

Frédéric Bauden\*

# Bandar al-Ṭūr. A Port on the Red Sea and Its Development in the Ninth/Fifteenth Century

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**Abstract:** The port of al-Ṭūr underwent major expansion in the late fourteenth century, though it was intermittently active since the late thirteenth century. Its rise coincided with the decline of nearby al-Rāyah, likely due to silting. Under the Mamlūks, especially during Barsbāy's reign, al-Ṭūr became a key hub for trade, pilgrimage, and military use. Documentary evidence suggests year-round activity from the mid-15th century onward. Archival records also highlight the role of the local Christian community and St. Catherine's Monastery in the port's operations.

**Keywords:** Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine, Red Sea, trade, al-Ṭūr, Mamlūk period

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, scholarly interest in the history of the Red Sea, with a particular focus on the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk periods, has witnessed a marked increase. This interest has manifested in various forms, including the publication of relevant documents and administrative and narrative sources. Additionally, studies focused on the economic development of ports located on the Red Sea's western and eastern shores have been conducted at a steady pace. The impetus for this surge in scholarly engagement appears to have been Li GUO's publication of the documents unearthed at the site of al-Quṣayr al-Qadīm, located on the western coast.<sup>1</sup> Two years after GUO's book became available, Khālid al-'Amāyirah produced his study on the ports of the Red Sea during the whole Mamlūk period, emphasizing their significance for the development of trade during this period.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, Roxani MARGARITI published her revised PhD dissertation on trade in Aden between the sixth/twelfth and early seventh/thirteenth century, for which

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1 Li GUO, *Commerce, Culture, and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic Documents from Quseir*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004, 92.

2 Khālid Muḥammad Sālim AL-'AMĀYIRAH, *Mawānī' al-baḥr al-aḥmar wa-atharuhā fī tijārat dawlat al-Mamālīk (648–923h/1250–1517m)*, Riyadh, 1427/2006.

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\*Corresponding author: Frédéric Bauden, Université de Liège, Liège, Belgium, f.bauden@uliege.be

she drew extensively on the Geniza material.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, Shlomo Dov GOITEIN's *India Book* was eventually published posthumously by Mordechai Friedman. This long-awaited study of the Geniza documents sheds light on the commercial exchanges between Egypt and India via the Red Sea at the end of the Fatimid period. It has the merit of offering translations of letters, accounts, and other documents related to Jewish merchants who were active on that route.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, John MELOY published a revised version of his PhD dissertation on the Meccan Sharifate, in which he elucidates the complex commercial and political relations that were established between Mecca and Cairo in the late Mamlūk period.<sup>5</sup> In the same year, Éric VALLET's revised PhD dissertation, in which he focuses his attention on the role played by the Rasūlids in the management of trade in that region until the mid-ninth/fifteenth century, appeared.<sup>6</sup> Three major fiscal and economic sources from Rasūlid Yemen had become accessible in the meantime, and VALLET was able to utilize the valuable insights they provide: the anonymous *Nūr al-ma'ārif* (end of the seventh/thirteenth c.),<sup>7</sup> the anonymous *Irtifā' al-dawlah* (early eighth/fourteenth c.),<sup>8</sup> and al-Ḥusaynī's (active early ninth/fifteenth c.) *Mulakhkhaṣ al-ḥiṭan*.<sup>9</sup> These studies made a significant contribution to the renewal of the field as they take into

3 Roxani Eleni MARGARITI, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port*, Chapel Hill, 2007.

4 Shlomo Dov GOITEIN and Mordechai Akiva FRIEDMAN, *India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza ('India Book')*, Leiden and Boston, 2008.

5 John L. MELOY, *Imperial Power and Maritime Trade: Mecca and Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*, Chicago, 2010; rev. ed. Chicago, 2015. See also idem, "Imperial Strategy and Political Exigency: The Red Sea Spice Trade and the Mamluk Sultanate in the Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123 (2003): 1–19; idem, "Money and Sovereignty in Mecca: Issues of the Sharifs in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53 (2010): 712–738; idem, "Mecca Entangled," in: *The Mamluk Sultanate from the Perspective of Regional and World History: Economic, Social, and Cultural Development in an Era of Increasing International Interaction and Competition*, ed. Reuven Amitai and Stephan Conermann, Göttingen, 2019, 453–478.

6 Éric VALLET, *L'Arabie marchande. État et commerce sous les sultans rasūlides du Yémen (626–858/1229–1454)*, Paris, 2010.

7 Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥīm Jāzim, ed., *Nūr al-ma'ārif fī nuẓum wa-qawānīn wa-a'rāf al-Yaman fī al-ahd al-muẓaffarī al-wārif*, 2 vols., Sanaa, 2003–2005.

8 *Irtifā' al-dawlah al-mu'ayyadiyah: jibāyāt bilād al-Yamān fī 'ahd al-sultān al-malik al-Mu'ayyad Dā'ūd b. Yūsuf al-Rasūlī al-mutawaffā fī sanat 721h/1321m*, Sanaa, 2008.

9 Al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī, *A Medieval Administrative and Fiscal Treatise from the Yemen: The Rasūlid Mulakhkhaṣ al-ḥiṭan of al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Ḥusaynī*, ed. Gerald Rex Smith, Manchester, 2006. See also Claude CAHEN and R. B. SERJEANT, "A Fiscal Survey of the Medieval Yemen. Notes Preparatory to a Critical Edition of the *Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fitan* of al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Ṣarīf al-Ḥusaynī," *Arabica* 4 (1957): 23–33.

account the intertwined issues of trade between the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea. Targeted studies have continued to appear.<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding this intensified scrutiny of the Red Sea trade over the last two decades, GUO's remarks concerning the question of sources retain their significance.<sup>11</sup> The publication of the documents unearthed in al-Quṣayr al-Qadīm provided historians of commerce in the Red Sea with a valuable and extensive source of information, not only in terms of the content of the documents themselves but also in light of the archaeological context in which they were discovered, which has yielded knowledge about the place where they were found.<sup>12</sup> The documents, which date to the late Ayyūbid period, offer invaluable insights into the activities of a port for which information is otherwise scarce, apart from that provided by some narrative sources.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that the documents from al-Quṣayr al-Qadīm may still yield further insights: of the 1,500 unearthed fragments, only approximately 100 were studied by GUO, with a further 14 being added by Andreas KAPLONY.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the documents from al-Quṣayr al-Qadīm, the Mamlūk documents concerning the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai represent a rich and valuable source of information for scholars, having been discovered in the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Patrick WING, "Indian Ocean Trade and Sultanic Authority: The *Nāzir* of Jeddah and the Mamluk Political Economy," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57 (2014): 55–75; Aḥlām bt. Sa'īd AL-GHĀMIDĪ, *al-Tijārah wa-l-milāḥah fī minā' Yanbu' khilāl al-ʿaṣrayn al-ayyūbī wa-l-mamlūkī, 569–923h/1174–1517m*, Jeddah, 2021. For the Roman period, see Federico DE ROMANIS, *The Indo-Roman Pepper Trade and the Muziris Papyrus*, Oxford, 2020. For the Byzantine and early Islamic period, see Timothy POWER, *The Red Sea from Byzantium to the Caliphate, AD 500–1000*, Cairo and New York, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> "The fact that after all these years, except for some general synthetic accounts, we still await a monograph devoted to Red Sea trade speaks volumes about the current state of knowledge in the field. The major obstacle lies obviously in sources." GUO, *Commerce*, 92.

<sup>12</sup> For the archaeological study of the site, see Katherine STRANGE BURKE, *The Sheikh's House at Quseir al-Qadīm: Documenting a Thirteenth-Century Red Sea Port*, Chicago, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> For GUO's book, see fn. 1. He published the preliminary results in two articles: Li GUO, "Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part 1: Business Letters," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 58 (1999): 161–190; idem, "Arabic Documents from the Red Sea Port of Quseir in the Seventh/Thirteenth Century, Part 2: Shipping Notes and Account Records," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 60 (2001): 81–116. Some of GUO's editions and translations were criticized by Mordechai FRIEDMAN (see his review in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 126 (2006): 401–409) and Werner DIEM (see his review in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 158 (2008): 164–170).

<sup>14</sup> Andreas KAPLONY, *Fünfundzwanzig arabische Geschäftsdokumente aus dem Rotmeer-Hafen al-Quṣayr al-Qadīm (7./13. Jh.)*, Leiden and Boston, 2014. In contrast with the assertion made in the title, the book only comprises 23 documents, 9 of which had previously been published by Guo.

