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The Tribal Dimension in Mamluk-Jordanian Relations

A growing interest in provincial history is producing alternative understandings of Mamluk political culture, ones that recognize the contributions and influence of local actors.¹ Given the uniquely local perspective of Syrian sources, the frequency with which one encounters references to local families and their larger tribal networks is not surprising. Jordanian *nisbahs* are a staple of Syrian biographical dictionaries, *waqfiyāt*, and chronicles of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, indicating the degree to which the peoples of Transjordan participated in the cultural, intellectual, economic, and indeed political life of the time in southern Syria. Malkawis, Ḥisbānis, and Ḥubrais made academic careers in Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo and were active in Sufi organizations outside their home towns; Shobakis acquired land at an early stage in the development of private estates, endowing much of it as family and charitable *awqāf* at the turn of the ninth/fifteenth century; ‘Ajlūnīs controlled markets and were successful in business; Kerakis were a constant challenge to the state in the fifteenth century, playing an active role in rebellions of myriad forms.² These teachers, businessmen, and rebels, regardless of where they were actually born and raised, traced their

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¹Yūsuf Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥaḍarī li-Sharq al-Urdunn fī al-‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Amman, 1982); idem, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī li-Sharq al-Urdunn fī ‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī al-Awwal (al-Mamālik al-Baḥrīyah)* (Amman, 1982); and idem, *Dimashq fī ‘Aṣr Dawlat al-Mamālik al-Thānīyah* (Amman, 2005); Taha Tarawneh [Tarāwinah], *The Province of Damascus during the Second Mamluk Period (784/1382–922/1516)* (Irbid, 1987); Alexandrine Guérin, “Terroirs, Territoire et Peuplement en Syrie Méridionale à la Période Islamique (VIIe siècle–XVIe siècle): Étude de Cas: le Village de Msayké et la Région du Laḡa” (Ph.D. diss., University of Paris–Lyon II, 1997); Aḥmad al-Jawārinah, *Tārīkh al-Urdunn fī al-‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī* (Amman, 1999); Yehoshua Frenkel, “Agriculture, Land-Tenure and Peasants in Palestine During the Mamluk Period,” in *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk Eras*, ed. Urbain Vermeulen and Jo van Steenbergen (Leuven, 2001), 193–208; Shawkat Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī li-Mintaqat Sharq al-Urdunn (min Junūb al-Shām) fī ‘Aṣr Dawlat al-Mamālik al-Thānīyah* (Irbid, 2002); Zayde Antrim, “Place and Belonging in Medieval Syria, 6th/12th to 8th/14th Centuries” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2005) and idem, “Making Syria Mamluk: Ibn Shaddad’s *Al-A‘laq al-Khaṭīrah*,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2007): 1–18; Bethany Walker, “The Role of Agriculture in Mamluk-Jordanian Power Relations,” in *Proceedings of Roundtable on the Age of the Sultanates*, ed. Bethany Walker and Jean-François Salles (Damascus, 2007), 77–96; and idem, *Jordan in the Late Middle Ages: Transformation of the Mamluk Frontier*, forthcoming.

²For examples of entries of ulama with Jordanian *nisbahs* found in contemporary biographical dictionaries, see Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥaḍarī*, 169–200.



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roots to Jordan, the majority maintaining close ties with kin there.³

There was, of course, no “Jordan” in the Mamluk period—a province (Mamlakat Karak) and the southernmost district of another (Mamlakat Dimashq) comprised the territory of what is today’s Hashemite Kingdom. The region was, in short, not an administrative unit. This is not the place to postulate whether, in spite of this, a “Jordanian” identity existed then—that belongs to another study. Nonetheless, there was, as there is today, a strong tribal dimension to Transjordanian society, a social cohesion created and reinforced by tribal ties and self-reference. Contemporary sources support this anthropological understanding of tribal society, as they describe the extent to which the Mamluk state tried at times to engage, at others break through, the complex tribal networks that permeated Jordanian societies. Economic life was, in part, structured by these networks, as were the relations that bound scholars in Damascus to ‘Ajlūn and Kerak and Jerusalem. Moreover, political power here was channeled through such networks, on both the local and imperial levels. The Mamluk state could not avoid encounters and confrontations with Jordanian tribes and their wide-flung and complex web of political, social, and economic ties.

While Transjordan represented the eastern frontier of the Mamluk empire, it was not peripheral to the political and strategic interests of the state. Transjordan was a linchpin in the Mamluk state’s defense against foreign invasion, as well as control over the peoples of Syria. At the beginning of the Mamluk period Transjordan represented a security concern; Ayyubid princes still maintained castles there, and the principle hajj route from Damascus to Mecca ran through the middle of the region. Sultan Baybars initiated an ambitious defensive project that involved reinforcing the citadel walls and towers at former Ayyubid castles, such as Kerak and Shobak, and building new fortifications at what would become rural capitals, such as Ḥisbān and Salt.⁴ He also built and leveled roads and reorganized the *barīd* system that would, by the eighth/fourteenth century, blossom into a comprehensive communications network of postal centers (*marākiz*), pigeon and fire towers, and caravan and pilgrim stops. Local tribesmen, who maintained tight social networks and were well armed and mobile, represented an immediate threat to this infrastructure. To secure the eastern frontier required controlling a complex tribal society that was not fully understood, culturally marginal, and never wholly incorporated into the state structure.

Recent scholarship in political anthropology and post-colonial theory have demonstrated that peoples and places normally on the geographical and cultural

³The complex meanings of *nisbahs* in the Mamluk period is considered in David Ayalon, “Names, Titles, and ‘Nisbas’ of the Mamluks,” *Israel Oriental Society* 4 (1975): 189–232.

⁴Bethany Walker, “Mamluk Investment in Southern *Bilād al-Shām* in the Fourteenth Century: The Case of Ḥisbān,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 62, no. 3 (2003): 243.



margins of the state emerge in times of political flux as critical to its maintenance or reform.⁵ The “imperial margins” described in such work are places of partial belonging that have always demonstrated some degree of autonomy or are beyond complete state control; are often subjected to irregular administrative practices, administrative or economic experimentation, and sporadic political violence; and are frequently the locus of resistance. They provide an ideal vantage point from which to observe the instability of state power and the mechanisms of its transformation. Tribal societies, which are flexible in structure and tend to move in and out of imperial systems as sociopolitical conditions change, are natural “margins” through which to evaluate political change.⁶ Rather than merely impassive subjects of imperial action, they can be political agents in their own right, impacting the state in important ways.

The following offers a few thoughts on ways to evaluate the exercise of political power by the Mamluk state in Transjordan at the turn of the fifteenth century. The central point of reference is the multiple relationships between the state and local tribes, considering not only the imposition of the imperial authority on local peoples, but also the ways in which the tribes helped to shape political culture in the region. It is a provincial perspective on Mamluk politics that pulls on textual and anthropological analysis and archaeological data to evaluate the ability of local actors to transform the imperial system during periods of political instability and turmoil.

DEFINING JORDANIAN TRIBALISM

Before we address the question of whether the Jordanian tribes were a political force at the turn of the fifteenth century, we must define what we mean by a “tribe.” The anthropological definition is a group of people that claim descent from a common ancestor. The term usually reserved for this in contemporary sources is “*ashīr*” (pl. *‘ushrān*). Local clans and tribal confederations are collectively referred to as *‘ushrān*.⁷ The term refers to a form of social organization and is not

⁵Veena Das and Deborah Poole, eds., *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Oxford, 2004); Thomas Hansen and Finn Stepputat, *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton, 2005).

⁶Øystein LaBianca, “Indigenous Hardiness Structures and State Formation in Jordan: Towards a History of Jordan’s Resident Arab Population,” in *Ethnic Encounters and Change*, ed. Muhammad Sabour and Knut Vikør (London, 1997), 143–57.

