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THE SPICE TRADE IN MAMLUK EGYPT

A Contribution to the Economic History of Medieval Islam

BY

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I

The study of the Islamic civilization, its rise and development throughout its history, has greatly been advanced in the last century. All the various aspects of Islamic civilization, its religion, tradition, poetry, philosophy, literature, law, art, and language have been thoroughly investigated and essential contributions have been made toward a better understanding of its manifold manifestations.

There is, however, one field in which no substantial advances can yet be registered, and which still remains greatly a *terra incognita*: the economic and social history of the Islamic civilization. It is true there exists now quite a number of studies on some aspects of the economic development of early and medieval Islam, but a comprehensive social and economic history of Islam has still to be written.¹⁾

Such a goal has to be preceded by specialized studies, monographical treatments of specific economic problems of the various regions and of the various periods of the Islamic world in order to pave the way and supply the basic material for the long over-due socio-economic history of Islam.

This study attempts to deal with but one phase of the economic history of the Islamic world and to survey, or rather re-examine, just one aspect, the spice and pepper trade of a group of Muslim merchants in Egypt, which was carried on from the 12th to the 15th century

1) It is the realization of this very need felt by scholarly circles and the awareness of its urgent remedy that this Journal has been launched and that other monographic treatments of the social and economic history of the Islamic and Oriental world in general are now being undertaken.

between Egypt on the one side and Yemen, South Arabia and India on the other side.

For very few periods in Islamic history do we possess such an abundance of historical sources, such a mass of first-rate records, documents and texts as for the history of Egypt under the Ayyubid and Mamluk dynasty. In subjecting even a part of this vast Arabic source material to an analysis and investigation, to a thorough search for economic and social data, we meet frequently and repeatedly with the term *Kārimī*, which is used mostly in connection with and as a qualification of a merchant and occurs mainly in the form of “*tājir al-Kārimī*”, or, in plural, “*tujjār al-Kārim*.”¹⁾

This term, *Kārimī*, which has no meaning in Arabic, remains still unexplained and has thus far defied any attempt at a satisfactory and acceptable solution. The suggestion to explain the word as a designation of the very commodity in which the merchants did specialize—namely, pepper and other spices—does not hold ground²⁾; nor does the explanation that *Kārimī* is to be regarded as a corrupt form of the word “*Kānem*”, the name of a territory inhabited by Negro tribes in the West Sudan.³⁾ This latter suggestion, though accepted by E. Quatremère⁴⁾ over a century ago and then by other European scholars⁵⁾ and has since then entered the Arabic dictionaries,⁶⁾ is also untenable. Nothing in the sources supports such an explanation and everything speaks against it, since the merchants who were designated as “*Kārimī*” did

1) Ibn Baṭṭūṭa uses the rather strange plural form *akārim*; see later Note.

2) E. Littmann refers to the Amharic *Kuararimā* as a possible ethymology (*Orientalia*, Vol. 8, Rome, 1939, p. 176); see E. Blochet's reference to the Assyrian word *Karkuma* “ambre jaune” (*Revue de l'Orient Latin*, Vol. 8, 1900/1901, p. 540).

3) On the land of *Kānem* in West Sudan, see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 2, p. 712 ff.

4) *Notices et Extraits des Manuscrits*, Vol. 12, Paris, 1837, p. 639 and Paris, 1838, Vol. 13, p. 214. He, however, carefully stated “cette assertion ne doit pas être prise dans un sens absolument rigoureux.”

5) E. Blochet, Moufaḍḍal b. Abil-Faḍāil, *Histoire des Sultans Mamlouks*, *Patrologia Orientalis*, Vol. XX, Paris, 1928, p. 49 calls them “des marchands nègres originaires du *Kānem*”; see also Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *La Syrie*, p. 74.

6) R. Dozy, *Supplément aux Dictionnaires Arabes*, Paris, 1927, Vol. II, p. 460 “une corruption de *Kānem*.”

not come from Kānem in the Western Sudan and were not at all a homogeneous group as far as their ethnic and geographical origins were concerned.

The failure to explain the meaning of the term Kārimī is the more regrettable since the term appears in the Arabic sources in innumerable places in connection with the names and biographies of about 50 different individual Muslim merchants.

While the present writer in his first investigation of the problem many years ago, on the basis of the then rather limited Arabic source material, listed fourteen individual Kārimī merchants designated as such,¹⁾ additional search over the years has yielded many more bearers of this title. It is G. Wiet's²⁾ great merit to have enumerated in his splendid recent monograph up to 46 individuals who are expressis verbis called Kārimī merchants; he has thus supplied a much broader basis for an understanding of the problems involved.

