

Jordan in Perspective: The Mamluk–Ottoman Period

Classical Moslem historians refer to Jordan in the 7th century as *Jund Al Urdun*. This term was a precise translation of the Greco-military term 'theme' which sometimes appears in Arabic sources as *Al Thumu*. On the order of the prophet Muhammad, two campaigns were waged against this *Jund* which was mostly inhabited by Arab tribes. Although these two campaigns failed to take any part of it, they paved the way for the coming expedition at the time of the first Orthodox Caliph Abū Bakr. This Caliph sent an army under the leadership of *Shuraḥbīl b. Ḥasnā* who recorded complete success. A student of history may be struck by realising that a good number of the early distinguished Moslem leaders, to mention but a few, Abū 'Ubaydā, *Shuraḥbīl b. Ḥasnā*, *Mūsā b. Nuṣayr*, who conquered Spain, and *Ja'far b. Abī Tālib*, a cousin of the prophet, are buried in Jordan.

Jordan is centrally located between the Arabian Peninsula and Greater Syria, which explains the fact that in Jordan as well as in Palestine, evidence of Arab tribes can be found since time immemorial up to the present day. It may not be too presumptuous to say that the populations of these two countries was an extension of the Arabian Peninsula. They played decisive roles in the political life of the area whether under the 'Umayyads, the Fatimids, the Ayyubids, the Mamluks or the Ottomans. Had it not been for the Arab tribes in Jordan, the Umayyads would have lost power to their enemies the Zubayris. Was it not politic of the Umayyads to build palaces, citadels and castles in the Jordanian desert to be near the centres of power?

It is not an exaggeration to say that the 13th century was a formative one in the history of Bilad Al-Shām (Greater Syria). After the repulsion of the Mongols who swept from the far East and destroyed the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad in 1258, the Crusaders were finally wiped out from the Syrian Coast in 1291 by an alien Moslem element known as the Mamluks.

During the Mamluk period (1258–1516) Bilad Al-Shām, administratively speaking, was divided into seven *Mamlakahs* (provinces). One of these was known as Mamlakat Al-Karak, which comprised most of what is usually known as Trans-Jordan, including part of northern Hejaz up to the town of Al-

'Ulā with the town of Al-Karak as its capital; at one time, in 1341 the capital of the whole of the Mamluk Sultanate.

Available historical material points out that most of the administrative departments and government agencies remained in existence during that period, without any serious interruption. This evidently shows that an established administration tradition was known to the people in that province. The Mamluk military administration guaranteed a reasonable degree of stability to the people and particularly to the pilgrimage caravan. This was secured through a number of citadels garrisoned by Mamluk soldiers. The Mamluk Sultanate in Cairo never neglected pools, such as *Zīzyā'*, nor paving the way enroute to Mekka or keeping the bedouins in check.

With regard to the population of this province, they were composed of town or village people and nomads. *Banū Ṣakhr* was among the tribes whose name is mentioned in the historical literature of the time as well as *Banū Uqbah* whose tribal 'imarah' (lordship) was acknowledged by the Mamluk Sultanate. Religion-wise, Christians represented a sizeable minority among the population.

During the period contemporary biographical dictionaries supply us with the names of a good number of *Karakis* who distinguished themselves in more than one aspect of learning. The Jacobite physician, therapist and surgeon Abū Al-Faraj Ya'qūb b. Al-Guff (1233–86) was native of Al-Karak. He travelled to Damascus to learn medicine at the hands of the famous scholar Ibn Abī Usaybi'a. In the circle of that savant he studied with the distinguished physician Ibn Al-Nafis. After graduating from Damascus, Ibn Al-Guff served in 'Ajlūn, where he produced his medical writings. They were many in number but here I refer to the most outstanding one in Islamic medical Literature *Al-'Umdah fī Sinā'ât Al-Jirāḥa*, which was published in two volumes in India in 1937. According to the well-established authority, the late Professor George Sarton of Harvard University in his famous work 'Introduction to the history of Sciences', Ibn Al Guff was among the very few medical doctors in the Islamic world who managed to free himself from the Greek medical tradition. He is particularly credited for his practicality in medicine as he always tried to inculcate in his students the empirical method.

His works were characterised by the clarity of his written manuals.

On this occasion may I mention a recent study by a historian of medicine, Dr Sami Hamarneh of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC., on the life and works of Ibn Al-Guff?

