever the quantities of grain that arrived in Cairo were, the fluctuations in the market were related to the observation of the rise of the river—which ultimately determined the intensity and volume of the demand. It must be pointed out that the rise of the Nile was measured and announced on a daily basis and the attempt of the first Fatimid caliph in Egypt (973) to ban this, in order to prevent panic, failed.² The suppression of information was an ill-conceived idea since it created panic. The rise was public knowledge and clearly observable even without the measurements made at the Nilometer.

HOW THE CAIRO WHEAT MARKET WORKED

When grain arrived at the grain ports (*sāḥil* pl. *sawāḥil*, meaning docks or wooden jetties) of Cairo it was taxed.³ This taxation is widely documented for the whole period of the Middle Ages. Ostensibly the government thus had a powerful tool in its hands to combat rising prices and to prevent the starvation of the worst-off segments of the urban population. Abolition of taxes, even temporarily, could have been an effective tool to combat both a brief (or artificial) crisis or a real and acute shortage by encouraging more affordable prices and delaying the worst of the famine for a while. Medieval regimes, however, were very reluctant to abolish

¹This section is based on the agricultural calendars of Ibn Mammātī, al-Makhzūmī, and al-Maqrīzī. These texts have been edited, translated into French, and annotated by Charles Pellat, *Cinq calendriers Égyptiens* (Cairo, 1986), 7, 15, 19, 65, 75, 79, 95, 99, 101, 105, 113, 123, 125, 127, 129. For the distinction between winter crops (wheat, barley, beans, and flax) and summer crops (watermelons, beans, cotton, and sugar cane), see Hassanein Rabie, "Some Technical Aspects of Agriculture in Medieval Egypt," in *The Islamic Middle East, 700–1900*, ed. Abraham L. Udovitch (Princeton, 1981), 68–71.

²Al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-Ḥunafā' bi-Akḥbār al-A'immah al-Fāṭimīyīn al-Khulafā'*, ed. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo, 1967), 1:138; Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Book of Travels (Safarnāmah)*, translated into English by W. M. Thackston, Jr. (New York, 1986), 41.

³In eleventh-century Cairo there were two main grain ports. One, *sāḥil Maqs*, served for unloading the grain designated for the consumption of the Fatimid palace, while the other, *sāḥil Miṣr*, served the capital and its population. Grain shipped from Upper and Lower Egypt arrived at *sāḥil al-Sa'īd* and *sāḥil Asfal Arḍ* while barley was unloaded at *sāḥil al-sha'īr*. See al-Musabbihī, *Akḥbār Miṣr*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid and Thierry Bianquis (Cairo, 1978), 39, 73, 78, 87, 94.



taxes on grain. For example, in 1025, taxes on grain were only lifted at the height of the famine but this was too late and too little to have any real effect on the prices.⁴ Another tool in the hands of the government was the declaration of maximum prices (*tas'ir*) for grain, flour, and bread. This policy was usually implemented more readily and at earlier stages of any evolving crisis yet, as far as can be ascertained from the sources, this always had a negative effect on the market and brought sales to a standstill.⁵

The government had two further means in its hands to combat shortages in grain and high prices: importation or the sale of grain from its own stocks. The importation of grain into medieval Egypt is a complex and little-researched topic and the evidence collected and discussed by Eliyahu Ashtor is inconclusive. We do know that grain was imported to Egypt during periods of shortage at the end of the thirteenth century, and even during normal years, but whether the Mamluk authorities or private merchants were behind the imports during the years of shortage remains vague.⁶ As has been demonstrated by Benjamin Arbel's work on Venetian Cyprus in the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, grain was traded in the eastern Mediterranean and the flow of the trade was determined by regional shortages with grain surplus countries exporting to places affected by poor harvests. Other forces were, however, also at work and price differences were a powerful inducement for the exporting of grain from Mamluk Egypt or Venetian Cyprus (even during

⁴For taxation of grain in the Fatimid period, see *ibid.*, 75. For the Mamluk period, see al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab fī Funūn al-Adab*, ed. al-Bāz al-'Arīnī and 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Ahwānī (Cairo, 1992), 32:227; al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyadah and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāh 'Āshūr (Cairo, 1943–72), 2:2:538, 3:3:972–73; Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā' i' al-Duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Cairo, 1963), 3:315, 331.