⁷A comprehensive presentation on the individual tribes of Jordan is well beyond the scope of this article. The reader should consult one of several works available on the topic. Al-Zāhiri describes individual Transjordanian tribes in some detail (Ghars al-Dīn Khalīl ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhiri, *Zoubdat kachf el-mamālik: Tableau politique et administrative de l’Égypte, de la Syrie et du Hidjāz sous la domination des sultans mamloûks du XIII au XV siècle*, ed. Paul Ravaisse [Paris, 1894], 105ff). In the third chapter of his chancellery manual, *Kitāb Tathqif*, Ibn Nāzīr al-Jaysh, an official of Sultan



specific to any economic strategy or settlement pattern: it can refer to peasants, herdsmen, villagers, nomads, or any combination of these.⁸ The term is generally used in collective reference to the Muslims of Transjordan.⁹ More often individual tribes or clans are named, in the context of specific events, such as targeted strikes on specific tribes by Mamluk amirs¹⁰ or the hospitality shown by others towards a sultan.¹¹

Among the *ʿushrān* of Jordan, Syrian sources differentiate between the *ʿurbān* and *ahl al-balad*.¹² The *ʿurbān* (s. *ʿarab*) appear with the most frequency on account of their attacks on state officials and villages and raids on trade and pilgrimage caravans.¹³ The violence of this group is often cited by contemporaries as a

Barqūq, describes the proper address for Arab amirs and tribal leaders in formal correspondence (Taḳī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad al-Taymī al-Ḥalabī al-Miṣrī ibn Nāzir al-Jaysh, *Kitāb Tathqīf al-Taʿrīf bi-al-Muṣṭalah al-Sharīf*, ed. Rudolf Veselý (Cairo, 1987). Brief references to individual tribes and events, however, are found in most Arabic sources of the period. See also A. S. Tritton, “The Tribes of Syria in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 12 (1947): 567–73; Frederick Peake, *A History of Jordan and its Tribes* (Coral Gables, 1958); Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārikh al-Ḥadārī*, 135–40; and Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārikh al-Siyāsī*, 211–17, for information regarding their political relationships to one another, territory under their control, and their impact on the local economy.

⁸For a discussion of the wide-ranging use of this term in a Jordanian context, see Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārikh al-Siyāsī*, 211–22. For an alternative understanding of the term, as semi-nomadic or sedentarized tribes, see Robert Irwin, “Tribal Feuding and Mamluk Factions in Medieval Syria,” in *Texts, Documents, and Artefacts: Islamic Studies in Honour of D. S. Richards*, ed. Chase Robinson (Leiden, 2003), 256.

⁹Jordan has a significant Christian minority, historically concentrated in the larger towns of Kerak, Shobak, and ʿAjlūn. They are generally referred to as among *ahl al-Karak*, *ahl al-Shawbak*, and so on (Walker, *Jordan in the Late Middle Ages*, Ch. 2).

¹⁰The Banū al-Maghrāwī were singled out among the *ʿurbān* of ʿAjlūn District for their insolence and independence. In 807/1404 the governor of Syria seized their homes, money, crops, and other property and demanded from every clan (*kull ṭāʾif min al-ʿarab*) a number of camels to carry the grains to ʿAdhrīʿat (Taḳī al-Dīn Abī Bakr ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārikh Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah*, ed. ʿAdnān Darwish [Damascus, 1997], 4:397).

¹¹For the hosting of Sultan Barqūq by the Beni Mahdi at Ḥiṣbān, see below.

¹²Ibn Ḥijjī occasionally differentiates villagers and farmers (*al-nās min arbāb al-qūrah wa-al-baṣāṭīn*) from the *ʿarab*; both, however are *ʿashīr* (see, for example, Shihāb al-Dīn Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Saʿīdī al-Ḥasbānī ibn Ḥijjī al-Dimashqī, *Tārikh Ibn Ḥijjī*, ed. Abū Yaḥyá ʿAbd Allāh al-Kundarī [Beirut, 2003], 2:769, 777).

¹³The most powerful and established tribes of the *ʿurbān* were the Banū Sakhr (and their clans), the Banū ʿUqbah (and their clans), and the Banū Lām (Muḥammad al-Bakhīt, “Mamlakat al-Karak fi al-ʿAhd al-Mamlūkī,” as *Das Königreich von al-Karak in der mamlukischen Zeit*, ed. Alexander Scheidt [Frankfurt am Main, 1993], 31–32; Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārikh al-Siyāsī*, 211–30; Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārikh al-Ḥadārī*, 135–40). The Banū Lām were arguably the greatest of the Transjordanian tribes, as well as the most ruthless. They are best known in Mamluk sources as the tribesmen who made



factor in the economic decline of Syria and the political collapse of the Mamluk provinces.¹⁴ They also appear as part of the state apparatus as caravan guides and guards and are appeased, temporarily, through assignments of amirships and *iqṭā'āt*. In addition, the Jordanian *ʿurbān* provided the Mamluk state with horses for the *barīd*, camels for transport of grain, and sheep, a staple of the Mamluk diet and a specialty of local herdsman, then as today.¹⁵ Although the term is used to denote a local Arab elite, it is not entirely clear what specific social, political, or economic groups belonged to it.¹⁶ It is easier, however, to define what the *ʿurbān* were not: they were not Christians, local merchants, or town dwellers.¹⁷ They do include armed groups of Muslims that lived on the desert periphery. According to al-ʿUmarī, the *ʿurbān* included Arabs who claimed descent from the nomads of the Arabian Peninsula, regardless of whether they continued the nomadic existence or had settled in villages.¹⁸ While largely herdsman, it is likely that many lived at least seasonally in small villages and did some farming.¹⁹

The term *ahl al-balad* refers to everyone else. Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, one of our most important sources on Jordanian society in this period, uses the term in the broad sense of the people of a region,²⁰ but more frequently townsmen, villagers, and residents of dispersed hamlets, in other words people of an identifiable residence. They comprised both Muslims and Christians and included local officials and the intelligentsia, merchants, and tribal leaders who lived inside the town proper.²¹

a living from attacking pilgrim caravans and killing those present.

¹⁴According to Ḥajjah, the local *ʿurbān* were a critical factor in the financial collapse of Transjordan in the fifteenth century. Their attacks on hajj caravans did considerable damage to the businesses that supported them, and their raids on Jordanian towns and villages destroyed local trade and agriculture, leading to demographic decline (Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥadārī*, 229–30).

¹⁵Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:397; Sato Tsugitaka, *State and Rural Society in Medieval Islam: Sultans, Muqtaʿs and Fallahun* (Leiden, 1997), 98.

¹⁶Rapoport comes to a similar conclusion regarding the *ʿurbān* of contemporary Egypt (Yossef Rapoport, “Invisible Peasants, Marauding Nomads: Taxation, Tribalism, and Rebellion in Mamluk Egypt,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, no. 2 [2004]: 1–22.).

¹⁷For a fuller discussion of this argument, see Walker, *Jordan in the Late Middle Ages*, Ch. 3.

¹⁸See discussion in Rapoport, “Invisible Peasants,” 16–17.

¹⁹See note 23.

²⁰In this sense, note, for example, an incident reported by Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah: in a struggle over the governorship of Kerak in 802/1399, all the local people (*ahl al-balad*) supported the incumbent (Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:81).

²¹Occasionally the medieval historian will emphasize the presence of Christians among the “people” (*ahl*) of the town, particularly in cases of conflict with the local Muslim community, when their loyalty is in doubt. To cite one example, after executing his two top amirs, Alṭunbughā and Ṭashtamur, in 742/1342, Sultan al-Nāṣir Aḥmad ordered the people of Kerak (*ahl al-Karak*), “Christians and others,” to take the widows and children of these amirs by force, an action strongly



Culturally, they were virtually indistinguishable from the *‘urbān*, many of whom belonged to the same *‘ushrān*. Both groups were armed and shared the same customs, value system, and local identity: both the *‘urbān* and *ahl al-balad* of Kerak were “Kerakis.” Socially, however, *ahl al-balad* were distinguished from other tribesmen, as the Christians among them did not belong to the extensive tribal networks that comprised the *‘ushrān* proper. This is suggested, in part, by the formula “*al-‘ushrān wa-ahl al-balad*,” used by Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah to indicate the participation of all local people in an event—Muslim and Christian.²²

The ambiguity of these terms reflects in part an incomplete knowledge about Jordanian tribal society by the Mamluk state as well as its fluid structure and economic strategies. Traditional Jordanian society was always based on a mixed agricultural and pastoral economy. As a result, many individuals spent part of the year in permanently built stone houses in villages, while seasonally living in the fields to guard crops or tend to herds.²³ In addition, residents of large towns often owned land in the countryside, which family members tended and on which they resided seasonally.²⁴ We will examine this fluidity of residence, which is a survival strategy special to southern Syria, later in this article. Nonetheless, the scholars’ demographic categories based on residence and subsistence may not accurately reflect the complexity and overlapping points of self-reference of Jordanians in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; neither did the terms used by contemporaries based in Damascus and Cairo. The terms *‘urbān* and *ahl al-balad* reflect at best the ways state officials understood their engagement with local peoples: one of potential conflict with people in places not easily administered and one of mixed

condemned by contemporaries (Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:81).