This is still a relatively small number, considering the fact that the Kārimī merchants, as we shall see, were an important factor in the economy of Egypt for almost three centuries (1181-1484); it can only be hoped that with the accessibility of further Arabic sources, many more bearers of this designation will become known.³⁾

1) Walter J. Fischel, *Über die Gruppe der Kārimī-Kaufleute*, in *Studia Arabica* I, Rome 1937, pp. 67—82.

The present writer had continued to collect over the years a great deal of new material and was preparing a supplementary article when the study of Gaston Wiet appeared.

2) Gaston Wiet, *Les Marchands d'Épices sous les Sultans Mamlouks*, *Cahiers d'Histoire Egyptienne*, VII/2, mai 1955, pp. 81—147, undoubtedly the most exhaustive study on the topic up to date.

Prof. Wiet has greatly honored me by dedicating his brilliant study to me as the author of "la première et fructueuse monographie sur une question obscure et passionnante," for which I want to express here again in all humility my sincerest gratitude and appreciation.

See also the important essay by Ṣubḥī Labīb: *at-Tijāra al-Kārimīyya wa-tijārat Miṣr fi l-'uṣūr al-wuṣṭā*, in *Bulletin de la Société Egyptienne d'Études Historiques*, Cairo 1952 Vol. 4 pp. 5-63; and his recent article in *Der Islam*, 1957 pp. 324-329.

3) E. Ashtor in "The Kārimī Merchants", *JRAS*, London, 1956, pp. 45-56. refers to a passage in Ibn Hajar (fol. 16a) according to which there were more than 200 Kārimīs in Egypt in the time of al-Malik an-Nāsir. Of the eight names

The lack of clarity as to the meaning of the term *al-Kārimī* is coupled with the uncertainty as to the origin and first appearance of the merchants thus designated. Despite the progress made toward a more comprehensive study of the actual activities of the *Kārimī*, no new light has been brought out by the recent studies pertaining to the terminus a quo of their activities. The question when their earliest appearance on the scene of history occurred remains still unsolved. The year 1181 (577 H.) is still the earliest year in which the *Kārimī* are first mentioned, and this in connection with the payment of the *zakāt* for four years upon their arrival from Aden in Egypt.¹⁾ It can be assumed, nevertheless, that their activities go back earlier than this year 1181, though documentary evidence is still lacking.²⁾

After their first mention in 1181, a great silence prevails and little is recorded of their activities until the early decades of the 14th century. We can, however, assume that under the Ayyubids, as the result of the new commercial policy of Saladin which tended to close the Red Sea to foreign traders and to make the Red Sea a purely Islamic waterway, the *Kārimī* trade began to be consolidated and developed into an evermore powerful commercial factor.³⁾ Under the Mamlūk Sultans, then, the *Kārimī* were enabled to carry out uninterruptedly their economic activities with Yemen, Damascus, and other territories, and could expand and intensify them until they reached the peak of their prosperity

which Ashtor had listed, all, with the exception of one, have been listed previously by Wiet and Labib, with whose studies he apparently was not yet acquainted.

The name *al-Māḥūrī*, as in *Sakhāwī*, *Tibr*, p. 198, should be corrected to *al-Māḥūzī*; see *Sakhāwī*, *Dau' X*, p. 112; *XI*, p. 224.

1) Maqrīzī, *Sulūk* ed. Cairo I, pp. 72-73.

2) My esteemed colleague, S. D. Goitein, adds a very significant detail to the early usage of the term *Kārim* (see his study in this issue on page 175). Though unable to supply any new name with the title *Kārimī*, he could show on the basis of the Geniza material that the term was used in the sense of a convoy earlier than the actual mention of the first individual bearer of the title *Kārimī*.

3) About Saladin and his economic policy, see the illuminating studies by Cahen, Ehrenkreuz, Gibb, Goitein, B. Lewis and Labib.

in the 14th and 15th centuries. Under them the Kārimī figured most prominently in the economic and political life of Egypt.

Concerning the terminus ad quem, the repeated designation of leading Kārimī merchants as “the last of the Kārimī” and the continuous listing of Kārimī merchants as “the last” well into the second half of the 15th century indicate only that the term “the last” cannot be regarded in any strict sense as final. The disappearance of the term Kārimī toward the end of the 15th century (about 1475) indicates, however, that by then they had finished their historic role.

