

# Mamluk Cairo, a Crossroads for Embassies

*Studies on Diplomacy and Diplomatics*

*Edited by*

Frédéric Bauden  
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Cover Illustration: Timur receiving gifts from the Mamluk ambassadors (*Zafarnāma* of Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī, Iran, Shiraz, 839/1436). Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. Keir Collection, England.

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## Three Mamluk Letters Concerning the Florentine Trade in Egypt and Syria: a New Interpretation

*Alessandro Rizzo*

On the basis of recent studies on medieval Arabic chancery documents, I examine some Mamluk documents related to trade between the sultanate and the city of Florence.<sup>1</sup> The Mamluk sultanate, and Alexandria in particular, became, in fact, one of the most favored Mediterranean destinations for the mercantile system of galleys established by the Florentine Republic after gaining control of the harbors of Livorno and Porto Pisano in 1421. From this date on Florence reorganized its sea trade with state ships that were made available to private merchants, thanks to the acquisition of these two direct outlets to the sea. The establishment of state-organized galley fleets, in imitation of the model of the Venetian navy, marked the beginning of diplomatic relations between the government of Florence and the Mamluk sultans.<sup>2</sup> From the first Florentine diplomatic mission to Cairo (1422) until the last years of the Mamluk regime, the exchanges between the Italian city and the sultanate were regulated and confirmed by documents that are today kept in several collections in Florence.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the documents in Arabic related to Florentine trade in the Mamluk realms are kept in the State Archives (ASF) and in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of my doctoral research, I have shed new light on these documents that represent a rare testimony of the diplomatic relations between the

1 To mention only a few recent studies: Bauden, *Mamlūk era documentary studies*; Bauden, *Les Relations*; Richards, *Mamluk administrative documents*; Dekkiche, *Le Caire*. The following two works do not concern the Mamluk chancery, but shed light on the method of diplomatic analysis of documents in Arabic and provide an updated bibliography: Martínez de Castilla, *Documentos*; Buresi and El Aallaoui, *Gouverner l'Empire*.

2 Catellacci, *Diario*; Corti, *Relazione*; Wansbrough, *Venice and Florence*; Wansbrough, *A Mamlūk commercial treaty*; Mallett, *The Florentine galleys*; Saponi, *I primi viaggi*; Tripodi, *Viaggi di ambasciatori*.

3 Archivio di Stato di Firenze (*fondi* "Signori," "Provvisioni," "Riformagioni," "Atti Pubblici," "Consoli del Mare," "Diplomatico, Varie IV"); Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Orientali 455 A.

4 ASF, Diplomatico, Varie IV, scrolls A, C, D, E, F, G, H, I; Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Orientali 455 A, scrolls A and B.

Mamluk sultanate and the cities/states of medieval Europe.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on the evidence in Arabic, I have taken into consideration the studies carried out over the past few decades that define the structure, the formulary, and the form of production of the documents drafted in the chancery of the Mamluk sultanate.

The Florentine documents were first studied by Michele Amari (1806–89) and, later, by John Wansbrough (1928–2002). These two scholars made significant contributions to Mamluk diplomatic studies but, in light of our current knowledge of diplomatic studies and history, we now know that they did not exhaust the informative potential of these sources. In some cases the analysis of these sources was affected by errors of reading and misinterpretations that modern historians must now correct. Amari published and translated eight documents in Arabic held at the Florence State Archives in his *I diplomi arabi del R. Archivio fiorentino*, a work printed in Florence in 1863.<sup>6</sup> Wansbrough worked on the translation and the critical study of the Mamluk documents kept at the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana and published his work in two articles in 1965.<sup>7</sup>

The documents that I study here have the shape of paper scrolls composed of several sheets pasted one to the other, according to the typical shape of the *darj* (pl. *durūj*), “scroll.” The letters (*mukātaba*, pl. *mukātabāt*) and other kinds of documents produced by the secretaries of the sultan took this specific shape. The documents kept in Florence are among the few Mamluk *mukātabāt* preserved to the present day. These missives were issued over the period of time (between 825/1422 and 916/1510) during which, as mentioned above, the city of Florence had intensified its trade with the Mamluk sultanate, as it tried to establish regular shipping lanes on the model of the Venetian *muda*. In this article I specifically consider three related scrolls that are evidence of the result of a diplomatic mission sent by Florence to the court of Cairo in 902/1497.<sup>8</sup>

