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Copper or Silver? The Monetary Situation in Late Mamluk Damascus

The economic history of the medieval Arabic Middle East is a troublesome child. Before the sixteenth century, in particular, systematic documentary evidence is sorely missed on all levels.¹ The current state of the region contributes to this situation, making further archaeological excavations almost impossible. Another main source, namely the many narrative (mostly historiographical) texts, are often inadequate to allow for any statistical approximation without corroborating evidence from other sources.² For this purpose, even foreign archives might often be better suited, as Ashtor has shown with regard to the records of Venetian traders to Egypt and the Levant.³ As Stefan Heidemann has argued, the only feasible trajectory to foster or even rewrite the economic history of the region before the

This study originated as a paper given at the workshop: “Coinage, Taxation and Economy in the Mamluk Period,” Hamburg University, 9 May 2015. My gratitude goes to Stefan Heidemann for inviting me and to all participants for the insightful discussion, from which this article profited greatly. In addition, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their incredibly helpful corrections. All remaining mistakes are my own.

¹Notable exceptions to this rule are, of course, the documents from the Cairo Geniza, the Jerusalem Ḥaram al-Sharif, the Damascene Qubbat al-Khaznah, or those discovered at the old Red Sea port of Quṣayr.

²Still, this evidence has been put to good use in studies by Jere Bacharach, Boaz Shoshan, and others. See, e.g., Jere L. Bacharach, “The Dinar Versus the Ducat,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4, no. 1 (1973): 77–96; idem, “Circassian Mamluk Historians and Their Quantitative Economic Data,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* (1975): 75–87; idem, “Circassian Monetary Policy: Copper,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (1976): 32–47; Boaz Shoshan, “Grain Riots and the ‘Moral Economy’: Cairo, 1350–1517,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10, no. 3 (1980): 459–78; idem, “From Silver to Copper: Monetary Changes in Fifteenth-century Egypt,” *Studia Islamica* 52 (1982): 97–116; idem, “Money Supply and Grain Prices in Fifteenth-Century Egypt,” *The Economic History Review* 36, no. 1 (1983): 47–67; Adel Allouche, *Mamluk Economics: A Study and Translation of al-Maqrizi’s Ighathah* (Salt Lake City, 1994); John L. Meloy, “Copper Money in Late Mamluk Cairo: Chaos or Control?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44, no. 3 (2001): 293–321.

³Eliyahu Ashtor, “Profits From Trade with the Levant in the Fifteenth Century,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 38, no. 2 (1975): 250–75; idem, *Studies on the Levantine Trade in the Middle Ages* (London, 1978).



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Ottoman conquests (1516–17) would be to combine narrative, documentary, and numismatic evidence (from within and without the region) in one’s research.⁴

This is, however, beyond the scope of this article (and, frankly, beyond my own abilities). Instead, I propose a thematically more restricted approach. Based on five annalistic texts—two by Muḥammad Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 1546) and one each by Aḥmad Ibn al-Ḥimṣī (d. 1528), ‘Alī al-Buṣrawī (d. 1500), and Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq (d. 1509)—I will return to the long-standing debate of whether the so-called “age of copper” indeed came to an end during the fifteenth century or whether it extended into the Ottoman period. This issue has been vividly discussed since the heyday of economic history in our field in the 1970s and 1980s. In the monetary context, we know much more about issues and uses of gold coins—whose use was, however, restricted to small segments of society—than about the relations between silver and copper coinage and their impact on small-scale, everyday transactions, which would have made up the vast majority of the local economy.

As Warren Schultz summarized the debate in 1998, Mamluk Egypt entered an “age of copper” by the beginning of the 1400s, when copper coins “became the dominant currency in the country” and even chief qadis allowed “that prices, contracts, and debts were to be recorded in terms of this copper money.”⁵ Although few mints of copper coins are attested after the early 1400s, the measuring by *dirham min al-fulūs*, that is by weight, was retained in the narrative sources “well into the middle of the century.”⁶ John Meloy has, however, proven that there was again proof of newly struck “heavy copper coins” well before the time of the Ottoman conquest. According to Meloy, who builds his argument both on his own surveys at the American Numismatic Society and data from Paul Balog’s seminal study *The Coinage of the Mamlūk Sultans of Egypt and Syria* (1964), “there was no shortage of copper” from the reign of Qāyṭbāy (1468–96) onwards and “the numismatic and chronicle evidence of the Late Mamluk period points to the plentiful supply of this metal in Cairo.”⁷

It is important to note that most contributions to this debate have focused on Cairo; Syria has only been regarded as secondary (as so often in Mamluk stud-

⁴Stefan Heidemann, “How to Measure Economic Growth in the Middle East? A Framework of Inquiry for the Middle Islamic Period,” in *Material Evidence and Narrative Sources: Interdisciplinary Studies of the History of the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Daniella Talmon-Heller and Katia Cytryn-Silverman (Leiden, 2015), 30–57.

⁵Warren Schultz, “The Monetary History of Egypt, 642–1517,” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, vol. 1, Islamic Egypt, 640–1517, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 337.

⁶Ibid., 338.

⁷Meloy, “Copper Money in Late Mamluk Cairo,” 298.



ies) and the publication of Syrian sylloge volumes has not come far.⁸ This study, on the other hand, adds to this discussion by, first focusing on the late fifteenth century, and, secondly, by focusing on developments in Mamluk Syria. It engages exclusively with Damascene narrative sources, whose authors were immersed in Syrian society and paid—obviously—much more attention to events on their own (figurative) doorstep than to their counterparts in Egypt. Moreover, the study deals with a long neglected period, which spans approximately the later 1480s until the early 1520s. This approach puts Damascus (and other minor Syrian cities) on the map of the economic and monetary history of the Mamluk period. The monetary situation there appears rather different from that in late Mamluk Cairo: no resurgence of copper currency as described by Meloy for Cairo is visible nor did I find any mention of the *dirham min al-fulūs*; in contrast, exchange rates between silver and gold coins show themselves surprisingly stable until at least the end of the fifteenth century.⁹ This is supported by numismatic evidence which shows continuous minting of silver coins (mostly *nişf*) throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.¹⁰ The extension of the temporal focus into the early years of Ottoman rule is instrumental in putting the findings for the Mamluk period into context. One reason is that, as Henning Sievert states in a different context, “moments of crisis...allow us to uncover the dynamics at work.”¹¹ Thus, the initial Ottoman policies with regards to currency shed additional light on those of their Mamluk predecessors and on the currency situation more generally.

Devaluation of currencies is one well-known device to create short-term boosts to the sultanate’s treasury, but it was far from the only one. Read conjointly, the narrative sources allow for a revision of the real impact of different measures on local as well as individual household economies. Chroniclers, in Cairo and elsewhere, did not write objectively about the plight of the common people but rather told a tale of the loss of some of their own privileges in the face of the Mamluks’ efforts to centralize as they struggled to transform their state to stave off the

⁸I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing me to a host of numismatic materials, including this.