3

The lack of definite clarity as to the meaning of the term and the early phases of their activities, however, does not absolve the scholar from looking behind the problem and re-examining some of the aspects connected with the economic role of the Kārimī merchants.¹⁾

The Kārimī merchants are called “the merchants of pepper and spices”; and indeed these were their major, though not exclusive, articles which they traded in. The sources indicate that they dealt also with other commodities (matjar), such as agricultural products, textiles, silk, wood, wheat, flour, sugar, rice, weapons, armor and other valuables of Yemen.²⁾ Yet, pepper and spices were their special feature, and through their specialization in one type of commodity, the Kārimī merchants became closely connected with that country which supplied them with this merchandise: namely, Yemen. Yemen seems to have been their supply-center and the starting point of their commercial transactions, although some of the spices which they brought from Yemen to Egypt were most likely of Indian origin; it seems that they were bought by them not directly in India but were shipped by Indian merchants to Yemen, before the Kārimī took them over and transported them to Egypt.

How frequently these merchants carried their commercial cargo

1) For reasons of space, the footnotes to the following are reduced to a minimum and the reader is referred to the extensive footnotes and bibliographies cited in the above-mentioned studies by Fischel, Wiet, and Labib.

2) See Ibn Taghribirdī, *Nujūm* ed. Popper, V, 117, 121, 571. Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ* III, 461; IV, 32, 187; XIII, 341.

from Yemen to Egypt is not ascertainable. Out of climatic and technical considerations, we may assume that this occurred only at special periods of the year. The arrival of the Kārimī caravans in Egypt must have been an important event since the chronicles of the time found it sometimes worthwhile to register the date of the arrival of the Kārimī ships in Egyptian ports.

4

The transport of the merchandise from Yemen to Egypt and the itinerary, the exact road the merchants chose en route to Cairo, can be reconstructed on the basis of scattered passages in the Arabic sources.¹⁾ Their starting-point, their main port between the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, was the city of Aden, which at that time was a great commercial center and a transit port of considerable significance. From Aden the articles were brought over by ships through the Red Sea to the West side of the Egyptian-Sudanese coast, to such ports as 'Aidhāb, Quṣair, or sometimes even to aṭ-Ṭur or Suez. 'Aidhāb was particularly favored as the landingplace and the meeting-place of the Kārimī merchants because of its harbor facilities, its high water and the easy accessibility of their ships.

Quṣair, on the other hand, had the advantage of being nearer to the city of Qūṣ; and by using Quṣair the transport by land was reduced, although it made the oversea journey longer.

The transportation of the spices and other commodities by land was well organized; and most likely with the help of hundreds of slaves and camels, the merchandise was carried from the coastal port to the city of Qūṣ on the Nile.

Qūṣ, next to Cairo, was the most important commercial center of Egypt at this period. Because of its central role as a transit station, Qūṣ was called the "port of the merchants from Aden." Qūṣ was also the seat of a mint (ḍarb), and it is well known that in its vicinity were found mines of considerable content; it was also a center of ship-building for transportation up the Nile.

1) See among others Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ.*, Vol. III, 468-470, who has given interesting details on the four possible sea and land routes of the Kārimī. See W. Heyd: *Geschichte des Levantehandels im Mittelalter*, Stuttgart, 1879, II, pp. 63-68.

From Qūṣ the transport continued on barques along the Nile to Foṣṭāṭ, Old Cairo. This last phase of the transport was again seaborne over waters on barques.

For their seaborne transportation, the Kārimī merchants obviously had to use ships which were most likely their own property. It is indeed documented that the Kārimī had ships of their own. Reference is made to five Kārimī ships (*marākib al-Kārim*).¹⁾ According to a report of the year 1289, the Sultan of Yemen, al-Malik al-Mu'ayyad, on the occasion of the Muslim festival, arranged a big banquet on ships in the vicinity of Aden, which was attended by the captains of Indian ships, who used to come to Aden, and also, as expressly stated, by the ship-captains of the Kārimī merchants. The Kārimī merchants returned after the feast to their own ships and under their own flags.²⁾ It is reported that at one time three of the Kārimī ships were taken by pirates in the Red Sea, which had prompted the Egyptian authorities to convoy the Kārimī ships by a squadron of warships for protection against the pirates.

Arriving in Cairo, the seat of the head office of the Kārimī merchants and the terminal of their transport, their merchandise was stored in warehouses or storehouses (*funduq*, *fanādiq*) well known also in the economic history of Europe, in which articles from overseas were deposited and stored until they were disposed of or shipped to their destination. In the organization of the Kārimī trade, these *fanādiq* played a very central role. All along their trade-routes such *funduq* were built by them and for them. *Funduq* of the Kārimī were located in Aden, in Zabīd, Ta'azz, Jidda, Qūṣ, 'Aidhāb, and mainly in Foṣṭāṭ and Alexandria. In the topographical description of Cairo by the Mamluk historians, repeated reference to Kārimī *fanādiq* is made. Many a Kārimī *funduq* was established as a *Waqf*, a religious pious institution, by the Kārimī merchants, who built also a mosque within the walls of the *funduq*, which was then named after their owner or their founder.³⁾

From these *fanādiq* in Cairo or Alexandria, the spices were sold to

1) Ibn al-Furāt, Vol. IX, p. 7, 20. Qalqashandī, Vol. 3, p. 524; Vol. 4, p. 32.