These are three letters (*mukātabāt*) issued by the sultan’s chancery within a few days of each other: one (henceforth A) is held in Florence at Biblioteca

5 Rizzo, *Le Lys et le Lion*.

6 Amari, *I diplomi arabi*.

7 Wansbrough, Venice and Florence; Wansbrough, A Mamlūk commercial treaty.

8 For my PhD thesis, I have undertaken a review of all the Florentine scrolls, I have produced new editions and updated translations, together with a critical analysis of these documents that take into account recent research on the diplomacy and trade between Florence and the Mamluk sultanate. In this work, particular attention has been given to extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of the documents, aspects that were neglected at the time of Amari or in the more recent work of Wansbrough.



Medicea Laurenziana and is dated 25 Jumādā I 902 (29 January 1497);<sup>9</sup> the other two are kept at the State Archives of Florence. The first one (henceforth B) of these two is dated 7 Jumādā II 902 (10 February 1497)<sup>10</sup> and the second one (henceforth C) is dated 10 Jumādā II 902 (13 February 1497).<sup>11</sup>

Amari published B and C and correctly interpreted them as two official letters about provisions granted to the Florentines.<sup>12</sup> The first one was addressed to the governor of Alexandria and the other one to the authorities of Florence. However, it appears that the author of *I diplomati arabi del R. Archivio fiorentino* erroneously dated the two documents to the year 901/1496. John Wansbrough published document A, but he interpreted it as a treaty on behalf of the Florentine merchants and did not realize that this *darj* is in fact a letter addressed to the governor of Damascus. This misinterpretation meant that he did not correctly identify the recipient of the *mukātaba* and the specific nature of the document.

In the following pages, I define the historical circumstances in which these letters were produced, to show that the dating of B and C proposed by Amari was not correct; I do this by reconsidering the nature of document A published by Wansbrough.

Historically, the three documents dated to 902/1497 constitute proof that the relations between the city of Florence and the Mamluk sultanate resumed eight years after the last diplomatic contact between the two states (dated to 894/1489), as confirmed in the sources. During the 1480s, relations between the sultanate and Florence intensified significantly, contributing to make the Republic one of the most important interlocutors of the Mamluk Empire. In 889/1484, Qāyṭbāy (r. 872–901/1468–96) sent a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici (r. 1469–92), in which he informed the *Magnifico* of the arrival of the emissary Muḥammad b. Maḥfūz in Cairo from Florence.<sup>13</sup> In 892/1487, the same envoy returned to Florence and from there headed to Egypt in the company of the Florentine emissary Luigi della Stufa. These embassies led to the conclusion of the treaty of 6 Dhū l-Ḥijja 894/31 October 1489 which regulated the commercial activities of the Florentines in the lands of the sultan.<sup>14</sup> After Lorenzo's death, nevertheless, diplomatic correspondence between the two powers stopped.

9 Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Orientali 455 A, scroll B.

10 ASF, Diplomatico, Varie IV, scroll C.

11 ASF, Diplomatico, Varie IV, scroll I.

12 Amari, *I diplomati arabi* 184, 210.

13 Rizzo, *Le Lys et le Lion* I, 113–4; Amari, *I diplomati arabi*, Appendice 46.

14 Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Orientali 455 A, scroll A; Wansbrough, A Mamlūk commercial treaty.

The political events that followed the ascent of the Magnifico probably did not allow the Florentine authorities to restore contacts with Cairo, at least not immediately. A few years later, the government was able to send an embassy to Egypt. The three documents examined in this contribution represent the only remaining evidence of this mission.

## 1 The Problem of Dating

Before proceeding to the analysis of the three documents, I focus on the reading of dates mentioned therein. Amari dated B and C respectively to 7 Jumādā 11 901 [22 February 1496] and 11 Jumādā 11 901 [26 February 1496], thus ascribing the two documents to the preceding year, compared to the year that I believe they were issued.<sup>15</sup> The Arabist expressed his uncertainty by adding, next to both dates, a question mark.<sup>16</sup> Amari was misled by the fact that both documents appear to have been sent by Sultan Qāyṭbāy, who died on 28 Dhū l-Qa'da 901/8 August 1496, i.e., six months before the real date of issuance of these two letters. In fact, B bears Qāyṭbāy's *'alāma* (i.e., his signature consisting, in this case, of his name), while in C, he is identified as the sender of the missive. I address the reason these two documents look like they were sent by a ruler no longer in office after I tackle the problem of their dating.

