CHAPTER TWO

The Bahri Mamluks

The Mamluks were the rulers of Egypt and Syria from 1250 until the Ottoman conquest in 1516-17. The period of their rule is usually divided into two: that of the so-called dawlat al-turk, the Turkish State, and that of the dawlat al-jankas, the Circassian State. In reality there was little difference between them. The Mamluks of the former were mamluk al-bahriyya, the Bahri Mamluks, whose name was derived from their barracks on the island of Roda on the Nile, known in Egypt as al-bahr, literally "the sea." They were Kipchak-speaking Turks originating from the area around the Caspian, with a mixture of Mongol, Greek and Slav, and had originally been the élite corps of the Ayyubid army, acquired mostly through purchase.

The Mamluks seized control of Egypt and then Syria in 1249, after the death of the last effective Ayyubid ruler, al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub. They accepted no system of hereditary succession which meant that each new rule was preceded by a struggle for power often involving considerable violence between rival factions. Nevertheless, in the early years, at least, this principle of the "survival of the fittest" brought a number of extremely able rulers to the fore. Three in particular stand out: Baybars I (1260-77), Qalâ‘un (1279-90) and al-Nâṣir Muhammad (1293, with two short breaks, until 1341). Between the death of Najm al-Din Ayyub and the accession of al-Nâṣir Muhammad the Mamluks stopped the westward advance of the Mongols and totally defeated the last of the Crusaders in Palestine. Both of these events were extremely important for the future history of the Islamic world.

In addition Baybars re-established the ‘Abbâsid Caliphate in Cairo, and obtained suzerainty over the Holy Places of Mekka and Medînâ, which, together with their control of Jerusalem, gave weight and credence to the claim of the Mamluks to be the champions and protectors of Islam. It was Baybars who laid the military and administrative foundations of the state, but it was his trusted aide and successor Qalâ‘un who established the dynastic foundations, for although hereditary succession had not hitherto been accepted among amir Mamluks, they placed Qalâ‘un’s son al-Nâṣir Muhammad on the throne after his father’s death. Despite being forced off the throne twice, al-Nâṣir Muhammad returned in 1310 and ruled until 1341, longer than any other Mamluk Sultan. Moreover, he was followed, admittedly in quick succession, by all but one of his nine sons, a grandson, and two great-grandsons.

By and large, the reigns of al-Nâṣir Muhammad and his descendants were times of
stability and prosperity for Egypt and Syria. By 1304 the threats from the East had receded and in the following years al-Nasir Muhammad established friendly relations with most neighbouring powers, finally, even with the Mongols. In 1322 a peace treaty was negotiated with Abu Sa'id, the Il-Khanid ruler of Mongol Iran and Iraq.5 al-Nasir Muhammad encouraged trade and commerce between Egypt and her neighbours, and much of this trade passed through Alexandria, which became a thriving entrepot for Egypt and the Near East, attracting merchants from all over the Mediterranean. al-Nasir Muhammad also increased the agricultural productivity of Egypt by a series of major land improvements bringing hitherto unusable land under cultivation. He instituted, and in part personally conducted, a complete cadastral survey of Egypt which resulted in a redistribution of land among the Mamliks. In April 1316 he redistributed the iqtim’s, or land-grants, to each amir according to his rank. These were allocated in such a way as to make the mutaq’s, or grants, dependent on several land-grants in different parts of Egypt. At the same time, al-Nasir Muhammad was able to confiscate the land-grants of those Mamliks who had sided with Baybars al-Jashmagir in 1309, when the Sultan had been forced into temporary exile. The result of this redistribution was an increase in iqtim’s khawatt, or lands owned by the Sultan, and the consequent weakening of power among the amirs, and the strengthening of that of the Sultan.6

al-Nasir Muhammad reformed the tax system and abolished many irksome, unjust and punitive taxes. Whatever may have been his reasons for doing so, the effect was to increase his popularity and stimulate economic growth. He ruled Egypt and Syria with a mixture of enlightened self-interest and ruthless self-preservation. Many of his policies had the effect of inhibiting the amirs, though he was ready to take their advice and to honour and reward them for their support, especially in the early years of his third and longest period in power. However, he had no hesitation in dismissing, banishing or executing any Mamlik he suspected of treachery or who displayed signs of dangerous ambition. In all cases their fortunes were confiscated.

After the death of al-Nasir Muhammad the tables were turned. In rapid succession, his sons were enthroned and deposed by the amirs, with whom all power now lay. The domination of the amirs over the Sultans continued until the end of the fourteenth century when the last descendant of al-Nasir Muhammad, his great-grandson Haji II (1382 and 1389-90), was overthrown by Barqiaq, who established the rule of the Circassian Mamliks. During the last sixty years of the fourteenth century, only two Sultans ruled for periods longer than five consecutive years: al-Nasir Hasan (1347-51 and 1354-61) and al-Ashraf Sha’ban (1361-76). Both were deposed and executed by the amirs, not because they were bad rulers, but as victims of the power-struggles among the various Mamlik factions.

Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Mamlik society was a unique one. Medieval society in the Islamic world had always consisted of the mass of the people—peasants, city-dwellers, artisans and such like, surrounded by a wealthy but politically weak merchant class—all governed by the military and administrative élite. Between rulers and ruled there was the restraining hand of the religious institution. Even when the ruling élite were of different racial origin to their subjects, members of the local population could be admitted to their ranks either by marriage or by exceptional administrative, and occasionally military, ability. But this never happened under the Mamliks. The élite relied entirely on young Mamliks from the steppes to replenish their ranks, about two thousand of whom were imported each year. They were kept in virtual imprisonment in their barracks in Cairo where they were trained and taught, never fraternizing with the local population. This aloofness became almost a point of principle with the Mamliks. No Mamlik would even eat in the presence of a non-Mamlik, no matter how elevated the latter’s social rank. No non-Mamlik could ever own a Mamlik as a slave. The children of the Mamliks, aulad al-nas, with the exception of the sons of the Sultan, could never hold any important military post. Many aulad al-nas occupied minor military and administrative positions and not a few became theologians.

The army was not composed entirely of Mamliks. There were many auxiliary troops conscripted from the populations of Egypt and Syria, together with Kurds, Turkomans, bedouins and other nomadic tribes who had moved westward under Mongol pressure.

At court the amirs of a thousand and of forty held the major ceremonial appointments. There was the lord of the audience chamber, the armour-bearer, the grand chamberlain, the grand major-domo or paymaster general, the treasurer and the master of the inkwell. Among the other important officers were amir ikhlar, master of the stables; amir janbar, master of the arsenal and prison; the sāqī, cup-bearer; the jāshmagir, taster; the ṣūhīdūr,
superintendent of stores; the jukandar, polo master; and the jamaqdar, mace-bearer. It was these amirs, together with the Sultan, who sponsored virtually all monuments and works of art during Mamluk rule, the vast majority of which are concentrated in Cairo. Indeed, there can be few Muslim cities whose medieval heritage of buildings, furniture, fittings and manuscripts has survived to the same extent.

Although a number of congregational mosques were built in the Bahri Mamluk period, the most famous being the fortress-like construction of Baybars I (1260-77), the majority of buildings took the form of mausolea, madrasas, khanaqs and zawiyyas, often grouped together to form a single complex maintained by a waqf, or pious endowment, established by the founder. Many factors have to be taken into account when considering Mamluk patronage of architectural structures, in terms of both patronage per se and the types of institution patronized. The intellectual explanation for such large-scale patronage of Islamic structures by a pagan-born élite has been aptly summed up by Humphreys: “...it revealed an alien group’s commitment to the indigenous society and showed that it had a legitimate and necessary role in it”. Yet, as the same author points out, Mamluk patronage of architecture communicated both their mastery over Islamic society and their attempts to make it subject to their own values and needs. Other factors are also relevant. In general Mamluks could not pass on their wealth to their descendants. One way of doing so was to appoint their heirs as supervisors (or beneficiaries) of the property they endowed as waqf.

Another reason was of course, piety. This was also expressed through increased support for religious mendicants, Sufi activities and institutions. Although Sufis were continually attacked by the religious establishment during the Bahri period, large numbers were gradually brought under control, and regularized in establishments such as the khanaqah. Thus the division between Sufism and the establishment became increasingly blurred until the khanaqah became a source of “Sunni-Sufism” which by the end of the fourteenth century was regarded as orthodox. Sufi behaviour in the zawiyya, on the other hand, always remained outside the pale of acceptance.

The numerous institutions founded by the Sultans and their amirs were endowed with all necessary furniture and fittings, together with copies of the Holy Qur’an and whatever literature was considered appropriate. The provision of furniture and fittings gave work to generations of carpenters, glass-makers and metal-workers throughout Egypt and Syria, particularly those of Cairo and Damascus. Works produced in the Bahri period were made to a consistently high standard by local craftsmen who were often assisted by others who came from Baghdad, Mosul and even further east. The decorative elements which made up the artistic repertoire of these craftsmen changed during the course of the fourteenth century, mainly due to the incorporation of new chinoiserie features introduced from the east. However, the principal decorative categories of Mamluk art remained the same: geometric and vegetal designs and inscriptions. These latter, which are one of the outstanding characteristics of Mamluk art were decorative in appearance though not in intent. They consisted of statements recording the name of the patron, magnificently and ostentatiously written, or certain Qur’anic ayat deemed, for whatever reason, necessary.

