9.12: The Mamluk Sultanate

The year was 1249, and Louis IX's seventh crusade had just gotten underway when as-Salih, the last Ayyubid ruler, took to his deathbed. Under the eminent threat of a Crusader invasion, as-Salih's wife, Shajar al-Durr, a Turkish concubine, agreed to take over the reins of government until her son, Turanshah, could assert himself. But he had never truly gained the trust of his father, and a cabal of mamluks loyal to as-Salih murdered Turanshah. They then raised Shajar al-Durr to the throne. Her rule resulted in much controversy and suffered from many internal problems. According to tradition, she sought recognition as sultana from the figurehead 'Abbasid Caliph, but he refused to pay homage to her. The mamluks responded by installing into power one of their own, a certain Aybak. He married Shajar al-Durr, and she abdicated the throne. The most powerful mamluk in Egypt, Aybak placated some of the opposition to Shajar al-Durr's rule and also dealt with Louis IX’s crusade to Egypt. While mamluks did not possess a tribal 'asabiyah in the traditional sense, they did constitute a proud caste of elite warriors who had an exaggerated sense of group solidarity. As a social group, their former status as slaves provided them with enough group cohesion to overthrow the Ayyubids.

Shajar al-Durr remained unsatisfied in her new role, however. In fact, she saw herself as another Cleopatra and wanted to rule in her own right. She also feared the consequences of Aybak’s potential marriage alliance with the daughter of the Ayyubid Emir of Mosul. In 1257, Shajar al-Durr had Aybak strangled and claimed that he had died a natural death. However, Qutuz, a leading mamluk, did not believe her story. Under duress, her servants confessed to the murder. Qutuz arrested Shajar al-Durr and imprisoned her in the Red Tower. Not long thereafter, Aybak’s fifteen year old son, al-Mansur 'Ali, had Shajar al-Durr stripped and beaten to death. He reigned as sultan for two years until Qutuz deposed him, as he thought the sultanate needed a strong and capable ruler to deal with the looming Mongol threat.
The Mamluk Sultanate appeared to be on a collision course with Hulagu’s Ilkhanate, one of Mongol Empire’s four khanates, whose forces were advancing through the Mamluk-held Levant. Then in the summer of 1260, the Great Khan Möngke died and Hulagu returned home with the bulk of his forces to participate in the required khuriltai, or Mongol assembly, perhaps expecting to be elected the next Great Khan. Hulagu left his general Kitbuqa behind with a smaller army to fight the Mamluks. In July of that year, a confrontation took place at Ayn Jalut, near Lake Tiberias. During the ensuing battle, the Mamluk General Baybars drew out the Mongols with a feigned retreat. Hiding behind a hill, Aybak’s mamluk heavy cavalrymen ambushed the unsuspecting Mongols and defeated them in close combat, securing a rare victory over the Mongols. The Mamluks captured and executed Kitbuqa, and forced the remnants of the Mongol forces to retreat.

Just days after their signal victory over the Mongols, Baybars (1260 – 1277) murdered Qutuz, continuing a pattern of rule in which only the strongest Mamluk rulers could survive. Too clever to be deposed, Baybars developed a strong military oligarchy that rested on the iqta' system, a centralized system of land tenure based on money that, by the thirteenth century, had been perfected in Egypt. Under the iqta’ system, individual mamluks received a percentage of profit from the sale of crops for their upkeep. Baybars owned all of the land, so mamluks only received the right to collect taxes from the land, a right akin to usufruct in feudal Europe.

Baybars relocated the ‘Abbasid Caliph from Baghdad to Cairo in order to present a veneer of legitimacy to mamluk rule. Since the Ptolemys, Egypt had been ruled by foreigners. In fact, the only impact native-born Egyptians had was in religion. The Mamluk Sultanate practiced Sunni Islam and emphasized Sufism. Sufis believed that traditional, orthodox Islam lacked compassion, and their Sufism helped conversion efforts because of its emphasis on love and making a closer connection to God, as opposed to a strict adherence to the dictates of the Quran. Sufis desired something more from religion and emphasized integrating the reality of God into man. Sufis thought that they could achieve a union with God based on love, a notion that contrasted sharply with the general perception of orthodox Islam which denied believers a direct experience to God because Muhammad represented the Seal of the Prophets and all understanding of
God came through the prophet. They set up new religious schools to pass on this Sufism. These madrasa consisted of a complex, with a mosque, school, hospital, and water supply for each community.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed the decline of the Mamluk Empire. Several internal and external factors help explain their decline. Domestically, the Black Death ravaged Egypt for years. In fact, it continued in North Africa longer than it did in Europe. This plague caused economic disruption in the sultanate. With fewer people available, labor, or human capital, became much more expensive. Further, plague-related inflation destabilized the economy, as the value of goods and services also rose. The mamluks responded to inflationary pressures by increasing taxes, but their revenue from those taxes actually decreased. This decrease made it difficult for the mamluks to maintain their irrigation networks and, without irrigation, agricultural productivity decreased.

Externally, plague was not the only cause of inflation. Columbus’s discovery of the New World began a process in which gold began filtering through Europe and into North Africa. Egypt’s weak economy could not absorb this massive influx of money, thus causing more inflation. New trade routes, like the one pioneered by Vasco de Gama, offered Europeans direct sea routes to Asia. No longer was Egypt the middleman for long-distance trade between Europe and Asia, thereby losing out on valuable revenue from tariffs. The profits from commerce transferred to the ascending states of Portugal and Spain. The decline of the Mamluks set the stage for the rise of the Ottomans.