⁵For legal and theological aspects of *tas'ir*, see D. Gimaret, "Les théologiens musulmans devant la hausse des prix," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 22 (1979): 330–39. For practical aspects, see Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Islam: Mamlūk Egypt, 1250–1517* (Cambridge, 2000), 138, 146.

⁶Eliyahu Ashtor, "The Wheat Supply of the Mamlūk Kingdom," *Asian and African Studies* (Haifa) 18 (1984): 283–85, 287. One of the most explicit references to massive imports of grain to Egypt concerns the famine of 694/1294–95, which was caused by the insufficient rise of the Nile. The imports of grain to Alexandria reached 300,000 *irdabbs* and the grain was imported from Sicily, Constantinople, and the Land of the Franks (perhaps France); but as to who was behind these imports, this is not specified. See Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Zubdat al-Fikrah fī Tārīkh al-Hijrah*, ed. D. S. Richards (Beirut, 1998), 305–6, 312. In 1396, the arrival of boats loaded with grain lowered the prices of wheat and bread in Fuṣṭāṭ-Cairo and brought relief to the famine-stricken capital. The crisis of 798/1395–96 was caused by excessive flooding of the Nile in the previous year, but the identity of those responsible for the imports in 1396 remains unknown. See Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh Ibn al-Furāt*, ed. C. Zurayk (Beirut, 1932), 9:432, 434, 435, 436.



years of shortages) toward markets offering higher prices.⁷ The most effective tool the government had to combat rising prices was the selling of grain from its own stocks and forcing people of the ruling class to do the same. This point directly touches upon the essence of the Cairo grain market and needs greater elaboration.

Ira M. Lapidus has pointed out that the ruler procured the grain he needed from the lands under his direct control, shipped it to the capital and stored it in granaries as did people of the ruling class, amirs and administrators. The urban grain market operated parallel to this system, but it was occasionally influenced by the household grain economy of the regime. The ruler and other people of the ruling class sold surplus grain on the urban market and, in time of crisis, diverted and confiscated supplies going to that market. How the grain economy of the Fatimid regime worked is known from al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ*. Al-Maqrīzī (1364–1442) combined in his account information derived from Ibn al-Ma'mūn (d. 1192) and Ibn al-Ṭuwayr (1130–1220). Lands belonging to the Fatimid ruler were scattered all over Egypt but the grain shipped for the regime to Cairo came from Upper Egypt. Grain from other regions was shipped to Alexandria, Tinnis, and Damietta and, from there, was transferred to Tyre and Ascalon. Tyre, until its fall to the Crusaders in 1124, received 70,000 *irdabbs* of grain annually while Ascalon (lost to the Crusaders in 1153) received 50,000 *irdabbs*. In Cairo the regime stored 300,000 *irdabbs* of grain in its granaries (*ihrā'*) and fodder in two large *shuwan*. The most significant information is supplied by Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, who specifies to whom the Fatimid regime allocated its grain: the employees of the state and the court (*arbāb al-rutab wa-al-khidam*), those who were entitled to state sponsored charities, the black corps of the army and navy, and the royal guest house. The grain intended for consumption by the ruler and his wives and concubines (*jihāt*) was ground at special mills operated by slave-girls of the palace.⁸ The Office of the Navy, also known in the Fatimid period as the Office of Holy War, maintained a fleet of Nile boats that belonged to the regime for the shipment of grain and

⁷ Benjamin Arbel, "Venetian Cyprus and the Muslim Levant, 1437–1570," in *Cyprus and the Crusades*, ed. N. Coureas and J. Riley-Smith (Nicosia, 1995), 171–72. For imports of wheat to Palestine and Syria in the high and late Middle Ages, see J. H. Pryor, "In Subsidiū Terrae Sanctae," *Asian and African Studies* (Haifa) (Studies in Memory of Eliyahu Ashtor) 22 (1988): 127–47; Robert Irwin, "The Supply of Money and the Direction of Trade in Thirteenth-Century Syria," in *Coinage in the Latin East*, ed. P. W. Edbury and D. M. Metcalf (Oxford, 1980), 77; Zohar Amar, *Agricultural Produce in the Land of Israel in the Middle Ages* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2000), 65–68. Most of these imports came from Sicily with small amounts coming from Egypt.