²²Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 3:107.

²³A contemporary description of these village houses is reproduced from a fourteenth-century *waqfiyah* in Yūsuf Ghawānimah, “Al-Qaryah fi Junūb al-Shām (al-Urdunn wa-Filistīn) fi al-‘Aṣr al-Mamlūkī fi Ḍaw’ Waqfiyat Ādar,” *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 1 (1982): 363–71. For archaeological reports and architectural analyses of Mamluk-period domestic ruins, see Bāsīm al-Maḥāmīd, “Ḥufriyāt Tall Dhibān al-Āthārī Mawsim 2002,” *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 47 (2003): 71–76 (Dhibān); Alison McQuitty, “The Rural Landscape of Jordan in the Seventh-Nineteenth Centuries AD: the Kerak Plateau,” *Antiquity* 79 (2005): 327–38, and idem, “Khirbat Fāris: Vernacular Architecture on the Kerak Plateau, Jordan,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 1 (2007): 157–71 (Khirbat Fāris—Kerak Plateau); Bethany Walker and Øystein LaBianca, “Tall Ḥisbān, 2004 Season,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 109, no. 3 (2005): 536–39 (Ḥisbān); Bethany Walker, “Northern Jordan Project, 2006 Season: Preliminary Report on Fieldwork in Sahm and Ḥubrās,” in “Archaeology in Jordan,” ed. C. Tuttle and B. Porter, *American Journal of Archaeology* 111, no. 3 (2007): in print (Sahm and Ḥubrās).

²⁴Poliak’s observation about the half-sedentary lifestyle of the *‘urbān* reflects this phenomenon (A. N. Poliak, “Les révoltes populaires en Égypte à l’époque des Mamelouks,” *Révue des études islamiques* 8 [1934]: 258).



benefit with places under direct control of the state. In short, such terms stand for two categories of place the state authorities could easily recognize and that fell into two different administrative categories: the walled town (with its village satellites and agricultural hinterland) versus the open countryside.²⁵

PERCEPTIONS OF “THE OTHER”

How did the state engage local tribes and upon what assumptions? Did the cultural distance between urban Cairo and rural Transjordan contribute to misunderstandings or exacerbate political tensions? Kerak emerges from contemporary sources as the ultimate symbol of Jordanian tribalism. The language used to describe the place and its people alternates from disregard to respect and fear, reflecting the political challenges this semi-autonomous provincial capital presented to the state. While certainly unique among administrative and defensive centers in Jordan for its size and political importance, official images of the place are suggestive of the ways local society was at times tamed, at others considered a political threat.

The physical and perceived political and cultural distance of Kerak from Cairo is behind many of the derogatory literary devices used to describe life in Kerak Castle.²⁶ Written sources present a rather unflattering image of life in the castle, which probably reinforced the belief that the lifestyle adopted by royal exiles here was frivolous and the place politically non-threatening. Here is where a sultan’s son would go to drink, meet women (and men), and waste his time; it was a land beyond the legal and cultural norms of Egyptian society; here was freedom from official duties and responsibilities. This is exactly where the perceptions of the capital failed to grasp the political realities of the province. Desert lands are not

²⁵The imprecision of nomenclature in reference to local tribes is echoed in the sliding tax scale used by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century to reflect degree of control over the local population (Wolf-Dieter Hütteroth, “Ottoman Administration of the Desert Frontier in the Sixteenth Century,” *Asian and African Studies* 19 (1985): 145–55). For example, the tax categories of the *mezrā‘ah* were ambiguous and could refer to a hamlet, an isolated (grain) field, or a tribe (ibid., 151–52; see also use of term in the Arabic commentaries on the tax registers of Liwā’ ‘Ajlūn in Muḥammad al-Bakhīt and Noufan Hmoud, *The Detailed Defter of Liwā’ ‘Ajlūn (The District of Ajlun) Tapu Defteri No. 970* (Amman, 1989), and idem, *The Detailed Defter of Liwā’ ‘Ajlūn (The District of Ajlun) Tapu Defteri No. 185, Ankara 1005 A.H./1596 A.D.* (Amman, 1991).

²⁶Under normal circumstances, the journey from Cairo to Kerak should have taken a couple of weeks. However, Sultan Baybars in 675/1276 made that trip in only eleven days (Fawzi Zayadine, “Caravan Routes Between Egypt and Nabataea and the Voyage of Sultan Baibars to Petra in 1276,” *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 2 [1985]: 171). This was an unexpectedly fast trip, as the sultan was on campaign. Sultan Aḥmad in 742/1342, anxious to return to a city to which he had a special attachment, accomplished the same in a mere six days (Joseph Drory, “The Prince Who Favored the Desert: Fragmentary Biography of al-Nāṣir Aḥmad [d. 745/1344],” in *Mamluks and Ottomans: Studies in Honour of Michael Winter*, ed. David Wasserstein and Ami Ayalon [New York, 2006], 27).



necessarily isolated or apolitical, nor are tribal societies without structure and cultural norms. Criticisms of local society and the “laxity” residence here produced in privileged exiles, such as sultans’ sons, illustrate a cultural condescension that underestimated its political potential. That is not to say that local tribesmen were not paid off when needed—they certainly were—but there was never a coherent policy to fully incorporate them into the state through marriage alliances, long-term residence, or some degree of assimilation, strategies with cultural currency then and today.²⁷ Three notable exceptions are found in the practices of Sultans al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, his son Aḥmad, and Barqūq, who made frequent trips to, and occasionally resided in, local towns and “Bedouin” encampments and were familiar with the local culture and its norms.

Al-Nāṣir Muḥammad felt a particular obligation to the people of Kerak, who had played a critical role militarily in returning him to the throne for his third reign and in whose company the sultan often travelled when in Syria. He was exiled twice to Kerak: the first time in 697–99/1297–99 as a child (deposed by his amirs) and then again in 709–10/1309–10, a self-imposed exile, which bought him time and opportunity to build an army and regain the throne. He had developed an attachment to Kerak and had developed political and social ties with its people. This sultan had a special respect for the tribal society of Kerak and its culture. He considered Kerak a kind of wet nurse, a healthy place for future sultans to grow up and grow tough. He sent his own sons there to be trained in martial techniques, utilizing the new *maydān* there for this purpose, and to acquire *furūsiyah*.²⁸ His sons Aḥmad, Ibrāhīm, Abū Bakr, and Ramaḍān were, essentially, raised there, with the hope that they would acquire the best qualities of tribal culture and would gain the love and respect of the local people.

The language used in two *taqlīds* sent to the amir Maliktamur describes Kerak in terms of “homeland” and its people as the sultan’s “flock.” In this first document, Maliktamur is assigned the governorship of Kerak and made responsible for the well-being of the sultan’s son. The text, preserved by al-Qalqashandī, expresses the sultan’s sentiments towards “a land that has become for us a home, whose virtues are in our hearts from love for its people (*min ḥubb al-waṭn*), and where our sons continue to live.” Not long afterwards, and shortly before his death, the sultan issued a second *taqlīd*, in which he promotes his son Aḥmad to the governorship but retains Maliktamur’s services there to assist him. Here the sultan expresses a patron’s care in tribal terms, as he reminds his amir that “these are

²⁷While one does read of the occasional marriage between Mamluk and tribal families, they are exceptional. Note, for example, the marriage of Amir Miṭāsh to a daughter of Nu‘ayr ibn Ḥayyār ibn Muhanna’, the great Arab amir of Barqūq’s reign. The alliance meant to be solidified by this union, however, failed (Irwin, “Tribal Feuding and Mamluk Factions,” 260).

²⁸Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 195–96; Drory, “The Prince Who Favored the Desert,” 19.



our dependants, in your care, and our flock, belonging to us and you. Shield them with your wings, and indulge them.”²⁹ In these documents the sultan adopted culturally appropriate terms to describe his relationship with this province, which was pastoral and tribal.