<sup>15</sup> Bernhard MORITZ was the first to publish some of the documents in his *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Sinaiklosters im Mittelalter nach arabischen Quellen*, Berlin, 1918. A handlist of those that were

Most of the petitions and decrees from the Ayyūbid, Mamlūk, and Ottoman periods have been edited and translated by several scholars,<sup>16</sup> while Donald Richards edited, translated, and annotated a significant number of administrative documents in 2011.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, these documents have seldom been examined for the insights they offer regarding al-Ṭūr, a port situated on the Sinai Peninsula. This port was linked to the monastery and became a crucial asset for the Mamlūks in their expansion of trade in the Red Sea during the ninth/fifteenth century.

To date, the port of al-Ṭūr has not been the subject of sufficient scholarly attention. The majority of studies have concentrated on other ports of the Red Sea, including al-Quṣayr and ‘Aydhāb on the western shore, and Yanbu’, Jeddā, and Aden on the eastern shore. This article primarily aims at considering the documents from the Sinai collection, along with the testimonies of contemporary Western pilgrims and the data provided by the rich Mamlūk narrative sources. Thanks to this material, it will become evident that this port started to play a pivotal role in the Mamlūks’ economic and political landscape from the second quarter of the ninth/fifteenth century. It will be demonstrated that, for the Mamlūks, it constituted a strategic location for two reasons: (1) The implementation of the Mamlūk policy toward the Ḥijāz, which entailed the subsidization of the Holy Cities through the dispatch of grain and the administration of the pilgrimage for worshippers coming from east and west; (2) The reorganization of the trade routes in the Red Sea, with the objective of increasing their own benefits. However, it would be erroneous to assume that the Mamlūks were the sole beneficiaries of this situation. Indeed, it will be shown that the monks of St. Catherine, together with local Arab Christians, played a crucial role in the management of port activities.

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microfilmed by an American mission in 1950 was published by Aziz Suryal ATIYA, *The Arabic Manuscripts of Mount Sinai: A Handlist of Arabic Manuscripts and Scrolls Microfilmed in the Library of the Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai*, Baltimore, 1955.

16 Horst-Adolf HEIN, *Beiträge zur ayyubidischen Diplomatie*, Freiburg, 1971; Hans ERNST, *Die mamlukischen Sultansurkunden des Sinai-Klosters*, Wiesbaden, 1960; Zaynab Muḥammad Maḥfūz HANĀ, “al-Taṭawwur al-Diblūmāsī li-marāsīm dīwān al-inshā’ bi-Dayr Sānt Kātrīn min al-Qarn al-khāmis ilā al-qarn al-‘āshir al-hijrī,” unpublished MA thesis, 2 vols., Cairo University, 1970; Klaus SCHWARZ, *Osmanische Sultansurkunden des Sinai-Klosters in türkischer Sprache*, Freiburg, 1970; Robert HUMBSCH, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des osmanischen Ägyptens nach arabischen Sultans- und Statthalterurkunden des Sinai-Klosters*, Freiburg, 1976. For a brief outline of the documents from the Mamluk period, see Frédéric BAUDEN, “Mamluk Era Documentary Studies: The State of the Art,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* IX, no. 1 (2005): 37–41.

17 Donald S. RICHARDS, *Mamluk Administrative Documents from St. Catherine’s Monastery*, Louvain, Paris, Walpole, MA, 2011.

## Al-Ṭūr or al-Rāyah?

In a section dedicated to the levies (*mukūs*) collected in excess of the fixed limits of Islamic law (*sharīʿah*) and accruing to the sultan's treasury (*al-dīwān al-sultānī*), al-Qalqashandī explains that four seashores along the Red Sea constituted the primary destinations for ships laden with commodities. Among these seashores was al-Ṭūr, about which he gives the following description:<sup>18</sup>

Al-Ṭūr is a seashore situated in close proximity to the cape which serves as the point of entry into the Gulf of Suez (*baḥr al-Qulzum*) and is positioned between the promontory (*ʿaqabah*) of Aylah<sup>19</sup> and the Egyptian mainland. In the past, this seashore was a major destination. This was due to the fact that some ship captains desired to visit it because the ships were in close proximity to the Ḥijāz mainland, to the extent that the mainland was never lost from the sight of the traveler on board. Additionally, its mainland is characterized by the presence of numerous roadsteads. In the event that the sea became rough, the ship owner was able to identify a suitable roadstead in which to enter. Following the disappearance of the Banū Budayr al-ʿAbāsīyyah, who were merchants, this seashore, which had been a departure point, was eventually abandoned. Due to the reef (*shīb*), travelers were reluctant to embark from this location, citing concerns about the safety of the vessels. This is why no one travels to it except during daytime. This situation remained unaltered until approximately the year 780/[1378–9], when the amir Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ibn ʿArrām – may God have mercy on him –, then chief chamberlain in Egypt, ordered the construction of a ship in it (al-Ṭūr) and its subsequent navigation. He then ordered another vessel to be built after the first. Despite the inherent risks, individuals were willing to undertake the journey on it (this boat) and they also constructed ships in it (al-Ṭūr). Ships from Yemen also reached it (al-Ṭūr) with merchandise, and ʿAydhāb and al-Quṣayr were abandoned. As a result, cereals (*ghūlāl*) were transported [from al-Ṭūr] to the Ḥijāz, and the merchants were able to greatly profit from the transportation of wheat (*ḥinṭah*).

This depiction of al-Ṭūr by an Egyptian author writing at the beginning of the ninth/fifteenth century is noteworthy for its historical account of the port's development, its eventual abandonment at some point in history, and its subsequent revival. To elucidate this evolution, al-Qalqashandī proffers a number of geophysical and historical justifications. As stated by al-Qalqashandī, the port was highly regarded by ship captains for its strategic location near the shores of the Ḥijāz and the suitability for navigating close to the mainland. This proximity to land offered numerous roadsteads for shelter in the event of inclement weather, a feature that likely contributed to the confidence of travelers aboard. However, there were pitfalls: the

<sup>18</sup> Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-a-shāʿ fi šināʿat al-inshāʿ*, 14 vols., Cairo, 1913–1939; repr. 1963, 3:469.

<sup>19</sup> On the shift from the name of Aylah to ʿAqabat Aylah, then simply ʿAqabah, see Donald WHITE-COMB, “The Town and Name of ʿAqaba: An Inquiry into the Settlement History from an Archaeological Perspective,” *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* VI (1997), 359–363.

coast is renowned for its reefs, which can damage vessels and result in shipwrecks. In al-Qalqashandī's view, two historical events contributed to the decay and subsequent revival of the port. For the former, he cites the extinction of a prominent merchant family, at an unspecified moment, who was undoubtedly instrumental in establishing the location as a thriving emporium. For the latter, he posits that it was at the behest of an influential Mamlūk amir that the activities in the port were reinitiated, thus fostering its development in the final years of the eighth/fourteenth century. Be that as it may, the reasons invoked by al-Qalqashandī to explain the port's historical fluctuations do not appear to fully justify them. The perils posed by reefs were intrinsic to the region, a fact of which any ship captain was aware. As for the disappearance of the family of merchants, it could be argued that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the success of the port was solely attributable to a single group of individuals.

Archaeological evidence seems to offer greater accuracy. The region of the Sinai Peninsula in the vicinity of the Monastery of St. Catherine has yielded evidence of two locations that were used as ports. One location corresponds to the place called al-Ṭūr, whose name derives from the mountain's name where the Monastery of St. Catherine was built, due to its rather close proximity.<sup>20</sup> The other was known as al-Rāyah in Arabic (see Figure 1). The latter was situated at a distance of eight kilometers to the south of al-Ṭūr.<sup>21</sup> The archaeological excavations at al-Rāyah revealed the existence of a Byzantine fort, which could be dated to the sixth century. Additionally, the excavations uncovered a mosque that had been constructed within the fort, which could be dated to the third/ninth–fourth/tenth century. This makes it the oldest mosque that has been recorded in the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>22</sup> The material discovered at the site was not posterior to the sixth/twelfth century, indicating that

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<sup>20</sup> The distance as the crow flies is 50 km. See Mutsuo Kawatoko, ed., *A Port City Site on the Sinai Peninsula: Al-Ṭūr. The 11th Expedition in 1994 (A Summary Report)*, Tokyo, 1995, 77. In 1581, it took the French pilgrim Jean Palerne at least three days to cover the distance between the monastery and the port, which he estimated to fifty “mil” (between 80 and 100 km). See Jean Palerne, *Voyage en Égypte de Jean Palerne Forésien, 1581*, Cairo, 1971, 147.

<sup>21</sup> See René-Georges COQUIN and Maurice MARTIN, “Raithou,” in *Coptic Encyclopedia*, 8 vols., New York, 1991, 7:2049b–2050b; Uzi DAHARI, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Remains*, Jerusalem, 2000, 138–141.