⁸ Ira M. Lapidus, "The Grain Economy of Mamlūk Egypt," *JESHO* 12 (1969): 12–14; al-Maqrīzī, *Musawwadat Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (London, 1995), 246–48. For shipping of firewood to Constantinople, see J. Koder, "Maritime Trade and the Food Supply for Constantinople in the Middle Ages," in *Travel in the Byzantine World*, ed. R. Macrides (Aldershot, 2002), 113–14.



firewood (*aḥṭāb*) to Cairo.⁹ Altogether the Fatimid regime had one million *irdabbs* at its disposal¹⁰ but one should add the grain sent annually to the Holy Cities of Arabia to the grain allotments mentioned by Ibn al-Ṭuwayr.

Little changed after the transition from the Fatimid-Ayyubid to the Mamluk period. Al-Qalqashandī (1355–1418) notes that grain, barley, and beans received from the lands controlled by the sultan were stored in the sultanic *ihrā'* that were located in Fuṣṭāṭ and at the arsenal. Fodder, designated for the royal stables, was also stored, as was most of the grain that came from the Manfalūṭ region where the taxes were collected in kind. The stored grain was sent to the sultan's mills, which were also located at the arsenal and occupied a vast closed area. The amirs did what the sultan did but on a reduced scale, storing grain and fodder and thus providing for the needs of their households and troops.¹¹ The clearest contrast between the household grain economy and the free markets appears in the early fifteenth-century writings of Muḥammad ibn Khalīl al-Asadī. He states that the daily wheat consumption of the capital city was 1,000 *irdabbs*, and this was divided equally between the free market and households. He maintains that the ruling establishment (*aṣḥāb al-mu'n wa-al-rawātib al-sulṭānīyah wa-al-amirīyah*, literally those employed by the sultan and the amirs), the law colleges, and the Sufi lodges consumed 500 *irdabbs* daily. Al-Asadī's figures, however, should not be taken seriously, especially since he states that the yearly consumption of the capital was 360,000 *irdabbs* of wheat, which is a misleading extrapolation from the supposed daily wheat consumption of the capital. The significance of al-Asadī's account is in its being a reflection of medieval people's awareness of the huge inequality that existed in the operation of the urban wheat market wherein a tiny minority enjoyed disproportionate supplies.¹²

It is important to note that the desire for a self-sufficient household grain economy (conduct typical of the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk rulers and people of the ruling class during those periods) was also shared by the better-off segments of the urban society. The Geniza documents and the work of S. D. Goitein shed important light on this subject. What clearly emerges is that the wheat market was almost always a buyer's market and that prices fluctuated sharply. Goitein estimates that twelve *irdabbs* of wheat were needed annually "for an average middle-class household."¹³ People of the upper middle class, and perhaps even of the middle

⁹Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, *Nuzhat al-Muqlatayn fī Akhbār al-Dawlatayn*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (Beirut, 1992), 139.

¹⁰Al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Muqaffā al-Kabīr*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ya'lāwī (Beirut, 1991), 6:489.

¹¹Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā*, ed. M. H. Shams al-Dīn (Beirut, 1987), 3:522–23, 4:33, 61.

¹²Al-Asadī, *Al-Taysīr wa-al-I'tibār*, ed. 'Abd al-Qādir Ṭalaymāt (Cairo, 1967), 142.

¹³See *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley, 1983), 4:235.



middle class (if such terms can be used to describe medieval society), often tried to buy the wheat needed for their household consumption as it arrived at the grain-ports of Cairo. Although they usually managed to provide for themselves they had no surpluses for sale and thus must be distinguished from the people of the ruling class and their vast stocks. It seems that people of the middle middle class could bake bread for themselves either by buying flour from a miller (*ṭahḥān*) or a flour merchant (*daqqāq*), yet their main problem must have been getting firewood.¹⁴