Considering the passage of the original Arabic text, where the date is mentioned, the error made by the author of *I diplomati arabi* consisted in reading the words indicating the year as *sanat ihdā wa-tis'imī'a* (year 901) instead of the correct *sanat ithnatayn wa-tis'imī'a* (year 902) (see figs. 26.1–26.2). The two dates are indeed not easy to decipher. The problem is the reading of the first word that indicates the unit. In other similar documents issued by the chancery of Cairo, the initial *alif* always appears at the beginning of the word *aḥad/iḥdā* (e.g., the date of scroll F;<sup>17</sup> see fig. 26.3). In the case of B, this letter is clearly missing and the *ductus* leaves little doubt that the word must be deciphered *thnatayn* (ثنتين). As for C, the word clearly starts with an *alif*, but the remainder

<sup>15</sup> Amari, *I diplomati arabi* 209, 212.

<sup>16</sup> Amari thus justifies the interpretation of the data he provides in *ibid.* 436: "La data, scritta in furia, come l'è quasi sempre ne' diplomati egiziani, mostra tuttavia certo il numero delle centinaia ch'è nove e che non potrebbe mai leggersi otto. Di più v'ha un altro vocabolo innanzi le centinaia. Or Kaitbai morì il 12 dsu-l-ka'da 901. Dunque è forza leggere anche 901: e confermasi questa lezione con la data un poco più chiara del diploma XLI, ch'è lettera di accompagnamento data agli ambasciatori, quando ritornarono a Firenze col presente trattato."

<sup>17</sup> ASF, Diplomatico, Varie IV, scroll F.

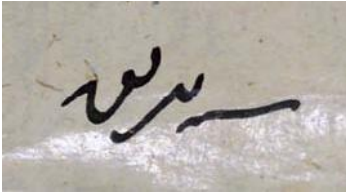


FIGURE 26.1  
The date in document B  
COURTESY OF THE STATE ARCHIVES OF FLO-  
RENCE

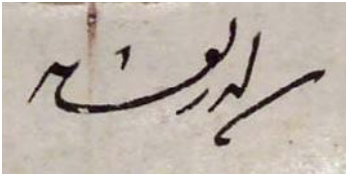


FIGURE 26.2  
The date in document C  
COURTESY OF THE STATE ARCHIVES OF FLO-  
RENCE

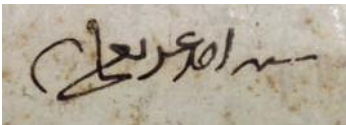


FIGURE 26.3  
The date in document F  
COURTESY OF THE STATE ARCHIVES OF FLO-  
RENCE

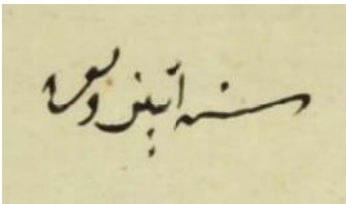


FIGURE 26.4  
The date in document A  
COURTESY OF THE BIBLIOTECA MEDICEA LAU-  
RENZIANA, FLORENCE

of the letters cannot be identified with *ihdā* given that the second letter is not comparable to a *hā'* (as in scroll F for instance; see fig. 26.3). Consequently, the word, though written in a cursive way, must be read *ithnatayn* (اثننتين).

Obviously, the presence of the Qāyrbāy's *'alāma* at the top of the document was not a sufficient reason to read *sanat ihdā wa-tis'imī'a*, given that, in the other letter taken into account in the present study (A), where the same signature appears, the decipherment of the date as *sanat ithnatayn wa-tis'imī'a* is not problematic at all and does not give rise to other possible interpretations (see fig. 26.4).

## 2 The Nature of the Three Letters

I begin with the study of the more recent letter, namely C, since it is useful to contextualize the three documents. In this missive to the authorities of Flo-

rence, the Mamluk chancery informed the addressees that emissaries of the Tuscan city were received at the court of Cairo. This embassy, according to the letter in question, led the sultan to grant provisions to the Florentine merchants to travel in Mamluk lands for their trading activities. These agreements granted the commercial operators of Florence rights similar to those enjoyed by the Venetians, such as, for instance, authorization to have their own consul in the city of Alexandria.<sup>18</sup> The letter also confirms that the Florentine emissaries left Cairo with Ibn Maḥfūz, most likely the same emissary who had been in Italy in previous years. This detail testifies to a certain continuity in diplomatic relations between Florence and the Mamluk sultanate in the late ninth/fifteenth century.

