

CHAPTER IV

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EGYPT

*

THE rôle of Egypt in the politics of the Crusades was of supreme importance.⁴² It has often been argued that the ultimate defeat of the Latins in the East was largely due to their failure to seize and hold the great cities of Syria like Damascus and Aleppo, which would have enabled them to threaten Baghdad and Iraq. A much weightier reason was their inability to drive the enemy out of Egypt. The Crusading leaders were fully aware of the military and strategic importance of the Nile Valley and the Delta, and they well knew that their positions in Syria could be imperilled by a Muslim pincers movement launched from Egypt in the south and from upper Mesopotamia in the north. Time and again, from the expedition of Baldwin I in 1118 to the capture and sack of Alexandria by Peter of Cyprus in 1365, they tried to conquer or cripple the nearest, most powerful and most dangerous of the Muslim States of this age. Had Egypt fallen, the whole future of Islam would have been placed in jeopardy; the Maghrib would have been cut off from the eastern Muslim world, and the Franks could have made direct contact with the Christians of Nubia and Abyssinia. In fact, the Crusaders never gained a permanent footing in Egypt, and it was a Muslim offensive from that land which finally expelled the Latins from the Levant.

To understand why the possession of Egypt was so fiercely contested at this time, we must remind ourselves of certain facts of Egyptian history and geography. Except for the heights

to the north of Cairo known as the Mukattam Hills, the country is almost completely flat: it is also rainless and treeless. In consequence, no land is easier to govern, consisting as it does of just river and desert, and being destitute of mountains or forests which could give shelter to rebels and facilitate the waging of guerilla war. The Nile mud provides a rich, fertile soil which has made Egypt for ages one of the world's chief granaries. The Arab conquerors of the seventh century were amazed at its wealth; and their leader Amr described it as 'a storehouse of corn and riches and blessings of every kind'. The Egyptian people are mostly peasants—passive, industrious, timid and unwarlike—who have watched apathetically wave after wave of invasion pass over them.

Since the days of the Pharaohs, Egypt has rarely been governed by her own sons: she has bowed successively to Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Arabs and Turks, but during the greater part of the Middle Ages, though ruled as usual by foreigners, she found herself not only an independent sovereign State but a Great Power. Under the Roman Emperors and the Arab Caliphs she was simply a province of a vast imperial realm and as such usually oppressed and exploited, but with the break-up of the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth century, she recovered her political independence. From the time when Ahmad b. Tulun, a Turkish slave who had risen to high command in the Caliph's armies, made himself effective master of Egypt in 868 and disclaimed all but a nominal allegiance to the Abbasid in Baghdad, down to the conquest by the Ottomans under Sultan Selim in 1517, the land was free from external control and interference.⁴³ It was during this long period of six hundred and fifty years that it attained a degree of power and prosperity it has never enjoyed since.

Several factors account for medieval Egypt's wealth and strength. First, as an independent State, her revenues were no longer diverted abroad in the form of tribute to Baghdad, but were spent at home. Secondly, her rulers from Ahmad b. Tulun's day onwards, instead of being governors appointed by the distant imperial power for brief terms of office during which they tried feverishly to enrich themselves at the expense of the country, were sovereigns resident in Egypt who desired from

motives of pride and interest to build up her resources. Thirdly, the defence of Egypt was entrusted to her own army, recruited from hardy races like the Berbers, Sudanese, Circassians, Kurds and Turks. Fourthly, strenuous efforts were made to develop her economy. In imitation of the practice of the Pharaohs, the Ptolemies and the Romans, a fleet was created in the Red Sea; commercial relations were fostered with India and the Far East; and Egyptian control was extended over the Hijaz (which meant a large share of the profits of the pilgrim caravans to Mecca), Aden, the Yemen and the Straits. Owing to the political disorders which followed the disruption of the Caliphate, the land routes across Western Asia became insecure, the trade of Persia and Iraq fell off, and the silks and spices of the East tended to go by sea under the protection of the Egyptian navy, which for long dominated the Indian Ocean. The rise in the customs revenue of Egypt was spectacular. Fifthly, the spread of Islam in Africa opened up direct relations with the negro peoples of the Sudan, and regular supplies of gold from Senegal, the Niger and Nubia began to reach Egypt and Barbary. By 950 the gold dinar had become the international currency throughout Islam.⁴⁴ The result was to prime the economy of Egypt and her neighbours, as the gold discoveries in California and Australia primed that of the West in the nineteenth century. Finally, Egypt enjoyed a long period of relative internal peace and security. Serious disorders, of course, usually accompanied a change of dynasty, and even before the Crusades there were often Byzantine naval attacks to be beaten off, but the country was never devastated as Barbary was by the Banu Hilal in the eleventh century or Western Asia by the Mongols in the thirteenth.