⁹Meloy argues that “the multifarious similar and dissimilar types [of copper coins] point to a succession of renewals of copper money” which were issued “in conjunction with devaluations in terms of money of account [i.e., *dirham min al-fulūs*].” Meloy, “Copper Money in Late Mamluk Cairo,” 298.

¹⁰Balog lists mints of silver half-dirhams (*nişf*) from Syrian mints for most Mamluk sultans, with some issuing new coins on a yearly basis. Paul Balog, *The Coinage of the Mamlūk Sultans of Egypt and Syria* (New York, 1964): types 675–76; 690–95; 697–98; 714–29; 733; 741–50; 766–72; 782; 792–96; 804; 821–32.

¹¹Henning Sievert, “Family, Friend or Foe? Factions, Households and Interpersonal Relations in Mamluk Egypt and Syria,” in *Everything Is on the Move: The Mamluk Empire As a Node in (Trans-) Regional Networks*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen, 2014), 83–125.



Ottoman (and other) expansionist—and increasingly aggressive—agenda, as well as against resistance from other Mamluk factions and civilian groups. As far as I can say for Damascus, devices such as the setting of prices, state monopolies, the creation of endowments, confiscations, taxing and trafficking of illegal substances (e.g., alcohol), raising duties for military campaigns, and the devaluation of money were used carefully and usually not simultaneously.¹² The economy would still work if one variable was changed, but no one was willing to take the risk that it would not recover from full-scale interventions. Whereas not all points can be addressed, let alone discussed, in this article, it is my conviction that even in the “twilight years” of the Mamluk sultanate¹³ the rulers’ economic policies should not be dismissed as purely oppressive but rather as strategic in the face of complex and eventually overwhelming obstacles.¹⁴

The article proceeds in three sections. The first introduces the sources with regard to their relevance to the present discussion and economic history more generally. For instance, whereas al-Buṣrawī’s chronicle follows price rises for staple foods closely in the earlier part of the period under study, for the latter part I have had to rely almost completely on the evidence provided by Ibn Ṭūlūn. Al-Buṣrawī and Ibn Ṭawq had died by the early 1500s, and Ibn al-Ḥimṣī only infrequently speaks on economic matters, though when he does, he usually offers comprehensive lists that go far beyond the information offered by the other authors. The second section delves into the issue of monetary history and the monetary situation of the time. I will argue that silver coins (*fiḍḍah*, more rarely *niṣf*) are treated as the standard currency in Mamluk Syria, as is corroborated by numismatic evidence. Not only did these coins make up the vast majority of currency used in transactions, but all other coins were usually converted into silver dirhams in contracts and other calculations. The final section addresses the absence of copper money. In this endeavor, I rely mostly on circumstantial evidence which is based on food prices and wages. This section thereby takes a critical position towards the depiction of the monetary situation as the narrative sources draw it.

¹²For some of the measures mentioned here, mostly with a focus on Cairo, see Kristen Stilt, “Price Setting and Hoarding in Mamluk Egypt,” in *The Law Applied: Contextualizing the Islamic Shari’a: A Volume in Honor of Frank E. Vogel*, ed. Peri Bearman, Wolfhart Heinrichs, and Bernard G Weiss (London and New York, 2008), 57–78; idem, *Islamic Law in Action: Authority, Discretion, and Everyday Experiences in Mamluk Egypt* (Oxford, 2011); Carl F. Petry, *The Criminal Underworld in a Medieval Islamic Society: Narratives from Cairo and Damascus under the Mamluks* (Chicago, 2012).

¹³The phrase is borrowed from the title of Carl Petry’s book *Twilight of Majesty: The Reigns of the Mamlūk Sultans al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy and Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī in Egypt* (Seattle, 1993).

¹⁴On the arguments of social competition over resources and Mamluk pragmatism, see also Torsten Wollina, “Between Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus: *Al-amr bi-al-ma’rūf* and the Sufi/Scholar Dichotomy in the Late Mamluk Period (1480s–1510s),” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 20 (2017): 57–92.



Who Writes about Money? Four Divergent Damascene Observers

The four authors considered here pay attention to economic processes to varying degrees, concerning different issues, and in starkly divergent frequency. Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's chronicle *Ḥawādith al-zamān wa-wafayāt shuyūkh wa-al-aqrān* speaks about economic matters the least.¹⁵ It covers the eight decades from 851 through 930, but during the period of concern here mentions only two instances (in 873/1469 and 922/1516) of economic matters such as price rises. In these entries, however, Ibn al-Ḥimṣī provides the most comprehensive information about how price rises affected foodstuffs other than just grains and meat.

The second source is al-Buṣrawī's chronicle *Al-Nūr al-bāhir fī akhbār al-qarn al-āshir*, better known as *Tārīkh al-Buṣrawī*.¹⁶ Regarding this still mostly unedited account of the years 871 through 904, it has been speculated that the author's lower status among the scholars might be a reason why he paid more attention to fluctuations of market prices and other economic matters. Like his contemporary and colleague Ibn Ṭawq (see below), al-Buṣrawī worked for a time as a notary and thus at the intersection of legal and economic life. Unfortunately, rather large parts of the holograph, the only textual witness, have been rendered unreadable by the passage of time. Yet, al-Buṣrawī's interest in economic matters decreases even before the first larger gaps in the text, which seems to have correlated with his promotion to a Shafi'i deputy judge.¹⁷ In my opinion, he presents economic information within a moralizing framework that blames sinful behavior for food insecurity, but offers at times more detailed information, most importantly during the dearth of 873/1469.¹⁸

The remaining two authors show themselves more attentive to economic matters in general and to the reissuing of currencies in particular. Muḥammad Ibn Ṭūlūn is perhaps the best-known Damascene observer of the late Mamluk and early Ottoman periods. In modern scholarship, his chronicle *Mufākahat al-khillān fī ḥawādith al-zamān* has had the greatest impact. While this work, which in its

¹⁵ Aḥmad Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith al-zamān wa-wafayāt al-shuyūkh wa-al-aqrān*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz Fayyād Ḥarfūsh (Beirut, 2000).

¹⁶ 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Alī al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh al-Buṣrawī: Ṣafahāt majhūlah min tārikh Dimashq fī 'aṣr al-mamālik (min sanat 871 H li-ghāyat 904 H)*, ed. Akram Ḥusayn al-'Ulabī (Damascus, 1988).

¹⁷ Ibn Ṭūlūn calls him "qadi" already by 885; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahat al-khillān fī ḥawādith al-zamān: Tārīkh Miṣr wa-al-Shām*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā (Cairo, 1964), 1:17.