Other segments of the population, the lower middle class, the working class, and the vast urban underclass, were dependent for their supply of bread on the operations of the wheat market. A number of participants were involved in this supply, each with its own role, but access to these participants was class related. Two professional groups, the oven owners and the bakers/bread vendors, were directly involved in the baking and selling of bread. Information on how the oven owner (*farrān*) operated is provided by *ḥisbah* manuals (works dealing with the rules of the market). For instance, according to al-Shayzarī, Saladin's contemporary whose work might reflect more a Syrian than an Egyptian urban reality, the *farrān* used to receive dough from customers and then bake bread for them which was delivered to their homes by boys in his service. The same picture emerges from the *ḥisbah* book of Ibn Bassām, a twelfth-century Egyptian contemporary of al-Shayzarī. The differences between the *farrān* and the *khabbāz* are, however, blurred in their works,¹⁵ an ambiguity that is also characteristic of the writings of Ibn al-Ukhūwah, a fourteenth-century Egyptian author of a *ḥisbah* manual. His chapter concerning these two professional groups, entitled "The rules of *ḥisbah* concerning the *farrān* and the *khabbāz*," implies that both had ovens and that certain regulations about how these should be operated applied to both of them. Ibn al-Ukhūwah's account mostly deals with the *farrān* who baked bread for people who brought him dough but, in fact, he also baked bread from his own dough for others.¹⁶ His main problem was how to secure fuel that was neither human nor animal waste, to operate the oven. The clearest evidence of the differences between the *farrān* and the *khabbāz* appears in the writings of Ibn al-Ḥājj (d. 1337), author of a moral guide who also presents a vivid picture of Cairo's street life. He corroborates Ibn al-Ukhūwah's depiction of the *farrān* as a baker who

¹⁴Ibn al-Ṭuwayr, *Nuzhat al-Muqlatayn*, 94.

¹⁵Al-Shayzarī, *Kitāb Nihāyat al-Rutbah fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah*, ed. al-Bāz al-ʿArīnī (Cairo, 1946), 22–23; Ibn Bassām, *Nihāyat al-Rutbah fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah*, ed. Ḥusām al-Dīn al-Sāmarrāʾī (Baghdad, 1968), 21–23, 61–62; Maya Shatzmiller, *Labour in the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden, 1994), 107, 108, 220–21.

¹⁶Ibn al-Ukhūwah, *Maʿālim al-Qurbah*, ed. with partial English translation by R. Levy (London, 1938), 91–92.



baked for others and he refers to his customers as "owners of the bread," meaning he baked them bread from the dough they had brought. The *farrān*'s shop served as a kind of communal bakery and a place of social gathering while the *khabbāz* sold bread from the flour he himself bought and his customers are referred to as "buyers." To what extent, if at all, the *farrān* also baked bread on his own initiative is not alluded to by Ibn al-Ḥājj. As clearly borne out by Maya Shatzmiller's discussion of the *farrān*, the Egyptian realities alluded to by Ibn al-Ḥājj were quite similar to those in other Muslim cities.¹⁷ We may safely assume that there were also bread vendors who had no ovens and baked no bread but bought a quantity of bread from the *khabbāz* in order to sell it in the streets.¹⁸ They are also referred to as *khabbāz* but, apparently, they served a lower class clientele and neighborhoods farther away from the main markets. Most probably the urban underclass, and perhaps also the working class, were dependent for their daily bread on this type of *khabbāz*.

Daily dependence on the bread vendor-*khabbāz* had serious drawbacks since the price of bread varied on a daily basis and, socially, buying bread on the streets was regarded as demeaning. Food and cooked dishes were sold on the streets but eating was perceived as a private matter. This tension between what was considered to be proper conduct and urban realities is nicely illustrated by Ibn al-Ḥājj. On the one hand, he describes food vendors and the dishes they prepared and sold but, on the other hand, he advocates the partaking of food at home.¹⁹ Another problem, according to the physician Ibn Riḍwān (998–1068), was that the bread baked in Egypt crumbled after a day and became inedible.²⁰ There were many qualities of bread ranging from white bread of high quality (*ḥuwwārah*), which enjoyed wide popularity and was common in Cairo and Baghdad alike, to low quality bread.²¹

¹⁷See *Kitāb al-Madkhal* (Beirut, 1972), 4:178, 180, 182–83; Shatzmiller, *Labour in the Medieval Islamic World*, 220–21.

¹⁸The clearest evidence for *khabbāz* as bread vendor is from Cairo of the mid 440s/early-1050s. A *khabbāz* referred to as *ṣu'lūk* (beggar, vagabond), indicating a low social origin, reduced the price of bread he sold and competed successfully with the *'arīf* (possibly meaning the head of the trade/profession) of the *khabbāzūn*. The market supervisor took actions against the *ṣu'lūk* but the chief qadi supported and rewarded him. See al-Maqrīzī, *Itti'āz al-Ḥunafā'*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥilmī Muḥammad Aḥmad (Cairo, 1971), 2:224. For a shop (*ḥānūt*) of a *khabbāz* in Cairo of 1025, see al-Musabbihī, *Akḥbār Miṣr*, 107.