<sup>22</sup> On the excavations, see Mutsuo Kawatoko, ed., *Archaeological Survey of the Rāya/al-Ṭūr Area on the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt (2002)*, Tokyo, 2003; idem, ed., *Archaeological Survey of the Rāya/al-Ṭūr Area on the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt (2005 and 2006): The First Japanese-Kuwaiti Archaeological Expedition (2006)*, Tokyo, 2007; idem, ed., *Archaeological Survey of the Rāya/al-Ṭūr Area on the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt (2007): The Second Japanese-Kuwaiti Archaeological Expedition (2007)*, Tokyo, 2008; idem and Yoko Shindo, eds., *Artifacts of the Islamic Period Excavated in the Rāya/al-Ṭūr Area, South Sinai, Egypt: Ceramics/Glass/Painted Plaster*, Tokyo, 2009.

it was abandoned at that period or shortly thereafter (seventh/thirteenth century).<sup>23</sup> The proposed causes for this phenomenon, as put forth by the archaeologists, include drought<sup>24</sup> or sedimentation,<sup>25</sup> yet no evidence is provided to substantiate these claims. DAHARI suggests that the settlement of al-Rāyah was relocated to al-Ṭūr;<sup>26</sup> a hypothesis that the excavations carried out at al-Ṭūr appear to corroborate: the archaeologists identified the oldest layer as originating from the eighth/fourteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The archaeological data recovered from both sites enables a reinterpretation of al-Qalqashandī's account. In discussing the abandonment and subsequent revival of the port toward the end of the eighth/fourteenth century, it is likely that he is referring to the two different locations, namely al-Rāyah and al-Ṭūr. Indeed, al-Rāyah was deserted between the sixth/twelfth and seventh/thirteenth century, while al-Ṭūr underwent development from the eighth/fourteenth century onward.<sup>28</sup>

The confusion between the two sites may be attributed to the fact that the port of al-Rāyah was referred to as the port of al-Ṭūr at that time, as al-Rāyah was the closest port in activity to the Monastery of St. Catherine. The documentary evidence corroborates this view. In a document from the Monastery of St. Catherine dated 662/1263 and dealing with palm trees endowed by two Christians from al-Ṭūr to the monks, al-Rāyah is referenced as “the port (*sāhil*) of al-Ṭūr; also known as the port

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23 Mutsuo KAWATOKO, “Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to the Islamic Period in Egypt and the Red Sea Coast,” *Antiquity* 79 (2005): 851–853.

24 DAHARI, *Monastic Settlements*, 146.

25 Cheryl WARD, “Sailing the Red Sea: Ships, Infrastructure, Seafarers and Society,” in *Ships, Saints, and Sealore: Cultural Heritage and Ethnography of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea*, ed. Dionisius A. Agius, Timmy Gambin, and Athena Trakadas, Oxford, 2014, 117; Stéphane PRADINES, “The Mamluk Fortifications of Egypt,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* XIX (2016): 53.

26 DAHARI, *Monastic Settlements*, 146.

27 KAWATOKO, “Multi-Disciplinary Approaches,” 853–855. On the excavations, see Mutsuo Kawatoko, ed., *A Port City Site on the Sinai Peninsula: Al-Ṭūr. The 11th Expedition in 1994 (A Summary Report)*, Tokyo, 1995; idem, ed., *A Port City Site on the Sinai Peninsula: Al-Ṭūr. The 12th Expedition in 1995 (A Summary Report)*, Tokyo, 1996; idem, ed., *A Port City Site on the Sinai Peninsula: Al-Ṭūr. The 13th Expedition in 1996 (A Summary Report)*, Tokyo, 1998. On the documents discovered at the site, the oldest being from the late ninth/fifteenth century, see Mutsuo KAWATOKO, “On the Use of Coptic Numerals in Egypt in the 16th Century,” *Orient: Report of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 28 (1993): 58–74; idem, “On the Use of Coptic Numerals in Egypt in the 16th Century: Addenda et Corrigenda,” *Orient: Report of the Society for Near Eastern Studies in Japan* 29 (1994): 147–157.

28 Charles LE QUESNE, “Hajj Ports of the Red Sea: A Historical and Archaeological Overview,” in *The Hajj: Collected Essays*, ed. Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, London, 2013, 79. The document referred to in the following note seems to corroborate that al-Rāyah was still in use in the mid-seventh/thirteenth century.



**Fig. 1:** The harbors of al-Ṭūr and al-Rāyah  
Source: Google Earth, October 2024

(*bi-sāḥil*) of Rāyah.”<sup>29</sup> In another part of the same document, dated 661/1263, it is mentioned that “the blessed port (*sāḥil*) of al-Ṭūr known as the salted sea (*al-baḥr al-māliḥ*) is notorious for the merchants of the Kārim and the pilgrims who travel from there.”<sup>30</sup> The two references in question unequivocally indicate that al-Rāyah was still in use among both pilgrims and Kārimī merchants during the mid-seventh/thirteenth century.

The identity and date of disappearance of the merchants identified by al-Qa-lqashandī as the Banū Budayr al-Abbāsiyyah have not yet been determined. The

<sup>29</sup> See ʿUmar Jamāl MUḤAMMAD ʿALĪ, “Basātīn al-nakhīl wa-l-fākihah fi Ṭūr Sināʾ fi al-ʿaṣr al-mamlūkī (648–923h/1250–1517m): Dirāsah fi ḍawʾ wathāʾiq Dayr Sānt Kātrīn,” *al-Majallah al-ʿIlmiyyah li-Kulliyat al-Adāb (Jāmiʿat Asyūṭ)* 19/54 (2016): 185.

<sup>30</sup> Monastery of St. Catherine, doc. no. 353.

second part of their name, al-ʿAbbāsiyyah, can be interpreted as a reference to the village of al-ʿAbbāsah – sometimes rendered as al-ʿAbbāsiyyah in sources – which was located in the Sharqīyyah region in the Delta, not far from Billbays and Lake Timsāḥ.<sup>31</sup> Al-Maqrīzī states that the village began to be abandoned toward the end of the Ayyūbid period, when the village of al-Ṣālihiyyah was built in its vicinity. By the advent of the Mamlūk sultanate, the village was in a state of disrepair.<sup>32</sup> It seems plausible to suggest that this merchant family may have specialized in the trade of staples originating in the Far East. Their emporium could have been established in al-Rāyah, from where the merchandise was transported further north to their home city via the Bitter Lakes and Lake Timsāḥ, and subsequently to Cairo. The possibility that drought and/or sedimentation at al-Rāyah would coincide with their disappearance is remote as they could have resettled a few kilometers to the north in the bay of al-Ṭūr. It is evident that the cessation of the commercial activities led by this merchant family on this route was due to factors other than the aforementioned reasons.

It is reasonable to conclude that one of these factors was the development that concurred with the emergence of the Egyptian trading route, which favored the itinerary along the Nile, from Cairo to Qūṣ, in Upper Egypt (al-Ṣāʿid), and, from there, by land, to the two ports that experienced an economic boom: ʿAydhāb and, to a lesser extent, al-Quṣayr. As al-Maqrīzī observed, the transition occurred around the mid-fifth/mid-eleventh century and persisted until approximately 665/1267, during the reign of Baybars.<sup>33</sup> The route from Qūṣ to ʿAydhāb or al-Quṣayr was significantly influenced by the political and economic circumstances in Syria during the Crusades. The traditional trade and pilgrimage routes were threatened by the expansion of Frankish control over the region. It was only under Saladin that the desert route through the Sinai Peninsula was reinstated, specifically via the construction of the fortresses of Ṣadr and Aqaba. As a result of this policy, the land route through northern Sinai was once again viable. Nevertheless, it took some decades before this itinerary was adopted by pilgrims. A notable transformation occurred when the route was eventually consolidated during the reign of

31 In the biography of one member of the family who was still active in the early eighth/fourteenth century, Ibn al-Dawādārī explicitly states that his *nisbah* derived from al-ʿAbbāsah (*min ahl al-ʿAbbāsah*), thereby confirming their provenance. Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar wa-jāmiʿ al-ghurar*, ed. Bernd Radtke et al., 9 vols., Cairo, 1960–1994, 9:310.

32 Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawāʿiz wa-l-iʿtibār fī dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār*, ed. Ayman Fuʿād Sayyid, 7 vols., London, 2013, 1:628–629. However, there is evidence to suggest that it was still inhabited in the later Mamluk period. See ʿAlī Bāshā MUBĀRAK, *al-Khiṭaṭ al-jadīdah li-Miṣr al-Qāhirah wa-muduniḥā wa-bilādihā al-qadimah wa-l-shahīrah*, 20 vols., Cairo, 1887, 13:6–7.