¹⁸ Al-Buṣrawī's coverage of food prices is densest during the dearth of 873. Whereas Ibn al-Ḥimṣī treats the connected price rise in only one entry, al-Buṣrawī follows these developments closely. His account takes a salvific turn when two nights of prayer and recitation result in long awaited rains that immediately cause grain prices to decrease by half (from 2000 to 1000 dirhams per *ghirārah*); al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh al-Buṣrawī*, 34–37.



original form should have treated the years 885 to 951 (only the part up to 924 is extant), will also be used here, I need to stress that its edition has had as much negative as positive impact on scholarship on the period. It has led to a widespread neglect of Ibn Ṭūlūn's larger corpus even where those works have also been edited and published. The *Mufākahah* has long been treated as the final word on the decades leading up to the Ottoman conquest, although the author himself admits that large parts on those years were copied from other works. Moreover, in another miscellaneous work, Ibn Ṭūlūn proves wrong those who treat the text as a diary. In his bio- and topographical work on the Shaykh Arslān cemetery, he remarks regarding a debate about the demolition of an adjoining wall that "I have mentioned an abridged version in my book *Al-Mufākahah*."¹⁹ This statement seems to apply to most of what he recorded prior to the events directly leading up to the Ottoman conquest (the early 920s/mid-1510s).²⁰

In contrast to the works treated so far, the *Mufākahah* thus consists of two distinct parts: for the earlier years, the author collated and abridged excerpts from other works; only for the later parts (much of which is regarded as lost) he relies all but exclusively on his own observations. In a more obscure way, it thus resembles Ibn Ṭūlūn's biographical collection of Damascene governors, *I'lām al-warā bi-man wulliya nā'iban min al-Atrāk bi-Dimashq al-Shām al-kubrā*, which will be used here as well. In the introduction to this latter work, Ibn Ṭūlūn declares openly that its first part consists of an abridgment (*ikhtiṣār*) of a work on governors by al-Zamlakānī, which covers governors of Damascus from the Mamluk expulsion of the Mongols (658/1260) up to the year 863/1458–59, whereas the second part is his own *dhayl* to this work, extending the temporal scope up to the year 943/1536–37.²¹ Although the *I'lām* is often more terse even than the *Mufākahah*—and some of their accounts are redundant—it nonetheless offers a different version of the (economic) history of Damascus during the late Mamluk and early Ottoman period.²²

¹⁹Ibn Ṭūlūn, "Ghāyat al-bayān fi tarjamat al-shaykh Arslān," Istanbul, Süleymaniye Library, MS Esat Effendi 1590, fol. 10b.

²⁰See Torsten Wollina, "The Changing Legacy of a Sufi Shaykh: Narrative Constructions in Diaries, Chronicles, and Biographies (15th–17th Centuries)," in *Mamluk Historiography Revisited: Narratological Perspectives*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen, 2018), 211–34.

²¹Ibn Ṭūlūn, *I'lām al-warā bi-man wulliya nā'iban min al-Atrāk bi-Dimashq al-Shām al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad Duhmān (Damascus, 1984), 11–12.

²²Further information on the economic history of—and even beyond—the period can also be gathered from other works by Ibn Ṭūlūn. His collection of historical bon-mots, *Al-Lama'āt al-barqīyah fī al-nukat al-tārīkhīyah*, in particular, betrays an early interest in economic matters. It includes, for instance, a transcript of the *waqfiyah* for the Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ashrafiyah with the allotted stipends/wages of its beneficiaries (*nuktaḥ* 17); lists of disasters in Damascus (*nuktaḥ* 19, 22, 44); information on urban (and rural) development (*nuktaḥ* 5, 25, 29, 32, 33); and accounts



The final source is the most pertinent for this article. Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq was not a famous scholar in his own time, but the diary he left, covering two decades in almost daily entries, is perhaps the most relevant narrative source for the economic history of the period.²³ Published in four volumes between 2000 and 2007, it has the potential to revolutionize our understanding of economic processes at the time. Ibn Ṭawq was both a notary and involved in agriculture, knowledge of which is reflected in his account: he gives regular information on weather, food prices and availability, payments between debtors and creditors, the income of several occupational groups, his own expenses, and even the physical coins exchanged in legal transactions. In his function as a notary to the Shafi'i chief judge Ibn al-Furfūr (d. 927/1521),²⁴ Ibn Ṭawq indeed participated in the distribution of reissued coins. Although the legal-administrative context in which he most often relates the exchange of money certainly played a role in his choice of terminology, what stands out is an all but complete absence of a copper currency.

A Silver Standard in Late Mamluk Damascus?

Mamluk society entertained a highly monetized economy by contemporaneous standards. The Mamluks had inherited or themselves established mints in Cairo and Alexandria for Egypt, and in Damascus, Aleppo, Ḥamāh, and Tripoli, along with some smaller or only temporary mints, in Syria.²⁵ From (some or all of) these, gold, silver, and copper coins were struck and issued. The golden or *ashrafi* dinar (named after al-Ashraf Qāyṭbāy) was used throughout—and beyond—the Mamluk Empire during the period under consideration, but the silver dirham (*fiḍḍah*, *dirham fiḍḍah*, *niṣf*) and the copper dirham of account (*dirham min al-fulūs*), which were measured by weight instead of number of coins, were used rather in the local economy. Furthermore, whereas the status of gold coins seems to have remained unquestioned during the period, the situation of silver and copper coins was much more fluid in the short run, and, due to their wider use in everyday transactions, they were much more vulnerable to supply shortages.

This was, of course, what originally started the “age of copper.” The traditional conception of a bi-metallic standard (gold dinars and silver dirhams) was

of the implementation and abolition of duties (*mukūs*) and their effect on food prices (*nukṭah* 36, 44). Two editions of this work exist: the edition by Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid in *Rasā'il Tārīkhīyah* (Damascus, 1929) used here, and another by Muḥammad Khayr Ramaḍān Yūsuf (Beirut, 1994).

²³Still, Ibn Ṭawq was certainly considered an *ʿālim* by his contemporaries and his legacy lives on in more sources than his diary. For the identification of some of those, see Torsten Wollina, “Traces of Ibn Ṭawq,” in *Damascus Anecdotes* (<https://thecamel.hypotheses.org/94>).

²⁴On Ibn al-Furfūr and his influence in Damascus and beyond, see Miura Toru, “Urban Society in Damascus as the Mamluk Era was Ending,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 10, no. 1 (2006): 157–93.