2) History of the Resūliyy Dynasty of Yemen, ed. J. W. Redhouse, London, 1906 Vol. I, p. 261.

3) The contemporary Arabic sources, such as Qalqashandī, Maqrizi, Khalil az-Zāhiri, Sakhāwī, Ibn Duqmaq, Ibn Taghribirdī, Ibn Iyās, Ibn al-Mujāwir,

the European merchants from Venice, Genoa, Pisa, Marseilles or Barcelona.

It should be mentioned that not only the Arab historians, but also Christian pilgrims and visitors to Palestine and Egypt in the 14th century took notice of the pepper merchants in Egypt; and although the European sources¹⁾ do not use the Arabic term "Kārimī", they refer clearly to those caravans and ships carrying spices from India to Egypt, across the desert to Cairo and Alexandria, to be sold to the European merchants.

5

In the light of the biographical sketches, given in the Arabic sources, these Kārimī merchants appear as widely travelled individuals who had undertaken business trips to many parts of Asia, to Ormuz, China, and Samarkand, and even to Africa, to Senegal, before they actually began to specialize in the pepper trade. Undoubtedly they were the great merchant travellers of the time.

Their ethnic and geographical origins varied considerably; they came from Syria, from Mesopotamia, from Yemen, Abyssinia, etc. When they became "Kārimī" merchants their commercial activities began to be centered mainly around two poles, Egypt and Yemen.

As to the inner structure of their organization, we have every reason to think that Abū Makhrama, etc., have an abundance of references to the funduq institution of the Kārimī.

The institution of the Funduq as an *economic* factor in the East-West trade of Egypt from Saladin's time on would deserve a special comprehensive monographic treatment.

For the derivation of the word, see Dozy and Engelmann, *Glossaire des Mots Espagnols Dérivés de l'Arabe*, 1865, p. 139, and the studies by P. Casanova, Sauvaget, and Wiet.

1) See in particular the publications of the Institutum Biblicum Franciscanum: Fra Niccolò of Poggibonsi, *Libro d'Oltramare*, A Voyage beyond the Seas (1346-1350), Jerusalem, 1945.

Frescobaldi, Succi and Sigoli, A Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Palestine and Syria in 1384, Jerusalem, 1948, and also Emmanuel Piloti de Crète (1420), *L'Égypte au Commencement du 15ème siècle*, Cairo, 1950, ed. Dopp.

See also the present writer's study on B. de Mignanelli's Vita Tamerlani (1416), in *Oriens*, Leiden, 1956, Vol. 9, pp. 201-232.

to assume that all the Kārimī merchants were part of a closely organized corporation, *Genossenschaft*, confederation or even guild, dedicated to the spice trade. The assumption of their cooperative organization is also based on philological and terminological grounds. In referring to an individual Kārimī merchant, the Arabic sources use repeatedly such expressions as “he belonged to the Kārimī merchants”, “he was one of the famous Kārimī”, “he was the chief of the Kārimī”, or “belonged to the notables of the Kārimī”, etc. Even if we do not stress too much this hierarchic structure, we are confronted here with an organization or corporation, an organized body of merchants closely knit together, a collective group of men who associated themselves for the pursuit of a common commercial goal—trade in pepper and spices.

This assumption of the cooperative, guild-like organization is also supported by the very nature of their trade, since it is unthinkable that any one individual merchant, powerful and wealthy as he may have been, could have carried out single-handedly the large and risky seaborne and overland trade on his own without the help of associates and partners. It is an established fact in the history of medieval trade of all nations¹⁾ that the typical organizational form of sea-borne trade, actually the only possible form of transportation of commodities by sea in the medieval economy, was the association of all those interested in the same branch of commerce. The very character of such an enterprise, the export and import, the sale and purchase, the traffic problems, and other difficulties, made association, cooperation, mutual help and assistance paramount.

It seems that the corporation of the Kārimī was in many instances a family organization and that the leadership passed from father to son, from generation to generation. The children of the leading Kārimī were trained for their economic task at an early age and were sent away on special commercial missions. The biographical data indicate very clearly the “dynastic” structure of the Kārimī organization.²⁾

1) Max Weber, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, München, 1923, pp. 183 ff. See also Karl A. Witfogel: *Oriental Despotism, A Comparative Study of Total Power*, Yale 1957, p. 330/331, who refers to the Kārimī merchants and their economic importance.