For the purpose of this study, the most interesting passage of the letter is that in which Sultan Qāytbāy (*sic*) communicates to the authorities of Florence, referred to with the term *mashāyikh*, that he ordered the issuance of two letters addressed to the governors of Alexandria and Damascus in order to make them aware of the provisions granted to the Florentines. Clearly, the new provisions in favor of the merchants of Florence had to be brought, as soon as possible, to the attention of the governors who ruled the commercial markets where similar commercial exchanges took place for foreign merchants. The examination of the two other letters (A and B), drawn up by the Mamluk chancery, a few days before the letter to the *mashāyikh* of Florence, respectively dated 25 Jumādā I 902/29 January 1497 and 7 Jumādā II 902/10 February 1497, leads me to argue that these are precisely the letters addressed to the governors of Damascus and Alexandria that are mentioned in the third letter (C).

As stated above, A was discovered by J. Wansbrough, who published it in an article that appeared in 1965.<sup>19</sup> Adopting a method of analysis that prevailed at the time he was writing, the American scholar examined the document in detail, although it seems he did not fully grasp its true nature. Wansbrough designated the scroll of the Laurentian Library under the generic term “treaty,” and, for the actual and evident similarities of content, related it to letter B, though he believed that the latter had been issued in 901/1496 (thus following Amari’s reading). More particularly, B is addressed by the sultan to the governor (*nāʿib*) of Alexandria, and includes a series of provisions that regulate and protect the trade of Florentine merchants, and was dictated by the ruler of Cairo at the request of the Florentine ambassadors.

18 Rizzo, *Le Lys et le Lion* ii, 213; Amari, *I diplomi arabi* 211–2.

19 Wansbrough, Venice and Florence.

In his article, Wansbrough writes that the drafting of the document he analyzed and the letter addressed to the governor of Alexandria (B), were in fact based on a Venetian-Mamluk “treaty” dating to 846/1442.<sup>20</sup> At that time, Venice constituted the main trading partner of the Mamluk sultanate. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the other European mercantile powers, when they made similar requests, referred to the model of the provisions (expressed in decrees) that Cairo had granted the Venetian merchants, in order to benefit from the same provisions.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in regulating the trade of merchants belonging to other foreign powers, the Mamluk government often referred to the rules that governed the exchanges with the Venetians.

Copies of the treaties concluded between Venice and Cairo are preserved in Florence. Therefore, starting from such analogies, Wansbrough assumed that documents A and B refer to the agreements of 846/1442 concluded between Sultan Jaqmaq (r. 842–57/1438–53) and the Venetian doge Francesco Foscari (r. 1423–57). He argues, correctly in my point of view, that there are three copies of the version of the treaty in Venetian dialect, two of which are now kept in the State Archives in Florence,<sup>22</sup> while the other is housed at the Museo Correr in Venice.<sup>23</sup> Amari published the edition of the better preserved copy of the State Archives,<sup>24</sup> while in his article Wansbrough presented an edition of the document from the Museo Correr. He then correlated the copy published by Amari with document B and that of the Museo Correr with document A. Relying on the corresponding contents, he demonstrated that the composition of document A was based on the copy found at the Museo Correr, while the draft of letter B was inspired by the document of 1442 preserved in Florence. However, what Wansbrough did not define is the precise nature of the documents in question.

Henceforth, I go beyond Wansbrough’s analysis in order to correct his generic definition of the documents as “treaties.” The document dated 23 Jumādā II 846 (29 October 1442), published by Amari, looks like a decree sent to the governor of Alexandria by the sultan to inform him that the Venetian ambassador Andrea Donato had gone to Cairo to request the extension of trade agreements between Venice and the Mamluk sultanate, and to request new provisions for the Venetian merchants. The *mandatum*, as defined in the first lines, written in Latin, contains a series of provisions whose application was to be ensured by the governor of Alexandria. The chapters devoted to trade in the port of