²⁵Schultz, “The Monetary History of Egypt,” 26 (in particular n. 5).



put under such stress by the late fourteenth century that the legal establishment saw no alternative to supplanting it with a tri-metallic standard, allowing for the declaration of endowments and contracts in copper coins.²⁶ In the later fifteenth century, copper came from diverse sources to Egypt and is testified in coin issues of diverse sizes, weights, and quality of striking.²⁷ Annalistic accounts of the period followed suit and relate prices in copper coins or the *dirham min al-fulūs*.

Chronicles from Damascus present a different image in that they usually give prices in dirhams. This is not the dirham of account but refers to a silver dirham (*niṣf* or *fiḍḍah*) measured by coin, not by weight.²⁸ Judging by the accounts explored here, silver seems to have regained its former status before the 1480s. This could be ascribed to the impact of the 1429 decree that stipulated a return to declaring sums of money only in gold and/or silver, to the success of Sultan Qāyṭbāy's (r. 1468–96) reforms to reestablish the silver dirham as the standard currency, or, judging by the numismatic evidence, simply to the fact that the silver dirham had never actually lost this status in Syria.²⁹

Although coins were a prime medium of a ruler's sovereignty, the Mamluk state did not necessarily have the means to enforce certain values of coins:

Prior to the rise of centralized banking, it should not be assumed without proof that any state or power could adequately control the money circulating within its borders. Without proof of such control, the monetary market place would operate much differently. To give but one example, without the regular withdrawal of older coins from circulation—something that cannot be automatically assumed without evidence—once new coins entered into circulation, they would find their value not by a standard set by the government, but by their relative value vis-à-vis the other coins in circulation. In this case, coins become little more than small ingots, their value determined by weight and purity.³⁰

²⁶Shoshan, "From Silver to Copper," 104.

²⁷Meloy, "Copper Money in Late Mamluk Cairo," 298.

²⁸This is sometimes done explicitly for food prices as well; Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq, *Al-Ta'liq: Yawmīyāt Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq: Mudhakkirāt kutibat bi-Dimashq fī awākhir al-ʿahd al-mamlūkī*, ed. Shaykh Jaʿfar al-Muhājir (Damascus, 2000–7), 1:52–53; 4:1691.

²⁹Shoshan, "From Silver to Copper," 105; Bacharach, "Circassian Monetary Policy," 43, 45.

³⁰Warren C. Schultz, "Recent Developments in Islamic Monetary History," *History Compass* 9, no. 1 (2011): 75.



The permeation of foreign coins is most visible for gold coins, which, at the same time, were not subject to any reissue during the period under study.³¹ Aside from the “endemic” *ashrafi* dinar,³² which made up the bulk of gold coins used in late Mamluk Damascus, there was also the “invasive” and slightly less valuable *iflūrīn*, which could refer to Florentine or Venetian gold coins. The Venetians had long been present in both Damascus and Beirut.³³ Since the sources at hand usually subsume agents of both city states under the generic term *al-faranj* (“the Franks”), it is difficult to establish whence these coins originally entered local circulation. The only other gold coin that makes an appearance in Ibn Ṭawq’s account is called *manṣūrīyah*, which indicates a Mamluk origin.³⁴

In contrast to the early fifteenth century, when the relative value of gold dinars ranged widely between 38 and 140 *dirham min al-fulūs*, exchange rates with silver dirhams during the late Mamluk period appear rather stable.³⁵ In the majority of cases, the *ashrafi* is given at a rate of 52 dirhams, whereas the *iflūrīn* was valued at about 45 dirhams.³⁶ Comparable relative values are attested by German travelers around 1480.³⁷ Even after the Ottomans conquered Damascus, they kept similar rates for Mamluk dinars: the *ashrafi* issued by Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī should now exchange for 60 dirhams, whereas another Mamluk dinar, “minted by Kamāl al-Dīn,” was to have an exchange rate of 56 dirhams.³⁸ The only exception to the stable rates is found on 20 Shawwāl 886/12 December 1481, when the *ashrafi*’s relative value soared to 1:91, almost double the usual value. It seems that this was part of a temporary measure connected to a devaluation of silver coins in the year

³¹One exception was “maghribī dirhams,” which were taken out of circulation in 886/1482; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 1:181. Furthermore, at least one sultan, Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī, issued new gold coins, according to Ibn Ṭūlūn, and kept the name *al-ashrafi*. They should probably not be treated as a reissue, since other gold coins were not taken out of circulation (see below).

³²The first coin by this name was originally issued by Sultan Barsbāy in 829/1426; Bacharach, “The Dinar Versus the Ducat,” 77–78.

³³Fuess argues, however, that Florence was also extending their trade contacts to the Mamluk Levant during the fifteenth century; Albrecht Fuess, “Beirut in Mamluk Times (1291–1516),” *ARAM* 9–10 (1997): 99.

³⁴The name might refer to the short reign of Sultan al-Manṣūr ‘Uthmān, who indeed issued gold coins in 857/1453–54; Balog, *Coinage*, 328: type 756.

³⁵For the exchange rates, see Allouche, *Mamluk Economics*, 96–98.

³⁶Ibn Ṭawq gives 3 *iflūrī* as the equivalent of 136 dirhams (p. 261). Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 1:121, 261–62, 551, 552, 553; 2:969; 4:1659.

³⁷Sebald Rieter witnessed rates around 1:50 in Mamluk Syria in 1479, while Walter von Gugglingen and others mention the same in the years 1482 through 1484. Walther Hinz, *Islamische Währungen des 11. bis 19. Jahrhunderts umgerechnet in Gold: Ein Beitrag zur islamischen Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Wiesbaden, 1991), 9–10.

³⁸Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahah*, 2:65.



prior.³⁹ When new cold struck silver coins were issued, it caused a panic; markets were closed and food became unavailable. It seems that the new coins had a lower intrinsic value, and the authorities initially reacted to the crisis by proposing an exchange rate at 12.5 dirhams per dinar “for both old and new coins.” Although Ibn Ṭawq speaks of distinguishable coins here, it seems that this rate would only make sense if the coins were exchanged according to weight. The exchange had limited success and both issues remained in circulation side by side. Even years later, Ibn Ṭawq distinguishes between these old (*‘utuq*) and new (*judud*) coins. In fact, the old coins remained the standard currency for at least a year. Again in 886, Ibn Ṭawq calculates an outstanding debt as “414 old coins,” which he paid with “149 old” and “392 new silver coins.” The reissue only found its place in the monetary system at two thirds the value of the old coins.⁴⁰

It should be said that this is the only devaluation of currency mentioned by Ibn Ṭawq. That is not to say that no further devaluations occurred, but that Mamluk authorities learned from the effect the measure had in this instance and proceeded more carefully in the following instances. It is also possible that they switched completely to other means of fiscal extraction. Among these, a set price on sugar looms large.⁴¹ Nonetheless, this instance is informative about the monetary situation in two ways. On the one hand, it demonstrates that concern over a devaluation might require a return to measuring currency by weight. On the other hand, no such measure is recorded for copper coins during that period, which places silver coins as the standard currency at the time in Syria. This is supported by the manifold transactions described by Ibn Ṭawq.⁴² He gives a large number of exchanges between silver and gold coins. A transaction in which the *manṣūrīyah* coin is mentioned might suffice as an exemplary case. Furthermore, it addresses both the official exchange rates between dinars and silver dirhams and the overall invisibility of copper coins at the time. It is the only transaction mentioned in any of the sources where copper coins appear at all. Ibn Ṭawq relates that in 890/1485–86 a sum of 500 current (*mutaqaddimah*) dirhams was paid in five dif-

³⁹Balog records no Damascene issue of silver coins for 885 and only one issue for 886 that is evidently not from Cairo; Balog, *Coinage*, 352: type 820.