33 Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawāʿiz wa-l-iʿtibār*, 1:550.

Baybars.<sup>34</sup> In his study of Qūṣ, GARCIN demonstrated that the itinerary Qūṣ–Red Sea reached its apogee during the sixth/twelfth–seventh/thirteenth century.<sup>35</sup> This conclusion is now supported by the al-Quṣayr documents, which can be dated to the end of the Ayyūbid period.<sup>36</sup> Be that as it may, if the Banū Budayr al-‘Abbāsiyyah’s commercial activities in the Red Sea came to an end, as al-Qalqashandī’s reports, it did not mean that they vanished. Indeed, members of the family were still attested in the early eighth/fourteenth and in the early ninth/fifteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

## The Port of al-Ṭūr Before the End of the Eighth/Fourteenth Century: The Rise to Prominence

Between the seventh/thirteenth and the end of the eighth/fourteenth century, ‘Aydhāb, initially, and al-Quṣayr subsequently, experienced a gradual decline for various reasons. GARCIN posited that ‘Aydhāb’s remoteness from Qūṣ, the obligatory point of transit for merchandise and pilgrims, and its proximity to Bedouin encroachment, which plagued the caravans connecting the port with the city throughout the first part of the eighth/fourteenth century, contributed to its decline. The prevailing insecurity prompted both merchants and pilgrims to pursue an alternative solution. The level of activity in al-Quṣayr never reached the same intensity as that observed in ‘Aydhāb. Following the cessation of ‘Aydhāb’s

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34 Jean-Michel MOUTON, *Le Sināi médiéval: un espace stratégique de l’islam*, Paris, 2000, 83–88. On the strategic role of the fortresses built by Saladin through Sinai, see idem and Sāmī Ṣāliḥ ‘ABD AL-MALIK, “La Forteresse de l’île de Graye (Qal’at Ayla) à l’époque de Saladin. Étude épigraphique et historique,” *Annales islamologiques* 29 (1995): 75–90; idem, Sāmī Ṣāliḥ ‘ABD AL-MALIK, Olivier JAUBERT, and Claudine PIATON, “La Route de Saladin (Ṭarīq Ṣadr wa Ayla) au Sināi,” *Annales islamologiques* 30 (1996): 41–70; idem, Jean-Olivier GUILHOT, Claudine PIATON, and Philippe RACINET, *Ṣadr; une forteresse de Saladin au Sināi: histoire et archéologie*, 2 vols., Paris, 2010. On the itineraries of the pilgrimage routes from Egypt and Syria, see ‘Alī b. Ibrāhīm GHABBĀN, *Les Deux Routes syrienne et égyptienne de pèlerinage au nord-ouest de l’Arabie Saoudite*, 2 vols., Cairo, 2011.

35 Jean-Claude GARCIN, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Égypte médiévale: Qūṣ*, Cairo, 1976.

36 Early seventh/thirteenth century.

37 One of them, named Najm al-Dīn b. Budayr al-‘Abbāsī, was still engaged in commercial activities in 723/1323, having been commissioned with gold, pearls, and precious stones belonging to an official whose assets were being confiscated by the sultan’s treasury. See Ibn al-Dawādārī, *Kanz al-durar*, 9:310. Another figure was Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Budayr al-‘Abbāsī, who established a madrasah bearing his own name (al-Madrasah al-Budayriyyah) in Cairo in 758/1357. Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Mawā’iz wa-l-i’tibār*, 4/2:570–571. Ibn Ḥajar also mentions a Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Budayr al-‘Abbāsī (d. 846/1443). Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā’ al-ghumr bi-abnā’ al-‘umr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī, 4 vols., Cairo, 1994–1998, 4:207.

role as a transit port, there was a brief resurgence in transit activity in al-Quṣayr.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Qūṣ was subjected to the greed of the amirs, a phenomenon that was documented by al-Maqrīzī around 760/1360.<sup>39</sup> GARCIN has shown that the decline of Qūṣ and ‘Aydhāb was more probably caused by the phenomenon that he called the “mediterraneazition” that the Mamlūk sultanate experienced in the second half of the eighth/fourteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

The issues faced by ‘Aydhāb and subsequently by Qūṣ coincided with the advent of al-Ṭūr as a pivotal node in the transportation network for goods and people connecting the northern and the southern regions, as well as in the reverse direction. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that al-Quṣayr was totally eclipsed during this period. The port is still referenced as a viable destination on several occasions during the ninth/fifteenth and the early tenth/sixteenth centuries. Nonetheless, these references should not be interpreted as indicative of a continuous operational status. It seems more plausible that the port was used by casual arrivals.<sup>41</sup> For example, in the year 790/1388, Ibn Khaldūn, having completed the pilgrimage, departed from Yanbu’ for al-Ṭūr, having previously arrived there a few months earlier. As they approached al-Ṭūr, a headwind pushed them toward the western coast, and they ultimately landed at al-Quṣayr. From there, they proceeded to Qūṣ and then sailed the Nile up to Cairo.<sup>42</sup> The Venetian chronicler Marino Sanuto (d. 1536) also makes mention of al-Quṣayr in his writings, noting the arrival of pepper at al-Quṣayr in the years 1500 and 1502.<sup>43</sup>

In his report on the port of al-Ṭūr, al-Qalqashandī identifies several potential risks associated with its geographic location. These hazards were tangible and require attention. The site is situated on the eastern side of the Gulf of Suez, in the southern region of the peninsula, in close proximity to its southernmost point. If we except the port of Suez, the port of al-Ṭūr was the sole harbor within the Gulf that offered a naturally protected anchorage from all directions. The site is constituted by two elements: a low tongue of land extending in a southerly direction and a coral reef in connection with it. Conversely, the site is protected from the southeast by the salient point of Jubayl (sometimes Jabul in modern references). Vessels may enter the harbor from either the northern or southern sides of the reef. The northern

<sup>38</sup> GARCIN, *Un centre musulman*, 399–410.

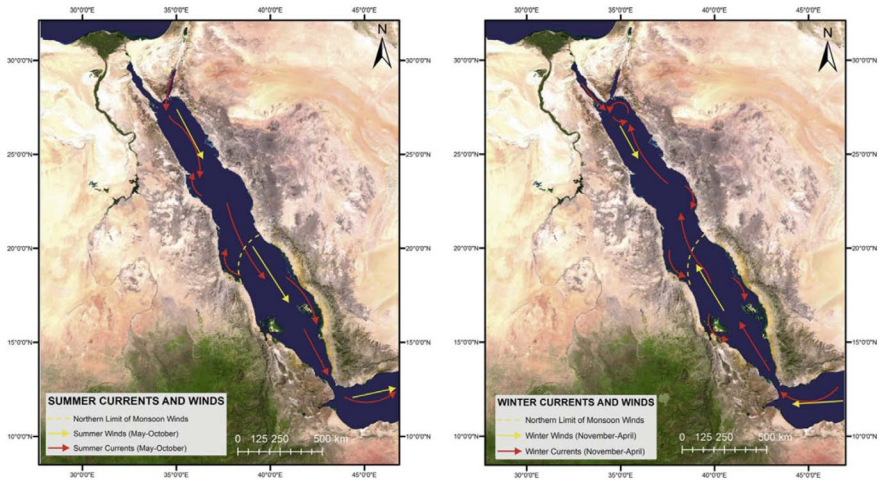
<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 405–410.

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Claude GARCIN, “La “méditerranéisation” de l’Empire mamelouk sous les sultans bahrides,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 48 (1973–1974): 114–116.

<sup>41</sup> GARCIN, *Un centre musulman*, 406–407, 417–420, 422–423.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Ta’rif bi-Ibn Khaldūn wa-riḥlatuhu gharban wa-sharqan*, ed. Muḥammad b. Tāwīt al-Ṭanjī, Beirut, 1979, 281–282.

<sup>43</sup> Marino Sanuto, *I diarii*, 58 vols., Venice, 1879–1903, 3:476 (*per via del Chosagiero*), 4:343 (*Cos-saer*), 418, 419, 492.



