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Ayyubids (1169–1250)

The Ayyubid dynasty was founded by Saladin (Salah-al-Din b. Ayyub, d. 1193), a military commander of Kurdish descent, who deposed the Fatimids and assumed control over Egypt in 1171. The commitment to jihad, the abolition of taxes deemed illegal by Islamic law, and the patronage of religious learning and Sufism, all spearheaded by Saladin, were presented as part of the wider ideology of the regeneration of the umma (prophetic traditions). His victory over the army of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and reconquest of Jerusalem in 1187, the apex of his career, immortalized him in Arabic historiography and popular culture as a heroic prince of virtue.

Before his death in 1193, Saladin concluded a peace treaty with Richard the Lionheart, leader of the Third Crusade, and bequeathed his domain to his son, brothers, and nephews, who formed a confederation of autonomous principalities of varied size and importance. It was a novel political organization for Syria and Egypt, reminiscent of the Buyid confederation (946–1012). Coherence largely depended on the authority of the sultan—the reigning head of the clan, usually situated in Cairo. Prerogatives of sultans included the vow of allegiance from the lesser princes and the mention of their names on coins and in the Friday noon sermon (khutba). The sultan in turn recognized the authority of the Abbasid caliph and repeatedly sought his formal investiture. Conflicting interests, a mobile military elite, and shifting alliances—some forged with external enemies—undermined familial solidarity and the confederation’s stability, yet most internal conflicts ended in agreements and territorial adjustments. Diplomacy and coexistence were also preferred to warfare with the Franks.

In 1250, Mamluk conspirators murdered the heir of the Ayyubid sultan who had made Turkish slaves the principal element in his army. By 1260, following the Mongol onslaught, only the principality of Hama in northern Syria remained in the hands of Ayyubid princes (until 1342).

Ayyubid rule brought economic renewal. Changes in the system of iqtā’ (grants of land to the military) and the reclamation of land led to greater agricultural production; cities and commerce expanded. Culturally, Syria assumed the leading position in the Arab-speaking lands, attracting immigrants and refugees.

The Ayyubids inherited most of their civil and military institutions from the Fatimids, Abbasids, and Seljuqs, including the division of the administration into three main offices: the chancellery (dīwan al-insha’), the office of military affairs (dīwan al-jaysh), and the treasury (dīwan al-mal). The armies had no clear system of ranks and command; the officer corps was by and large hereditary. Toward the end of Ayyubid rule, Syria and Egypt underwent a steady process of militarization, strikingly reflected in the appointment of the mamlūk—a military official entrusted with the supervision of the civil administration.

The Ayyubid period does not seem to have produced political thinkers of great caliber, yet three contributors to the field of government and administration deserve to be mentioned: ‘Ali al-Harawi (d. 1215), better known as the author of the first pilgrim’s guide to Syria, wrote his Tadhkirah Harawiyya fi al-Hiyal al-Harbiyya (On the ruses of war) and Wasiyya Harawiyya (Last counsels) in the tradition of Mirrors for Princes for al-Malik al-Zahir (d. 1216) of Aleppo. He addresses warfare and government, recommending piety, justice, sound fiscal and economic administration, surveillance of judges and officials, respect toward religious scholars and foreign ambassadors, wariness of bad counselors, secrecy and discreetness, and caution and patience. Above all, he calls for fidelity to the shari’a and military might, in light of Saladin’s example.

Sibt b. al-Jawzi (d. 1257), Damascene historian and popular preacher, is considered another of the Mirrors for Princes, Al-Jalis al-Salih wa-l-Anis al-Nasih (The good counselor), composed for al-Malik al-Ashraf (d. 1239) of Damascus, in his praise. Sibt b. al-Jawzi lists trustworthiness, grace (fadi), justice, piety, the patronage of scholars, and the love of beneficence and munificence as attributes of a good ruler. He ends his book with stories (hältayt) of exemplary rulers of the past.