This prosperity reached a high level during the two centuries of Fatimid rule (969-1171). For a time Egypt was the greatest Power in the whole Mediterranean area; the Fatimid Caliphs reigned from western Arabia to the frontiers of Morocco; they controlled Sicily and Malta as well as North Africa, and the old Egyptian capital Fustat was enlarged and beautified into the splendid metropolis which they named al-Kahira, 'the Victorious', corrupted in Western speech into Cairo.⁴⁵ The

commerce of the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean converged on Egypt;⁴⁶ Amalfi, Venice and other Italian trading republics began carrying timber and slaves to Alexandria in return for luxury goods from the East, demand for which kept pace with the slowly rising living standards of the West, and the Fatimid Government encouraged the manufacture of paper, porcelain and carpets, which soon became lucrative objects of export. The economy of Egypt was a kind of State Socialism, such as had been traditional since Pharaonic times: transport, the mining and metal industries, and the making of arms were all under State control, and a Persian visitor around 1050 noted the existence of no less than twenty thousand 'government shops' in Cairo.⁴⁷ Travellers praised the order and security and excellent police arrangements of Egyptian cities, and were astonished at the magnificence of the palaces, mosques, colleges and other public buildings. Cairo was intended to outrival Baghdad, and was indeed worthy of its status as a great imperial capital.

By the time the Crusades had begun, however, the Fatimids were showing signs of going the way of other oriental dynasties. As Ismailian heretics they were hated and feared by the orthodox and were at enmity with the rest of the Muslim world. Tolerant and liberal though they were, their Shia tenets never struck deep root among their subjects, on whose religious loyalty they could therefore never count. A terrible famine, which lasted for seven years (1066-73) undermined the foundations of the State. The discipline of the army broke down, and the Turkish and Sudanese mercenaries fought each other in the streets and terrorized the countryside. The outlying provinces of the empire (North Africa, Sicily, Syria and the Hijaz) either revolted or were conquered by enemies of the Fatimids, and the Seljuk Turks pressed down into Palestine and threatened Egypt itself. For a time the ruin of the régime was averted by the abilities of two Armenians, Badr and Afdal, father and son, who ruled the land successively from 1073 to 1121 as virtual dictators. They re-established order in Egypt and recovered Palestine from the Seljuks, but Afdal was unable to check the progress of the Crusaders, and it was from Fatimid hands that Jerusalem was wrested in 1099. To throw back the

Frankish invasion was clearly beyond their power, and this failure contributed not a little to their eventual downfall.

King Baldwin I, one of the ablest of the Latin princes of the East, resolved to reduce Egypt, and after seizing Aila at the head of the Gulf of Akaba in order to cut her communications with Muslim Asia, he marched across Sinai towards the Nile, only to die of fever on the frontier in 1118. His death afforded a respite to the Fatimids, but the murder of Afdal three years later was followed by fresh turmoil in Egypt, of which, however, the Franks were unable to take advantage because of the rise of Nur ad-Din and the loss of Edessa in 1144. But in 1153 Baldwin III besieged and captured Ascalon, the last Fatimid stronghold in Palestine, the 'Bride of Syria' as it was called, whose mosque was reputed to contain the head of the martyred Husain, the most venerated relic of Shia Islam. With this military and naval base firmly in Christian hands, the threat to Egypt had become grave.

The decay of the Fatimids was now patent to all. They had lost Palestine to the infidels of the West; their North African empire had gone; the Hijaz had slipped from their grasp, and orthodox Islam tended to blame them, however unjustly, for the excesses of the Assassins. The conflict of Christian and Muslim now took the form of a race to seize the heritage of the dying heretic régime on the Nile. Nur ad-Din, who had gained lustre throughout Islam by driving back the Crusaders in the north, saw that at all costs they must be prevented from taking Egypt. The Fatimid court was torn by rival factions, one of which was prepared to bring a Christian army into the country. In 1163 King Amaury or Amalric advanced towards the Nile, but was forced to retire by floods: the next year Nur ad-Din sent his general Shirkuh to 'protect' the Fatimid Caliph and put the land in a state of defence against the Crusaders.