2) Particularly prominent were the families of the Kuwaik, Kharrūbi, Maḥalli, Damāminī, etc. See Wiet, l.c. p. 114/115, who lists the genealogical ramifications of some of these big Kārimī families and so Ashtor, l.c. p. 49

The Kārimī organization was not only a professional unity, a corporation or guild, but also a confessional unity. The question of the participation of Jews in the Kārimī trade has been variously answered. M. Clerget regarded the Kārimī merchants altogether as Jews and maintained that among the Kārimī “on n’y trouve pas que des Juifs d’ailleurs”.¹⁾ This is just as wrong as the sweeping statement by R. B. Sergeant and A. Lane, that “in the histories of the Mamlukes of Egypt a Jewish family of bankers and merchants known as the Kārimī house is frequently mentioned.”²⁾ E. Ashtor, more cautious but determined to prove the participation of Jewish Kārimī merchants in the pepper trade, based his contention on some Judeo-Arabic documents from the Cairo Geniza, whose corrupt and vague text and undetermined date, however precludes any clear decipherment and is spurious and unreliable.³⁾

It is certain, however, as previously expressed by the present writer,⁴⁾ that the Kārimī were confessionally a homogeneous group, that the bearers of the title Kārimī were devout and pious Muslims, being unified through the common bond of Islam— and spices. Only two are mentioned in the available sources who were of non-Muslim origin; namely, one whose father was a Copt, but converted to Islam,⁵⁾ and another, ‘Izz ad-Dīn Abd u’l ‘Azīz b. Maṣṣūr (d. 1314), whose father was a Jew from Aleppo, but he — the son — was already a converted Muslim.⁶⁾ It is true, Jewish and Christian merchants as individuals and groups are well known to have been very prominent in overland and

1) M. Clerget, *Le Caire, Étude de géographie urbaine et d’histoire économique*, Cairo, 1934. II pp. 321-322; see also p. 317 on the institution of the funduq.

2) A Lane and R. B. Sergeant, *Pottery and Glass Fragments from the Aden Littoral*, in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, London, 1948, pp. 113-114.

3) See his article in *JRAS* 1956, p. 55 and his earlier reference in “*Kiryath Sefer*”, 1951, Vol. 18, pp. 199/206 and in his “*Toldoth hayehudim*” I, pp. 197-198.

4) Now supported also by S. Labib, l.c. p. 12, and Claude Cahen in “*Arabi-ca*”, Paris 1956, p. 339, see also D. Neustadt-Ayalon in “*Zion*”, II, 1937, p. 243.

5) Sakhāwī, *Dau’*, III, No. 406, p. 101.

6) For details about this merchant, his extraordinary wealth and wide travel experiences, see Ibn Hajar, *Durar al-Kāmina*, II, 383/384 and the sources listed by Fischel (p. 69, 71, 75), Wiet (p. 107/108), Labib (p. 12) and Strauss, *Toldoth hayehudim*, I, 281/282.

oversea trade in the lands of the Eastern Caliphate under the Abbasids, also in medieval Egypt under the Fatimids; they had conducted business transactions on a large scale and thus had a great share in the economic development of their time.¹⁾ But the Jews seemed to have lost their economic power in the medieval trade of Egypt at least before the rise and prosperity of the Karimites and were most likely superseded by such a powerful group as the Kārimī.

6

The extensive activities of the Kārimī brought about considerable changes in the Mamluk administration. The taxes which were levied on the merchandise of the Kārimī became a permanent and ever-increasing source of income for the government. Taxes were levied at various places, in the Hijāz, and then on Egyptian soil, in 'Aidhāb, Quṣair, Ṭur, Suez, etc.; and although the sources are too meager to indicate the actual size of the taxes as well as the actual prices of the products brought in by the Kārimī, the amount of taxes must have assumed considerable proportions.

The extensive commercial activities of the Kārimī merchants confronted the Mamluk administration in Egypt with new tasks. In order to cope with the new financial and administrative problems connected with the Kārimī trade, the central government in Cairo had to create new offices and departments and appointed special officials, designated exclusively to supervise and tax the ever-increasing trade of the Kārimī.

Among these administrative innovations was the office of a controller of the spice trade of the Kārimī (Mustawfī al-buhār wal-Kārim); it was his responsibility to supervise the import of the great variety of merchandise the Kārimī imported from Yemen, Aden, and later Djidda, into Egyptian territory and probably also to supervise the funduqs, their wares and their sale to European merchants.

