

## A Note on the Mamluk Historians' Description of Plagues in Egypt

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**Abstract:** The plague which took place during the Mamluk era had big impacts on the economic life in Egypt. This disaster caused high mortality and reduced the agricultural production. It is the aim of this article to analyse the plague which occurred fifty years before the fall of kingdom and how this disaster affected agriculture during that time.

**Key words:** Mamluk • Plagues • Egypt

### INTRODUCTION

The plagues which occurred in the Mamluk kingdom were not a new phenomenon but had already been known in the early Islamic period [1].

Many Mamluk historians mention the adverse effects these had on the economic life of Egypt's population [2-7]. This is also documented by modern scholars [8-9].

**The Plagues Before 872/1468:** The outbreak of the Black Death (*al-mawt al-aswad*) in 749/1348, during the reign of Sultan Hasan b. al-Nasir Muhammad, is well known in the history of the Mamluk kingdom. The plague began in Egypt during the autumn of 748/1347 and by Muharram 749/April 1348 it had spread all over the country, reaching its peak during the months of Sha'ban, Ramadan and Shawwal 749/October 1348 to January 1349. It came to an end in Dhu al-Qa'da 749/February 1349 [10]. The estimate given by Ibn Habib, a contemporary historian, that the Black Death reduced the population of Egypt by a third is perhaps not far from the truth [11-12]<sup>1</sup>.

**The Plagues After 872/1468:** The first Black Death pandemic was followed by recurring outbreaks of plague in Egypt right up until the fall of the

Mamluk kingdom [13-16]. For example, there is evidence that pneumonic plague recurred regularly in this period [17]<sup>1</sup>. The occurrences of plagues in Egypt from the period of 872-922/1468-1517 are shown in the following table:

Date	Plagues
873/1469	This first outbreak occurred during the reign of Qaytbay. The plague persisted in Egypt for several months, from Rajab/January until Shawwal/May [18-20].
881/1476-7	The second outbreak also occurred during the reign of Qaytbay. It continued for several months, from Ramadan/December until Dhu al-Hijja/April [21].
897/1492	The third outbreak also happened under Qaytbay. In this year, the plague started in Rabi' al-Thani/January and worsened in Jumada al-Akhira/March. In Sha'ban/June the plague lessened in intensity [22].
903/1498	The plague reached Qatya province in Jumada al-Akhira/January and then spread into Cairo in Rajab/February. It started to abate at the end of Ramadan/May [23].
909/1504	In this year, the plague reached its peak at the end of Dhu al-Hijja/June [24].
910/1505	This was a continuation of the previous year's plague. It intensified during Ramadan/February and Shawwal/March [25].
912/1507	The plague spread in Upper Egypt at the end of this year [26].
919/1513	The plague began early in this year and reached its peak in Safar/April and Rabi' al-Awwal/May [27].

The effects of plagues on the agricultural sector have been documented by many modern scholars [28-30]<sup>1</sup>, particularly as concerns the increased mortality rate among Egyptians as happened, for example, as a result of the Black Death. Thus, Abraham Udovitch says that demographic changes caused by plague affected Egyptian agriculture and that smaller harvests were produced [31]. While Boaz Shoshan likewise states that current assessments of economic trends in Egypt between 751/1350 and 906/1500 emphasise the causal relationship between depopulation and decreased economic productivity [32].

Al-Sayrafi estimates that at its peak about 4,000 people died in Cairo during the first outbreak of the plague in 873/1468 [33]<sup>1</sup>. According to Ibn Iyas, the plague caused death among children, Mamluks, black slaves, slave-girls and foreigners [34]. During the second outbreak of the plague in 881/1476-1477, about 2,000 of the royal Mamluks died [35]<sup>1</sup>. Later, during the third outbreak of the plague in 897/1492, about 200,000 people died [36-37]. This pestilence ravaged both the urban and rural populace [38]. On another occasion in 903/1498, about 200,000 people died because of the plague, 1,200 of them being royal Mamluks [39]. Another disaster occurred in 909/1504 and killed more than one hundred people [40-42]. In 910/1504, about 4,000 people died when the plague was at its most intense [43]. In 919/1513, the Bureau of Escheats recorded that 356 people died at the height of the plague [44]<sup>2</sup>.

The effect of the plague can also be seen in the countryside [45]<sup>2</sup>. A number of peasants died in the disaster and those who survived migrated to areas not affected by the plague [46]. In the plague of 881/1476-1477 some villages were abandoned [47]. According to al-Sakhawi, in 897/1492 the plague killed a number of peasants in Siryaqus and reduced a number of farmers to working in the farmyard at the Bilbays [48]. On another occasion in 919/1513, the plague hit Asyut and caused high mortality among the peasants [49-52]<sup>2</sup> This disaster affected those members of the population who worked in the agricultural sector, especially in cultivation or harvesting.

### CONCLUSION

The recurrences of plague in Egypt during the period under review affected the agricultural sector. The resulting depopulation caused a shortage of workers and this led to the decrease of agricultural products.

<sup>1</sup> During the Middle Ages, Egypt had three to four million inhabitants.

<sup>2</sup> There were various types of the disease during the Mamluk period, such as bubonic, septicaemic and pneumonic plague. Pneumonic plague is distinguished by the sufferers spitting blood as a result of massive infection of the lungs. This form of plague tends to occur primarily in the winter. See Michael W. Dols, "The Second Plague Pandemic and its Recurrences in the Middle East: 1347-1894," in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 22 (1979), p.173. Pneumonic plague is almost 100 per cent fatal and death occurs within twenty-four to thirty-six hours.

<sup>3</sup> In some European countries plagues had almost the same effect as they had in Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Sayrafi estimates the number of deaths by counting the biers that were prayed over in one important oratory in Cairo and roughly multiplying that number by the number of principle oratories in the city.

<sup>5</sup> This was because they were young and not sufficiently immune.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Iyas says that this figure represented as little as ten per cent of the total number of deaths in Cairo during that year

<sup>7</sup> Sato remarks that the repeated outbreak of plague also affected the Egyptian society

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to estimate Egyptian mortality rates in the rural areas during the period under review. No records of deaths among the peasants were kept. Moreover, most contemporary estimates of death are for major cities and are of little assistance in estimating rural depopulation.

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