

# *Mamluk Economics*

A STUDY AND TRANSLATION OF AL-MAQRĪZĪ'S IGHĀTHAH

Adel Allouche



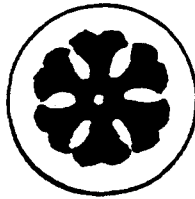
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## Preface

Chronicles contemporaneous with the rule of the Circassian Mamluks in Egypt abound in criticism of the maladministration and unorthodox financial practices of these rulers. Their authors complain about the general decline of the country, particularly the suffering of the lower classes and the poor, and often attribute it to the lack of adherence to moral and religious precepts by the state. The religious education of these historians leads them, in typically medieval fashion, to link morality, piety, and economics. Among these authors, the Shafi'ite Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1442) stands out as the most vocal critic of the Circassian monetary policy, which he blames for the impoverishment of the country. The targets for his attack were the excessive coinage of the copper *fulūs*, the cessation of silver coinage, and the adoption in 1403 of a money of account: the dirham of *fulūs*. Although several attempts were made later to reintroduce silver coinage, the dirham of *fulūs* remained the unit of account until the fall of the Circassians and the beginning of Ottoman rule in Egypt. The immediate effect of this new monetary system was an acute economic crisis dominated by an inflationary trend. This was worsened by a plague and an epizootic, thus strengthening the belief in a divine punishment. This situation prompted al-Maqrīzī to present his views of the causes of the crisis in a separate monograph appropriately entitled *Ighāthat al-ummah bi-kashf al-ghumamah* [Helping the Community (or the Nation) by Examining the Causes of Its Distress]. This work became a reference for students of the medieval economic history of Egypt and its importance did not escape the attention of the erudite Gaston Wiet, who published in 1962 a French translation based on the 1940 Cairo edition, the same edition that is followed in the present translation.

The study of the economic history of the Middle East in the Middle Ages is still in its formative years and it is natural that Wiet's translation, published over thirty years ago, reflects the knowledge of

his time. In this respect, the quotations from Wiet's translation in the introduction to the present work are not meant to diminish the worth of his endeavor. Rather, they are a justification for an updated rendering of al-Maqrīzī's work in light of the expansion of our knowledge of the economic history of Egypt under the Circassians and an attempt to draw the reader's attention to the difficulty of the text as well as the complexity of the monetary issues of the period.

While al-Maqrīzī blames the adoption of the dirham of *fulūs* for the economic chaos in his time, modern historians may have the right to blame the Circassians for the designation of this unit of account and for the difficulty it has created in comprehending the monetary data of the Circassian period! The several uses of the term "dirham," together with the variation in the weight of the copper *fals* (which may equal one dirham, as was the case in 879/1474-75) throughout the Circassian period, have led to the same confusion among specialists of Mamluk history regarding the nature of the dirham of *fulūs* and its relation to the copper coins and caused some to limit the scope of their research.

This book is not an exhaustive study of the economic and monetary conditions of Egypt under the Circassian Mamluks, a complex topic that still needs further research and debate. It is an attempt to present a careful translation of *Ighāthat al-ummah* that may eventually contribute to a reassessment of al-Maqrīzī's ideas and a better comprehension of the Circassian monetary system. The reader is provided with a brief introduction that is limited to the presentation and explanation of a number of relevant issues. The inclusion of additional documentation, particularly the appendices, provides a handy reference. With regard to the translation, additions to facilitate the reading of the text are shown in brackets. Dates of death, reign, or tenure in office of important persons are added in parentheses. The rendering of Qur'anic verses is based on Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation. The often repetitive traditional laudatory utterances found in the original text have been eliminated in order not to distract the reader from the focus of the work. Throughout the translation, an effort has been made to give both the Hijrī and the corresponding Gregorian date. The transliteration of names and technical terms conforms to the system of the Library of Congress.

This project has been made possible by a grant from the National

Endowment of the Humanities, Washington, D.C. I have also benefited from the advice of several colleagues and friends to whom I would like to pay tribute. Professors Donald P. Little (McGill) and Ulrich Haarmann (Kiel) read and commented on earlier drafts. More recently, Dr. Michael L. Bates, of the American Numismatic Society, New York, made valuable comments and offered extensive explanations that helped me clarify the subtle details of the numismatic data. A number of my graduate students criticized earlier versions and were generous with their time and suggestions, particularly Dr. Devin Stewart (Emory University), and Mr. Asim Memon (University of Pennsylvania). Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation for the patience of my children (Jeanette, Adam, and Alexander) and the assistance of my wife, Ann Kuhlman, who helped me through the several stages of this project, particularly with her computer skills, despite the demands of her own work.

Adel Allouche