**Fig. 2:** The currents and winds on the Red Sea  
Source: Anna M. Kotarba-Morley

approach is more readily accessible as the predominant wind is north-northwest. This renders the southern entrance more favorable when departing. The location was deemed to be optimal, offering the most favorable conditions for maritime and terrestrial transportation. However, this was not a constant or universal phenomenon. The combination of two factors contributed to the continued hazardous nature of navigation in the Gulf of Suez.<sup>44</sup>

Firstly, the prevailing winds in the Red Sea blow from the south toward the north between mid-April to mid-September. During the remaining months of the year, the winds blow from the opposite direction due to monsoon activity in the Indian Ocean. This prevailing wind pattern is observed only to the south of a line that passes through Jeddah and Suwākin, at approximately 20°N. In the northern sector of the Red Sea, encompassing the Gulf of Suez, the dominant wind direction is from the north to the south throughout the year (see Figure 2). With regard to the currents, which are primarily driven by the prevailing winds, though influenced by other factors, such as salinity, water temperature, and water density, their patterns are similarly irregular. During the summer months, the primary current runs from the north to the south. However, there are also local currents along the Egyptian coastline south of the Sinai Peninsula, which flow southwest. During the

<sup>44</sup> Wilhelm KROPP, *Physical Geography of the Red Sea: With Sailing Directions*, Washington, 1872, 22–23.

winter months, the prevalent current direction is north-northwest, although there are some localized currents along the Egyptian and Arabian coastlines that flow in a southerly direction. In the region immediately south of the Sinai Peninsula, the current exhibits a cyclonic behavior, directing its flow toward the south. As for the Gulf of Suez, the prevailing current runs southward all year round (see Figure 2). As a result, sailing upwind in the Gulf of Suez is inherently challenging throughout the year for vessels, whereas sailing southward is facilitated by the dominant winds and currents.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, this did not constitute a significant impediment for vessels. In fact, the second factor, when considered in conjunction with the current and wind factors, resulted in a heightened level of risk.

Secondly, as al-Qalqashandī pinpointed, “due to the reef (*shiʿb*), travelers were reluctant to embark from this location, citing concerns about the safety of the vessels. This is why no one travels to it except during daytime.”<sup>46</sup> The coast along the Sinai Peninsula is indeed characterized by a multitude of coral reefs, necessitating constant vigilance and maintenance. The presence of shoals represents another source of anxiety for captains. In his travel account dated 1581, the French traveler Jean Palerne notes that boats rarely sailed north of al-Ṭūr due to the aforementioned challenges. If they did venture beyond this point, up to Suez, it was always in daylight and with a sailor stationed at the bow.<sup>47</sup>

Al-Qalqashandī posits that the initial phase of the activities at the port of al-Ṭūr commenced circa 780/1378–9. In his own words, these activities were initiated by Ṣalāh al-Dīn Khalīl b. ʿAlī b. Aḥmad b. ʿArrām (d. 783/1381).<sup>48</sup> Ibn ʿArrām was appointed to the governorship of Alexandria on multiple occasions.<sup>49</sup> In the

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45 On winds and currents in the Red Sea, see KROPP, *Physical Geography*, 9–12, 16–24; *The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Pilot, Containing Description of the Suez Canal, the Gulfs of Suez and Akaba, the Red Sea and Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, the Gulf of Aden with Sokotra and Adjacent Islands, and Part of the Eastern Coast of Arabia*, London, 1900<sup>5</sup>, 19–21; DE ROMANIS, *The Indo-Roman Pepper Trade*, 32–35. On the significance of the geophysical circumstances on the evolution of ports of trade in the Red Sea, see Anna M. KOTARBA-MORLEY, “Ancient Ports of Trade on the Red Sea Coasts – The ‘Parameters of Attractiveness’ of Site Locations and Human Adaptations to Fluctuating Land- and Sea-Scapes. Case Study *Berenike Troglodytica*, Southeastern Egypt,” in: *Geological Setting, Palaeoenvironment and Archaeology of the Red Sea*, ed. Najeeb M.A. Rasul and Ian C.F. Stewart, Cham, 2019, 741–774. The article by G.R. TIBBETS, “Arab Navigation in the Red Sea,” *The Geographical Journal* 127/3 (1961):322–334, primarily focuses on the region south of Jeddah.

46 See above.

47 Palerne, *Voyage*, 154.

48 See his biography in Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Manhal al-ṣāfi wa-l-mustawfā fi baʿd al-Wāfi*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, 13 vols., Cairo, 1984–2009, 5:263–8 (no. 1006).

49 For his various appointments as governor of Alexandria, see Aḥmad ʿABD AR-RĀZIQ, “Les Gouverneurs d’Alexandrie au temps des Mamlūks,” *Annales islamologiques* 18 (1982): 135 (no. 21), 136 (no. 24), 136–7 (no. 27), 138 (no. 33), 139 (no. 37).

interim periods, he assumed the roles of vizier and chief chamberlain. In the period between his last two appointments as governor of Alexandria, first between 777/1376 and 779/1378 (two years) and in 782/1380 (less than four months), he was first nominated as vizier, and then as executive secretary of a high-ranking amir.<sup>50</sup> It can be reasonably inferred that this interval was when he began the venture in al-Ṭūr, as suggested by al-Qalqashandī, through the construction of a vessel.<sup>51</sup> If Ibn 'Arrām's venture may have played a significant role in establishing al-Ṭūr as an emporium in the later Mamlūk period, it remains that its harbor could have been casually used earlier than the late eighth/fourteenth century as demonstrated by earlier mentions of al-Ṭūr in the sources from the late seventh/thirteenth century.<sup>52</sup> It is indeed attested as a port in activity in the *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, a Rasūlid administrative manual datable to the end of the seventh/thirteenth century. The author, who remains anonymous, states that the Kārimī merchants were prohibited from purchasing or constructing vessels in Aden due to the concerns that doing so would result in a loss of revenue from renting vessels provided by the government. An additional rationale provided was that they would disembark at al-Ṭūr instead of 'Aydhāb, which could potentially allow the Egyptian military to board their vessels and launch an attack on Yemen.<sup>53</sup> Such apprehensions were realized in the year 707/1307, during the reign of al-Nāṣir Muḥammad (2nd reign, 698–708/1299–1309), when a decision was made to prepare a naval expedition with the objective of punishing the Yemeni ruler and, potentially, invading Yemen. The reason for this was that the Rasūlid sultan had declined to send the customary annual gift to the Mamluk sultan.<sup>54</sup> Orders were issued to some emirs to construct boats and to have them transported, unassembled, to al-Ṭūr. The components were to be assembled

<sup>50</sup> On his career, see Martina MÜLLER-WIENER, *Eine Stadtgeschichte Alexandrias von 564/1169 bis in die Mitte des 9./15. Jahrhunderts: Verwaltung und innerstädtische Organisationsformen*, Berlin, 1992, 179–187.

<sup>51</sup> Despite al-Qalqashandī's assertion that he held the position of chief chamberlain at the time of the event, this claim is not corroborated by other sources. See Ibn Taghrī Birdī, *al-Manhal al-ṣāfi*, 5:264–265.

<sup>52</sup> By the end of the seventh/thirteenth century, it is more probable that these mentions refer to al-Ṭūr and not more to al-Rāyah. It should be noted that the archaeological evidence found at al-Rāyah points to the abandonment of the port during the same century. The last reference found in the documents is from the mid-seventh/thirteenth century.

<sup>53</sup> *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, 1:492. In another place (*ibid.*, 109), al-Ṭūr is again referenced in relation with a two-month salary and an allotment of forty (dirhams?) for travel expenses, which were provided by the Rasūlid state to certain officials, including envoys and military officers, who traveled from Aden to al-Ṭūr. See also VALLET, *L'Arabie marchande*, 492.

<sup>54</sup> The Mamlūk authorities eventually accorded priority to the transmission of a missive from the 'Abbāsīd caliph. The letter was conveyed to the Rasūlid sultan by two individuals, one of whom was Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Ṭūrī, thus from al-Ṭūr. See VALLET, *L'Arabie marchande*, 498–499.

in the harbor from which the vessels would be launched.<sup>55</sup> In the event that the expedition was ultimately canceled, this incident illustrates that the site could be utilized for the purpose of mounting such an expedition.

## The Port of al-Ṭūr in Its Heyday

Al-Qalqashandī's assertion that al-Ṭūr's development should be dated to the late eighth/fourteenth century is corroborated by the evidence that mentions of al-Ṭūr in the sources from the seventh/thirteenth and eighth/fourteenth centuries remain occasional. Such references begin to proliferate toward the conclusion of the eighth/fourteenth century, encompassing both the pilgrimage and commercial activities. The port's development was facilitated by its strategic location, which allowed for convenient access to northern regions of the peninsula and the most significant cities within the Mamlūk realm. The coastal route provided a vital transportation corridor, while the Monastery of St. Catherine, accessible via camel or mule, offered a convenient hub for trade and pilgrimage. The port's proximity to the Ḥijāz made it an ideal gateway for pilgrims seeking to reach the Holy Cities via Yanbu' and Jeddā. Additionally, it served as a crucial hub for the annual grain supply, which was vital for the local population of Medina and Mecca.