Both sides realized what was at stake, and Franks and Byzantines for once united in a combined land and sea assault on Egypt in 1169. This was beaten off by the skill of Shirkuh's nephew and successor, the famous Saladin, who became on his uncle's death in this same year, sole master of the country. In 1171 Saladin took the decisive step of ordering the name of the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad to be substituted in the public

prayers for that of his Fatimid rival. Egypt was thus restored to the community of orthodox Islam. Shortly afterwards, the last Fatimid Caliph, a youth of twenty-one, conveniently died, and so far as Egypt was concerned, the Ismailian heresy died with him. The worst of the schisms which had so long paralysed Muslim resistance to the Franks was over, and Muslim power in the Near East now possessed a vigour and unity it had not known for centuries.

The death of Nur ad-Din in 1174 gave Saladin the chance to extend his power into Syria and Mesopotamia, and a vast new Muslim State, the Ayyubid Empire (so-called from Saladin's father Ayub or Job), stretching from the Euphrates to Tunisia, came into existence before which the Kingdom of Jerusalem went down in ruin on the fatal field of Hattin in 1187.⁴⁸ Of this great realm Egypt was the solid core, and now no longer cold-shouldered by the rest of the Muslim world, as a land of heretics, she was able to cultivate friendly relations with East and West, with the Abbasid Caliphate, and with the Almohads of Spain and Morocco. The Crusading States were encircled and were relentlessly pressed back towards the coasts, while the Ayyubid occupation of the Yemen and the holy cities of Arabia, also accomplished by Saladin, gave Egypt continued domination of the Red Sea and the Straits of Bab al-Mandib.

At home the régime was tolerant and enlightened. Saladin was more than a champion of Sunni orthodoxy: he was a moral regenerator of Islam, a humane and enlightened prince whose reputation for probity and chivalry spread all through Christendom.⁴⁹ Native Copts replaced Armenians in the civil administration; Jewish refugees from Spain were welcomed into Egypt; *madrasas* or colleges were built to instruct the rising generation in Muslim orthodoxy, and generous encouragement was given to scholarship. Among the outstanding literary works of the Ayyubid age is the short but graphic description of Egypt composed at Cairo about 1200, by Abd al-Latif, a Baghdad scholar who enjoyed the patronage of Saladin and his successors.

Under Sultan Kamil (1218-38) peace was made with the Franks in the person of the Emperor Frederick II, by which Jerusalem was restored as an open city to the Christians, and

Franciscan and Dominican friars were permitted to preach in Egypt. The chief weakness of the Empire lay in the quasi-feudal nature of its government: whole provinces were parcelled out as appanages among princes of the ruling family, and these in turn bestowed smaller lordships on their vassals. The army, instead of being paid out of the public treasury, was maintained out of the *ikta*, or fiefs, landed estates granted to the amirs or generals upon whose revenues a fixed number of soldiers was chargeable. The troops were mostly Kurdish freemen and Turkish slaves, and this difference in status, combined with the fact that the reigning family was of Kurdish origin, was productive of no little friction within the armed forces. In the end, family conflicts shook the State to pieces, as in the case of the Carolingian Empire in Western Europe.

Ayyubid Egypt was able to conduct its offensive against the Crusaders on the economic as well as on the military plane. It does not appear that the navy was restored to the same pitch of strength and efficiency that it had attained in Fatimid times, and the coastal defences were so poor that twice (in 1219 and 1249) Frankish armies were able to land and seize the port of Damietta. But Saladin and his successors displayed much skill and shrewdness in dividing their Christian enemies by encouraging commercial relations with the Mediterranean trading cities. The growing anti-Latin feeling in the Byzantine Empire, which culminated in the mob-outbreak and massacre of Westerners in Constantinople in 1182, drove the Venetians and Genoese to seek compensation in the markets of Egypt, into which they were soon importing slaves at the rate of two thousand a year. Nor were they above selling war material to the infidels: in a letter to the Abbasid Caliph in 1183, Saladin remarks that Franks are supplying him with arms with which to kill other Franks.⁵⁰ When Pope Innocent III organised a new Crusade to regain Jerusalem by striking at Egypt, the Venetians skilfully diverted it towards Constantinople, and the overthrow of the Byzantine régime and its replacement in 1204 by a Latin Empire was their revenge for the murderous episode of 1182. The merchants and shipowners of the Italian republics had no desire to see their commercial interests damaged by Crusading attacks on the Ayyubid kingdom. Already Venice had two