⁴⁰Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 1:26–27, 97, 261–62.

⁴¹A duty on sugar developed into a political issue in 886. Ibn Ṭawq blamed the sultan’s *ustādār*, Ibn Shādībak, as the source of price rises in several cities. In Damascus, he wanted to raise the price of sugar from 14 to 28 dirhams. The merchants immediately sought the help of the Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Qāḍī ‘Ajlūn and later the sultan. The conflict lasted for half a year, between Rabī‘ II and Sha‘bān. Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 1:62–63, 66, 70, 74–75, 82.

⁴²For a list of transactions from volumes 2 and 3 of the edition, see Li Guo, review of *Al-Ta’līq: Yawmīyāt Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq*, ed. Sheikh Jaafar Al-Muhajir (Ja’far Al-Muhājir), Vol. II: 891/1486 to 896/1491 (text: pp. 577–1069), Vol. III: 897/1492 to 902/1497 (text: pp. 1081–1517), *Mamlūk Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2008): 216–17.



ferent currencies: four *ashrafī* dinars (208 dirhams), two *iflūrīn* (ca. 90 dirhams), 30 silver coins (*fiḍḍah*), two *manṣūrīyah* coins, and ten copper coins.⁴³ Assuming that the silver coins used had a similar value to the “current silver dirhams,” the known coins make up 328 of the 500 dirhams. The two unknown gold coins and the ten copper coins thus had a joint value of slightly less than 172 dirhams, a decisively higher value per gold coin than usual. I cannot say whether the copper coins made up a considerable part of this sum or whether they were included to fill the gaps created by the *manṣūrīyah* and *iflūrī* coins.

The silver standard is also attested from another, unexpected side: the Maghribī Sufi shaykh ‘Alī ibn Maymūn (d. 917/1517) wrote a polemic critique of the innovative practices of Syrian Sufis and jurists.⁴⁴ In this work, titled *Bayān ghurbat al-Islām bi-wāsiṭat ṣinfayn al-mutafaqqihah wa-al-mutafaqqirah min ahl Miṣr wa-al-Shām wa-mā yalihimā min bilād al-A‘jām*,⁴⁵ he also complains about current money-lending practices, saying that those Syrian *mutafaqqihūn*—he denounces the jurists as mere pretenders—would lend out money at 30 percent interest and generally only looked for their personal gain and profit. One could dismiss this as moralist rancor if it was not corroborated by other sources.⁴⁶ Ibn Maymūn’s other complaint about monetary practices is even more important for the present purpose, since he also attacks their greed in the exchange of coins (in the words of Ignaz Goldziher): “in den Tauschgeschäften, wenn sie nämlich Gold für Gold oder Silber für Silber, oder Gold für Silber und umgekehrt auswechseln, jagen sie nach Vortheilen und Gewinnsten.”⁴⁷ Again, there is no mention of a copper currency, although this might have fit nicely into an argument over the vices of the established scholarly families.

Where Was the Copper?

The silver dirham emerges as the standard currency in Ibn Ṭawq’s account, whereas copper coins are barely visible. These descriptions are supported by numismatic evidence as well. While there is proof for regular issues of silver coins,

⁴³Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 1:553.

⁴⁴On him, see Wollina, “Between Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus,” particularly 58–62.

⁴⁵I know of two manuscript copies, one in Leipzig (MS Vollers 849) and one in Cairo (Dār al-Kutub, MS Majāmi‘ Muṣṭafā Fāḍil 48). A recent edition has been published in Beirut: ‘Alī Ibn Maymūn al-Maghribī, *Bayān ghurbat al-Islām bi-wāsiṭat ṣinfayn min al-mutafaqqihah wa-al-mutafaqqirah min ahl Miṣr wa-al-Shām wa-mā yalihimā min bilād al-A‘jām*, ed. Ḥakīmah Shāmī (Beirut, 2007).

⁴⁶Ibn Ṭawq also speaks of the “common practice of lending against interest”; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 4:1891–92.

⁴⁷Ignaz Goldziher, “‘Alī Ibn Mejmūn al-Maghribī und sein Sittenspiegel des östlichen Islām: Ein Beitrag zur Culturgeschichte,” *Zeitschrift der Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 28 (1874): 311–12.



there is little evidence of copper coins being minted in Damascus.⁴⁸ That said, the evidence might not be as unanimous as presented so far. The overall invisibility of copper could have several causes. One of these is certainly the notarial context in which coins were most often enumerated. In the context of Qāyṭbāy's efforts to return to a silver currency, for example, the enumeration of sums in contracts according to copper coins was once more abolished. Another possible cause is the authors' affiliation with the wealthy and powerful. Most cases that Ibn Ṭawq notarized dealt with rather large sums; to pay those, silver and gold coins were an obvious choice. While this development certainly constitutes a paradigm shift from the "age of copper," can we really assume that all transactions were now executed in silver dirhams?

There is little evidence to the contrary, but it stands to reason that copper money, measured either by coins or by weight, retained its importance for large parts of Mamluk society long after local mints had ceased to issue new coins. Indeed, upon the first Ottoman mint run of copper coins in 923/1517, Ibn Ṭulūn mentions that "old copper coins would be declared void" a few days later. These must have been Mamluk copper coins. The new coins were initially distributed at a rate of one eighth of a silver dirham (in itself a testimony to the silver standard?) and shortly after devalued to one sixteenth of a silver dirham.⁴⁹ Provided that these rates were comparable to earlier exchange rates (as those for gold coins were), sums paid in copper coins might have eluded the chroniclers' interest for the most part.