Some ayat had become almost mandatory: mosque lamps always had Ayat al-Nur, the Light Verse (XXIV. 35), around their necks or bodies; Ayat al-Kursi, the Throne Verse (II. 255), was employed on buildings, lamps, Qur’an-containers and sometimes on copies of the Holy Qur’an. In general, however, the ayat chosen had some relevance to the object on which it was found. Thus it is rare to find Ayat al-Kursi on copies of the Holy Qur’an, since most of the ayat employed there are those which specifically mention the Holy Book by name, or use some expression which is a synonym for it. Al-Waqfah (LVII. 77-78) was the most frequently used, on opening illuminated pages or on buildings, but several other ayat were also used. Sometimes we come across ayat embellishing the opening or closing pages of the Holy Qur’an, chosen possibly for the symbolic meaning they held for the patron or patrons.

The Qur’ans produced in the Bahri period were of two types. There was the single-volume type, always called a masbah (pl. masabih), and the multi-part type referred to as a rihlah. The same word was also used for the box containing the separate parts. The word musabih, literally box, seems to be relatively modern. Furthermore, in Mamluk documents the term kursi, which today is used for the hexagonal metal container said to have held copies of the Qur’an, applies solely to a Qur’an reading stand. Any Qur’an kept in such
containers must have been small in size since the doors of these containers are little more than twelve inches high. Very large Qur’āns were kept in textile bags made of silk or some other luxury material.\textsuperscript{12}

Most of the surviving fourteenth-century copies of the Holy Qur’ān are in single-volume form. The earliest thirty-part Qur’ān which is unquestionably Mamlūk does not date from earlier than 1330 (Cat. 18), for although there exist a number of metal containers made for thirty-part manuscripts between 1322 and c.1329-30,\textsuperscript{13} only a small number of thirty-part Qur’āns survive from the period between 1330 and 1376, the end of the reign of al-Ashraf Sha’bān. The great seven-part Qur’ān commissioned by Baybars al-Jāhānghīr in 1304-05 (Cat. 1) was unique; no other Mamlūk Qur’ān of this format was ever made.

However, we know from the study of waqf documents that multi-part Qur’āns were used in Sīfī rituals in the khanqāhs. According to the waqfīyyah of the khanqah of Baybars al-Jāhānghīr, the šaykh al-khanqāh used to gather with the inhabitants of the khanqāh each noon and read from a raḥs shari‘ah, a multi-part copy of the Holy Qur’ān.\textsuperscript{14} The waqfīyyah of al-Nāṣir Muhammad’s khanqāh at Syraqūs dated 1317 states that when the Shaykh and

Fig. 13 Hexagonal cabinet used for storing Qur’āns. Brass with silver inlay. Cairo 1328. Islamic Museum, Cairo, No. 139. (Photo after Wert). This is the work of Muhammad ibn Sanqr al-Bağṣddī and a well-known metalworker. Any Qur’āns kept in cabinets such as this would have been small, single-volume copies.

the Sīfīs met for a ḥudūr, or ritual session, they had to perform a complete recitation of the Holy Qur’ān: that is, they had to read through a thirty-part copy, with a different person reading each juz’.\textsuperscript{15} This is confirmed by the traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, who visited Cairo in 1325 and attended a ḥudūr session in a khanqāh. After certain preliminaries had been completed, “copies of the Holy Qur’ān in ajzā’ (thirty-parts) are brought...each faṣūl takes a juz’ and reads”\textsuperscript{16}.

In mosques and khanqāhs copies of the Holy Qur’ān were kept in containers in a special room. When required they were brought out by members of the khanqāh appointed for this task. One person was responsible for bringing and returning the single volume copy for the Shaykh. He was known as khādīm al-mushaf or, literally “servant of the Qur’ān”. The person responsible for bringing and distributing the multi-part copy and then collecting it was called khādīm al-raḥs al-shari‘ah, or “the servant of the multi-part Qur’ān”\textsuperscript{17}.

Despite the apparent care taken with multi-part copies they were subject to great wear and tear, being used hundreds of times in the course of each month. This accounts for the scarcity of multi-part copies today. Single-volume copies had a much greater chance of surviving intact. The large-format copies of the Holy Qur’ān produced by the Mamlūks in the second half of the fourteenth century were usually single-volume manuscripts. Beautifully written and illuminated, they were mainly for ceremonial use in mosques and madrasahs, whenever public reading of the sacred text was required.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, today, these huge volumes exist in comparatively large numbers, usually in excellent condition. It is with these masterpieces that this book is largely concerned.