Thus, the Jordanian *‘ushrān* were imagined simultaneously as a people of particular martial qualities and skills, a flock in need of a shepherd, and a society without structure or discipline. What were Jordanian perceptions of the Mamluk state? It is difficult to identify the particular perspective of the *‘ushrān* in Syrian sources. Such abstractions as cultural perceptions and preferences are not easily retrieved from the archaeological record, either, which is otherwise quite informative about local society—its subsistence, consumption, and standards of living. Nevertheless, formal complaints against local officials by Jordanian villages, which are recorded with greater frequency from the mid-fourteenth century, do articulate the kinds of expectations people had about the state and what practices they found the most exploitative, culturally insensitive, and short-sighted.

In his recent book on Damascus in the Circassian period, the Jordanian historian Yūsuf Ghawānimah spares no words of criticism in his evaluation of the impact of Mamluk policies on rural society. On the basis of polemics by Damascus-based historians, Ghawānimah essentially describes *iqṭā‘* holders and local officials as exploitative colonists, who were violent and uninterested in the well-being of local people: they “were particularly tyrannical to the peasants, harsh and arbitrary in their dealings, assaulting their honor and property.”³⁰ The critiques of villagers echo these sentiments. The people of the Jordan River Valley (the Ghūr) filed numerous complaints against officials posted there at the turn of the fifteenth century, largely in response to illegal diversion of shared water, forced labor on sugar plantations, physical violence, inability to react to local crises, and inappropriate use of the land.³¹ It is in the language used to describe the reception of popular officials, however, that popular images of the state are clarified: Amir Zayn al-Dīn Zubālah (d. 784/1382), *Bāshir al-Aghwār*, “loved the people;”³² Amir Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn (d. 784/1382), another *Bāshir al-Aghwār*, was “meritorious” (*min mashkūrīn*);³³ and Amir Sayf al-Dīn Baydamar (d. 789/1388), *Bāshir al-Aghwār*, “was known for his good [administrative] practice

²⁹Aḥmad ibn ‘Alī al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā fī Ṣinā‘at al-Inshā’* (Cairo, 1963), 12:226–32; Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 196.

³⁰Ghawānimah, *Dimashq*, 31 (translation mine).

³¹For a fuller discussion of these themes, see Walker, “The Role of Agriculture,” and idem, *Jordan in the Late Middle Ages*, Ch. 2.

³²Ibn Ḥijjī, in Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 1:97.

³³Ibn Ḥijjī, in *ibid.*, 102.



(*ishtahara bi-ḥusn al-mubāshirah*) and good reputation.”³⁴ Expectations ran low among the people of the Ghūr, however, after surviving a series of corrupt and violent administrators, so that they cautiously awaited the arrival of each new official. This cynicism is reflected in Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah’s assessment of Amir Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Tālik (d. 799/1396), *Mutakallim al-Ghūr*, of whom he claims “there is no doubt about it, he was better than most!”³⁵ Apathy, greed, and ineptitude were to some degree expected from local officials, who were often the only point of contact between rural communities and the state.

The ambiguities of such cultural perceptions exacerbated tensions and created irregularities in practice and in responses it elicited. In the period of intense clientage that followed the death of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, state officials tried to manipulate local tribal networks as they did the urban networks of Cairo, but with less facility.³⁶ Likewise, local societies saw the state as both a necessary evil in moderating tribal conflicts, as well as a foreign, and usually unwelcome and exploitative, presence, whose ignorance about local resources and peoples caused damage in the long term. Disdain and distrust characterize the images of “the other” that occasionally emerge from the texts, modelling the ways in which both parties engaged the other. The state tried three strategies to control local tribes, each informed by assumptions about Jordanian society held by the Mamluk elite: selective cultural assimilation, clientage, and confrontation through military force. The response of Jordanian tribes to these efforts was effective at times in preventing further imperial penetration of the area but, more importantly, also transformed, in subtle ways, the Mamluks’ administrative and political culture.

ASSIMILATION

As a show of military force was financially and politically costly, and risky, the Mamluk state generally attempted first to neutralize the potential of political opposition from local tribes through co-option. The “softest” strategies involved a kind of selective assimilation, through the partial adoption of local customs for political purposes, and cultivating ties with local tribal networks, through occasional residence or repeated visitation. The irregular reign of Sultan Aḥmad best illustrates the former trend. Although the story of his residence in Kerak is well known to Mamluk historians, a review of some salient points about his cultural transformation there is relevant here.³⁷

³⁴Ibid., 226.

³⁵Ibid., 639.

³⁶For the social and political maneuvering of the Mamluk elite during this period, see Jo Van Steenberghe, *Order out of Chaos: Patronage, Conflict and Mamluk Socio-Political Culture, 1341–1382* (Leiden, 2006), Ch. 2.

³⁷The following summarizes the account presented by Shams al-Dīn al-Shujā‘ī, who was a



Al-Nāṣir Aḥmad spent more time at Kerak than he did in Cairo: through a complex series of events, he essentially became “Jordanian” and no longer felt comfortable in Cairene Mamluk society. Aḥmad’s first trip to Kerak was in 726/1325, when his father, the reigning sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, sent him there, to be joined later by his brothers, to be raised, educated, and disciplined.³⁸ Aḥmad was eight years old at the time. The boys were eventually called home to Cairo by their father; Aḥmad did not stay long, though, as his father sent him back to Kerak soon afterwards. In 731/1330 al-Nāṣir Muḥammad once again called his son to Cairo, this time for his circumcision; Aḥmad had the surgery and returned to Kerak. Seven years later, he was summoned home for a third time, on this occasion to marry. At this point the reason for Aḥmad’s reluctance to marry and remain in Cairo for any length of time was revealed to the sultan, either as a rumor or an official report: he had fallen in love with a Keraki boy, whom he showered with gifts. Moreover, the sultan learned, his son spent his time in Kerak drinking and occasionally left the citadel wearing Keraki shoes.³⁹ The implication that he had “gone native” was enough to infuriate his father and insist that he stay in Cairo: the ties he was developing with Kerak smacked of rebellion and shame.

His father died later that year, and Aḥmad used the opportunity to free himself of Cairo, he believed, once and for all. He withdrew to Kerak, which he now claimed as his territory through his father’s *taqlid*, and his brother Abū Bakr, the *wālī ahd*, was put on the throne. After Abū Bakr’s arrest and exile to (and later execution in) Qūṣ in Upper Egypt, Aḥmad was declared sultan and eventually forced to return to Cairo to take the throne, which he did in 741/1342, in the company of a small group of Keraki intimates and clad in Bedouin dress (*zayy al-urbān*).⁴⁰ His return to Cairo was, however, brief, as he went back to Kerak only 51 days later, serving a mere two days in the Dār al-ʿAdl. He meant for this move to be permanent: Sultan Aḥmad took the imperial Treasury with him, along with stocks of food and various supplies; it appears he meant to move the capital to Kerak. His amirs could not comprehend such an act and sincerely feared what

contemporary of these events (as *Tārīkh al-Mālik al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn al-Ṣāliḥi wa-Awlādihī*, ed. and tr. Barbara Schäfer [Wiesbaden, 1985], 35, 69–71, 250–53, 278–80), and Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, who borrows largely from al-Shujāʿī and Ibn Kathir (Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:125–421).

³⁸ See al-Maqrīzī’s account of the same, where young Aḥmad is disciplined in *furūsiyah* (Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Maʿrifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Muṣṭafá Ziyādah and Saʿīd ʿĀshūr [Cairo, 1956], 2:272).

³⁹ Al-Shujāʿī, *Tārīkh*, 69; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:421.