This further raises the question of whether the "old coins" mentioned were simple pieces of bullion, as numismatic evidence suggests, or rather the product of minting efforts under the last Mamluk sultans.⁵⁰ This is, of course, connected to the question of whether copper was exchanged by weight or by number of coins. Indeed, Ibn Ṭawq provides two glimpses that raise suspicions as to the trade in coins only, both of which happened outside the legal transactions he attended. The first case is the extraction of money from several Damascene madrasahs to pay the ransom for hostages from a pirate attack in 886/1486–87. He describes the extraction as "*istikhrāj darāhim min al-nuḥās*."⁵¹ The term he uses for copper money differs from the better known *dirham min al-fulūs* and could actually refer to copper coins proper. In fact, it would attest to their low value, comparable to the

⁴⁸On silver coins issued in Syria from the reign of Qāyṭbāy through Qānṣūh, see Balog, *Coinage*, 349, 354, 362, 375.

⁴⁹Ibn Ṭulūn, *Mufākahah*, 2:59, 60.

⁵⁰Cf. Schultz, "The Monetary History of Egypt," 338.

⁵¹Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 1:65–66; on the role of madrasahs in raising the ransom and in housing the ransomed prisoners, see Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190–1350* (Cambridge and New York, 1994), 58, and *ibid.*, n. 108.



rates around the time of the Ottoman conquest, that only they would be taken, whereas the profits in silver would be reserved for the regular beneficiaries. More importantly, it indicates a wide availability and use of copper coins.

The second case indicates that copper was also still exchanged by weight. After a period of absence in 894/1488–89, Ibn Ṭawq relates news he heard from his shaykh and relative Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Qāḍī ‘Ajlūn (d. 928/1521–22).⁵² In particular, Taqī al-Dīn had recently resigned from a teaching position in the Shāmīyah al-Barrāniyah for an amount of “600 [dirhams], weighing 400 [dirhams].”⁵³ Unfortunately, Ibn Ṭawq’s absence from the actual procedures results in both cases in a terse description of the transactions, devoid of the details he usually provides. Yet, together they subvert the picture drawn by his renditions of contracts and betray the continuing relevance of copper money even in administrative processes and among the highest strata of local society.

There is further, albeit circumstantial, evidence to the continuing relevance, if not centrality, of copper to everyday transactions. The narrative sources follow to different degrees the development of grain, meat, and other prices, which in turn allows for conclusions about the purchasing power of the different coins in circulation. Although these reports do not primarily deal with monetary issues, they often address them indirectly—in any case, they provide us with a different perspective on the value of money.

Most studies on the economic history of the Mamluks have a strong focus on grain prices, for a variety of reasons. Grain was a—if not the—staple food for the vast majority of the population. As such, it occupied an important symbolic position that connected the provision of grain (and, in turn, bread) with the ability to rule justly.⁵⁴ Moreover, grain prices are fairly common in the narrative sources of the period, which still constitute the bulk of our available material. However, there a number of issues with the evidence on food prices as provided by most chronicles. The first issue is that grain prices are usually given in huge measurements. The Damascene sources usually mention the price according to the local *ghirārah*, which measured about 265 liters, equaling around 207 kilograms of wheat or 178 kilograms of barley.⁵⁵ It is the consensus that this unit of capacity

⁵²On him, see Wollina, “Between Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus,” particularly 62–68.

⁵³Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 2:904; cf. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Nu‘aymī, *Al-Dāris fī tārikh al-madāris*, ed. Ja‘far Ḥasanī, (Damascus, 1948), 1:295–96.

⁵⁴Cf. Linda Darling, “Medieval Egyptian Society and the Concept of the Circle of Justice,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (2006): 1.

⁵⁵I follow in this a table of conversions provided by the University of Oldenburg. Their conversion rates are based on cases from late nineteenth-century Germany. See <http://www.nausa.uni-oldenburg.de/zuroev/masse.htm> (accessed 8 December 2014). One liter of wheat weighs about 0.782 kilograms, while the same capacity of barley amounts to only 0.672 kilograms. Ashtor relies on estimates made by Hinz and comes to a rate of 0.757 kilograms per liter of wheat. Eliyahu Ashtor,



probably refers to wholesale prices and thus at best offers indirect evidence for retail prices. The high investment of a purchase of only one *ghirārah* notwithstanding, few people would have had the means to store such quantities, and the prices given might refer to the prices set by local authorities.

Retail prices would rather refer to smaller units of capacity (one *ghirārah* = 12 *kīl*/72 *mudd*),⁵⁶ but in most cases that I found, even grain was sold according to the weight-based *raṭl*.⁵⁷ The Damascene *raṭl* usually consisted of six to seven *awqāyah*, weighing 1.7 to 1.9 kilograms and thus almost four times its Cairene counterpart (about 450 grams).⁵⁸ In an unfortunately not completely legible entry, however, Ibn Ṭawq relates that in 886/1480 it “was set for the merchants at a maximum of four *uqqah*.”⁵⁹ This would have put the Damascene *raṭl* at 1.2 kilograms at most, but it is uncertain for how long this regulation was really enforced.⁶⁰ By 1495, Sultan Qāyṭbāy attempted another standardization of scales and measures on the imperial level and decreed that the Damascene markets should adopt the Egyptian *raṭl*. This measure must be seen as part of a larger strategy of centralization under the last Mamluk sultans to strengthen their control over far-away Syria and make its resources more easily accessible for the sultan’s agents. The institution of the Egyptian as the one and only “imperial” *raṭl* would have increased the power of the imperial center over the provinces,⁶¹ but this attempt seems to have failed due to strong local resistance.⁶² Even though the *raṭl* did not remain stable dur-

“Levantine Weights and Standard Parcels: A Contribution to the Metrology of the Later Middle Ages,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 45, no. 3 (1982): 480; Walther Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte; umgerechnet ins metrische System* (Leiden, 1955), 37–38.

⁵⁶The term *ghirārah* could also refer to an actual bag of cereals, which measured at one *kīl*. Ibn Ṭawq uses the term in this way while relating a fight with a business partner over a harvest of sorghum. Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 2:806; Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith*, 516, n. 3.

⁵⁷The *mudd* appears only once for flour and once for barley; Ibn Ṭūlūn, *I’lām al-warā*, 158; Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith*, 117–88 (see below).

⁵⁸Ashtor, “Levantine Weights and Standard Parcels,” 476–77; Shoshan, “Money Supply and Grain Prices,” 52.

⁵⁹Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta’līq*, 1:24.

⁶⁰At least, it was also reported by Venetian merchants and other European visitors, on whose accounts Ashtor’s and Hinz’s findings that the *qinṭar* weighed about 180 to 185 kilograms depend. This would, in turn, also put the *raṭl* at around 1.2 kilograms. Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte*, 30; Eliyahu Ashtor, “Spice Prices in the Near East in the 15th Century,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* (New Series) 108, no. 1 (1976): 26–41, 27.

⁶¹I presume that a standardization of scales and measures was to help avoid losses in tax money, the need for which might have been further increased by the role of Damascus as a major way station of the Mamluk armies on their way to the northern frontier. Purchases of provisions had to be made locally and the sultan’s agents would often not have had the necessary knowledge to avoid being taken advantage of.