As’ad b. al-Mammari (d. 1209), author of Qawwanin al-Dawawin (Rules of administration), provides a detailed description of the administration of Egypt under the Fatimids and the Ayyubids, written as a guide for state officials (kuttāb) for the sultan al’-Aziz ‘Uthman. See also Mirrors for Princes; Saladin (1138–93)

Further Reading

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The history of Azhar, a mosque and an institution of religious learning situated in Cairo, Egypt, has reflected shifts in political power since its foundation in 970 by the Fatimids. Historians have disagreed about the role of Azhar as a tool for political and religious propaganda under the Fatimids, and there is no consensus on when
Azhar became a central institution of learning. Under the Mamluks, it was a major institution for the transmission of knowledge, and this continued in the early Ottoman period, with the top positions within the institution occupied by Ottoman officials. Its influence and reach went beyond Egypt, and Azhar became a site where knowledge, religious authority, and politics were tightly linked. Its prominent 'ulama' (religious scholars) participated in a partnership with the rulers, but the 'ulama' rarely held the upper hand. They mediated between the rulers and the Egyptian populace, relaying the demands of the general public to the sovereign and vice versa and helping maintain social stability. Thus Azhar participated in politics through negotiation rather than overt opposition or strong political leadership. The 'ulama' would articulate political advice (nasīṭa) to the ruler but rarely expressed overt opposition.

In the early 19th century, Azhar and its 'ulama' were politically marginalized by the emergence of a strong state that aimed at reforming its own administrative structures and transforming the domains of law and education. Through these reforms, Islam lost its preeminence in the two domains where the 'ulama' had previously been the main actors. New channels for educating the elites were created, and Azhar's scholars and the student body suffered from the competition with new schools (such as Dar al-Ulum, established in 1872). Muslim scholars and reformers in the 18th and 19th centuries also articulated strong critiques of Azhar and its 'ulama', who they said had become passive and were more interested in life in this world than in the defense of their religion. This economic and social marginalization did not mean that Azhar entirely lost its significance. Rather, its 'ulama' still had relevance in normative and political debates, at least as individuals if not as representatives of their institution. The political constraints around them changed, however, as the modern state's reach and regulatory power in society weakened Azhar's influence on Egyptians. This transformation of state power found its apex in postcolonial Egypt when President Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime nationalized the religious endowments (waqfs; 1952–53), put an end to the existence of shari'a courts (1955), and introduced wide-ranging reforms at Azhar itself (1961). This series of changes circumscribed the power of Azhar further: its 'ulama' were deprived of their judicial domain, they lost their economic independence, and they became civil servants within a bureaucracy at the service of the state. They did not all accept this new set of circumstances; some prominent 'ulama' resigned in opposition. The curriculum of Azhari institutes and of the university was transformed with the introduction of new subjects, in particular faculties for secular knowledge that were added to the older faculties of theology (usul al-din), law (shari'a wa-qanun), and Arabic language ( lugha 'arabiyya). The Nasserist regime echoed many of the criticisms directed earlier at Azhar for its passivity, in particular the Muslim Brotherhood's criticisms of Azhar as a dormant institution, which had helped justify the state's reforms. The reinvigoration of Islam had become the task of the state.

Many 'ulama' from Azhar continued, however, to view themselves as the guardians of the tradition, and they resented Nasser's transformation of their institution. For instance, Azhar was forced to condemn the Muslim Brotherhood when the state fought them and to legitimate socialism from an Islamic point of view. During the presidency of Anwar Sadat, however, gaining greater space to maneuver and armed with the large state bureaucracy that Nasser had created, the 'ulama' attempted to reform politics through their own articulation of Islamic norms. They did this, for instance, by appealing to the state for the implementation of Islamic law in the 1970s and by providing their own draft of an "Islamic constitution" in 1979. Far from losing their ability to participate in political debates, the 'ulama' insisted on the necessity of implementing societal and political Islamic norms as they understood them. They also reinvigorated a classical political trope in the history of Sunni Islam: in a state whose religion is Islam and for which the shari'a is the main source of legislation—as is stated in the Egyptian constitution of 1980—it is the duty of the 'ulama' to articulate the Islamic norms to be followed by the state. Hence it is the responsibility of the 'ulama' to lay down the Islamic norms—but certainly never to govern on their own—and it is the responsibility of the policy makers who are in power to implement them. This reinvigoration of the partnership between those who have the knowledge of the foundations of Islamic law and those who devise state policy did not always provide Azhar with more legitimacy, however. This very partnership with the authoritarian state, and the administrative status of Azhar as a state institution, put Azhar's officials at odds with members of Islamist movements. Within Azhar, this partnership paradoxically created resistance against state policies through the voice of some 'ulama' aligned with Islamist discourses on diverse subjects from the criteria for pious public behavior to international relations. Whereas Islamist movements in general have had a negative view of Azhar's 'ulama' as the scholars "of the state," Azhar's leadership has been able to show some autonomy at times to force its way into politics and to make its voice heard, especially through 'ulama' expressing themselves in the Egyptian public arena and beyond.

See also Egypt; madrasa; 'ulama'

Further Reading


MALIKA ZEGHAL