20 Ibid. 483–7.

21 Caselli, *Strategies*.

22 ASF, Diplomatico, Atti pubblici, Spoglio 3, no. 4.

23 Venice, Museo Correr, Fondo Donà dalle Rose, cod. 217.

24 Amari, *I diplomi arabi* 347–59.

Alexandria are followed by provisions relating to the Venetian trade in Damietta and by the letter sent by Sultan Jaqmaq to the Venetian doge Francesco Foscari, through which the sultan notified him of the reception of the Venetian embassy. On the other hand, the document from the Museo Correr, although lacking the heading and the first three clauses, looks like a letter addressed to the governor of Damascus. This is explicitly stated in several points of the same missive.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the content of this letter concerns the commercial exchanges of the Venetians in the Syrian territories.

Considering the elements that distinguish the two documents of 846/1442, I suggest that they constitute a translation into the Venetian dialect of the letters sent by Sultan Jaqmaq to the governors of Alexandria and Damascus, respectively, to make them aware of the agreements concluded with the ambassador of the *Serenissima*. At this point, it should be made clear why B presents similarities to the 1442 letter preserved in the Archives of Florence; they are both letters sent by the sultan to the governor of Alexandria. It is probable that when the Florentine emissaries required provisions for the merchants of their city operating in the Egyptian port, they made reference to those long enjoyed by the Venetians, who kept those letters in their archives.

Now that the obvious relationship between the other letter of 1442 related to Syrian trade and document A has been demonstrated, I argue that the latter is in fact the letter addressed to the governor of Damascus, to which document C, addressed to the Florentine authorities on 13 February of the same year, refers. In fact, document A presents a series of clauses on the activities of the Florentine merchants in Syria, references that are not contained in the letter to the governor of Alexandria. Therefore, the documents that Wansbrough describes as “treaties,” should rather be considered letters (*mukātabāt*).

Furthermore, the title designating the recipient of the scroll belonging to the Biblioteca Laurenziana, *al-Maqarr al-karīm*, was in fact at that time reserved for a small number of high ranking addressees,<sup>26</sup> among whom was the governor of Damascus, who had governmental responsibilities over the whole Syrian region. The titles were employed according to specific rules described in detail in the Mamluk chancery manuals, such as those of al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418)

25 Wansbrough, *Venice and Florence* 490, clause XIII: “Perche nui comandemo a vui Armiraio de Damascho che vui comande chel ...”; for another explicit reference, see *ibid.* 491, Cap. XVIII.

26 Dekkiche, *Le Caire* 361–6.

and al-Saḥmāwī (d. 868/1464).<sup>27</sup> In fact, the titles are part of a set of elements, intrinsic and extrinsic, such as the size of the scroll or the internal spacing in the document, which varied according to the status of the recipient and the category of the document. Al-Qalqashandī describes these titles as *alqāb makāniyya*, a formula that refers to the position regarded as a rank.<sup>28</sup> Nothing was left to the rhetorical creativity of the chancery's secretaries, rather every element of the document had a specific function, which the scholar of diplomatics must investigate. For instance, the governor (*nā'ib*) of Alexandria is addressed as *al-Janāb al-ālī* in the letter kept in the State Archives. This title is inferior, in terms of diplomatic hierarchy, to the one reserved for the Syrian governor.

The sultan's *'alāma* is another element that provides clues about the nature of the recipient. In the Mamluk era, the sultan used different kinds of signatures; these indicate the rank of the recipient and his relationship to the sultan. In the case of our documents, it must be noted that in letter B, to the governor of Alexandria, the *'alāma* consists of the formula *wāliduhu*, "his father," while document A presents the expression *akhūhu*, "his brother," both are accompanied by the sultan's name (Qāyṭbāy). Clearly, the link between the sultan and his representative in Syria was expressed by means of a symbolic relationship of brotherhood, a type of relation that his Alexandrian counterpart did not enjoy.<sup>29</sup>

Given this, if the absence of the term *mukātaba* in document B does not come as a surprise, my hypothesis is strengthened: this word was omitted precisely in letters to high ranking officials or sovereigns.<sup>30</sup>

### 3 The Exceptional Nature of the *'alāma*

Having examined and determined the true nature of the Florentine scrolls, the reason the three *mukātabāt*, the two letters to the governors of Damascus and Alexandria (A and B) and the missive addressed to the Florentine authorities (C), appear to have been sent by Sultan Qāyṭbāy, who had actually died the year before, must still be addressed. The letters to the governors of Egypt and Syria undeniably bear Qāyṭbāy's *'alāma*, while the one sent directly to Florence specifies that Qāyṭbāy is the sender. As we have seen, the presence of the sultan's

27 Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* v, 438–9, 493–502; al-Saḥmāwī, *al-Thaḡhr al-bāsim* i, 515–22.