⁴⁰ Drory, “The Prince Who Favored the Desert,” 24, citing Ibn Taghrībirdī, *Nujūm*, and al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*.



such a move would do to the stability of the state.⁴¹ Al-Shujā'ī describes this pivotal event in terms of a physical transformation of the sultan, as Aḥmad left the Cairo citadel and headed towards Kerak:

The sultan got down [off his horse], took off his garments [of state], and put on luxurious Arab dress and was draped in two veils (*wa-daraba lahu li-thamayn*). The Kerakis came to his side, and he mounted a camel and rode this way on the open road to Kerak.⁴²

The amirs begged the sultan to return to Cairo. Once again, Sultan Aḥmad's response is indicative of his attitude towards his office, and his image of Kerak's position in the empire:

Syria is mine, and Egypt is mine, and Kerak is mine, and any place important to me where I have resided. You don't bother to visit me, so I am under no restrictions of yours.⁴³

The amirs were furious and, after repeated pleas for his return to Cairo and the return of the Treasury, put his brother on the throne. The winter of that year (743/1344), two years after Sultan Aḥmad left Cairo for good, and after seven or eight campaigns, the armies of Egypt and Syria met at Kerak, took the citadel, with the help of a *muqaddam* of local 'urbān foot soldiers, Bāligh ibn Yūsuf ibn Tayyī',⁴⁴ captured Aḥmad and assassinated him, decapitating him, cutting off his arms, and burying the body (minus the head) where it belonged, in the soil of Kerak.

Sultan Aḥmad's assimilation to Jordanian culture was sharply criticized by contemporaries, who cited it as an example of personal folly, suggesting that it threatened the stability of the state.⁴⁵ While I know of no comparable instances of

⁴¹One of the sultan's closest advisors tried to talk him out of this move: "O lord, what is so important that you must go [to Kerak]? Once you leave we will devour each other (*na'kulu ba'ḍunā ba'ḍan*), and the crops will be destroyed, [at this time], during the harvest" (Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:246; in a slightly different form in al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh*, 250).

⁴²Al-Shujā'ī, *Tārīkh*, 253; Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:247.

⁴³Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:296.

⁴⁴He is described as the "ornament of the tribes and the support of the kings and the sultans" (*zayn al-qabā'il . . . 'umdat al-mulūk wa-al-salāṭīn*) in a *manshūr* granting him an *iqṭā'* for his services to the state in this event (preserved by al-Maqrīzī and published by Frédéric Bauden, "The Recovery of Mamluk Chancery Documents in an Unsuspected Place," in *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, ed. Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni [Leiden, 2004], 59–76).

⁴⁵Ibn Iyās called him a "crazy teacher" (*mu'allim majnūn*); al-'Asqalānī accused him of mismanagement and preoccupation with his own personal pleasures; for al-Ṣafadī he caused social and spiritual harm to the people; to Ibn Taghrībirdī he was frivolous and thoughtless; and to al-Maqrīzī "the ruin of the monarchy (*sabab li-kharab al-mamlakah*)" (Drory, "The Prince Who



cultural assimilation among the Mamluk elite, there are hints in Syrian sources of attempts by sultans and their representatives to present themselves in culturally acceptable forms. Visiting local communities, for example, was a more subtle form of cultural engagement that required from the representative of the state some knowledge of local cultural norms and tribal structure. The visits of two sultans to the town of Ḥisbān and their temporary, and fully voluntary, residence there are suggestive of the ways targeted visitation was put to political use.

On a strategic hilltop location some 25 kilometers south of Amman, overlooking the grain fields of the Madaba Plains and the northeast corner of the Dead Sea, the town of Ḥisbān was a very old settlement of Byzantine, Roman, and Moabite foundations. Its importance in the Islamic period was tied to its location, which made it a convenient stop on the pilgrimage caravans to Mecca and Jerusalem.⁴⁶ Ḥisbān was already a substantial settlement with its own qadi, madrasah, market, citadel,⁴⁷ and extensive fields and orchards⁴⁸ and was made the capital (*wilāyah*) of the Balqā (the southernmost district of Damascus Province) for a while, likely replacing the town of Salt, on the eve of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's third reign.⁴⁹ A relatively minor town from the imperial perspective, and a rural administrative center of less than fifty years, Ḥisbān was privileged with sultanically visits on three occasions: twice by al-Nāṣir Muḥammad and at least once by Barqūq. It is worth examining in some detail these visits for the light they shed on imperial-tribal relations in the fourteenth century.

The documented visits of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad took place in 709/1309, during a tour of Syria to garner support for his return to the throne, and again in 717/1317, when he visited only Ḥisbān. On the first occasion he sat in audience in the local citadel, presumably meeting with tribal leaders from the region and his amirs, bringing an "iron, Chinese throne" from Kerak for the purpose.⁵⁰ On the second

Favored the Desert," 29).

⁴⁶Ḥisbān was a node in the interior pigeon route through Syria, was a stop on the *barīd* route, and was not far from the hajj road from Damascus.

⁴⁷The entrance to the citadel, the upper courses of the fortification walls, and the southwestern tower (which was rebuilt at twice the scale of the other three) appear to be early Mamluk constructions. This work may be attributed to Sultan Baybars, who did similar work at Kerak and Salt, strengthening damaged towers by rebuilding them bigger and with higher walls (Walker, "Mamluk Investment in Southern *Bilād al-Shām*," 243; Robin Brown, "Excavation in the 14th Century AD Mamluk Palace at Kerak," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 33 [1989]: 290; Peake, *A History of Jordan and its Tribes*, 80; Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 74, 77).

⁴⁸It was said to have controlled an agricultural area of over 300 villages (al-Zāhirī, *Zoubdat Kachf el-Mamalik*, 46).

⁴⁹According to al-ʿAynī, there was already a *walī* serving at Ḥisbān at the beginning of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's third reign, when he visited the site (Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥaḍarī*, 48–49).

⁵⁰Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥaḍarī*, 116, citing al-ʿAynī. The excavators believe the large, vaulted



visit, the sultan left Cairo specifically to visit Ḥisbān and check on its affairs.⁵¹ There he met with his Syrian amirs, including the governor of Syria, thereafter returning to Cairo without traveling on to Damascus.⁵² The latter trip took the sultan 12 days from Cairo, a not insignificant period to visit a single town.⁵³

During Barqūq's sojourn at Ḥisbān, which in many respects resembled that of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad in 709/1309, the town was no longer the capital of the Balqā and retained no official importance.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, as part of his attempt to return to power in 791/1389, after a year's exile (and house arrest) in Kerak Castle, Barqūq stopped at Ḥisbān en route to Damascus. He stayed for a while with his mamluks and a group of Kerakis who had accompanied him there. From his temporary camp at Ḥisbān, Barqūq corresponded with the governors, qadis, and amirs in Syria, in an effort to confirm the alliances in Syria and to form a new army to march on Cairo.⁵⁵

Where did Barqūq reside during the roughly two weeks he was in Ḥisbān?⁵⁶ Most of the citadel was in ruins, with only sporadic or seasonal occupation of individual rooms after an earthquake destroyed the citadel a generation earlier.⁵⁷ Although he left Kerak in the company of 500 mamluks and 1000

room to the west of the central courtyard of the governor's residence, the "dīwān," was the location of formal meetings with tribal leaders and amirs (Bethany Walker, "Mamluk Administration of Transjordan: Recent Findings from Tall Ḥisbān," *al-Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭá* 13, no. 2 [2001]: 29–33; idem, "Mamluk Investment in Southern *Bilād al-Shām*," 251; Bethany Walker and Øystein LaBianca, "The Islamic *Quṣūr* of Tall Ḥisbān: Preliminary Report on the 1998 and 2001 Seasons," *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 47 [2003]: 447, 449, Fig. 5).

⁵¹Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārikh al-Siyāsī*, 194; full account is provided by al-Nuwayrī.

⁵²As governor of Ḥamāh, Abū al-Fidā' should have attended this meeting and offered to do so, but the sultan excused him from the long journey, accepting a gift of horses in return (al-Mālik al-Mu'ayyad 'Imād al-Dīn Abū al-Fidā', *Al-Mukhtaṣar fī Akhbār al-Bashar*, as *Tārikh Abi al-Fidā'*, ed. Muḥammad Dayyub [Beirut, 1997], 4:97–98).

⁵³*Ibid.*, 428.

⁵⁴Ḥisbān remained the district capital until 757/1356, when the governor (*wāli*) was transferred to Amman. The sources are silent about the rationale for the promotion of Ḥisbān to *wilāyat Balqā*, but as for its demotion in 757/1356, there are indications that the move to Amman served the financial interests of Amir Ṣarghatmish. It is also possible that the Ḥisbān citadel was not usable at this point, as there is archaeological evidence for a mid-century earthquake at the site (Walker, "Mamluk Investment in Southern *Bilād al-Shām*, 254; Walker and LaBianca, "Tall Ḥisbān, 2004 Season," 451).