¹⁹See Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Kitāb al-Madkhal*, 2:322, 324, 328, 330.

²⁰*Medieval Islamic Medicine: Ibn Riḍwān's Treatise "On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt,"* English trans. and introduction by Michael W. Dols, Arabic text ed. 'Ādil S. Jamāl (Berkeley, 1984), 90 (trans.), 7 (text). J. D. Latham, "Some Observations on the Bread Trade in Muslim Malaga (c. A.D. 1200)," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 29 (1984): 113.

²¹The preference for white bread was deeply rooted in Middle Eastern societies. For Byzantine Egypt, see M. S. A. Mikhail, "Some Observations Concerning Edibles in Late Antique and Early



Other types of breads common in Egypt were *khushkār*, made of coarse-ground flour, and semolina bread (*samīd*). The price differences between the *ḥuwwārah* and the *khushkār* breads are illustrated by the attempts of the *muḥtasib*, the market supervisor, to regulate their prices during the famine of 1025. He fixed the price of the *khushkār* bread at five *raṭls* per dirham and that of *ḥuwwārah* at four *raṭls* per dirham; however, as usually happened with price-fixing, the edict brought the market to a standstill. Following the cancellation of the edict the *samīd* bread was sold at two *raṭls* per dirham, indicating how unrealistic the price regulation of the market supervisor had been. Although the prices continued to soar the pricing of bread continued to reflect the different qualities and preferences of the customers. The *samīd* was sold later at two *raṭls* per one and a quarter dirhams while the *khushkār* was sold at two *raṭls* per dirham.²²

One last point concerns the highest level of the grain market, where we find both the wheat merchants (*qammāḥūn*) and the brokers (*samāsir*). The *ḥisbah* manuals do not mention them at all, indicating that they were too powerful to be under the jurisdiction of the market inspector. Their wealth is well attested in the sources, but their precise role in the operation of the market still requires clarification. This is also the case with respect to the difference that existed between the roles played in the market by wheat merchants and brokers.²³

THE FAMINE OF 662/1263–64

The information concerning the events of 662/1263–64 and Baybars' grain policy comes from a number of highly authoritative and well-placed contemporary historians. We shall begin with the narrative of Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir (1223–92), who was the head of Baybars' chancery (*dīwān al-inshā'*). He recounts that, at the beginning of Rabī' II 662/end of January–beginning of February 1264, the prices went up and the sultan imposed maximum prices. Although not explicitly

Muslim Egypt," *Byzantion* 70 (2000): 108. For Baghdad, see D. Waines, "Cereals, Bread and Society," *JESHO* 30 (1987): 280. For Constantinople, see J. L. Teall, "The Grain Supply of the Byzantine Empire, 330–1025," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 13 (1959): 91–92, 99–100.

²²Al-Musabbiḥī, *Akhbār Miṣr*, 48, 72. For types of bread and bakeries, see Ch. Pellat, "Khubbz," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 5:1087–92; R. Mielck, *Terminologie und Technologie der Müller und Bäcker im islamischen Mittelalter* (Hamburg, 1913), 75, 78–79 (I owe the reference to Mielck's work to the kindness of Thomas Bauer of Münster University).

²³This ambiguity is reflected by al-Musabbiḥī's report about the death (in 1025) of Ibn Sa'dān, described as a "wheat merchant who was one of the respected brokers dealing with wheat at the Upper Egypt Dock in Fuṣṭāṭ." See *Akhbār Miṣr*, 94. For the wealth of a Christian wheat merchant in mid-eleventh century Cairo, see Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Book of Travels*, 55–56. The memory of the wealth and generosity of a flour merchant who handed out charity to the poor during the 1060s civil war in Cairo still lingered in fifteenth-century Cairo. See Ibn al-Zayyāt, *Al-Kawākib al-Sayyārah fī Tartīb al-Ziyārah*, ed. A. Taymūr (Baghdad, n.d.), 149.



stated, it is clear that Baybars' edict of maximum prices brought the market to a standstill. The sultan quickly realized his failure at influencing the working of the market and on 7 Rabī' II/8 February he rescinded the maximum prices.