28 Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* v, 493–502.

29 Al-Saḥmāwī, *al-Thaḡhr al-bāsim* ii, 646–7.

30 Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a'shā* vi, 342.

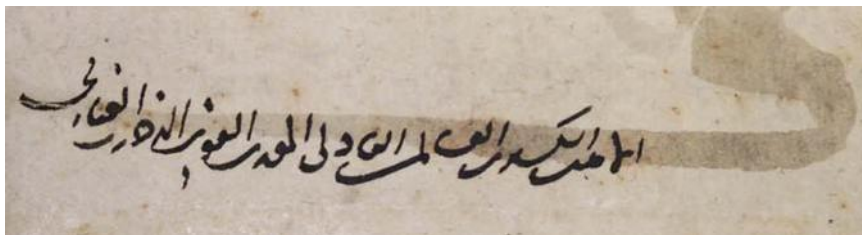


FIGURE 26.5 A line of text overlapping the sultan's signature in document B  
COURTESY OF THE STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORENCE

name misled Amari about the dating of the two letters he published in his work on the Florentine documents. If we now consider the two scrolls addressed to the governors of Damascus and Alexandria from a material point of view, it appears that their text was copied by the secretary after the sultan's *alāma* had been penned, which is contrary to the diplomatic practice. A close look at the first sheet of both letters demonstrates that the text in dark ink obviously overlaps the signature of the sultan (see fig. 26.5), which is written with a thicker reed pen and pale ink. It goes without saying that this is an exceptional case given that the sultan's signature had to be applied to the document once its contents were read to him and he agreed with them.<sup>31</sup>

Chancery authors' manuals indicate that the sultan's signature was added to the space reserved for it, i.e., the *bayt al-'alāma*, between the second and the third line, after the *basmala*.<sup>32</sup> However, some exceptions to these rules are reported by the authors of the chancery manuals, even though, to date, we have not identified any document that illustrates these exceptional practices. In a passage of his *al-Thaḡhr al-bāsim*, al-Saḥmāwī speaks of the figure of the *dawādār*, the executive secretary, and describes his functions within the *dīwān al-inshā'*, the chancery. Al-Saḥmāwī states that this official was responsible for the preservation of the material used by the secretaries working in his office, such as the paper and the ink.<sup>33</sup> Among the objects placed under his guardianship, as al-Saḥmāwī writes, were what he calls *al-'alāmāt al-murtaja'a* or *al-maqrūṭa*, namely the sultan's signatures prepared by the sultan in advance and then returned (*al-murtaja'a*) to the chancery for later use. The term (*al-maqrūṭa*) seems to imply that, in certain cases, the signatures were cut out of the scrolls (i.e., reused?). From this it can be deduced that in some, albeit rare, cases the Mamluk sultan did not sign documents directly, rather he prepared

31 Dekkiche, *Le Caire* 428–9.

32 Ibid. 341, 357, 400.

33 Al-Saḥmāwī, *al-Thaḡhr al-bāsim* i, 374.



several samples of his signature corresponding to the various categories. These signatures, executed in advance, could then be glued in the right place in the scroll before the document was drafted, as in the case of documents A and B. Undoubtedly, the two 902/1497 letters kept in Florence are an instrumental example of this practice.

#### 4 A Particular Form of Succession

The question that arises now is why the three letters concerning the trade of the Florentines do not bear the name or the signature of the sultan who was then ruling, i.e., al-Nāṣir Muḥammad b. Qāyṭbāy (r. 27 Dhū l-Qa'da 901 to 15 Rabī' 1 903/7 August 1496 to 31 October 1498), but rather that of his father and predecessor. The three documents of 902/1497 taken into account are linked, as we have seen, to a Florentine diplomatic mission to the court of the sultan to request the renewal of trade agreements previously agreed between Florence and the Mamluk sultanate (894/1489).