Besides this controller, we hear also of other special officers, an overseer, inspector of the Kārimī trade (ustādār and mutahaddith) and an official set over the Zakāt, to which the Kārimī, as Muslims,

1) See W. J. Fischel: Jews in the economic and political life of Mediaeval Islam, London, 1937, pp. 44-89.

of course, were subjected. Special regulations had to be issued by the administration to deal with the trade of the Kārimī merchants in Egypt, and it was decreed that the taxes and customs derived from the Kārimī activities should be reserved for the Sultan.

In view of the financial benefits which the administration derived from the commercial transactions of the Kārimī, the Egyptian authorities were naturally interested in their protection and in the furtherance of their activities. A very important document has been preserved from the time of Sultan Qalā'ūn which is nothing less than a charter, an amān, a letter of safety for the group of the Kārimī, guaranteeing protection of their ships and caravans, undisturbed security of the roads and just treatment.¹⁾

7

Although the organization of the Kārimī corporation in all its details, the number of people and slaves whom they employed, the actual prices and profits, the amount of taxes and other dues they had to pay are not yet sufficiently documented in the sources,²⁾ we recognize as one of the general results of their activities the tremendous accumulation of wealth in their hands. In all the biographical sketches of the individual Kārimī members, the sources cannot praise too highly their prosperity and their wealth. Their wealth was proverbial in the whole realm of the Orient.

1) F. Wuestenfeld ed., *Die Chroniken von Mekka*, Göttingen, 1857 ff, p. 285.

2) The manifold references to the taxes and other payments of the Kārimī, scattered throughout the sources, do not yet supply a coherent picture, important as these details are. See also C. H. Becker, "Egypt", in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, II, p. 18.

My esteemed colleague, Prof. Claude Cahen, in a private communication, conveyed to me some details pertaining to the custom duties levied on the Kārimī in the port of Aden at the beginning of the 15th Century, from a still unpublished financial treatise which will soon be published by him.

According to another communication from Prof. Cahen, Dr. Labib has found in the Archives of Venice a document of the year 1400 pertaining to an agreement between a Kārimī and a shipcaptain for the transportation of commodities to Egypt with many interesting details. This publication, too is eagerly awaited.

Arabic sources repeatedly express their astonishment about one or another of the Kārimī merchants, in such words as “his wealth could not be counted”, or “no one surpassed him as far as money is concerned.”

The famous Arab traveler, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304-1378) must have known the extraordinary resources of these Kārimī merchants and their paramount importance for the Egyptian economy. In describing the tremendous wealth of the Indian pearl merchants of Daulatabad, the Sāha (Indian word for banker or merchant), he could not help find a better illustration and example than to say “they resemble the merchants of the Kārimī in Egypt” (he used here a strange plural form, “al-akārim”). Ibn Baṭṭūṭa compared also the Kārimī with Chinese merchants, with the Satī who have been regarded as the wealthiest merchants of China.¹⁾

Along with the wealth, their generosity and charity are constantly praised. They are admired for having spent funds lavishly for charity. Many a mosque, madrasa, khānqā, hospital or other religious Muslim institution in Mecca, Foṣṭāṭ and elsewhere would never have been founded, repaired or completed if not for the support of these merchants. When a fire destroyed almost one-third of the holy mosque in Mecca, it was the famous Kārimī merchants, Burhān ad-Dīn and Nūr ad-Dīn al-Maḥallī, who supplied a large sum for the restoration of the building.²⁾

8

It is an economic law well confirmed by history that prosperity in purely mercantile activities resulting in the accumulation of wealth leads by necessity to banking activities on the part of the successful merchants. Indeed the Kārimī proved no exception to this rule, and their great wealth and the availability of liquid funds enabled them to assert great influence on the monetary markets of Egypt and led them

1) Ibn Baṭṭūṭa IV, 49; IV, 259.

2) Many of the Kārimī merchants were men of high culture and science, teachers of Islamic tradition (Ḥadīth), composers of Arabic poetry and authors of religious books; one was even hailed as a chemist (see Ibn Taghribirdī, Nu-jūm VI, p. 281).

to the function of bankers and financiers in a very extensive way.

C. H. Becker had already referred to the banking activities of the Kārimī by stating "the Karamites had a bank which conducted international business on a large scale."¹) The sources confirm this statement by listing many financial transactions which show how the Kārimī entered the field of international finance by supplying loans and credits to individuals and governments.