Baybars' subsequent policies were the outcome of his initial failure to influence the working of the market. It seems that on the same day, 7 Rabī' II/8 February, he ordered the selling of grain from the stocks of the regime to the amount of 500 *irdabbs* per day. The sale was made exclusively, and at affordable prices, to the poor (*ḍu'afā'*) and widows and restricted to two *wabī'* per person. What makes Baybars' policy unique is his decision to commit the resources of the regime to combat high prices at a very early stage of the crisis. The steps that followed were an extension of this policy towards other social groups and involved people of the ruling class in sharing the responsibility for the implementation of the policy. The names of the poor in Cairo-Fuṣṭāṭ were registered and amirs were obliged to feed groups of the poor for three months. In addition to this, people who belonged to the civilian society, such as great merchants, witnesses serving at the courts of the qadis, and other wealthy people, took upon themselves the responsibility of providing for the poor (*masākīn*). To what extent the participation of the people of the ruling class and those of the civilian society in these efforts was voluntary or forced is not alluded to. Baybars undertook to provide for the blind, but the most interesting references are to the Kurds and the Turkmen (*turkumān*) for whom the *atābak*, or commander-in-chief of the Mamluk army, provided.²⁴ Apparently the Kurds and the Turkmen were both part of the *wafīdīyah* and, as auxiliary troops, their remuneration was low and insufficient in times of dearth. The high price of bread brought them to the brink of starvation and, as organized military tribal units, they had the potential for violence. Baybars, by committing the resources of the state and the ruling class, bought social peace.

According to Shāfi' ibn 'Alī (1251–1330), Baybars' biographer and the maternal uncle of Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, the rise of the Nile in 662/1263–64 was low and, as a result, prices surged.²⁵ His remark indicates that the crisis of 662/1263–64 was probably caused by massive purchases of grain in anticipation of difficulties in 663/1264–65, but the supplies that existed in 662/1263–64 must have been quite normal and the regime probably had adequate grain resources at its disposal. The

²⁴See *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir fī Sīrat al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. and trans. into English by S. F. Sadeque under the title *Baybars I of Egypt* (Dacca, 1956), 94–95 (text), 204–6 (trans.); ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1976), 188–90. Other accounts are strongly influenced by Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir: see al-Nuwayrī, *Nihāyat al-Arab*, 29:96; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 1:2:507–8.

²⁵See Shāfi' ibn 'Alī Ibn 'Asākir, *Kitāb Ḥusn al-Manāqib al-Sirrīyah al-Muntaza'ah min al-Sīrah al-Zāhirīyah*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Khuwayṭir (Riyadh, 1976), 74. According to Ibn al-Dawādārī, the rise of the Nile in 661/1262–63 was above 16 cubits but he has no data for 662/1263–64. See his *Kanz al-Durar wa-Jāmi' al-Ghurar*, ed. Ulrich Haarmann (Cairo, 1971), 8:94, 106.



fact that the crisis began only in February 1264 does, however, raise some questions. If indeed the crisis was a result of a low Nile and massive purchases of grain for the future one would expect it to have begun earlier (in August–September when the low rise of the Nile had already been recorded) and to have intensified during October–November 1263. Possibly the rise of the Nile was only slightly below 16 cubits and the future purchases, although not that massive, were sufficient to create a depressed market that experienced low supplies and high prices. This trend slowly gained momentum, and erupted in full force during February 1264.

The sources offer clues about Baybars' household grain economy. Apparently Baybars needed 20,000 *irdabbs* of grain annually to bake bread for the people of his inner circle (*khāṣṣah*) and his *mamālīk* military slaves, in addition to 120,000 *irdabbs* of fodder for his stable. Another biographer of Baybars, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Ibn Shaddād (1217–85), says that the state (in his words, Baybars) made charitable distributions of wheat and flour to the poor and devotees in the Holy Cities of Arabia and also distributed large quantities (10,000 *irdabbs* annually) to the poor, mystics living in lodges, and the people living in seclusion in Cairo. These charitable allocations of grain must be distinguished from a special pious endowment (*waqf*) set up by Baybars for buying bread for poor Muslims. It seems that feeding the poor was quite central to Baybars' conduct as a ruler and believer and, during Ramaḍān, Baybars used to set slaves free and supply food to 5,000 people each night. The freeing of slaves was Baybars' personal charity, but whether the Ramaḍān food provisions were supplied from Baybars' own grain or from the state resources remains unclear.²⁶

