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The Economic Condition of Egypt in the 18th Century AD

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Economic conditions are determinative on both human behaviours and fate of states. Gaining an economic might, local administrators began to use their authority against the central government from time to time in eighteenth century Ottoman Egypt. To be able to examine the uprisings of Mamluk Beys and their undesirable actions against the central government such as not sending the annual ırsaliyya, we have to consider the financial status of Egypt. What were the items of provincial incomes and their sources in eighteenth century Ottoman Egypt? How was the distribution of the income among the administrators of Egypt such as governor, shaykhulbalad1, and other beys? The answers of abovementioned questions are important in terms of political scenery of eighteenth century Ottoman Egypt.

There is no doubt that Egypt was the biggest province of the Empire with regard to revenue potential, due to its productivity and its unique position between East and West. The products from the fertile lands around the Nile and the coastal area of the Mediterranean served as the main source of food production for the people in Istanbul and Haremeyn - the holy cities Mekke and Medine - besides Egypt’s people. Its geographic position allowed both the local merchants and administrators to acquire a generous income. Rather than supporting the central government in military aspects, Egypt provided large quantities of grain and tax revenue for the central government2.

The Ottoman Empire had a huge economic and financial advantage with the acquisition of Egypt in the sixteenth century. Land tax revenues, urban taxes and custom dues from the ports of the Nile, Red Sea and Mediterranean filled the provincial treasury. After covering the provincial expenses as well as the expenses of

1 The title of Shaykhulbalad refers to the most powerful figure among the other mamluk beys. The shaykhulbalad was the most prominent person after the governor sent by the central government and had the power to rule the province during the absence of the governors.

2 While the number of soldiers that attended to wars from the province of Rumeli in the fifteenth century was approximately 24,000 and from Anatolia there were 20,000 soldiers, in the eighteenth century the central government used to require only 3,000 soldiers from the Egyptian province. (Halil Inalcik 2012: 169. Güneş 2009: 83).
the annual hajj caravan, grain and financial supports for the people of Haremeyn, the surplus of the treasury was sent to the central government in Istanbul. Considering all the goods sent from Egypt to Istanbul and Haremeyn, it might be thought that the Ottoman Empire exploited Egypt as a province, but in fact it was the reverse. Egypt’s integration into a vast empire, which established a stable rule over its territory compared to contemporary regimes, provided a peaceful environment for its tax-paying residents (reaya) that allowed Egypt to experience a long period of prosperity. Being incorporated within the Ottoman Empire enhanced Egypt’s economic status and strength since by 1500 Mamluk sultanate’s control over the region had weakened, and it was no longer in a position to resist the expansionist activity of European countries. Under Ottoman protection, Egypt was able to maintain its economic status as a key zone of commodity exchange between East and West. Cairo was a junction point in which import goods were distributed to the Middle, the Delta and Upper Egypt. The numerous entrepôts built in Cairo, Rosetta and Bulaq demonstrate that trade increased during the Ottoman period.  

In the sixteenth century, classical Ottoman systems were working well and the revenues were high and sufficient. One year after the Ottoman conquest, the amount of the ırsaliye-i hazine was sixteen million paras and it was increased to twenty million paras with the new regulations. Egypt enjoyed a prosperous period thanks to its political stability. Yet, by the seventeenth century Egypt had experienced a transformation like most of the empire’s provinces. The centralised rule was no longer so effective. The governors sent by Istanbul were not as strong as their predecessors. The seventeenth century witnessed for the rise of households, and the conflict between Qazdagli and Fiqari household followers went on during the century. Moreover, towards the end of the century, the aghas of the seven regiments began to establish their dominance and after mid-eighteenth century Mamluk Beys became the most powerful figures in the province of Egypt and, therefore, managed the money and the authority. 

3 Raymond 2002: 182.
4 Winter 1998: 5.
5 Hathaway 1997.
Due to decentralization, as with the other provinces, Egypt was the scene of incessant conflicts between those who desired to acquire authority. Despite the continuing tyranny of military establishments, outbreaks of violence between rival military households, and episodes of the plague, the Egyptian economy did well throughout the eighteenth century. By mid-century, thanks to political stability, especially in the period of *shaykhulbalads* such as Ibrahim Kethuda (d.1754), Abdurrahman Kethuda (d.1776), Bulutkapan Ali Bey (d.1773) and Ebuzzeheb Mehmed Bey (d.1775) the economy prospered for the middle and upper classes. Among them, Abdurrahman Kethuda is the most significant one. He used his vast fortune in restoring or building new religious and public works, built or restored twenty-one religious monuments, seven fountains and two bridges.

Bulaq is a significant example of the results achieved for the growth of Egypt's economy in the eighteenth century. It was widened as an urbanized area and joined to Cairo during the eighteenth century. The commerce with European merchants was the primary factor behind the urban development and expansion of Bulaq, furthermore, the distribution of buildings in the town. In the eighteenth century, instead of governors, it was merchants, officials, officers, and aristocrat families that appeared as new builders of Bulaq. Many other merchants or officers took part in constructing new buildings such as *wikalas*, mills, grinders, shops, public fountains and mosques in Bulaq. Also, to a lesser extent, constructions included industrial facilities such as sugar presses and cloth-dyeing workshops.