The first recorded instance of their loan transactions goes back to the year 1288 at the time of the Mamluk Sultan Qalā'ūn. It is stated that the Sultan summoned some of the leading merchants from Damascus to Cairo and charged them with a very high fine; but fearing that these merchants, upon their return to Damascus, would not pay these fines, the Kārimī merchants of Cairo were urged to lend these Damascus merchants the amount. The Kārimīs complied with this demand and received in turn written obligations from the Damascus merchants.²) When in 1300 the Ilkhān ruler Ghāzān threatened the Syrian province of the Mamluks, the funds needed for the equipment of an army to repulse Ghāzān were requested from the Karimites.³) Maqrizī reports also of the establishment of a loan company between a Karimite and a Christian merchant, the capital of which to the amount of 20,000 dinars was given by the Karimite, while the investment was made by the Christian merchant.⁴)

In the middle of the 14th century, the Kārimīs were repeatedly called upon to supply loans to rulers and governments.⁵) At the request of the mother of the Yemenite ruler, al-Malik al-Mujāhid, who was then imprisoned in Cairo, the Kārimīs made a huge loan to her son.⁶) When the uprising of the Syrian government against the Mamluk Sultan in 1352 necessitated extra funds, it was the Kārimī merchants who had to supply them.⁷)

1) Encyclopedia of Islam II, p. 18/19; Islamstudien, Leipzig 1924 I, p. 186.

2) Quatremère-Sulūk II, 2nd pt. 92-93; Sulūk, ed. Cairo I, 739.15. Ibn al-Furāt, Vol. 8, p. 62. These obligations known as masāṭir, masṭūr (see Dozy, Supp. II) were, however, not honored by the Damascus merchants.

3) Sulūk ed. Cairo I, 899; Quatremère-Sulūk, II, p. 167.

4) Sulūk ed. Cairo II, pp. 103-104.

5) Nujūm, ed. Popper, V, 89. 19-26; 90. 1-8.

6) Nujūm V, 117. 9-15; cf. Durar III, pp. 49-50.

7) Nujūm, ed. Popper, V. 121. 8 ff.

The ramifications of their financial activities is indicated by the fact that they even gave a loan to the king of Taqrūr, Monsa Mūsa, in 1323, which caused them great difficulties because the king did unduly delay the return of the loan. The Kārimī merchant, Sirāj ad-Dīn ibn al-Kuwaik, sent first one of his associates and then went himself, but he died on the way and his son got finally the money.¹⁾

One of the biggest financial transactions for the financing of a war is reported for the time of Sultan Barqūq. In order to equip the army and to pay the soldiers for their march to Syria to repel the army of Tamerlane in 1394, the three leading Kārimī merchants—Burhān ad-Dīn al-Maḥallī, Shihāb ad-Dīn b. Musallam, and Nūr ad-Dīn al-Kharrūbī—were summoned to give a loan to the amount of one million dirham.²⁾ They supplied the funds for the Sultan and received in turn guarantees from the head of the financial administration in Cairo, Maḥmūd b. ‘Alī al-Ustādār, in form of written obligations.³⁾ Thus these Kārimī merchants helped indirectly to stave off the march of Tamerlane to the West, and by supplying funds and loans to the Mamluk government, actually contributed to the survival of the Mamluk regime.⁴⁾

9

The economic power of the Kārimites led by necessity to political

1) About him see Durar II, 405; Ibn Baṭṭūṭa IV, 431-432 and Encyclopedia of Islam under Senegal.

2) Nujūm, ed. Popper, V, 562, under the year 1394; Ibn al-Furāt IX. pp. 378-379. See also Nujūm, ed. Cairo I, 271-272 where, however, their title Kārimī is not given. The amount of the loan is variously given; see Ibn Iyās I, 302. 10.

3) This Maḥmūd b. ‘Alī, the Ustādār, was a very important figure in the financial administration in the time of Barqūq. About his monetary reform, see Nujūm VI, p. 277, 286; Ibn Khaldūn, ‘Ibar, Vol. 5, pp. 497-498 G. Wiet: Les Biographies du Manhal Safī, Cairo, 1932, p. 373, No. 2479 and the references to the sources; also Maqrīzī, Ighātha, p. 71. 2. Anastase-al-Karmeli: an Nuqūd al-Arabiyyā, Cairo, 1939, p. 61, 69. and now W. Popper: Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghribirdī’s Chronicles U. of Calif. Publ. in Semitic Philology Vol. 16, Berkeley 1957, p. 55.

