

Rafat el Majali, Abdul Rahim Mas'ad

## Trade and Trade Routes in Jordan in the Mamluke Era (AD 1250–1516)

### Introduction

This paper is intended to present an analysis of trade and trade routes in the Mamluke era in Jordan.

The strategic and geographical location of the Mamluke Sultanate played an important and positive role in the economic life of the area, and established it as a very important axis for commercial routes. The vital strategic location of the Sultanate made it a crossroads between East and West, for the Sultanate was located on the shortest routes leading to India (a source of goods that were badly needed in the European Continent) and on trade routes that were connected to the main ports. This area of Jordan played a vital role during the Mamluke era for the following reasons:

- Its control and monopoly of the Red Sea and the South Arabian trade, and its military and economic contacts between Egypt, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq.
- The economic importance of the area due to its vast economic resources.
- Its important location on the northern borders of the Arabian Peninsula, and its control of the commercial routes between Syria, Egypt and Morocco.

Numerous trade posts existed in the Transjordan area which were the cross-points for the various trades and businesses bound for Europe, Asia Minor, and the African Continent and numerous fortresses were built in the country to accommodate and protect the caravans and traders passing through the area. The country also witnessed a period of great economic progress and an increase in importance especially in the northern and southern parts of the country, and many old trade centers which still stand to this day are solid proof of the strategic and important location of this area at that time. In addition to the strong economic ties that joined Eastern Jordan with Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem, Palestine, and the Arabian Peninsula, there also were strong economic ties with Baghdad. There were also economic and trade connections across the Red Sea between Jordan and the countries of India, China and Africa, and with Western Europe.

### Transport Routes

Transportation and transference phenomena are very much related to the history of nations and the evolvement of historical events in Jordan, and progress and movement became the major factors in the evolution and rise of civilizations. The English geographer, George Campbell, states that man has a constant urge for continuous movement in spite of being settled down, and this is due to his strong desire for the acquisition of more territory, or what professor W. G. Sumner called 'earth hunger'. This transference, which is based on personal motives and a strong will to stay alive, is considered to be a natural human phenomenon which cannot be eradicated. Therefore, the case of transportation and transference in the Mamluke era cannot be studied apart from geography, due to the interaction between man and his geographical environment and what can stem from this relationship in the growth of major important developments; thus the type of transportation and transference and its occurrence is connected with geographical elements as well as with other factors which are inherent in man's talents and his mental and material ability.

During the Mamluke era, main roads were paved and freely accessible with few difficulties, while the other roads were surfaced with large stones. The only periods when these roads became inaccessible were when they were threatened by armed gangs and highway robbers. Therefore, in times of peace and security and with the existence of strong central government, these roads stretched eastwards, while they contracted westwards during times of chaos and crisis. These roads served many purposes; they were used for transporting commercial products or for military expeditions, and on many occasions for the passage of pilgrims. Many of these roads owed their existence to the old Roman roads which excelled in being straight and were made of hard and shaped rocks, and which had, in addition, ditches and barriers on the sides to prevent streams from flooding them.

The Mamlukes also constructed khans and commercial markets to accommodate traders and caravans and also for the exchange of goods; moreover, they paid much attention to the roads and this resulted in greater efficiency. Among the goods being transported and exchanged along the Mamluke

roads were woollen and silk products, light metallic products, precious metals, spices, wines etc., and these goods were being transported between Iraq, Syria, and the Arabian Peninsula. These roads were the main reason for the establishment of well-known cities, some of which faded away in time after the roads were no longer used. The Mamluke roads avoided the natural barriers by means of wide curves and detours which resulted in the formation of large isolated population-free areas, and in some cases the foundation of remote areas which became havens for oppressed ethnic and religious minorities.

#### Strategic importance of the area

The strategic importance of East Jordan arose from the vital geographical location of the country, for it was a major junction between Egypt, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula, Palestine and Iraq. Moreover, the country had been a central location for the numerous cultures in the Near East since earliest times.

If we consider the strategic importance of southern Jordan in particular, we realize that this region controls the trade of the Red Sea and the southern Arabian Peninsula, and it also plays a vital role in the commercial and military communication between Egypt, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq. It is also worth mentioning that the number of villages around Karak at this time reached 400, in the Balqa district they numbered 300, and in the northern part of the country they numbered 1,200.