⁶²Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahah*, 1:163; Ashtor, “Levantine Weights and Standard Parcels,” 487.



ing the period under study, the historical accounts insist on giving many prices “according to the [customary] Damascene *raṭl*.”⁶³ With the exception of livestock, chickens, and eggs (which were counted by piece), the *raṭl* was the central unit by which retail sales of food were measured. For many lower class people, however, purchase by *awqīyah* must have been more common, and these purchases would have been paid for in copper, at least under normal—or “good”—circumstances.

Perhaps measuring by *raṭl* should in itself be regarded as a result of the peculiar circumstances in which chroniclers usually come to speak of food prices. This is the second issue with the evidence as presented in narrative sources: they usually record grain prices only when they exceeded what contemporaries considered a fair or just price; prices were only recorded when the system was under strain. As Carl Petry observes, chroniclers were more conscious of these items after they had themselves experienced a harsh shortage. Therefore, “Ibn Iyās’ price data for [Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī’s reign] was meager compared with the multiple details provided by historians of Qāyṭbāy’s time.”⁶⁴ The most significant crisis for the period under study occurred in 873/1468–69. Al-Buṣrawī follows the inflation in a day to day fashion from Ṣafar to Shaʿbān. During that period, the price for wheat rose five-fold, from an already high 420 dirhams per sack (*ghirārah*) on 25 Ṣafar to 900 dirhams on 15 Rabīʿ I and again on 5 Jumādā II, then to 2,000 dirhams on 13 Shaʿbān.⁶⁵ The focus on crises is understandable but makes for poor evidence for estimations of regular purchasing power.

Ibn al-Ḥimṣī’s treatment of the 873 crisis is instructive as to what can be gained from the sources despite these obstacles. Whereas al-Buṣrawī concentrates solely on grain prices, Ibn al-Ḥimṣī gives a rather comprehensive list of how living costs in general were affected:

[W]heat cost 40 gold dinars [2080 dirhams]⁶⁶ per *ghirārah*; a *mudd* of barley was worth 10 dirhams [= 720 per *ghirārah*]; the *qinṭar* of flour 1200 dirhams [= 8 per *raṭl*]; one *raṭl* of bread 80; one of rice 15; one of date syrup (*dibs*) 7; *samn* oil 28, sesame oil 15; the *raṭl* of cauliflower 2; of carrots 2; of onions 3.5; of cheese 18; of yoghurt 7; of sweet potatoes 4; 4 eggs cost 2 dirhams; [the *raṭl* of] boiled

⁶³This formulation is used by Ibn al-Ḥimṣī; see *Ḥawādith*, 118.

⁶⁴Carl F. Petry, *Protectors or Praetorians? The Last Mamlūk Sultans and Egypt’s Waning As a Great Power* (Albany, 1994), 105.

⁶⁵Al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh al-Buṣrawī*, 34–37.

⁶⁶While this conversion is based on the exchange rates given by Ibn Ṭawq only a decade later, the total sum also agrees with the prices given by al-Buṣrawī.



chickpeas 4; of boiled beans 5; of raw fish 6—all according to the Damascene *raṭl*.⁶⁷

This list is interesting for dietary and food studies in a number of ways that go beyond the scope of the present article. It also offers important information for the purpose of this paper. In particular, all the prices are given in silver dirhams. Furthermore, the differentiation between raw and prepared foodstuffs stands out. Boiled beans or chickpeas cost double what other raw vegetables were offered for, and uncooked rice, which was twice as expensive as wheat flour, still ranked far below baked bread. As Amalia Levanoni has argued for Mamluk Cairo, most people depended on pre-cooked food for a large part of their diet. Thus, the crisis would have hit them more severely than wealthier households, which had cooking as well as storage facilities.⁶⁸ Moreover, it shows the complexity of deducing retail from wholesale prices.

Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's choice of units of measurement and currencies should be taken seriously. His switch from *ghirārah* to *mudd* implies that poorer people had to make do with barley and that ready-made bread and even wheat flour were beyond their means. In other cases of (less) extreme dearth, authors suddenly switch to the *awqīyah*, usually the weight of one loaf, to measure bread and other items.⁶⁹ On the other hand, the measurement by *raṭl* could suggest an atmosphere of stockpiling in expectation of a worsening crisis. At the same time, it is possible that at the highpoint of the crisis wheat was indeed only sold in exchange for gold coins, as Ibn al-Ḥimṣī relates. They would have allowed for a safer storage of one's wealth in the face of future devaluations of either silver or copper.⁷⁰

No other comparable shortage struck Damascus during the remainder of the period under study. Nonetheless, the authors continue to record only extreme prices for grain. For other foodstuffs, however, I would argue that the price information allows for an estimation of “normal” or “just” prices between 885/1480 and 906/1501. The following prices will refer to “the [customary] Damascene *raṭl*.” Ibn Ṭawq gives all these prices according to the silver dirham (*fiḍḍah*). For wheat

⁶⁷ Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith*, 117–88.

⁶⁸ Amalia Levanoni, “Food and Cooking During the Mamluk Era: Social and Political Implications,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2005): 204–8.

⁶⁹ Al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh al-Buṣrawī*, 116; Ibn Ṭūlūn, *I'lām a-warā*, 158. For the weight, see Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 3:1242.

⁷⁰ In contrast, Ibn Ṭūlūn records all prices during another dearth shortly after the Ottoman conquest in dirhams. The prices he gives are: one *ghirārah* of wheat at about 400 dirhams, of barley at 360, one *raṭl* of mutton at 10, of beef and goat at 8, of *samn* oil at 30, of honey at 18, of olive oil at 15, of sesame oil at 18, of syrup at 7, of rice at 6, of charcoal at 5, of firewood at 1. He concludes that “all kinds of household effects are expensive,” but this is clearly dwarfed by the dearth of 873; Ibn Ṭūlūn, *Mufākahah*, 2: 42.



bread, prices between one and two dirhams were regarded as normal, with only three recorded higher prices between 880/1475 and 923/1517.⁷¹ For cheese, Ibn Ṭawq usually gives a price of 3 dirhams, although it is my impression that he still considered that price high.⁷² Yoghurt was cheaper at usually one half to one dirham.⁷³

Interestingly, Ibn al-Ḥimṣī's list is completely devoid of meat, another symbolically charged consumable.⁷⁴ Perhaps it was not sold at all during the crisis or access to it was restricted to specific parts of the population; in any case, it appears to have been exempt from market exchanges completely.⁷⁵ In the case of meat, availability was as much as problem as price. It bespeaks Ibn Ṭawq's relatively high status and/or financial means that he could complain about going just a few days without it.⁷⁶ Mutton, the most valued variety, had an average price of three to five dirhams—prices below three dirhams were considered cheap.⁷⁷

It has already been pointed out that none of the chroniclers can be regarded as a commoner. For Damascenes of a lower status, it would have been much more common to purchase only one to three *uqqah* at a higher frequency, especially if they had to buy prepared food. If four dirhams for a *raṭl* of boiled chickpeas and beans was regarded as an exceptionally high price, how would they purchase lower quantities at lower prices? The same question arises with regard to the other food prices provided by Ibn Ṭawq. The silver dirham at the time was already a half-dirham (*niṣf*). Still, Ibn Ṭawq frequently mentions price rises of half a dirham. Would still smaller quantities be paid for in copper coins?