It should be noted that the traditional pilgrimage route by land, which traversed northern Sinai, remained the primary itinerary for the caravans of pilgrims accompanying the palanquin. However, the sources indicate that a number of pilgrims elected to forsake the main caravan at Suez, instead opting to proceed south with the convoy transporting grain to the Ḥijāz. Upon reaching al-Ṭūr, they would then embark on a boat headed for Yanbu'. This is the route that Ibn Khaldūn himself traversed in 789–790/1387–1388. As he elucidated, he departed Cairo during the midpoint of Ramaḍān 789/29 September 1387. Upon reaching al-Ṭūr, he was compelled to wait until 10 Shawwāl/24 October before embarking on a vessel that arrived in Yanbu' one month later (10 Dhū al-Qa'dah/22 November). The entire journey, from point to point, thus spanned approximately two months. In order to return to Cairo, he had to wait for a period of 50 days in Yanbu' for favorable conditions before embarking on a vessel bound for al-Ṭūr.<sup>56</sup> As previously indicated, upon approaching al-Ṭūr, the prevailing winds and currents, blowing and running toward the southwest during that period of the year, propelled the vessel toward

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<sup>55</sup> Baybars al-Manṣūrī, *Zubdat al-fikrah fī tārikh al-hijrah*, ed. Donald S. Richards, Beirut, 1998, 395–396. See also VALLET, *L'Arabie marchande*, 493.

<sup>56</sup> For the references, see fn. 42.

the Egyptian coast, with the pilgrims disembarking in al-Quṣayr. This experience demonstrates that, despite the preference of some pilgrims for the maritime route, it was not without incident and could extend beyond the anticipated duration.

In 851/1447, al-Qalaṣādī (d. 891/1486), an Andalusī scholar, selected the same itinerary for his pilgrimage. The journey from Cairo to al-Ṭūr took 10 days. In al-Ṭūr, he was obliged to wait eight days before he could embark on a vessel. The maritime journey to Yanbuʿ represented a 20-day undertaking while the whole trip lasted 38 days. For his return journey, he preferred to travel by land from Yanbuʿ to Cairo via Aqaba.<sup>57</sup> The rationale behind his decision to embark on this alternative route remains unclear. However, the prevailing currents and winds customary during the winter season may have played a pivotal role in his choice. In any case, the distance between Yanbuʿ and Cairo was completed in 22 days. In this instance, the land route proved to be a more expedient option, in addition to the fact that the timing (end of March) was optimal as the majority of pilgrims faced significant challenges due to dehydration during the warmer season. The two examples presented show that the itinerary Cairo–al-Ṭūr–Yanbuʿ could last from three weeks and up to two months. However, it is evident that the actual travel time was typically less than this. To illustrate, in 889/1484, the distance between al-Ṭūr and Yanbuʿ was traversed in a mere 5 days and the journey from Cairo to Mecca required slightly more than 10 days in total.<sup>58</sup>

Naturally, the sea journey entailed authentic risks for the prospective traveler. A pilgrim who embarked at al-Ṭūr on a boat headed for Jeddah in 882/1477 experienced a shipwreck but was the sole survivor. This probable outcome may have been due to the pilgrim's ability to swim and the fact that the boat likely followed the coastline.<sup>59</sup> In 861/1457, a Medinese individual attempting to return to Medina met a similarly unfortunate fate: he perished by drowning between al-Ṭūr and Yanbuʿ.<sup>60</sup> Such dangers deterred other prospective seafarers. A certain al-Ḥarīrī, who had planned to reach Mecca by sea for the pilgrimage, lost heart when he arrived at al-Ṭūr, seeing the sea. He preferred to forego his religious obligation and returned

57 Al-Qalaṣādī, *Riḥlat al-Qalaṣādī*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Ajḫān, Tunis, 1985, 129–130: Cairo (28 Rajab 851/9 October 1447) > al-Ṭūr (8 Shaʿbān/19 October), al-Ṭūr (16 Shaʿbān/27 October) > Yanbuʿ (7 Ramaḍān/16 November); Yanbuʿ (30 Dhū al-Ḥijjah 851/7 March 1448) > Aqaba (17 Muḥarram 852/23 March 1448), Aqaba (19 Muḥarram/25 March) > Cairo (23 Muḥarram/29 March).

58 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmiʿ li-ahl al-qarn al-tāsiʿ*, 12 vols., Cairo, 1934–1936, 6:272.

59 *Ibid.*, 4:81. On swimming, see Aboubakr CHRAÏBI and Samira MEZEGHRANE, “Natation et perfection: un marqueur de la civilisation islamique,” *Quaderni di studi arabi* 19 (2024): 1–30. It is evident that other scenarios can be postulated. For instance, the castaway's survival could be facilitated by securing himself to a piece of debris from the wreckage and subsequently ascending onto a reef, where the intervention of a passing vessel could lead to his rescue before dying of thirst.

60 Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍawʿ al-lāmiʿ*, 11:127.

to Cairo, where, al-Sakhāwī adds, he ironically died by drowning in 852/1448.<sup>61</sup> On the basis of these data, transmitted by the chronicles and the biographical dictionaries, it is difficult to estimate how many persons made the choice of the itinerary by sea, be it for the pilgrimage or for any other reason, but the flux must have been continuous and the reason why seafaring via al-Ṭūr was preferred to the alternative route by land must have been a question of time and/or convenience more than anything else.

Additionally, the transit via al-Ṭūr is documented in other circumstances, such as in 846/1443, when two brothers of the Sharif of Mecca Barakāt were apprehended and dispatched to Cairo via al-Ṭūr, where they were imprisoned.<sup>62</sup> Five years earlier, the newly appointed amir and the inspector of the Privy (*nāzir al-khāṣṣ*) at the port of Jeddah both reached their destination by sea via al-Ṭūr.<sup>63</sup> In 802/1400, the amir leading the pilgrimage caravan gathered all of the destitute people who were in Mecca and sent them to Yanbu' with instructions for the local amir to facilitate their transportation by sea to al-Ṭūr.<sup>64</sup> The port was occasionally utilized to send fodder for the army's horses. This occurred on two occasions (in Rajab/mid-November–mid-December 912/1506 and Ramaḍān/mid-January–mid-February 912/1507), when the sultan directed a military detachment to Mecca.<sup>65</sup> When, in 915/1509, the sultan ordered the construction of a hospital and a dwelling place (*ribāṭ*) in Mecca, as well as the paving of the sanctuary, the architect Khāyir Bak was appointed to oversee these projects, and he traveled to Mecca via al-Ṭūr with numerous craftsmen.<sup>66</sup> In the same year, dismantled boat components were sent to al-Ṭūr for reconstruction and subsequent deployment at sea, just as in 707/1307. The objective was to challenge the Portuguese presence in the Indian Ocean.<sup>67</sup>

If pilgrims and occasionally state officials, as well as equipment and supplies, contributed to the development of al-Ṭūr in the ninth/fifteenth century, they were only a marginal effect of the trade policies instituted by the Mamlūk sultans from the beginning of the same century. As such, al-Ṭūr certainly allowed the Mamlūks to increase their grip on the Ḥijāz for religious and political reasons. It also allowed them to implement their new economic policies in the region in particular and the

61 Ibid., 4:267.

62 Ibn Ḥajar, *Inbā' al-ghumr*, 4:200–201.

63 Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk li-ma'rīfat duwal al-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Ziyādah and Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āshūr, 4 vols., Cairo, 1934–1973, 4/3:1028.

64 Ibid., 3/3:980.

65 Ibn Iyās, *Badā'i' al-zuhūr fī waqā'i' al-duhūr*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, 6 vols., Beirut, 1960–1975, 4:101 and 103.

66 Ibid., 4:163.

67 Ibid., 4:150–151.

Red Sea in general. However, they were preceded by the favorable policies adopted by the Sharifs of Mecca from the end of the eighth/fourteenth century. The reign of the Sharif Ḥasan b. 'Ajlān coincided with an expansion of economic policy and the growth of the port of Jeddah as a hub not only for pilgrims but also merchants. Subsequently, vessels belonging to the Kārimī merchants commenced sailing to Jeddah, circumventing Aden, which was under the control of the Rasūlids. By the mid-ninth/mid-fifteenth century, Aden had lost its competitive advantage to Jeddah, which had become the new commercial center of the Red Sea.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, the Mamlūk sultans engaged in the trade of spices for their own benefit, making decisions that had a lasting impact on the economy. One such decision, made by Baybars in 833/1430, was the purchase of a given quantity of pepper for the sultan, which had to be sold at a fixed price before the remainder of the stock could be offered for sale. The result of this decision was the strengthening of the position of the port and the increase of its revenue. In al-Maqrīzī's words, the sultan's pepper was sent from Jeddah to Alexandria via al-Ṭūr.<sup>69</sup> A few years earlier (828/1425), the sultan had appointed the first inspector in Jeddah, whose role was to collect the various taxes, the revenue of which would now go directly into the sultanate's treasury, thus contributing to the weakening of the status of the Sharifs of Mecca.<sup>70</sup>

Consequently, al-Ṭūr began to play an important role due to its ideal location and its proximity to the emerging eastern ports such as Jeddah and Yanbu', making it the main terminus for Red Sea shipping. During his passage by al-Ṭūr in 1384, the Tuscan pilgrim Leonardo Frescobaldi (d. ca. 1405) was already impressed by the quantity of vessels anchored in the port. He stressed that they were loaded with spices from India that waited to be disembarked and transported on the backs of camel to Cairo.<sup>71</sup> Over a quarter of century later, the Cretan merchant Emmanuel Piloti (d. 1441) makes reference to al-Ṭūr as the port where vessels arriving from

68 VALLET, *L'Arabie marchande*, 650–672; idem, “Le Marché des épices d’Alexandrie et les mutations du grand commerce de la mer Rouge (XIV<sup>e</sup>–XV<sup>e</sup> siècle),” in: *Alexandrie Médiévale 4*, ed. Christian Décobert, Jean-Yves Empereur, and Christophe Picard, Alexandria, 2011, 222–226.