The roads of southern Jordan served the international trade for many centuries, and the caravans which carried oriental goods used to cross these commercial roads on their way to Egypt and Syria, and sometimes to Iraq. The numbers in these caravans were often large, and on many occasions they numbered between 18,000 and 20,000 camels. Inns were built along the routes to accommodate the traders, and tax centers were established for collecting customs. The Mamluke Sultans paid great attention to the development of commercial centers along the trade routes across Jordan, (FIG. 1), and they fortified the areas and built civil and religious institutions in them.

Centers were established in:

- AJLUN: A mountainous center with a fortress. It served as a transportation center connecting Syria with Egypt.
- SALT: Served as a center for traders and for exchanging goods.
- GHOR Area: Located on the Jordan Valley, given greater attention by Sultan Baybars for its location on major trade routes connecting Damascus with Cairo. Numerous bridges were built to serve as crossways over the Jordan Valley between Jordan and Palestine.
- KARAK: Lies on the southern edge of the Dead Sea and rises 3,100 ft above sea level; it served as a strategic center and a base for commercial caravans coming from the south and the east.
- SHAUBAK: To the south of Karak, has a fortress which rises 1,330 ft above sea level. It served as a transportation center for caravans arriving from the Arabian Peninsula.

- HISBAN: Sultan Baybars gave it special attention and renewed many of the town dwellings.

Additional trade centers were then established to accommodate more traders and caravans, the following being some which were considered junction centers for trade caravans arriving from various parts of the country:

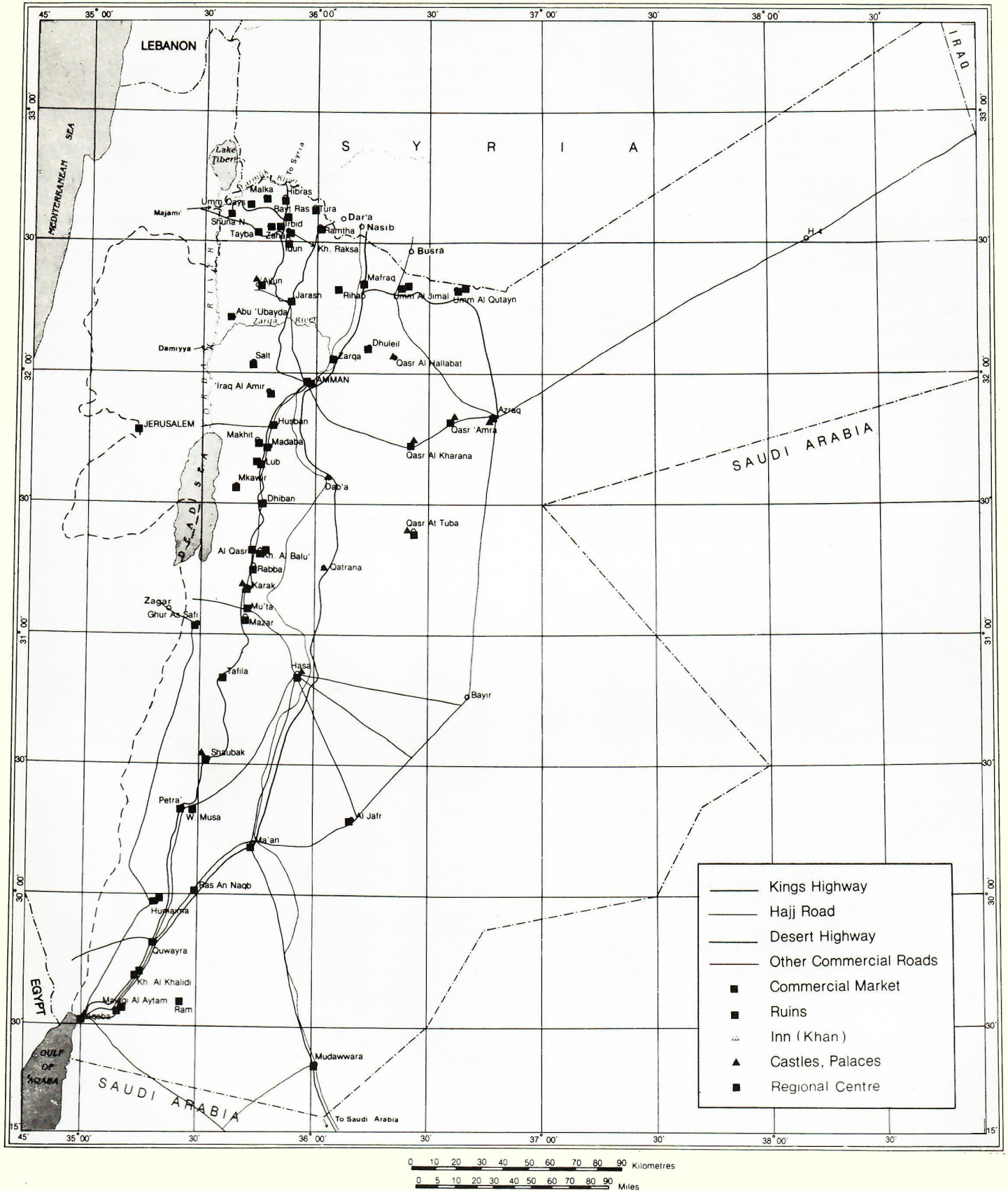
- IRBID (ARBILA): Located on one of the major trade routes which connected East Jordan with the port of Haifa on the way to Tiberias and Nazareth; as a result, Irbid became an important center for trade and traders arriving from Palestine and Syria. The city is surrounded by flat and rich fertile land.
- UMM QAYS: A hilly center to the north-west of Irbid; it served as a forwarding station for trade caravans headed for Palestine and Syria, and also as a visitors' center, since it was located near hot mineral springs in the Yarmouk river basin.
- JARASH: A strategic town, famous for its plentiful agricultural products.
- PETRA: The farthest Nabatean city in the country. It served as a trade center for exchanging goods.
- MA'AN: The administrative center of the southern region, located on the far edge of the desert; it had a fortress, built to protect the route of caravans arriving from the Arabian Peninsula.
- KHIRBAT AL KHALIDI: Situated at the entrance of a rocky valley, for protection of the caravan routes.
- AQABA (Aqaba port): The only waterway located on the eastern edge of the Red Sea, it was the doorway of Syria to the East. It was a center for collecting taxes on goods arriving at the port of Aqaba, the goods being transported by land caravans to Damascus and Aleppo and from there to the ports of Tripoli, Beirut, Sidon, Tyre, Constantinople and Acre, then to be exported to Europe. The Dead Sea also served as a connection between the city of Karak and the surrounding areas of Jericho and Jerusalem.