fondaci or warehouses in Alexandria, managed by a colony of traders under their own consul; Italian shipping frequented the port of Laodicea in Syria, which was under Ayyubid control, and Christian merchants were found in the markets of Damascus and Aleppo.⁵¹ In vain the Lateran Council of 1215 declared an economic blockade of Egypt and forbade Christians under pain of excommunication to trade with the Saracen unbelievers. The traffic continued, and in the course of the thirteenth century the Italians were joined by shippers and traders from Catalonia and the French Mediterranean ports. Egypt was at once the most dangerous enemy of the Crusaders and the source of the richest profits to the Christian commercial republics of the Mediterranean. This doubtless explains to a large extent why the Frankish States in Syria fell to the Muslims at the time when naval control of the Levant, now based chiefly on Cyprus, had passed to the Christian Powers.

When towards the middle of the thirteenth century the Ayyubid régime sank into the unmistakable decay which sooner or later overtook all oriental dynasties, the Franks again strove to save the Christian position in the Levant by the conquest of Egypt. Once more the prize eluded their grasp. The Ayyubid government was actually overthrown by the Mamluks at the time when the Crusading armies under St Louis were encamped on Egyptian soil: indeed the mutinous Turkish soldiery, having brutally killed the last Sultan of the house of Saladin, offered the throne to the king of France, who was then a prisoner of war! In reality the revolution of 1250 in Egypt spelled the doom of the Crusading movement, and it was from the hands of the Mamluks operating from the Nile valley that the Frankish States in the East received their *coup de grâce*.

Mamluk Egypt has been curiously neglected by Western historians.⁵² This is due partly to the fact that, with the final collapse of the Crusades, the attention of European scholars is drawn away to the rise of the great nation-States of the West, partly also to the fact that Mamluk Egypt contributed nothing to Western life and culture except (very belatedly) the *Arabian Nights*!⁵³ It has therefore been set aside as of no great moment, an out-of-the-way affair, a segment of incomprehensible Oriental history. Yet the rule of the Mamluks, besides being a

fascinating political experiment in itself, had no little impact on the course of world history, and under it Egypt enjoyed for the last time the status of a Great Power.

Ever since the Abbasid Caliphs had started recruiting Turkish slave mercenaries in the ninth century, Turks of various tribes and clans had steadily infiltrated into Islam, and some had become the founders of short-lived dynasties. The Seljuks had even for a brief period made themselves the masters of nearly all Western Asia. The Ayyubids, who were Kurds, continued the policy of purchasing Turkish slaves for their army, until the Turkish element outweighed the Kurdish and destroyed the balance of the State. The Mamluk military chiefs who seized power in Egypt in 1250 were all Turkish ex-slaves who inaugurated a new type of government upon which the later Ottoman régime was to some extent modelled. It was a kind of perpetual military dictatorship, power resting in the hands of a ruling class of servile origin; the Sultan, always himself a former slave, was assisted by a group of generals known as *ashab al-suyuf*, lords of the sword, and this strange monarchy remained to the end virtually elective. The Mamluks were hostile to the idea of hereditary succession, and few Sultans managed to transmit their authority to their sons.

The army's ranks were kept filled by slaves who were imported in a steady flow, chiefly via the Genoese colonies in the Crimea, from the Caucasus and the steppe country north of the Black Sea and the Caspian: they were mostly Kipchak Turks or Circassians. In training, discipline and equipment, these troops had no equal until the time of the Ottoman Janissaries; they were skilled archers and excellent cavalymen, and they succumbed in the end because of a scornful refusal to adopt the use of firearms.⁵⁴ As nothing like a 'reigning family' developed, the appanage system of the Ayyubids disappeared, and though high-ranking officers and civil servants continued to be paid out of the rents of certain lands, they did not reside on these estates or pass them on to their heirs, and so the emergence of a feudal order was prevented.

