

Jewish Settlement in the Land of Israel during the Mamluk Period

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Abstract

The Mamluk period (1260-1517) in the Land of Israel was marked by significant changes and challenges for the Jewish communities. This paper examines the state of Jewish settlement during this era, focusing on the socio-political dynamics, economic activities, and religious life. Despite the political instability and occasional persecutions, Jewish communities managed to sustain their presence and contribute to the cultural and economic fabric of the region. By analyzing historical records, archaeological findings, and contemporary accounts, the paper highlights the resilience and adaptability of Jewish settlers during the Mamluk rule.

Introduction

The Mamluk Sultanate, which controlled the Land of Israel from the mid-13th century until the early 16th century, was a period of fluctuating fortunes for Jewish communities. The Mamluks, a military caste that rose to power in Egypt and expanded their rule to include the Levant, brought stability and order after the chaos of the Crusades. This paper explores how Jewish settlements adapted to Mamluk rule, examining their economic activities, social structures, and religious life.

Political and Social Context

The Mamluks, having established their dominance after defeating the Mongols and the Crusaders, imposed a feudal system that affected all inhabitants of the Land of Israel, including Jews. The Mamluk regime, although Islamic and often restrictive towards non-Muslims, allowed for a degree of religious autonomy. Jews were classified as dhimmis, a protected but second-class status, which permitted them to practice their religion and maintain communal structures in exchange for paying the jizya (poll tax) (Stillman, 1979).

Despite these constraints, Jewish communities found ways to adapt and thrive. Major Jewish settlements during the Mamluk period included among others, Jerusalem, Safed, Hebron, and Gaza. These cities not only housed significant Jewish populations but also became centers of religious and economic activity.

Economic Activities

The economic life of Jewish communities under Mamluk rule was diverse and dynamic. Jews engaged in various trades and crafts, including textiles, metalwork, and commerce. Some Jews served as intermediaries in trade between Muslim and Christian merchants, leveraging their diasporic connections (Gil, 1992). The presence of Jewish merchants in key port cities such as Acre and Jaffa facilitated international trade, contributing to the local economy.

Agriculture was another important sector for Jewish settlers. They cultivated crops like olives, grapes, and wheat, which were vital for both local consumption and export. The stability brought by the Mamluk administration allowed for agricultural development, though Jews often faced challenges such as heavy taxation and periodic local hostilities (Ben-Shalom, 2005).

Religious and Cultural Life

Religious life flourished during the Mamluk period despite occasional restrictions. Jewish communities maintained synagogues, yeshivas (religious schools), and charitable institutions. Jerusalem, in particular, saw a resurgence of Jewish religious activity. The establishment of the Ramban Synagogue in 1267 by Nahmanides marked a significant moment in the re-establishment of Jewish presence in the city (Elazar, 1989).

Safed emerged as a major center of Jewish mysticism and scholarship, which would later culminate in the development of Kabbalah in the 16th century. The Jewish community in Safed benefited from the relative security and prosperity of the region, attracting scholars, mystics, and refugees from Europe and the Middle East (Scholem, 1971).

Cultural exchanges between Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities enriched the intellectual and spiritual life of the Jews in the Land of Israel. Jewish scholars engaged with the broader intellectual currents of the Islamic world, contributing to fields such as philosophy, medicine, and science.

Challenges and Resilience

The Mamluk period was not without its challenges for Jewish communities. Periodic outbreaks of violence, such as the attacks on Jews in Jerusalem in 1391 and 1401, and natural disasters, like the earthquakes in the Galilee, tested the resilience of Jewish settlers (Frenkel, 2004). Additionally, the heavy taxation and legal restrictions imposed by the Mamluk authorities created economic and social pressures.

Despite these difficulties, Jewish communities demonstrated remarkable resilience. They maintained strong communal structures and networks, both locally and with the wider Jewish diaspora. The support from Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East helped sustain Jewish life in the Land of Israel during times of hardship.

Conclusion

Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel during the Mamluk period was characterized by resilience and adaptability in the face of political and economic challenges. Jewish communities managed to sustain their religious, economic, and cultural life despite the restrictions imposed by the Mamluk authorities. The legacy of Jewish life during this period laid important foundations for the subsequent resurgence of Jewish settlement in the Ottoman era and beyond.

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