#### External trade relations

The geographical location of the Mamluke state played a positive role in its economic life and developed it into a major axis for commercial routes. The Mamluke state stretched from the Libyan desert in the west to the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula in the east, and from the Noba in the south to the Mediterranean in the north. This vast stretch of territory gave it an advantage in monopolizing three vital waterways, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the entrance to the Indian Ocean. This geographical position of the Mamluke state turned it into a vital junction point between East and West. It was located on the shortest routes leading to India (source of much needed goods in Europe), it was connected with numerous Mediterranean ports, and in addition, it contained many trade routes and regular commercial roads that linked the East with the West. In addition to the strong trade relations which existed between East Jordan and Cairo, Damascus, Jeru-

## Trade and Trade Routes in the Mamluke Era

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan



salem, Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula, there were also trade ties with Baghdad, India, China and the eastern coast of Africa.

The Haj pilgrimage route came from neighbouring countries across Jordan, passing through many commercial markets, inns, fortresses and palaces which were intended to protect and accommodate traders and trade caravans. Jordan was the only entrance for the Haj caravans arriving from Syria, Persia and Northern Iraq, and these caravans then took many different routes. The route from Damascus and Muzayrib in Syria came through Jordanian territory in the north passing by the town of Ramtha. Then the caravans headed towards Zarqa where the pilgrims stayed near Shabib Palace for one or two days, and then to Zayzya and on towards Lajjun and Karak, Hasa, Ma'an, Tabuk, Medina and Mecca. Due to the existence of huge commercial markets, the people of Jordan had prospered greatly and a surplus of goods and supplies was created. The inhabitants exchanged some of these goods with the pilgrims.

Caravans which came to the country from Palestine had to take either of two routes as follows:

#### *The First Route*

Caravans would cross over the Jordan Valley by using the Sanbara Bridge (Majami' Bridge) passing through numerous villages and towns including Al Kassir (North Shuna), then to Umm Qays, which served as a vital strategic location due to its proximity to Syria and Palestine. After Umm Qays, the caravans proceeded towards Malka and Kafr Sawm, then resting in Izrit, where there was a large trade center in which business transactions took place. After Izrit, caravans headed in two different directions:

*The first direction:* A commercial route heading towards Syria, passing across the Yarmouk river, to Dhunayba and Tura, through Syrian territory and on to Damascus and Europe.