On the whole, the Mamluk government was stronger and more centralized than its predecessor, and it was certainly long-lived, lasting as it did for over two and a half centuries

from 1250 to 1517. Its spirit was indeed harsh, violent and capricious, far removed from the enlightened humanity of Saladin and Kamil, but it produced able if ruthless commanders and statesmen like Baybars and Kala'un who rendered notable services to Islam and even to art and culture. Under the Mamluks Egypt became the last refuge of the old Arabic civilization, and the last noteworthy works of Muslim history, geography, science and theology were compiled in the Cairo of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In the general context of world history, the Mamluks had two outstanding achievements to their credit. They stemmed the tide of Mongol conquest by their brilliant victory at Ain Jalut in 1260, thereby saving Egypt and the Maghrib and perhaps Islam itself from destruction, and they threw the Franks out of the Levant and dissipated forever the dream of a Christian restoration in the Near East. Their successes were won as much by clever statesmanship as by military strength; their diplomatic network was spread over the greater part of Europe and Asia, and embassies from the Pope, the Byzantine Emperor, the Kings of France and Aragon,⁵⁵ the Sultan of Delhi and the Negus of Abyssinia, converged on Cairo.

In their determined offensive against the Christian positions in the Levant, it is possible to detect four stages in their advance. The first, directed against the remnants of Frankish power in Syria, ended with the fall of Acre in 1291; the second, of which the target was the Crusaders' Armenian ally, was completed by the destruction in 1375 of the Armenian kingdom of Cilicia, whose last king was carried captive to Cairo; the third had Cyprus for its objective, and the fourth the island of Rhodes. The only serious reaction from the West to this continuing Mamluk assault, the capture and sack of Alexandria by an expedition from Cyprus under King Peter of Lusignan in 1365,⁵⁶ did nothing to restore the Christian position in the East. It failed to save Armenia, and it provoked reprisals against the island kingdom which culminated in an Egyptian naval attack in 1426, the capture of King Janus, and the reduction of Cyprus to the status of a Mamluk tributary. Only Rhodes, against which the Mamluks thrice launched their fleets between 1440 and 1444, resisted the Muslim 'counter-crusade',

and survived, a lonely outpost of Christian Latin power in the Levant, until the Knights of St John succumbed eighty years later to the superior might of the Ottoman Turks.

One might almost say that it was Egypt which defeated the Crusades. The failure of both Franks and Mongols to get possession of this rich and prosperous land saved Islam from what might have been irretrievable catastrophe, and the Mamluks were able to use it as a base for the great Muslim *revanche*. Its economic strength helped to ensure its safety, since Christian opinion was sharply divided, one party holding that the Latin States in Syria could never be secure so long as Egypt was unconquered, the other unwilling to weaken or damage a Power which controlled the lucrative trade with India and the Far East. How much depended on this commerce is shown by the rapid decline of Egypt after the discovery of the Cape route to India.⁵⁷ Perhaps if the West had opened up this route in the age of Marco Polo⁵⁸ instead of in that of Vasco da Gama, the Crusades might have had a different outcome.

CHAPTER V

THE ARMENIAN ALLY

*

Of all the Christian communities of the East, the most conspicuous service to the Crusaders was rendered by the Armenians.⁵⁹ The Copts of Egypt, a timid race, played but a passive part: they stood aside, doubtful and apprehensive, unwilling to risk the wrath of their Muslim masters, when Crusading armies landed on their shores. The Syrian Jacobites were rather more active: often driven from their towns and villages by Muslim princes who suspected them of being potential fifth-columnists, they migrated in fair numbers into the Frankish principalities and a considerable colony of them was planted in Jerusalem after the ruthless massacre of the Muslim population on the occasion of the city's capture in 1099.⁶⁰ The Maronites of Mount Lebanon, tough and warlike hillmen, whom neither Arabs nor Turks were able to subdue, gave loyal support to their co-religionists from the West.⁶¹ But the most valuable ally of the Crusaders was undoubtedly Armenia, not indeed the ancient country of that name, but the new or Lesser Armenia which had been brought into being in Cilicia by refugees fleeing from the Turkish invaders shortly before the Latins broke into the Levant.

Old Armenia is the high plateau bounded by the Taurus mountains in the south and the Pontic chain in the north; the climate is severe, long cold winters being followed by short hot summers, and its volcanic hills are rich in minerals such as silver, copper, iron and lead. Its rugged terrain is admirably