⁵⁵Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārikh*, 1:294.

⁵⁶According to Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, Barqūq arrived in Ḥisbān on Thursday, 20 Shawwāl, then left and reached Adhra'āt and then Zarqah on 3 Dhū al-Qa'dah (Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārikh*, 1:293–95).

⁵⁷See note 54.



Kerakis,⁵⁸ he came to Ḥisbān with a small retainer.⁵⁹ Upon his arrival in Ḥisbān, he enjoyed the hospitality of the Beni Mahdi.⁶⁰ Given the relatively small number of his forces, the circumstances of his residence there, and the physical state of the citadel, he likely stayed in the plains around the citadel, in the camps of the Beni Mahdi.⁶¹ Using modern Jordanian tribal practice as a gauge, it is likely that Barqūq was given quarter with them and shared a large and elaborate *mansef*⁶² (eaten communally with the tribal elite). He would have been in the constant company of the Beni Mahdi, who would have had ample opportunity to scrutinize his behavior. There was some political risk involved in accepting hospitality of this sort. Barqūq, who had spent a lengthy exile in Kerak, had become familiar enough with Jordanian tribal customs to successfully fulfill his role as guest among them.

Mamluk culture did not, apparently, hold the same attraction for Jordanians as their tribal culture did for some sultans. I have not identified any evidence in either written or archaeological sources for an attempt to assimilate the Jordanian tribes or any process of acculturation on the part of the *‘ushrān*. There is, on the other hand, some evidence for the cultural assimilation, whether deliberate or not, of the non-Mamluk population of Cairo—a militarization of civilians that is expressed in some consumer goods, such as housewares, textiles, and dress.⁶³

⁵⁸Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Ibn al-Furāt, *Tārīkh Ibn al-Furāt*, ed. Custantin Zurayq (Beirut, 1936), 9:1:125. While the numbers are likely exaggerations on the part of Ibn al-Furāt, it is clear that a large force was traveling with Barqūq, whose lodging could only be provided outside villages and towns.

⁵⁹Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 1:294.

⁶⁰The Benu Mahdī were one of the most important tribes of the central plateaus, together controlling, with the Beni ‘Uqbah, the important hajj route to ‘Aqabah and authorized, through assignment of *iqṭā‘āt*, to command a thousand horsemen (Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥaḍari*, 137; Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 221). Their traditional grazing lands were the Balqā region, including the erstwhile administrative centers of Salt, Ḥisbān, and Amman.

⁶¹Citing once again Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, we learn that the Beni Mahdi put him up in their camp: *wa-dayyafahu ‘Arab Banū Mahdī wa-anzalūhu* (*Tārīkh*, 1:294).

⁶²The *mansef* is the national dish of Jordan: rice and boiled lamb (or sheep and goat) served in a heavy yoghurt sauce on a large tray. It is often mentioned in Mamluk-period sources in the context of entertaining by and for tribal shaykhs and amirs.

⁶³For evidence of the “militarization” of Cairo’s civilian population in matters of dress, see Bethany Walker, “The Social Implications of Textile Development in Fourteenth-Century Egypt,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 4 (2000): 167–217, and in housewares, idem, “Ceramic Evidence for Political Transformations in Early Mamluk Egypt,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (2004): 1–114. There is, as well, growing evidence for the popularization of military titles, inscriptions, and blazons in a Syrian ware, called “Glazed Relief Ware” in archaeological circles. Produced in Jerusalem, and likely elsewhere in Syria, bowls in this style are found throughout Palestine and Transjordan in fourteenth-century village sites associated with administrative centers and large



While this phenomenon may be the result of the opening up of the amiral class in the second half of the fourteenth century,⁶⁴ the granting of numerous amirships and *iqṭā'āt* to local tribal leaders in Jordan for the purposes of pacification and road security did not produce a market for “militarized” goods there. The aping of Mamluk culture that appears in Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, and other large administrative centers is quite limited in Kerak, Shobak, ‘Ajlūn, or any of the other district capitals. If anything, the material culture of Mamluk-period sites in Jordan suggests just the opposite: that Mamluk amirs and soldiers stationed in Transjordan adjusted to local conditions of housing, diet, and consumerism.⁶⁵

CLIENTAGE

The immediate effect of sultanic visits was to build on and benefit from ties of clientage that had developed with local tribes. There were defensive and overtly political objectives in these personalized visits, which frequently coincided with changes in local administration. The state’s overarching concern for defense (against both foreign and domestic enemies) impacted the structure of administration in the region, which in southern Bilād al-Shām was particularly fluid, with periodic shifts in administrative borders and district (*safaqah*) capitals (*niyābahs* or *wilāyahs*) and the combination or division of districts.⁶⁶ The promotion of a previously undistinguished village to a district capital, for example, served to solidify relations between the sultan and the powerful local tribes of Transjordan in the power struggles among the Mamluk elite throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

iqṭā'āt. (Idem, “Militarization to Nomadization: The Middle and Late Islamic Periods,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 64, no. 4 [1999]: 220–21; idem, “Mamluk Administration of Transjordan”; idem, “Mamluk Investment in Southern *Bilād al-Shām*”; and idem, “The Northern Jordan Survey 2003—Agriculture in Late Islamic Malka and Ḥubrāṣ Villages: A Preliminary Report of the First Season,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 339 [2005]: 67–111; Walker and LaBianca, “The Islamic *Quşūr* of Tall Ḥisbān,” 466; Marcus Milwright, “Modest Luxuries: Decorated Lead-Glazed Pottery in the South of Bilād al-Shām [Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries],” *Muqarnas* 20 [2003]: 85–111).

⁶⁴In his recent book, Van Steenberghe suggests the awarding of amirships to non-mamluks in the post-Nasirid period accounts for the spread of special privileges, such as dress (Van Steenberghe, *Order out of Chaos*, 20).

⁶⁵For cultural analyses of ceramic assemblages in Mamluk citadels in Jordan, see Brown, “Excavation in the 14th Century AD Mamluk Palace at Kerak,” and idem, “Karak Castle/Qal‘at Karak” (www.lib.uchicago/e/su/mideast/encyclopedia/index2.html, forthcoming) for Kerak; Marcus Milwright, *Fortress of the Raven: Karak in the Middle Islamic Period (1100–1650)* (Leiden, 2008) for Kerak; and Walker and LaBianca, “The Islamic *Quşūr* of Tall Ḥisbān,” 464–66, and idem, “Tall Ḥisbān, 2004 Season,” for Ḥisbān.

⁶⁶Walker, “Mamluk Investment in Southern Bilād al-Shām,” 241–46.



While contemporary sources reveal little about the rationale behind the irregular administrative structure, they do intimate that rivalries among officers, uprisings and revolts, and tribal relations may have influenced a sultan's or amir's decision to promote one administrative center over another.⁶⁷ In his account of the revolt of Khadar al-Mālik al-Mas'ūd, the son of Sultan Baybars, in Kerak in 678/1279, Baybars al-Dawādārī, the Mamluk officer then serving at the Kerak citadel, related that Sultan Qalāwūn temporarily promoted the capital of the Balqā at the time, Saṭ, which was formerly a *wilāyah*, to the status of a *niyābah*, appointing an *amīr jandār* to its governorship.⁶⁸ Ghawānimah suggests that the sultan may have done so for strategic reasons, to block the movement north of al-Mālik al-Mas'ūd's troops;⁶⁹ the administrative promotion of Saṭ meant the assignment of a higher-ranking garrison commander and, thus, a stronger and larger garrison. Administrative restructuring could occur on the provincial level: the previously independent Province of Kerak was merged, first with the districts of 'Ajlūn and Saṭ in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, and then absorbed in its entirety by the Province of Damascus in the early sixteenth. Contemporary sources attribute this change to an attempt by the state to eliminate the independence of the Kerak governors and quell the amiral rebellions there that rocked Jordan in the late Mamluk period.⁷⁰

While administrative restructuring was used to control local rebellions, so too was the manipulation of tribal networks. For example, through choice and coercion and as the result of inter-tribal rivalries, Kerakis (of all walks of life) were pulled into conflicts between officials throughout the Mamluk period and directly into the amiral rebellions that raged on the Kerak Plateau at the turn of the fifteenth century. Historical rivalries, such as those that existed between the Qaysis and Yemenis, could be easily exploited and turned to political advantage, although with unexpected results. This was the case during the rebellion of the governor of Kerak, Amir Sudūn, against Sultan al-Faraj in 802/1399. During this conflict, the sultan sent his official, 'Abd al-Raḥmān, to Kerak to kill the governor. The arrival of the sultan's agent divided the tribes of Kerak, who willingly participated by

⁶⁷On a variation of this theme, Tarawneh suggests that the complexities and vacillations of Syrian administration were due to the intramilitary patronage practices of the sultans (Tarawneh, *The Province of Damascus*, 26).

