A Note on Western Travellers’ Observations on Mamluk Economy

Wan Kamal Mujani

Institute of West Asian Studies (IKRAB), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this short article is to discuss the contribution of western travellers in documenting the Mamluk economy during their visits to Egypt and Syria. It is important to note that these accounts are crucial in that they refer to a number of phenomena which may have seemed to contemporary Mamluk historians to be too banal to be recorded in their chronicles.

Key words: Western, travellers, observation, Mamluk, economy

Introduction

Several travellers from the West visited Egypt and the Mamluk territories in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Most of them recorded their experiences and observations during their journey, including economic, political and social aspects. Some of them had written guidebooks for the pilgrimage and these books contained information on the Circassian Mamluks (Anon, 1893). There follows an account of some of the western travellers who visited the Middle East.

Felix Fabri (d. 1502):

Felix Fabri was born in about 1441 in Zurich. He made two pilgrimages to the Holy Land, one in 1480 and again in 1483-1484. Not much is known of his life, except for the two periods when he went on pilgrimages, in 1480 to Jerusalem, and in 1483 to Jerusalem, Sinai and Egypt (Prescott, 1954). He wrote two accounts of his travels, one in German, the other in Latin. The former is rather brief; the other is very complete and accurate in its descriptions of the places he visited. This second book made Fabri one of the most distinguished and learned writers of the fifteenth century.

The first trip to the Holy Land took Fabri from Ulm to Memmingen where he met some fellow pilgrims. They travelled overland through Innsbruck, over the Alps into present day Italy, through Treviso and on to Venice. From Venice, the travellers sailed on a ship through the Mediterranean to Corfu, Crete and Cyprus. The captain of the ship avoided the Isle of Rhodes on the first leg of their journey due to the siege by the Turks on that island. It was usually a normal stop for pilgrims, and was made by Fabri and his companions on their return trip, and again by Felix when he returned to the Holy Land two years later. The return trip was by the same route (Fabri, 1896).

His book is a great work which tells us about the time that he lived in, the people that he travelled with, the sights he saw and the events that he witnessed. His accounts provide information on the social and economy of the Circassian Mamluks including the life of the Mamluks, commercial activities, local and foreign merchants, merchandise, markets, the currency, kinds of plantations and taxes on pilgrims. He also mentions the population, kinds of food and fruit, livestock, and the vast ruins of some cities (Fabri, 1896).

Canon Pietro Casola (1427-1507):

Canon Pietro Casola was born in 1427 in Milan, Italy. He was from a family listed among the nobles of Milan. He spent his early years in the church there, then served sixteen years as secretary attached to the Milanese Embassy in Rome before returning to Milan in 1478 where he became the senior of the cardinal deacons. In 1494, at the age of sixty-five, he made his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On May 15, 1494, Casola left Milan, going overland to Venice. From there, he took a galley which made frequent stops as it crossed the Adriatic and Mediterranean to the port of Jaffa in Palestine. Among the places his galley docked at were Ragusa, Modone, and Crete. From Jaffa he took a mule to Jerusalem, which he reached on August 5th. After
staying thirteen days, he started his return journey. On his pilgrimage, Casola (1907) took the opportunity to visit other places such as Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jericho, and the River Jordan.

Casola (1907) left a description in his diary of the cities he stayed in during his journey, most of which focuses on churches and fortresses. Nevertheless, he also briefly mentions some facts relevant to the political and economic situation, like the salt industry and the silk industry in the islands he visited. In the Holy Land, he mentions taxes on pilgrims, the currency, the cotton industry, market-places, inns, food, trade and merchandise. One point worth mentioning at this juncture is his description of the lack of highly-technology mills and the fact that cities were under-developed. According to him, there were many buildings and premises destroyed and not restored.

Tomé Pires (1468-1540):

Tomé Pires was a famous Portuguese explorer and navigator in the sixteenth century. He sailed from Portugal to the Far East via the Cape of Good Hope, India, Malacca, Indo-China and China. His distinguished book is The Suma Oriental, which contains accounts of his journey to the East from the Red Sea to Japan. The book was written in Malacca and India in 1512-1515. Tomé Pires wrote in detail on the places he visited including political, economic and social aspects. It is important not to regard these notes as his personal diary since they were prepared as a report to the Portugal government for the purpose of colonisation.