4) It is strange that Ibn Khaldūn, who lived in Egypt during the conquests of Tamerlane and was an eye-witness of the events under Barqūq, does not mention this financial transaction at all. See Walter J. Fischel, “Ibn Khaldūn and Tamerlane: Their Historic Meeting in Damascus, 1401”, Berkeley, 1952.

influence, which they indeed asserted in many instances in the field of international conflicts. As intermediaries in the spice trade between Yemen and Egypt, any political conflict between these two countries would have affected their commercial activities. In times of tension and crisis between the two countries, the Mamluk Sultan chose ambassadors from the Kārimī merchants' group to straighten out the conflicts and to prevent a war between Yemen and Egypt, which, of course, would have had serious repercussions for the economic activities of the Kārimī and for the revenue of the state.¹⁾

It was in particular one of the most prominent leaders of the Kārimī, Burhān ad-Dīn al-Maḥallī, who was entrusted with special diplomatic missions and assignments to the court of the Yemenite ruler.²⁾ In peaceful times, too, leaders of the Kārimī merchants functioned repeatedly as intermediaries between the Egyptian Sultan and the ruler of Yemen.

Many conflicts and tense difficulties could be avoided or eliminated through gifts and presents which were freely and lavishly offered by the Kārimī merchants.³⁾ The presents given by the Kārimī to the Sultan of Yemen and those given in return by the latter to the Mamluk Sultans of Egypt are described in many details and amounted to tremendous sums.⁴⁾ Such gifts were, of course, the result of cold political calculation with which the Kārimī assured for themselves the peaceful conditions which were indispensable for their prosperity.

10

The activities of such an international trade cooperation was naturally dependent on a high degree of political stability. As long as the Mamluk Sultans would not interfere with the Kārimī activities and were satisfied with deriving from them all the economic and fiscal benefits, the Kārimī could flourish and develop.

Under Sultan Barsbay (1422-1435), however, the gradual decline and

1) Resuliyy I, p. 374.

2) Qalqashandī, Vol. 8, pp. 72-76, a letter to Barqūq. See Ibn al-Furāt, IX, p. 458, 13 ff.

3) Resuliyy Dynasty II, p. 139, 193, 198, 283.

4) Ibn Iyās I, 307.

dissolution set in when the government began to interfere with the trade of the Kārimī and introduced a new trade policy and a new method of taxation. The government itself went into the business of spice trade and curtailed the free enterprise which the Kārimī had carried out for centuries. Barsbay introduced the system of state monopoly for all the imported articles, spices, sugar, etc.,¹⁾ by fixing the sale of spices to the European merchants, only at prices which the Sultan himself determined. He applied to the Karimites the system of *ṭaraḥ*,²⁾ which is forced buying, in order to increase the profit for the government.

Thus, in 1428, he prohibited the Kārimī merchants to sell spices to the Italian merchants in Alexandria, and forced them to buy the spices from the government directly at a much higher price. The Kārimī could no longer sell spices without the Sultan's permission, and no one bought or sold spices except through the Sultan. Thus the Kārimī were eliminated as the chief merchants and became agents and employees of the government.

The free enterprise of the Kārimī came thus to an end through the monopolistic policy of Barsbay, a policy which was followed also by the Mamluk Sultan Khushqadam (1461).³⁾

Additional factors which brought about the decline and final disappearance of the Kārimī trade were undoubtedly the discovery of the route around the Cape of Good Hope — 1498 — and subsequently the rise of the Portuguese power and their penetration into the Indian Ocean.⁴⁾ The Portuguese colonization of the West coast of India, with their hold over the major ports and trade stations, set an end to the

1) Barsbay introduced a monopoly in sugar, and prohibited the planting of sugar cane. The sugar monopoly of Barsbay did, however, not last long and was revoked in 1424, only to be reintroduced in 1425. The Edict of the abolition of the sugar monopoly was engraved in an inscription at the Omayyad Mosque in Damascus.

See M. Sobernheim, *Das Zuckermonopol unter Sultan Barsbay*, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 1912, Vol. 27, pp. 75/84.

2) For the term *ṭaraḥ* see Quatremère, *Notices et Extraits* XII, 639; XIII, 214.

3) See Wiet, p. 105; Labib, l.c. p. 43/46.

4) See Kaemmerer: *Les guerres de poivre: Les Portugais dans l'Océan Indien et Rouge*, *Société Royale Géographique*, Le Caire, 1935.

Muslim pepper trade monopoly and contributed to the final disappearance of the Kārimī.¹⁾

The Kārimī made a definite contribution to the stability of Egypt throughout three centuries of their activities and added to the economic strength, to the prestige and leadership of Egypt of that time. In supplying Egypt and the lands of the West with the products of the East and particularly with the spices and pepper, the Kārimī merchants fulfilled a task similar to that which was continued later by the Portuguese, English, French, Dutch and other East India companies from the 16th century on, as whose forerunners the Kārimī merchants could regard themselves.

1) The last Karimite seems to have been Badr ad-Dīn Ibn ‘Ulaiba (d. 1484). See Ibn Iyās ed. Kahle, III, 202. Sakhāwī, *Dau* III, 90-91.