⁶⁸Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥaḍarī*, 48. A brief survey of the uprising, from a military perspective, can be found in Rukn al-Dīn Baybars al-Manṣūrī al-Dawādārī, *Zubdat al-Fikrah fī Tārīkh al-Hijrah*, ed. D. S. Richards (Beirut, 1998), 180. Eventually becoming governor (*nā'ib*) of Kerak, for a while, and later imprisoned there, Baybars al-Dawādārī was an eyewitness to, and participant in, the vagaries of Mamluk rule in Jordan.

⁶⁹Ghawānimah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Ḥaḍarī*, 48.

⁷⁰Hajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 185–87.



supporting, with arms, one amir or the other: the Keraki Yemenis, led by the local *ḥājib*, defended the governor, as the Qaysis, following the *qāḍī al-quḍāh* in Kerak, threw their support behind Amir al-Muḥtār. The result was civil war, with the violence spreading even to the Ghūr.⁷¹

More often than not, tribal rivalries were an immediate liability to the state, as they could prevent the smooth running of official business. When Amir Batkhāṣ was named governor of Kerak later that year, he tried to enter the city in the company of members of the local Qaysi confederation. Members of the rival Yemeni clans were offended, rebelled against him, and locked the gates of the city, preventing his entry. The people of Kerak wrote a letter of complaint to the sultan, asking for Batkhāṣ's dismissal and his replacement with Amir Jarkās. Unwilling to witness further turmoil in the region, the sultan agreed, sending Batkhāṣ to Aleppo and Jarkās on to Kerak.⁷² Al-Maqrīzī credits inter-tribal conflicts for the Kerakis' decision to support Barqūq in 791/1388. Tribal politics could have even greater consequences for the state. Amir Mīnṭāsh, then in power in Cairo, made the decision to execute Barqūq, who was imprisoned in Kerak Castle. He sent his amir, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Barīdī, to Kerak to fulfil this mission. Al-Barīdī was originally from Kerak, but he had become a *persona non grata* there following his dishonorable divorce from the daughter of a popular judge. The people of Kerak never forgave him for slighting this family. When he arrived in Kerak, and news got out of his plan to murder Barqūq, the previously neutral population decided to help rescue Barqūq and pledge him their allegiance, because of their hatred for al-Barīdī. A group of Kerakis made their way into the citadel one night and murdered al-Barīdī before he could finish his task. The following day, the governor opened the gates of the citadel, and Barqūq walked free.⁷³

In all of these cases, inadequate knowledge of tribal disputes exacerbated existing tensions between the executors of Mamluk policy and local peoples. Effectively building clientage networks is time-consuming, however, requires knowledge of current tribal alliances, and does not offer immediate results. An alternative way of garnering tribal support, and neutralizing opposition, was through awards—both cash and employment. The state knew just how restless and variable the region could be politically and was prepared to bribe local tribes for their support, or minimally, for their non-interference. This was the case in 802/1399, during a rebellion against the sultan by the governor of Kerak, described above. The sultan's agent wisely arrived with money and letters of appointment to

⁷¹Ibid., 115.

⁷²Ibn Qāḍī Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 3:107.

⁷³Summarized from *Kitāb al-Sulūk* in Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 72–73.



distribute among the *‘urbān*, winning the support of some.⁷⁴ In a similar fashion, after Sultan al-Nāṣir Aḥmad’s return to Kerak in 741/1342, local tribesmen were paid to ravage the countryside and the leader of the Āl al-Faḍl⁷⁵ paid to block the roads in order to create disorder and force the sultan to leave his hilltop fortress.⁷⁶ The capture of Kerak Castle and arrest of Aḥmad two years later would not have been possible without the financial incentives offered to Keraki tribesmen, which included both cash and *iqṭā‘āt*.⁷⁷

The distribution of cash awards was, however, a risky and short-term solution to local conflict; moreover, it could never guarantee tribal compliance. On the other hand, the employment of tribal leadership through state service had the benefit of merging official and local interests on the long-term, as well as co-opting tribal networks. The *‘urbān* penetrated Mamluk administration as amirs. In this capacity, they received titles⁷⁸ and *iqṭā‘āt* and collaborated with the state in matters of road maintenance and security, guiding and granting safe passage to the hajj caravan, providing state officials with information about rebellions, and serving militarily as auxiliary forces. The judgment of contemporaries about these tribes is mixed. On the one hand, the *‘urbān* of Kerak were politically loyal to the point of sacrificing their own lives; they were among the Kerakis who gave their wives their *ṣadaqah* and paid in full their debts before leaving with Barqūq for Damascus, knowing they may never see Kerak again.⁷⁹ On the other hand, they could be rapacious and cruel: in the fifteenth century, in a medieval form of “highway robbery,” the *‘urbān* of Kerak and Shobak attacked countless hajj caravans, leaving pilgrims—without transport, money, food, or water—to die in the wilderness.⁸⁰ Collectively, they represented the greatest support locally to the state, when the state was strong, as well as one of the greatest political threats, in times of imperial weakness.⁸¹

⁷⁴Ibn Qāḍi Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 4:81.

⁷⁵This tribe was among the largest (according to al-Zāhiri, 24,000 strong) and most influential in Syria (Tritton, “The Tribes of Syria,” 572).

⁷⁶Al-Shujā‘ī, *Tārīkh*, 278; Ibn Qāḍi Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 2:207ff.

⁷⁷Al-Maqrizī, the partially published *manshūr* cited earlier; Bauden, “The Recovery of Mamluk Chancery Documents;” al-Ṣafadī, *A‘yan al-‘Aṣr*; Drory, “The Prince Who Favored the Desert,” 28.

⁷⁸A formal system of title and address for tribal amirs was developed in the fourteenth century and described in detail by Ibn Nāzir al-Jaysh (d. 786/1384), in his *Tathqīf al-Ta‘rīf bi-al-Muṣṭalah al-Sharīf*. For an analysis of this document, see Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 218; for the introduction of the tribal amirates, see M. A. Hiyari, “The Origins and Development of the Amirate of the Arabs During the Seventh/Thirteenth and Eighth/Fourteenth Centuries,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 36 (1975): 509–24.

⁷⁹Ibn Qāḍi Shuhbah, *Tārīkh*, 1:292.

⁸⁰Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 226.

⁸¹This is the point of view, as well, of the Jordanian historian Ḥajjah, who contrasts Mamluk rule



CONFRONTATION

The “soft” approaches of selective assimilation and clientage, however, frequently failed, particularly during times of environmental stress and political turmoil, which destroyed crops and led to the abandonment of villages. Poor administration by local officials, who put an extra strain on limited local resources (especially water),⁸² made life particularly difficult for peasants and herders alike under these circumstances and was one of the most common flashpoints of conflict between Jordanians and the state.⁸³ Armed confrontation was usually the result. The effective, however temporary, resistance of the *‘ushrān* during these crises was due to several factors: their socioeconomic and residential flexibility, physical mobility, the unique topography of the Jordanian interior, and their martial skills and access to arms.

Flexible subsistence was one strategy for survival during droughts, wars, and times of political insecurity.⁸⁴ The opposition between the “desert and the sown” is an artificial one, as mixed farming has always been the subsistence foundation of the country: nearly everyone, regardless of where they lived, had family members engaged in both farming and herding. Ottoman tax authorities, who built on Mamluk practice in the region, recognized this sliding scale between the fully sedentary and the nomadic by assigning special categories for “Bedouin” who maintained small plots, taxing them on both harvest and flocks.⁸⁵ There has, thus, always been a range of subsistence and residential choices available, from village-based farming to nomadic pastoralism, options that allowed local communities to survive as sociopolitical conditions changed. The demographic decline and disappearance of villages in fifteenth-century Jordan so hotly debated by archaeologists today suggests that many farmers adopted a semi-sedentary or semi-nomadic lifestyle when attacks on villages made residence there untenable.