The information conveyed by Tomé Pires (1944) is in more detail than that in the other travellers’ books. For instance, he describes the importance of the Nile to the agricultural sector in Egypt, the commercial ports in the Mamluks’ territories, the import and export trade in Egypt, trade routes, international merchants and merchandise from the West and East. He also wrote about the natural products and the population of some cities, and the military activities in every port. It is also interesting to see that Tomé Pires describes how the Circassian Mamluks suffered from the decline in taxes on the spice trade and pilgrims in the Holy Land.

Conclusion:

Contrary to the general perception that research using diaries within economy has been limited, there was evidence that travellers have used personal diaries to recount personal experiences and observations. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Fabri, Casola and Pires made a journey to Middle East and documented in great detail their experiences and observations in personal diaries. Spontaneous recording of places, sights, people, events, experiences and observations were made as they travelled to Middle East. Indeed, history contributes to the understanding of economy and recounting the contents of Fabri, Casola and Pires diaries provides an early account of the economic, political and social aspects of Mamluk.

When Felix Fabri travelled to Jerusalem, he wrote two diaries. His first diary, written in German provides brief accounts of his first pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But his second diary, originally written in Latin, i.e. the infamous The Book of the Wanderings of Felix Fabri contained detailed and comprehensive descriptions of the locations he visited during his second pilgrimage and travel to Jerusalem, Sinai and Egypt. From Ulm, Fabri travelled to Memmingen where he met several fellow pilgrims. They voyaged together overland through Innsbruck, over the Alps into present day Italy, through Treviso and on to Venice. From Venice, they sailed on a ship through the Mediterranean to Corfu, Crete and Cyprus. The captain of the ship kept away from the Isle of Rhodes on the first leg of their trip because of the siege by the Ottomans on that island. It was generally a regular stop for pilgrims, and was made by Fabri and his friends on their return trip, and again by Felix when he returned to the Jerusalem two years later. The return trip was by the same itinerary.

Fabri made thorough accounts about his fellow travellers, the sights he saw and the events he witnessed. His writings give information on the economy and social of the Mamluk as well as the life of the Arabs, business activities, domestic and international traders, goods, souks, the coinages, types of cultivated areas and duties on pilgrims. There were also records on the inhabitants, foodstuff, crop, stocks, and the great ruins of several towns.

Canon Pietro Casola also wrote a diary. Coming from an aristocrat family in Milan and himself a secretary attached to the Milanese Embassy and subsequently served as a senior of the cardinal deacons, Casola’s diary also highlighted the economic and political situation of the places he travelled. At the age of 65, he made his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In 1494, Casola left Milan, going overland to Venice. From Venice, he took a ship which made regular stops as it crossed the Adriatic and Mediterranean to the harbour of Jaffa in Palestine. Some places his galley docked at were Ragusa, Modone, and Crete. From Jaffa he took a mule to Jerusalem. After staying 13 days, he set off his return trip. On his journey, Casola took the chance to go to other locations such as Ramallah, Bethlehem and Jericho.

In his diary, Casola recorded about the towns he lodged, most of which focused on cathedrals and fortifications. He recorded on the economic condition of the silk and cotton industry, the coinage, the souks,
inn, foodstuff, commerce and goods. He also observed the lack of highly-technology mills, under-developed towns, shattered and unrestored structures and premises.

A traveller’s personal diary can also doubled up as an official report. Tomé Pires’s personal diary on the political, economic and social aspects of Egypt was given to the Portugal government. His diary, The Suma Oriental, was written in Malacca and India contains reports of his trip to some parts of the Middle East. For example, this diary gives important historical details of Egypt such as significance of the Nile to the agricultural activities, the trade harbours, an entrepot trading, trade routes, international traders and goods from the East and West. Pires also recorded on the natural produces, the inhabitants of several towns, and the naval activities in every harbour.

In summary, there were some western travellers visited Egypt and the Mamluk territories in the 15th and 16th centuries. They contributed in reserving information about the economy during the Circassian Mamluk period. Their accounts are significant in that they refer to a number of phenomena which may have seemed to contemporary Mamluk historians to be too banal to be recorded in their chronicles.

Acknowledgments

Research for this study was supported by a grant from ‘Arabic Culture and Islamic Civilizational Research Group’, National University of Malaysia (Grant No. UKM-OUP-CMNB-09-38/2011).

References