It is commonly asserted that there was a dramatic reduction in trade in Egypt as a direct result of Yavuz Sultan Selim taking the artisans and merchants to Istanbul after the conquest in 1517. However, contrary to this general claim, Raymond mentions that the men who Yavuz Selim took to Istanbul in fact returned to Egypt after a short time.

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7 Raymond mentions that he had 32.9 million *paras* as heritage, apart from his other revenues. Abdurrahman Kethuda spent his fortune bringing in Cairo an Ottoman aspect (Raymond, Andre, *Yenicerilerin Kahiresi*, Istanbul, 1999 p. 52).
8 Raymond 2002: 205.
Hence, this could not have led to a dramatic reduction in trade.⁹ In addition, it is also claimed that by becoming a province of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and especially its capital Cairo were adversely affected in terms of economy and trade. However, it can be said that although the production of luxury goods and artisanal products for the sultans and their palace personnel decreased and migrated in part to Istanbul, Egypt became an enormous market that opened to the Empire’s other provinces, especially Der-saadet, the imperial capital Istanbul.¹⁰

Cairo was the centre for manufacturing and consumption as well. Besides its population density, Cairo was the place of residence for the politically and socially highest-ranking and richest people made up of the dominant Mamluk caste, important traders and the ulama class. It was these groups in particular that drove consumer demand for luxury goods. The decisive commodities for the Egyptian trade were coffee and spices. At least 62 caravanserais were devoted to the sale of these two commodities in Cairo.¹¹

Besides the Indian and European trade, being incorporated in a huge empire made Egyptian ports active and domestic trade was also being realised in huge amounts between other ports of the empire in the Mediterranean and the Aegean.¹² Raymond considers the sixteenth century as a tough process of transition, the seventeenth century a development period up to the 1700s, and regards the eighteenth century as the peak period of oriental commerce for the broad range of Egyptian commerce.¹³

In eighteenth century Egypt, besides the governors, shaykhulbalads were among top gainers. Besides his personal incomes, a new shaykhulbalad had the right to inherit his predecessors’ wealth and some merchants.¹⁴ For example, Abdurrahman Kethuda (1739-1765) had a 32.9 million paras of fortune inherited from his father and other

¹⁰ Raymond 2002: 182.
¹² Panzac 2000: 368.
¹⁴ Raymond 1999: 42-43.
predecessors. It might be more, as the court records might not cover all the belongings. Abdurrahman Kethuda (d.1776) supplemented his fortune with the income he acquired from supervising the janissaries’ regiments and other incomes. Abdurrahman Kethuda used his fortune for an unprecedented architectural activity, but his successors like Ali Bey al-Kabir used their fortune for their political ambitions. On the other hand, leading a hajj caravan used to enable a Mamluk to establish commercial network in the Red Sea area and control coffee trade. Through the coffee trade, Shaykhulbalad’s household could control the merchants and customs houses, and that provided great opportunities.\(^{15}\)

The second half of the eighteenth century Egyptian trading history is to be researched by keeping in mind British-French competition in the area. Their influence on Egypt’s administrators and advisors cannot be denied. The short-sighted beys and their advisors were always focused on the rise of revenues and thus encouraged the European merchants to come to the Red Sea ports, where it was forbidden to do commercial activities for non-Muslims.

Crecelius claims that Mamluk Beys restricted themselves to Egyptian domestic issues and concerned themselves only with increasing their income. Following the basic logic of a merchant, they were unaware of the factors that made Europeans “formidable competitors” in both the war and commerce sectors.\(^ {16}\) I think this hypothesis can be suggested not only for Mamluk Beys, but also for most Ottoman administrators in general. They were so concerned with their personal interests that they could not do something to compete with Europeans, even when they realised the unfavourable situation the empire was in. Maybe one of the reasons for the aforementioned situation, namely the failure of the Ottoman administration to successfully resist European expansion, was due to the inequality between the Western and Ottoman merchants. Ottoman merchants did not have the right to trade in the Western ports; moreover, they paid higher dues in their homeland.

\(^{15}\) Raymond 1999: 42-43.
\(^{16}\) Crecelius 1998: 68.
In conclusion, it can be said that Egyptian administrators had the chance to acquire a wealth during their administrative period using the opportunities that Egypt’s unique place in the crossroads of Middle Eastern trade offered. Besides the administrators, central government also took advantage of Egypt’s favours like agricultural products and military products. Despite the Ottoman decline in discourses of modern historians in the period that this study examines and the European expansion as well, in-depth studies show that Egypt’s economy did well in the eighteenth century and it encouraged local beys to take benefit of it for their self-interest.\textsuperscript{17}

Abdurrahman Kethuda’s personal fortune proves that being a \textit{Mamluk Bey} in eighteenth century Ottoman Egypt was a profitable profession and it was worth the struggle to keep it, even if that meant going against the central authority. Also, contemporary historian narratives show us that the real reason of \textit{Mamluk Beys’} struggle was the desire for acquiring the wealth and authority.

\textsuperscript{17} Hanna 1983: 18-19.
Bibliography