One final aspect should be considered: what was the spending power of a Damascene commoner? Ibn Ṭawq offers some information on wages of people on whose services he called. Among them are those of the “manager” (*mu'allimah*) of the bathhouse his wife used to visit and daily wages of a workforce he hired

⁷¹For the “just” prices, see Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 1:70, 72; Ibn Ṭulūn, *I'lām a-warā*, 174 (appendix, citing from the *Mufākahah*); Ibn Ṭulūn, *Mufākahah*, 2:60. In the other cases, the prices only rose to 3 dirhams per *raṭl*; see al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh al-Buṣrawī*, 116; Ibn Ṭulūn, *I'lām a-warā*, 193 (appendix, citing from the *Mufākahah*); Ibn Ṭulūn, *Mufākahah*, 2:2.

⁷²Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 2:749 (twice). Ibn al-Ḥimṣī records a price of 15 dirhams shortly before the Ottoman conquest; *Ḥawādith*, 516.

⁷³Ibn Ṭawq also gives prices of 6 dirhams per *raṭl*, but that is described as exceptionally high. Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 1:125, 292; 2:749; 4:1577.

⁷⁴The classic study on the symbolism of meat remains Joshua Finkel, “King Mutton, a Curious Egyptian Tale from the Mamluk Period,” *Zeitschrift für Semitistik und Verwandte Gebiete* 9 (1932): 122–48.

⁷⁵Ibn Ṭawq mentions that in 899/1494 meat was so scarce that only “the people of the state (*dawlah*) and the notables eat it”; Ibn Ṭawq, *Ta'liq*, 3:1260.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 3:1101.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 1:89, 125, 287, 291, 425, 553; 2:675; 3:1201, 1353, 1459, 1462; 4:1590, 1802, 1892.



for repairs of his house and garden. The *mu'allimah* received twelve dirhams, although it is uncertain whether that accounted for one visit or for an undeterminable period. The foreman (*mu'allim*) of his workforce was certainly paid that amount per day. His wages were thus considerably higher than the six to eight dirhams common workers received, but less than the seventeen dirhams a skilled carpenter gained from one day of work.⁷⁸ It is difficult to extrapolate a monthly salary from these numbers. We can assume that the *mu'allimah* received frequent payments from all customers of her establishment, but the workers and craftsmen could probably not hope to have work throughout the month. In a crisis such as in 873, their daily wages would have been eaten up instantly in providing for their households. Even in good times, they probably had to stretch their income to get through the month. Whereas Ibn Ṭawq, who would receive an average of ten to twenty dirhams for each notarization, with exceptions of up to more than 300 dirhams per case,⁷⁹ could afford to count his money in silver dirhams, the majority of Damascenes would probably more often deal in copper coins.

Conclusions

As this contribution has demonstrated, evidence from late Mamluk Damascus does not indicate a continuation of the “age of copper” beyond the mid-fifteenth century. The silver dirham was once again—or had indeed remained—the standard currency, one that was measured at face value (except in crises). It was predominant in those everyday transactions recorded in the sources; even a *raṭl* of vegetables or fruits would be paid for in silver. The fact that all four writers neglect copper almost completely does in fact attest to the end of the “age of copper,” when even chronicles acknowledged the prevalence of “*fulūs*” and gave prices in this currency.⁸⁰

In conclusion, the Mamluk sultanate might not have had the means to reinstate a purely bi-metallic standard based on the exchange of gold and silver coins alone during its twilight years. Although copper certainly remained important in local and especially low-scale transactions, it did not occupy a central position in the economy at large and only reemerged as a state-sanctioned medium of exchange with the region’s integration into the Ottoman system.⁸¹ Late Mamluk Syria did not undergo the same fiscal upheavals that troubled Egypt in the early fifteenth century; rather, it retained its local economy that rested mostly on silver

⁷⁸Ibid., 1:32, 98, 101, 105–7.

⁷⁹Torsten Wollina, *Zwanzig Jahre Alltag: Lebens-, Welt- und Selbstbild im Journal des Aḥmad Ibn Ṭawq* (Göttingen, 2014), 126.

⁸⁰Schultz, “The Monetary History of Egypt,” 338.

⁸¹Ibid.



and gold but also allowed for exchanges in copper, which could be traded either by coins or by weight.

Finally, the last section of the article attempted to shift the perspective toward the more elusive everyday transactions, especially of lower class Damascenes, through a reverse reading of the sources. Their economic reality is mostly beyond our grasp, and copper coins or bullion might have remained their main means to procure their livelihood. I tried to incorporate sources from authors of diverse backgrounds, with Ibn al-Ḥimṣī and Ibn Ṭūlūn representing the higher echelons of Damascene society and al-Buṣrawī and Ibn Ṭawq being in lower positions. Nonetheless, all authors had some connections to the wealthy classes, and their accounts would be biased by their own social and financial status in that they could afford to neglect the less valuable copper money used by large numbers of Damascenes.

It is my contention that an analysis of these lived realities would require going beyond currency as such. It would have to approach the subject from a wider perspective that juxtaposes the scarce information on wages and costs of living, and also acknowledge the specific measurements and currencies used in the sources. Ibn Ṭawq's diary seems to be a promising starting point for such a study and, indeed, his own financial improvement is traceable when short notes on personal expenses (without currency!) disappear towards the end of the edition's first volume (ca. 890/1485). This shift would also have to take into account the coexistence of a market and a household economy, competition in the labor market, and, in conjunction, migration within and beyond the Mamluk Empire.⁸²

⁸²For the household economy, see Yaacov Lev, "The Regime and the Urban Wheat Market: The Famine of 662/1263–64 in Cairo," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 8 (2004): 149–61. For migration, see Bethany Walker, "Mobility and Migration in Mamluk Syria: The Dynamism of Villagers 'On the Move,'" in *Everything is on the Move: The Mamluk Empire as a Node in (Trans-)Regional Networks*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Göttingen, 2014), 325–48. On labor, see Maya Shatzmiller, *Labour in the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden, 1994).