The Mamluk Sultanate (which was capable of defending the heart of the Islamic world for two centuries and a half) was, by the beginning of the 16th century AD, in a very weak state. A small principality (*imarat Ghuzzah*) had sprung up in Western Anatolia by the end of the 13th century AD. That small principality followed the famous formula of challenge and response propounded by the late Professor Toynbee in his attempt to explain the events of history, and by its peculiar location, succeeded in destroying the great Byzantine Empire. Besides, it succeeded in annexing the lands of many small Turkoman principalities in Anatolia which brought her in direct contact with the Mamluk Sultanate and with a new rising Shi'i Moslem power in Iran. Both the Ottomans and the Safavids in Iran were striving for the lands of the Mamluks. The Ottomans acted quickly; and on August 24, 1516 the whole of Syria fell into their hands in a short battle. When the Ottomans established themselves in Syria, they divided the country into three major provinces: Aleppo, Tripoli and Damascus. Each province was divided, on its own, into a number of *Sanjaks* or *Liwas*. The Mamlakah of Karak was left intact but changed its name to the 'Sanjak' of Karak-Shawbak.

'Ajlun and its present district was made a separate *Sanjak*. It is safe to say that these two *Sanjaks* comprised almost exactly what is known today as the East Bank of Jordan. The Ottomans did not distinguish themselves as fighting soldiers of first class by the standard of the time, but as administrators they were of high calibre, at least in their taxation system. Unsurpassed by the various Moslem states, they had the habit of making a detailed census of the population, animals, and produce from time to time to the extent that nothing escaped their attention even bee-hives, caves or water-mills. This well preserved, available statistical information which goes back to the 16th century helps us to draw the following observations:

- 1) Almost all the towns, villages, hamlets, manors, quarters, and tribes of Jordan today were in existence at least since the 16th century.
- 2) Most of the inhabitants of these two *Sanjaks* were settled in towns or villages or were semi-nomads. Their number exceeded the number of the nomads.
- 3) Agriculture was their main source of income.
- 4) Christians constituted a sizeable minority in towns like 'Ajlun, Salt, Karak, and we find them even in villages.

- 5) The area enjoyed more stability than any time before, due to the fact that it was covered by expanded or restored old fortresses; to name but a few, 'Ajlun, Salt, Karak, Shawbak, Aqaba, Ḥasā, Qatrana, Maām and Dhat Ḥajj in *Northern Hījaz*.

All these posts were well garrisoned by janissaries with the aim of encouraging agriculture and providing security to the pilgrims and merchants against bedouin attacks. It is worth mentioning here that the government of these two *Sanjaks* was often entrusted to a local family known as the Al-Ghazzawī family which was reputed for its influence during the latter days of the Mamluks. On visiting Damascus in 1511, the head of the family, Nāṣir Al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Sā'id Al-Ghazzawī entered the city while Sufis (mystics) were beating their drums as a sign of joy; and when he went to the Umayyad Mosque to perform the Friday prayers, such was his popularity, people gathered everywhere to see him and to beg God to protect him. There was great rejoicing when peace was concluded between Nāṣir and the Mamluks and the safety of the pilgrims was assured. Another member of the family Qānṣūh played a more significant role during the latter part of the 16th century. For more than thirty years, he was entrusted with the governments of 'Ajlūn and Karak-Shawbak. He was so competent that in addition, he was, appointed for many years as *amīr Al-Ḥajj* (commander of the pilgrimage caravan), a noble post indeed at the time. It happened that in 1585 he ran out of favour, was jailed and sent to Istanbul. When he was brought before the sultan, the latter, touched by his dignity ordered his immediate release and confirmed him in his previous posts. Five years later, he was out of favour again and went to Istanbul where the sultan reconfirmed him; but the old gentleman died in Istanbul. In appreciation of the role of this family, his son was appointed by the sultan to replace him. Drawing parallels, the role of this indigenous local powerful family was no less than the Ma'nides in Lebanon.

When reforms were imposed on the Ottoman Empire, this area came to know schools, medical care, modern judicial courts, roads, wide schemes for planting grapes and, above all, a railway connecting it with Medina and Istanbul via Damascus and Aleppo. When the Ottoman Moslem Empire became the victim of the idea of Pan-Touranism and when the young Turks tried to Turkify the Arabs, Sharif Ḥusayn of Mekka, a Hasani descendent of the prophet Muhammad started his Arab Revolt against the Turks. The Arab East intelligentsia joined hands with Sharif Ḥusayn and his four sons. The Arabs of Trans-Jordan wasted no time and immediately launched their attacks against the Turks whether stationary or retreating. From the battle of Marj Rahit in 683 to 1947, the people of this country have played a major role in the history of the Middle East.