*The second direction:* From Izrit heading towards Beit Ras, Irbid and Ajlun, the latter serving as a trade center for exchanging goods and for other business transactions. After a night or two in Ajlun, caravans proceeded to Jerash and Amman, towards Madaba, Al Qasr, Rabbah, Karak, Mu'ta, Mazar, Khirbat Tannur, Tafila, Shaubak, Wadi Musa and Petra. After Petra they continued on to Aqaba port, where they separated into two groups, one travelling to the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen, and the other going to India, China and Europe.

#### *The Second Route*

Caravans came from Palestine through Lower Ghor (Zagar) heading towards Mu'ta, Karak, Rabbah, Lajjun and then to the Eastern desert, passing through Kharana Palace, Amra Palace and Azraq on their way to Iraq. As for the caravans arriving from Southern Palestine, they crossed Jordan by using the Aadly Bridge which was located north of Aqabat Afeek.

Caravans had to stop in Aqaba to conduct business transactions and to pay taxes. After leaving Aqaba, they travelled in a north easterly direction passing through Khirbat Khalidi, Quwayra, Ras en-Naqab to Ma'an and Sarafand, where they headed towards Iraqi territory.

#### **Syria to Jordan caravan routes**

From Damascus, caravans journeyed south towards Jordan, passing through Damascus, Adra'at, Ramtha, Tura and Irbid where some caravans separated on their way to Palestine. Another route for Syrian caravans bound for Jordan was from Damascus to Busra on the border, then south towards Azraq, Amra Palace, Bayir, and down the desert highway to Jafr and Ma'an on the way to Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula and as far as Persia.

Another route went from Damascus to Adra'at, passing through Ramtha and then heading in an easterly direction towards Mafraq, Dhuleil, Zarqa, Amman, Hisban, Madaba, Karak and continuing down to the town of Zagar in the lower Ghor on the way to Palestine. A further route separated at Karak and continued on to Mu'ta and to Hasa Inn, towards Petra and passing through Gharandal on to Aqaba.

Caravans that arrived by the Red Sea had to stop in Aqaba port, with a choice of two onward routes: one route headed in a north easterly direction passing through Khirbat Khalidi, Quwayra, Ras an-Naqab and Ma'an, where traders rested and business transactions took place. From Ma'an, caravans took off towards Jafr and Bayir, passing through Amra Palace which served as a rest house and a protection center, then they proceeded towards Azraq, Umm Jimal, Syria and Iraq.

The second route started from Aqaba passing through Humaima, Gharandal, Sala and Shaubak, then to Petra, Wadi Musa, Tafila and Zagar, passing by Mu'ta and Khirbat Tannur and moving on to Karak, Rabbah, Al Qasr, Dhiban, Madaba, Hisban, Burj Al Abyad, Amman, Jarash and on to Ajlun, where the Castle provided a means of protection for commercial caravans. Irbid was the next target of the traders; it served as a trade center and had various big markets. The caravans then continued on to Beit Ras, Izrit and Umm Qays in Syria.

Caravans that arrived from the east took the following route: from Iraq territory towards Jordan passing through the towns of Umm Al Qutayn, Khirbat Al Arnab, Umm Jimal and Mafraq, heading west by the towns of Khanasiri, Husn, Sarih, Irbid, Beit Ras, Izrit, Kafr Sawm, Umm Qays, North Shuna and towards Palestine. The other route travelling westward diverted towards Umm Al Qutayn and on to Mafraq, Dhuleil, Zarqa, Amman, Madaba, Dhiban, Al Qasr, Karak, Mazar, Khirbat Tannur, Tafila, Najl, Gharandal and Aqaba.

#### **The Syrian Haj road\***

Three hours after leaving Muzayrib near the Syrian border, the Haj caravan would reach Ramtha where people would stay overnight, to proceed on the next day through Zarqa,

\* Pilgrims used to gather in Damascus and travel more than 1,500 km on the way to Medina and Mecca.

Balqa, Qatrana, Karak, Hasa, Eniza, Ma'an and Aqaba to reach Mudawwara.

**State of the roads**

The outbound Syrian caravan roads from Muzayrib, Bosra and Nasib still have their distinctive stony surfaces. For example, the Bosra–Azraq road, which is made of flat basaltic rocks, still has its original surface structure near the village of Umm Al Qutayn (FIG. 2), and it is possible to follow this road in its original form up to the town of Azraq. The Badiya road outbound from Iraq, through Al Qutayn to Azraq (FIG. 3) is flat and easily accessible, and can be traced in various locations. If we track the outbound roads from Palestine across Jordanian territory we will immediately realize that the road from Al-Majame bridge to Umm Qays still has its stony form in some locations (FIG. 4).