Between the conclusion of this agreement and the letters of 902/1497, no chancery documents testifying to diplomatic relations between Florence and Cairo have been preserved. It can be assumed that the government of Florence, content with the existing agreements, did not need to renew them until the last months of Qāyṭbāy's reign.

I would eliminate the possibility that the diplomatic contacts between Florence and the Mamluk sultanate which led to the three letters in question began after Qāyṭbāy's death. In fact, between the sultan's passing away and the issuance of the *mukātabāt* A, B, and C, six months had elapsed. Considering the duration of other embassies, it is unlikely that between Dhū l-Ḥijja 901/August 1496 and Jumādā 1 902/January 1497, the emissary Muḥammad b. Maḥfūz, mentioned in the letter C, went to Florence and returned to Egypt with the Florentine ambassador who obtained the agreements. Therefore, I provide here two examples to compare the duration of the diplomatic missions. The first Florentine ambassadors to the Mamluk sultanate left from Porto Pisano on 22 Rajab 825/12 July 1422 and they returned to Florence on 29 Šafar 826/11 February 1423.<sup>34</sup> On the occasion of Muḥammad b. Maḥfūz's second embassy to Florence, the emissary arrived in the Tuscan city on 24 Dhū l-Qa'da 892/11 November 1487.<sup>35</sup> Then he left Italy again with Luigi della Stufa, from

34 Catellacci, Diario.

35 Rizzo, *Le Lys et le Lion* i, 121; Meli, Firenze di fronte al mondo islamico.

Naples, on 20 Rabīʿ 11/23 March 1489. However, Luigi obtained the treaty that regulated the commercial activities of the Florentines in the lands of the sultan only on 6 Dhū l-Ḥijja 894/31 October 1489.<sup>36</sup>

In order to explain the presence of Qāyṭbāy's *ʿalāma* in letters dated after the sultan's death, with the current state of knowledge, we can only speculate. First, a look at the historical circumstances is necessary.

When the sultan passed away, the Mamluk sultanate lost one of its most skilled and longevous rulers. Qāyṭbāy had managed the sultanate through precarious times. The maintenance of the army of Mamluk soldiers and the advance of the Ottoman military threat had led to its increasing dependency on the precious metals brought by European traders, which they exchanged for spices. Venice far surpassed other nations in the spice trade; to the merchants of this city, stocks of spices were assigned at a fixed price annually by the Mamluk sultanate.<sup>37</sup> This agreement became increasingly onerous for the Venetian guild, as in 1489 it was unable to pay for pepper; this caused enormous financial damage to the Mamluk government.<sup>38</sup> In this context, the trade with minor—compared to the Venetian—powers should not be underestimated. Unsurprisingly, the agreements with the Florentines concluded in the late ninth/fifteenth century date back to the most difficult years, in economic terms, for the Mamluk sultanate.

In the last days of Qāyṭbāy's life, the conflicts between the Mamluk amirs who aspired to power, led to the appointment, by the caliph and the chief *qādīs* of the four legal schools, of the sultan's fourteen-year-old son, al-Nāṣir Muḥammad, who ascended to the throne on 27 Dhū l-Qaʿda 901/7 August 1496, the day before his father's death.<sup>39</sup> Considering this form of succession, and thanks to the analysis carried out by Ulrich Haarmann in a 1998 article,<sup>40</sup> we may investigate further the reasons for Qāyṭbāy's *ʿalāma* on the letters written at the beginning of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's sultanate.

The Mamluk government during the Circassian period almost never followed the standard principles of dynastic transition, which was the most common form of transition in medieval monarchies. In general terms, the hereditary succession was not unusual for the Mamluk regime: in fact, among the fifty sultans who succeeded one another between 648/1250 and 923/1517, twenty-five acceded to the sultanate by hereditary right. In a recent study, Loiseau

36 Wansbrough, A Mamluk commercial treaty.

37 Apellániz Ruiz de Galarreta, *Pouvoir et finance*.

38 Ibid. 197.

39 Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr* iii, 323–6; Petry, *Twilight of majesty* 117.