69 Al-Maqrīzī, *al-Sulūk*, 4/2:823–4 (*wa-sabab hādihā anna al-sultān aqāma ṭā'ifah tashṭarī lahu al-baḍā'ī wa-tabī'uhā fa-idhā ukhidhat bi-Juddah al-mukūs min al-tujjār allatī tarīd min al-Hind ḥumīlat fulfulan wa-ghayrahā bi-baḥr al-Qulzum min Juddah ilā al-Ṭūr thumma ḥumīlat min al-Ṭūr ilā Miṣr thumma nuqilat fī al-Nīl ilā al-Iskandariyyah*). See also MELOY, *Imperial Power*, 113–170; idem, “Economic Intervention and the Political Economy of the Mamluk State Under al-Ashraf Barsbāy,” *MSR* 9/2 (2005): 85–103; idem, “Imperial Strategy.”

70 See Patrick WING, “Indian Ocean Trade and Sultanīc Authority: The *nāzīr* of Jeddah and the Mamluk Political Economy,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57 (2014): 55–75.

71 Leonardo Frescobaldi, Giorgio Gucci, and Simone Sigoli, *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384*, trans. Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade, Jerusalem, 1948, 34.

Jedda with spices disembarked. In his emphasis, the vessels sailed along the coast during daylight hours, but dropped anchor at night to evade the perils posed by reefs and shoals. Their cargo was then unloaded and transported on the backs of camels.<sup>72</sup>

The primary vessel used for the conveyance of individuals, animals, and commodities in the Red Sea was the *jalbah* (pl. *jilāb*, *jalabāt*). As was the case with all boats sailing in the Red Sea, they were constructed from planks that were sewn together with a cord and smeared with fish oil.<sup>73</sup> Some of them, the cargo *jalbah*, could be large enough to carry camels, as the Maghribī traveler Ibn Baṭṭūtah (d. 770/1368–9) himself noted, and had a weight capacity of about 50 tons.<sup>74</sup> Given the prevalence of coral reefs and other submerged structures in these regions, it seems likely that these vessels were designed with a shallower draft in order to navigate such environments more effectively.<sup>75</sup> Another type of vessel documented between Jedda and Yanbuʿ is the *zaʿīmah* (pl. *zaʿāʾim*).<sup>76</sup> These were probably smaller than the *jalbah*. Navigation in the Gulf of Suez, north of al-Ṭūr, was even more complex and more dangerous for such vessels.<sup>77</sup> There is evidence of a distinction between ships used in the Gulf of Suez (*marākib al-Qulzum*) and those used along the coast of the Ḥijāz. This may indicate that such smaller ships as the *zaʿīmah* were used between al-Ṭūr and Suez.<sup>78</sup> Speaking of transporting all the necessities for the Egyptian pilgrimage caravan, al-Jazīrī (d. ca. 977/1569–70) reports that in 897/1492 *jilāb* and *zaʿāʾim* were used between al-Ṭūr and Jedda and Yanbuʿ.<sup>79</sup>

72 Emmanuel Piloti, *Traité d'Emmanuel Piloti sur le passage en Terre Sainte (1420)*, ed. Pierre-Herman Dopp, Louvain and Paris, 1958, 105. The port is also mentioned in a letter addressed to the Venetian consul in Alexandria in 1419 for the arrival of spices. See Georg CHRIST, *Trading Conflicts: Venetian Merchants and Mamluk Officials in Late Medieval Alexandria*, Leiden and Boston, 2012, 25, fn. 36.

73 Dionisius AGIUS, "Ships that Sailed the Red Sea in the Medieval and Early Islam: Perception and Reception," in: *The Hajj: Collected Essays*, ed. Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, London, 2013, 88.

74 Dionisius AGIUS, *Classic Ships of Islam: From Mesopotamia to the Indian Ocean*, Leiden and Boston, 2008, 219–220, 226–227.

75 *Ibid.*, 220.

76 Unlikely similar to the coracle that was used in Iraq and also called *zaʿīmah*. See AGIUS, *Classic Ships*, 129–130.

77 This is confirmed by the Portuguese Tome Pires (d. ca. 1540), who, describing the situation in 1511, says that it "is not possible to go from Suez to Tor except by day and in small light craft, as the water is all shallow and full of rocks." Tome Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515*, ed. and trans. Armando Cortesão, 2 vols., London, 1944, 1:18.

78 MELOY, *Imperial Power*, 63.

79 Al-Jazīrī, *al-Durar al-farāʿid al-munazzamah fi akhbār al-ḥājj wa-ṭariq Makkah al-muʿazzamah*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan Ismāʿīl, 2 vols., Beirut, 2002, 2:5–6. In another place (*ibid.*, 2:5), he pinpoints that the *jilāb* were small ones, indicating that this kind of ship was available in two sizes.

If sea transport could be organized on smaller ships between al-Ṭūr and Suez, the preferred route remained the land route along the coast. Piloti emphasizes that the goods were loaded on the backs of camels and that the journey to reach one of the branches of the Nile, where they were transferred to ships, took from seven to eight days.<sup>80</sup> The camels were rented from the Bedouin tribes, each of which provided a certain number of animals.<sup>81</sup> The land route presented a number of risks too, including robbery perpetrated by some Bedouin groups residing between al-Ṭūr and Suez. In 903/1497, the pilgrims who returned by sea via al-Ṭūr and then by land were subjected to this threat. Upon their arrival in Cairo, the members of the first caravan promptly informed the relevant authorities of the unfortunate incident that had befallen the second caravan. It was reported that the Bedouins had launched an attack, resulting in a considerable number of pilgrims losing their belongings.<sup>82</sup>

The Mamlūk narrative sources lack detailed information about the buildings in the port and the administrators who worked there. However, the travel accounts of Western pilgrims who visited the monastery of St. Catherine and documents<sup>83</sup> allow us to gain a fairly precise picture of the structures found in the port and its administration. The representation of the port found in the *Rutter of the Red Sea* written by the Portuguese João de Castro provides valuable insight into the structure of the port and its buildings (see Figures 4–9). This is particularly noteworthy given that it was created just 24 years after the Ottoman conquest. In this text, de Castro describes Estêvão da Gama's expedition in the region in 1541. During this expedition, da Gama, whose objective was to assault the Ottoman fleet anchored

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<sup>80</sup> Piloti, *Traité*, 105.

<sup>81</sup> The tribes from al-Ṭūr that participated in this activity, along with the quantity of loads they were able to transport, are outlined by al-Jazīrī, *al-Durar al-farā'id al-munazzamah*, 2:14, specifically in relation to the pilgrimage. However, there is no evidence to suggest that this service was exclusive to the pilgrimage season. Al-Jazīrī also states that the cost of each load in the early tenth/sixteenth century was two dinars (*ibid.*, 2:6). A Mamluk decree dated 907/1501 suggests that the rental of the camels (*al-tarkīb*) was managed at the port by designated representatives and that this enterprise generated a revenue stream (*mutahaṣṣil*), from which these representatives were remunerated. See Frédéric BAUDEN, "An Unpublished Decree of Qānṣūh al-Ghawrī Regarding Administrative Matters in the Port of al-Ṭūr," *Mamlūk Studies Review* XXVI (2024): 365–389, here 384.

<sup>82</sup> Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith al-zamān wa-wafayāt al-shuyūkh wa-al-aqrān*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmurī, 3 vols., Sidon and Beirut, 1999, 3:39.