THE WIDER IMPLICATIONS

Two issues need to be addressed when the wider implications of the events of 662/1263–64 are discussed: 1) to what extent Baybars' policy was unique and 2) what the characteristic features of Cairo's wheat market in a broader comparative perspective were. As simple as the typology of famine in medieval Egypt is, it should serve as a guide when the response of a regime to a crisis is evaluated. There is no point in comparing what a regime did, or failed to do, during a famine caused by the inadequate rise of the Nile to its conduct in other circumstances. The crisis of 662/1263–64 was a minor one and Baybars' actions reflect his understanding of the limits of governmental intervention into the market mechanism. Clearly, those most adversely affected were the poor and some foreign military groups and Baybars realized that there was no point in exerting pressure on other

²⁶Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir, *Al-Rawḍ al-Zāhir*, ed. Sadeque, 24, 103 (text), 107, 217 (trans.); Shāfi' ibn 'Alī, *Kitāb Husn al-Manāqib*, 34; Muḥammad ibn 'Alī Ibn Shaddād, *Tārīkh al-Malik al-Zāhir*, ed. Aḥmad Ḥuṭayṭ (Wiesbaden, 1983), 301–2.



participants in the market to lower prices, so he took action on his own. The grain stocks of the sultan and the military and civil elite were adequate and the supplies of new grain (determined by the harvest of 661/1262–63) were normal. The sultan could afford to dispense grain in order to achieve social peace. His policies enhance what is known about his personality, his involvement in the affairs of the state, the way he set a personal example, and his swift and determined response to emergencies.

Baybars' biographers favorably compare his policies in 662/1263–64 to those of other rulers, whose indifference in times of crises brought great misery to people. Quite understandably they conveniently overlooked the different circumstances of each crisis and Ibn 'Abd al-Zāhir's comparison of Baybars to the Ayyubid sultan al-Malik al-'Adil and his actions in 597/1200–1 is quite misleading. According to Ibn al-Dawādārī (d. after 1335), in 595/1198–99, 596/1199–1200, and 597/1200–1 Egypt suffered a famine caused by the insufficient rise of the Nile. The cumulative effect was devastating and, in 597/1200–1, the signs of depopulation in the capital and the rural areas were visible, with people being reduced to cannibalism. At the height of the famine (in 596/1199–1200, according to al-Maqrīzī, or in 597/1200–1, according to Ibn al-Dawādārī), al-Malik al-'Adil distributed grain to the poor and his example was followed by the amirs and people of means.²⁷ By any comparison al-'Adil did more than Baybars did and under the worst circumstances imaginable. If anything al-'Adil's example perhaps inspired Baybars, and providing for the poor by the sultan and other members of the elite during times of crisis became common in the Mamluk period. The responses of the Mamluk sultans, however, varied greatly and fluctuated between intervention and indifference or a late response.²⁸ It is difficult, almost impossible, to discern clear patterns in the way rulers dealt with crises and the assumption made about the grain "moral economy" in Mamluk Egypt is rather speculative, being based on a questionable model (eighteenth-century France and England) and presented with too little textual evidence.²⁹

²⁷Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-Durar*, ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āshūr (Cairo, 1972), 7:133, 136, 140, 148, 149; al-Maqrīzī, *Ighāthat al-Ummah bi-Kashf al-Ghummah*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyadah and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Shayyāl (Cairo, 1940), 29–31.

²⁸During the famine of 1294–95, for example, people of the military ruling class as well as wealthy civilians, including the historian Baybars al-Manṣūrī (then an amir in Alexandria), provided for the poor, while during the crisis of 1395–96 the sultan Barqūq distributed food and charity to the poor and righteous in the capital (see sources quoted in note 6). For a detailed study of the 1294–96 crisis, see M. Chapoutot-Remadi, "Une grande crise à la fin du XIIIe siècle en Egypte," *JESHO* 26 (1983): 217–46.

²⁹See Boaz Shoshan, "Grain Riots and the 'Moral Economy': Cairo, 1350–1517," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10 (1980): 459–61.