40 Haarmann, Joseph's law.

writes that the leadership of the sultanate had always been subject to the dichotomy between the ruler's personal will to transfer the throne to his natural descendants and the Mamluks' refusal to pass military honors (and power) to those who had not been slave soldiers and followed a particular training process.<sup>41</sup> The ninth/fifteenth century was the time of the long reigns of sultans Shaykh (815–24/1412–21), Barsbāy (825–41/1422–38), Jaqmaq, Īnāl (857–65/1453–61), Khushqadam (r. 865–72/1461–7), and Qāyrbāy. None of them acceded based on hereditary right. This is probably the reason the appointment of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad was perceived as an exceptional practice by contemporaries. Even if Qāyrbāy's son effectively became sultan in 901/1496, the testimonies about this succession differ and contradict one another. In a letter written by the Venetian consul at Alexandria and sent to Marino Sanuto in May 1496, the Venetian official wrote that Sultan Qāyrbāy had abdicated in favor of his son; the sender interpreted this decision as an act contrary to their customs, provided that only bought slaves could take power in the eyes of the Mamluks.<sup>42</sup> As the Venetian consul explained, Muḥammad was *fiol di la zente*, i.e., he was part of the *awlād al-nās*, literally “the people's sons” (“people” indicating here the elite of the Mamluks ruling the sultanate). As such, they enjoyed a special status, which in fact precluded them from the possibility of taking power. The testimony provided by Marino Sanuto is curious, as compared with other historical accounts, according to which Qāyrbāy was worried that the Mamluks opposing him might use his son to replace him.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, he imprisoned his son. The historian Ibn Iyās reports that the sultan, during the month of Rajab 900/April 1495, secluded Muḥammad in the barracks of the citadel and from that moment until his death he despised his son.<sup>44</sup> Such a testimony is hard to reconcile with the possibility that Qāyrbāy abdicated in favor of his son.

Whatever the exact circumstances of the succession and Qāyrbāy's agreement with it, we are certain that the transfer of power took place in 901/1496 in a way that was unusual for the ninth/fifteenth century. Formally, in fact, the main sultans during that century had never been part of the *awlād al-nās*. Whenever they ascended to the throne, they shared two common characteristics: they had held the office of *atābak*, and they had been responsible for the regency in the name of the preceding sultan's sons. Although, as we have seen, unlike the earlier Mamluk period, the later sultans did not effectively succeed their fathers. In 1496 the *atābak* was Timrāz al-Shamsī, who favored Muḥammad's accession to the throne, and waited for the struggles between the amirs

41 Loiseau, *Les Mamelouks* 111.

42 Sanuto, *I diarii* i, 262; Haarmann, Joseph's law 56–7.

43 Petry, *Twilight of majesty* 112–3.

44 Ibn Iyās, *Badāʾiʿ al-zuhūr* iii 308.

to subside in order to become sultan himself.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, Timrāz was soon imprisoned and replaced in the position of *atābak* by Qānṣawh Khamsumi'a, who had the same ambitions for power.<sup>46</sup>

Considering the exceptional nature of Muḥammad's sultanate, it can be assumed that the powerful Mamluks who actually exercised power in the name of the young ruler were waiting for the appropriate time to replace him. In this case it is possible that these amirs wanted the Florentine authorities to believe that the documents related to the agreements that were initiated during Qāyrbāy's life were produced by the same sultan and not by his temporary successor. It should be also taken into account that Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad's stability was so precarious that between 28 Jumādā 1 902/1 February 1497 and 1 Jumādā 11 902/4 February 1497 Qānṣawh Khamsumi'a succeeded in imprisoning the sovereign and was proclaimed sultan.<sup>47</sup> This interregnum happened in the days which elapsed between the drafting of documents A and B.

Despite these precarious circumstances, it is known that the sultan used to sign the documents issued by the chancery of Cairo and addressed to the governors of the sultanate. In this regard, it is noteworthy to mention a passage from al-Buṣrawī's chronicle. He writes that when the news of Qāyrbāy's death reached Damascus, many people reacted in disbelief. But these doubts were dispelled a few days later when Sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad sent the administrators of the Syrian capital decrees that bore his own *'alāma*.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, we know that the new ruler signed, with his own hand, the decrees sent to Damascus.

The precarious state of affairs at the beginning of Muḥammad's sultanate has been shown. However this does not provide an exhaustive explanation for the presence of Qāyrbāy's signature in documents drafted and issued after his death. Thus, while I have tried to define the exact nature and dating of the three letters, the question of the signature remains open.<sup>49</sup>

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47 Ibid. iii, 334–7.

48 Al-Buṣrawī, *Tārīkh* 182–3.

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