The traditional mobility of Jordanian tribes, documented archaeologically and ethnographically, functioned much the same way. For much of the Ottoman period Jordanians used the natural, and ubiquitous, caves in the limestone escarpments

in Jordan in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Ḥajjah, *Al-Tārīkh al-Siyāsī*, 217).

⁸²Modern Jordan is notoriously limited in natural water sources and today suffers from extreme water shortages during the summer months. Rainfall today in Jordan ranges from 600 mm a year in the northern hill country to 200 mm in the southern and eastern steppes; 300 mm annual rainfall is needed for dry farming. Because so much of the country received barely enough rain for dry farming, and because grains (the staple of Jordanian agriculture) are generally not irrigated, the wheat crop today fails on the average of once out of every five years (Carol Palmer, “Following the Plough’: The Agricultural Environment of Northern Jordan,” *Levant* 30 [1998]: 132).

⁸³Walker, “The Role of Agriculture.”

⁸⁴This is a central theme of LaBianca, “Indigenous Hardiness Structures.”

⁸⁵See note 25.



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domestically, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries adding stone structures to the entrance.⁸⁶ “Cave villages,” the ruins of which dot the Jordanian countryside, often escaped the attention of Ottoman tax collectors.⁸⁷ The ability of villagers to move to the desert, of “Bedouin” to live in a village, and the use of caves by both to escape notice, would have been very effective strategies for outmaneuvering Mamluk officials, one not articulated in Mamluk-period sources but amply attested archaeologically, ethnographically, and in Ottoman-period travelers accounts.

In short, the mobility of the local *‘ushrān*, both *‘urbān* and full-time villagers, owes much to the unique topography of Jordan. Most of Transjordan is occupied by a rough plateau dissected by deep valleys bordered by hills and mountains, with elevations ranging from 400 meters below sea level (the Dead Sea) to 1700 meters above sea level (Jebel Rūm, near Petra). In periods of political insecurity, the plains and plateaus have been abandoned for the hill country, where villages were secure from “marauding Bedouin” and, generally, the political violence of the state.⁸⁸ This is the general demographic pattern emerging from archaeological surveys and one that seems to be connected to the repeated rebellions by local people and amirs alike. The desert, as well, offered the opportunity for escape for the economically and politically persecuted. The romantic vision of the political independence of the hills and mountains⁸⁹ so lovingly painted by French social historians such as Braudel and Le Roy Ladurie for the late medieval Mediterranean resonates for fifteenth-century Jordan.⁹⁰ Here, too, hill villages suffered less from direct state violence and “feudal” control than those in the valleys and plains. The great grain fields of the Madaba Plains and the Kerak Plateau fell under the jurisdiction of *muqtā‘*s, while the smaller orchards of the northern hills gradually

⁸⁶This kind of architecture has come under archaeological scrutiny in recent years. The domestic use of caves in the Mamluk period is also suggested by recent excavations at Tall Ḥisbān.

⁸⁷The village of Shammākh near Shobak is one of these villages (L. Noca, *Smakieh: Un village de Jordanie* [Lyon, 1985]; Walker, “Militarization to Nomadization,” 215). Extensive ruins can also be seen at Ḥisbān, across the Wādī Ḥisbān from the tell. Ethnographic interviews with residents at Ḥisbān document the use of caves under the oldest houses for hiding goods from tax collectors a century ago (MPP–Tall Ḥisbān Excavation project archives, 2001 and 2004).

⁸⁸Walker, “Mamluk Investment in Southern *Bilād al-Shām*,” 248.

⁸⁹Braudel differentiates between “hills” (which lay at an altitude of 400 meters above sea level or less) and “mountains” (which are higher than that) (Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* [New York, 1972], 1:55). The only true mountains, by this definition, in Jordan are the seats of Crusader, Ayyubid, and Mamluk castles: Kerak, Shobak, Habis, ‘Ajlūn. I am referring here to Jordan’s numerous “hills” that rim the central plateaus and border Irbid in the north.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 25–60; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* (New York, 1978), 3–23, 69–88.



became, over the course of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, *waqf*, communally-held land (today we would use the term *musha'*), or private estates.⁹¹ While the hill country was not entirely inaccessible physically to state officials, invading armies, and the 'urbān, the longevity of these communities through the troubled fifteenth century—with their populations increasing while much of the rest of the country's declined—bears witness to the security and hope for escape that these regions offered.

Most importantly, Jordanian tribesmen were armed—on this point the sources are clear. As early as Qalāwūn's reign, there was an attempt to disarm the 'urbān in the provinces.⁹² Villagers and townsmen were armed, as well, and could be used as local militias or auxiliary forces when needed. This was the case, when at the conclusion of his exile and imprisonment in Kerak in 791/1388, Barqūq raised troops among both the 'urbān (specifically the Beni 'Uqba, Āl Faḍl, and 'Arab Jarm) and the “troops of Kerak and Shobak” (*ahl al-Karak wa-al-Shawbak wa-ajnadihā*).⁹³ Armed resistance by peasants is described in both the Syrian and Egyptian countrysides as either a collaboration with the 'urbān or as occurring at the same time as “Bedouin” attacks against villages.⁹⁴ Either way, the victims were other villages and officials in transit or on patrol. Inter-village violence is also recorded: the political turmoil surrounding the rebellions against Barqūq in 801/1389 encouraged peasants to plunder crops, apparently their neighbors'.⁹⁵ The sources do not fully explain the background of rebellions or raids, but one can surmise in many cases that many were perpetrated by displaced peasants, forced to leave their villages and homes because of armed conflict or drought. Incidences of this sort increased in northern Jordan immediately after Timūr's

⁹¹This is addressed in Walker, *Jordan in the Late Middle Ages*, Ch. 5.

⁹²Both Ibn Furāt and al-Qalqashandī reproduce a memorandum (*tadhkirah*) that was supposed to have been written by Sultan Qalāwūn for his vice-sultan Kitbughā in 679/1281. In it, the provincial and district governors are to “notify the 'urbān not to carry swords, spears and weapons of any other kind. They are to be prohibited from purchasing them in Cairo. Those who flout this order and travel with weapons from village to village will have them confiscated and will be punished.” (Sato, *State and Rural Society*, 113–14).

⁹³Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ṣaṣrā, *Al-Durrah al-Mudī'ah fī al-Dawlah al-Zāhiriyyah*, as *A Chronicle of Damascus 1389–1397*, ed. William Brinner (Los Angeles, 1963), 25. According to a European merchant living at the time in Damascus, Bertrando de Mignanelli, Barqūq relied on armed peasants from Kerak during his march to Damascus (“*Ascensus Barcoch: A Latin Biography of the Mamluk Sultan Barqūq of Egypt* [d. 1399], Written by B. de Mignanelli,” *Arabica* 6 [1959]: 155ff).

⁹⁴For a clear example of collaboration, see Ibn Ṣaṣrā, *A Chronicle of Damascus*, 42.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 24. For parallels from Egypt, see Stuart Borsch, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study* (Austin, 2005), 49.



invasion and are attested even five to six years afterwards.⁹⁶ Much of the violence of the fifteenth century in Jordan can be attributed to the arming of a wide cross-section of the population.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion we return to two questions introduced at the beginning of this essay: were the tribes of Jordan a political force, and if so, in what ways did they mold Mamluk political culture in the troubled period at the turn of the fifteenth century? I would suggest that the *‘ushrān* acted politically and asserted themselves through institutional, military, and diplomatic means throughout the Mamluk period. The Mamluk state was forced to take account of tribal networks and local power structures and to recognize the potential military threat the *‘urbān*, in particular, presented to regional security. Mamluk-tribal relations in Jordan resembled in many respects the relations between post-colonial states and their “margins”—the fluid and inconsistent administration of these regions, the level of political violence, and the ability of local communities to force accommodation in policy and practice. In these terms, Mamluk political culture was molded locally by tribal structures and politics. Whether this was a uniquely Jordanian situation or characterized provincial administration as a whole is an important issue that belongs to another study.

⁹⁶ Ibn Ḥijjī, *Tārīkh*, 2:769. It is not clear whether these were actions of desperation or concerted attacks on the state, however.