Any comparison made between the unique Egyptian realities and other Mediterranean regions, not to say Western Europe, is difficult and must be carefully handled. According to Paul Magdalino about forty percent of Constantinople's grain market in the ninth–twelfth centuries was dominated by the household grain economy. The court, the Church, charitable institutions, and private people managed to secure grain supplies for themselves in a way unrelated to the ups and downs of Constantinople's grain market.³⁰ Thus a basic resemblance to Cairo does exist but the differences are no less important. Supplying Constantinople with grain, from the point of view of geography (i.e., the regions from which the grain came) and transportation, was a far more complex and demanding task than it was in Cairo, which benefited from the movement of boats from Upper and Lower Egypt toward the capital.

In the case of the Cairo wheat market and, more broadly, the grain economy of Muslim Egypt as a whole, we can truly speak about *longue durée* trends. Al-Kindī, the tenth-century author of a booklet entitled the *Excellencies of Egypt*, outlined the three main grain economy realities of Egypt: 1) the country produced vast surpluses; 2) there was a close correlation between the height of the Nile's annual rise, the agricultural fortunes, and the level of taxation; and 3) Egypt fed the Holy Cities of Arabia.³¹ This was not only a question of a river-dependent agricultural economy, since the Nile and its annual flood also permeated the religious and social life of the country. Moreover, ancient Egyptian customs and festivities continued under the guise of Christianity, and later Islam, well into the nineteenth century.³²

Al-Kindī's last point reflected the new seventh-century realities of an Egypt slipping away from Byzantine control. Although the loss of Egypt and North Africa carried many consequences for Byzantium, the shipment of grain from Alexandria to Constantinople had already collapsed earlier. In the sixth century truly vast quantities of grain, estimated at 160,000 metric tons, were being shipped each year by a fleet of 1,200 to 1,800 ships from Alexandria to Constantinople but this *longue durée* system came to an end in the early seventh century. In 618 the distribution of public bread in Constantinople ceased and new patterns of supply

³⁰P. Magdalino, "The Grain Supply of Constantinople, Ninth–Twelfth Centuries" in *Constantinople and Its Hinterland*, ed. C. Mango and G. Dagron (Aldershot, 1995), 39, 43.

³¹See *Faḍā'il Miṣr*, ed. Ibrāhīm Aḥmad. al-'Adawī and Muḥammad 'Umar (Cairo, 1947), 44, 46, 60, 70.

³²For medieval festivities and ceremonies connected with the Nile, see William Popper, *The Cairo Nilometer* (Berkeley, 1951); Paula Sanders, *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany, 1994), ch. 5. For the early nineteenth century, see E. W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (repr. New York, 1973), ch. 26. The similarities are striking and these accounts can be read as a continuous sequence.



emerged and were consolidated.³³ Writing about Constantinople after the eighth century J. Durliat has categorically stated: "Constantinople ne fut plus affamée."³⁴ It must be emphasized that the provision of grain to Constantinople was not only a question of overcoming geographical and administrative complexities, but frequently involved political issues relating to Byzantium's commercial relations with other Mediterranean powers. For example, in the commercial treaties between Byzantium and Venice during the rule of Michael VIII (1259–82), Venetian exports of grain from Byzantium were dependent upon the level of grain prices in Constantinople, giving priority to the needs of the local urban market.³⁵ Like their Byzantine predecessors, the Ottomans were much concerned with securing orderly grain supplies for Istanbul and preventing shortages. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, these efforts culminated in the creation of a special administration to deal with this problem.³⁶

Returning to medieval Cairo and its wheat market, one may conclude that it was torn between the household grain economy of the regime, the ruling elite, the upper echelons of the civil society, and the free market upon which the rest of the population was dependent. Governmental intervention in the functioning of the free market was minimal and no special efforts were made to supply Cairo. This lack of interest in how the population of the capital obtained its bread stands in contrast to the Byzantine and Ottoman policies in regard to Constantinople-Istanbul.

³³For the sixth-century system of supply and its collapse, see M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy* (Cambridge, 2001), 104–5, 108–10.

³⁴See "L'approvisionnement de Constantinople," in *Constantinople and Its Hinterland*, 21.

³⁵J. Chrysostomides, "Venetian Commercial Privileges Under the Palaeologi," *Studi Veneziani* 12 (1970): 267–356.

³⁶R. Murphey, "Provisioning Istanbul: The State and Subsistence in the Early and Modern Middle East," *Food and Foodways* 2 (1988): 217–63; T. Guran, "The State Role in the Grain Supply of Istanbul: The Grain Administration, 1793–1839," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 3 (1984–85): 27–39.