As for the trade roads which led to Aqaba, such as the

2. The Mamluke paved 'Desert Highway'—Umm Al Qutayn



3. The Mamluke paved 'Desert Highway'—Azraq



4. The Mamluke paved 'Desert Highway'—Umm Qays



King's Highway, they were extremely narrow in some areas. The height of these areas varied between 800 and 1,500 m, and these roads were trackable alongside the hills around the old town of Humayma, rising to about 1,300 m in the Rabbah and Al Qasr areas. There were also roads which faded and disappeared with time, except for the remains of water courses near Hisban. Other desert roads pass over less rugged ground due to the absence of deep valleys, the maximum height for these areas not exceeding 1,000 m. As for the Eastern roads that come from Azraq, Bayer and Al-Jafr, they excel in being easily accessible on their way to the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq.

**Conclusion**

Trade routes created a pattern of interlocking relationships between specific regions on the East Bank and the regions immediately opposite on the West Bank, e.g. Nablus with Ajlun and Es-Salt; Hebron–Bethlehem with the Karak regions; and Jordan with Iraq–Syria and Saudia Arabia. The greatest advantages of the spreading of these trade routes were in social

well-being and economic wealth. Trade and religion went hand in hand, not only in the sense that the merchants often were the means of spreading religion, but also that sacred sites which were centers of pilgrimage often became important trading centers.

## References

- المراجع
- ١ - أحمد مختار العادي، (١٩٦٩)، قيام دولة المماليك الأولى في مصر والشام / دار النهضة العربية لنشاعة والنشر - بيروت - لبنان.
  - ٢ - انطوان خليل صيموط، (١٩٨٠)، الدولة المملوكية، التاريخ السياسي والاقتصادي والعسكري / دار الحدائق، بيروت - لبنان.
  - ٣ - بركهارت، رحلات بركهارت (سوريا الجنوبية) الجزء الثاني - ترجمة انور عارف / المطبعة الأردنية - عمان ١٩٦٩.
  - ٤ - تركي النقاش، (١٩٥٨) العلاقات الاجتماعية والثقافية والاقتصادية بين العرب والفرنج.
  - ٥ - جونيف تسيح يوسف، الطبعة الثالثة، (١٩٨١)، العرب والروم واللاتين في الحرب الصليبية الأولى / دار المعارف - القاهرة - مصر.
  - ٦ - ديتري براكمي، (١٩٧٣)، آثار الضفة الشرقية من المملكة الأردنية الهاشمية / نشرة انطوان بك نزال - عمان - الأردن.

- ٧ - سعيد عاشور، (١٩٦٥)، العصر المماليكي في مصر والشام / دار النهضة العربية، القاهرة - مصر.
  - ٨ - سليمان موسى، (١٩٨٤)، رحلات في الأردن وفلسطين / دار ابن رشد للنشر والتوزيع - عمان - الأردن.
  - ٩ - فوزي زيادين - طرق القوافل التجارية بين مصر والنبطية / وزارة السياحة والآثار - عمان ص.ب. ٨٨.
  - ١٠ - فيليب حتمي - تاريخ سوريا ولبنان وفلسطين / الجزء الثاني ترجمة جورج حداد وكال البازجي، دار الثقافة - بيروت ١٩٥٨ / ١٩٥٩.
  - ١١ - مصطفى الدباغ، (١٩٧٣)، بلادنا فلسطين / دار الطليعة - بيروت - لبنان.
  - ١٢ - نعيم زكي فهمي، (١٩٧٣)، طرق التجارة الدولية ومحطاتها في العصور الوسطى / اخبة المصرية العامة للكتاب، القاهرة - مصر.
  - ١٣ - يوسف درويش غوانمه، (١٩٨٢)، التاريخ السياسي لشرق الأردن في العصر المملوكي / دار الفكر للنشر والتوزيع - عمان - الأردن.
  - ١٤ - يوسف درويش غوانمه، (١٩٧٩)، تاريخ شرق الأردن في عصر دولة المماليك / وزارة الثقافة والشباب - عمان - الأردن.
- Doughty, Charles, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, 2 vols. 3rd ed., London. Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1936.
- Porter, Richard, in *An Overview of Intercultural Communication*, L. Samovar, ed. New York: Random House, Inc. 1972.
- Wright, Thomas, *Early Travels in Palestine*, London: Henry. G. Bohn, 1848.