<sup>83</sup> Part of which were published: ERNST, *Die mamlukischen Sultansurkunden*; 'Abd al-Laṭīf IBRĀHĪM, "Thalāth wathā'iq fiqhīyyah," *Majallat Kullīyyat al-Adab, Jāmi'at al-Qāhīrah* 25/1 (1963): 95–123; Maḥfūz HANĀ, "al-Taṭawwur al-Dīblūmāsī," D.S. RICHARDS, "St Catherine's Monastery and the Bedouin: Archival Documents of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," in *Le Sinaï de la conquête arabe à nos jours*, éd. Jean-Michel Mouton, Cairo, 2001, 149–181; *id.*, *Mamluk Administrative Documents*.

at Suez, a goal that proved unsuccessful due to the timely dissemination of intelligence to the Ottomans, finally attacked the port of al-Ṭūr.<sup>84</sup>

In regard to the buildings, the Flemish nobleman Joos van Ghistele (d. 1525), who visited Egypt in 1482–1483 and passed by the port after his visit to the Monastery of St. Catherine, observed the existence of numerous warehouses specifically constructed by the sultan to store spices.<sup>85</sup> In addition to the aforementioned warehouses, other structures were owned by the monks of the Monastery of St. Catherine. Indeed, for the monks, the port represented a unique opportunity to engage with the wider world. A branch of the monastery (*metokhion*) was established with a contingent of monks responsible for the management of the monastery's affairs, including the cultivation of vines and date palms in the vicinity of the port.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the monks could utilize this structure as a refuge in the event of any issues that could arise on Mount Sinai.<sup>87</sup> From the mid-ninth/mid-fifteenth century onward, the decrees issued by the Mamlūk sultans make reference to buildings that belonged to the monks and provided income through rent. In a decree dated 879/1474, we learn that the monks owned courtyards (*aḥwāsh*) where the merchants stayed. However, some individuals were causing them inconvenience by staying in

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**84** Three copies of this text from the sixteenth century have been preserved. The only dated copy is from 1543 (British Library, MS Tiberius d.IX), while a second copy is probably contemporary of the former (James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota, MS 1541 fCa). The third copy is from the third quarter of the sixteenth century. (Biblioteca Geral de Universidade de Coimbra, MS Cofre 33). On these copies, see Roger Lee DE JESUS, “As ‘Tábuas dos Roteiros da Índia’ de D. João de Castro da Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra: novos dados,” *Boletim da Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra* 51 (2021): 75–116.

**85** Joos van Ghistele, *Voyage en Égypte de Joos van Ghistele, 1482–1483*, trans. Renée Bauwens-Préaux, Cairo, 1976, 181.

**86** The building is visible on the depiction of the port in João de Castro's rutter. See Figures 5, 7, and 9 (indicated by letter D). The *metokhion* seems to appear in some documents from Sinai under the form *anṭūsh/amṭūsh*, but there is controversy as to whether this word refers to a building, a garden, or even to a person's name. See RICHARDS, “St Catherine's Monastery and the Bedouin,” 153n23; id., *Mamluk Administrative Documents*, 92. See also ERNST, *Die mamlukischen Sultansurkunden*, 148 (no. XXXII, dated 872/1467), where the decree mentions people from the monastery who were settled in the port of al-Ṭūr to manage the assets of the monks. See *ibid.*, 160 (no. XXXVI, dated 873/1468), where it is stated that the monks had designated a Christian representative to oversee all matters pertaining to their assets, which included palm trees, in the port.

**87** In 898/1482, the majority of the monks of St. Catherine were compelled to seek refuge in their *metokhion* located in the port of al-Ṭūr. This was a direct consequence of the actions of the Awlād 'Alī, a local tribe of Bedouins who had subjected them to tyrannical oppression. In their pursuit of the monks up to al-Ṭūr, the Awlād 'Alī not only inflicted physical violence upon them but also perpetrated acts of robbery. See RICHARDS, *Mamluk Administrative Documents*, 77–79 (no. IX). In response to the complaint raised by the monks, a decree was issued by the sultan. See ERNST, *Die mamlukischen Sultansurkunden*, 202–205 (no. LIV).

their courtyards and storing their spices there without their consent and without paying any rent.<sup>88</sup> In 890/1485, a decree was issued after the monks complained once again that the courtyards, warehouses (*makhāzin*), houses (*buyūt*), all facilities that they rented, were occupied by individuals who refused to pay the rent.<sup>89</sup> In a decree dated one year later (891/1486), it is stated that a monk and his superior possessed storehouses (*hawāṣil*) that had been converted into endowments (*awqāf*) and where the spices belonging to the sultan's treasury (*al-dhakhīrah al-sharīfah*)<sup>90</sup> were stored and that some local Bedouins unjustly requested money that they were not entitled to receive.<sup>91</sup> In 892/1487, the storehouses owned by the monks, as well as by other individuals, including Muslims and Christians, in the port were requisitioned to store the spices intended for the sultan's treasury. This resulted in a loss of income from the rent that had to be suspended.<sup>92</sup> Such grievances were repeated almost annually. As early as 894/1489, another decree was issued in response to the monks' repeated complaints that their courtyards and storehouses, which were typically used to store the spices for the sultan's treasury, had been taken over by individuals who had stored wheat, beans, and flour in them without paying the rent.<sup>93</sup>

A review of the archives of the monastery reveals numerous deeds of purchase and endowments, which provide insight into the number of acquisitions that were made by the monks and others. Such deeds are preserved as early as from the year 854/1450. In that year, Ibn Ṭaybaq procured from a long-distance trader (*al-tājir al-saffar*), Ibn Ṭarkhān from al-Shawbak, two shops (*hānūt*) situated on the shore in close proximity to the port.<sup>94</sup> The majority of the properties whose purchase or endowment is documented between 864/1459 and 922/1516 consisted of a court-

88 ERNST, *Die mamlukischen Sultansurkunden*, 176 (no. XLII).

89 *Ibid.*, 180 (no. XLIV).

90 Daisuke IGARASHI emphasized that it was aligned with the sultan's financial resources, particularly various forms of official financial resources that were directly managed by the sultan himself. At the inception of the Circassian period, the bureau's jurisdiction initially encompassed the sultan's leasehold lands. However, during the reign of Qāytbāy, the bureau's purview was expanded to encompass additional revenue streams, including those derived from the sultan's transactions in spices, the proceeds of certain taxes, and other commercial activities. Daisuke IGARASHI, "The Evolution of the Sultanic Fisc and *al-Dhakhīrah* During the Circassian Mamluk Period," *Mamlūk Studies Review* XIV (2010): 85–108, here 89, 99–102.

91 *Ibid.*, 184 (no. XLVI).

92 *Ibid.*, 188 (no. XLVIII).

93 *Ibid.*, 196 (no. LI).

94 Monastery of St. Catherine, doc. 262. Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ṭaybaq was the son of Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Nūr al-Dīn 'ALĪ, who is mentioned in a document regarding an endowment in Cairo dated 798–9/1395–7. See Muḥammad Muḥammad AMĪN, *Catalogue des documents d'archives du Caire de 239/853 à 922/1516 (depuis le III<sup>e</sup>/IX<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à la fin de l'époque mamlouke)*, Cairo, 1981, 89.

yard, more rarely of a house (*dār*) or a shop, including one or more warehouses.<sup>95</sup> The deeds are also informative in that they precisely describe the location of the properties in question. For example, Khalīl b. Yūsuf b. Nuṣayr, a Melkite Christian, purchased from Salmān b. ʿIsā b. Jūdāh, also a Melkite Christian, a shop and a warehouse in the port of al-Ṭūr in 865/1461. The shop included an outdoor bench (*maṣṭabah*)<sup>96</sup> and a door. The property abutted, to the north, the property of ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥalāwah, to the south the main road, to the east the shop of Muḥammad al-Ḥarīrī, and to the west the warehouse, which was part of the same deed.<sup>97</sup>

This suggests that the monks took advantage from the spice trade, either for the benefit of the sultan (storing the spices for the sultan's treasury in return for rent), or for the benefit of the merchants. The precise financial outcome of these activities is unclear. It is yet to be determined what the financial yield of these activities was for the monks. In one instance, we are informed that the rental fee for a single load in a warehouse was set at 6 dirhams in 894/1489.<sup>98</sup> In addition, the port generated revenue that benefited the sultan's administration.<sup>99</sup> It is challenging to ascertain the precise magnitude of these revenues. Nevertheless, insight can be gained by examining the estimates provided by Ibn Shāhīn al-Ẓāhīrī (d. 872/1468). In the mid-ninth/fifteenth century, he evaluated that the import of grain from al-Ṭūr amounted to 30,000 dinars in levies (*mukūs*) per year, collected by the ruler of Yanbu'.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, taxes were levied on commodities unloaded at al-Ṭūr, as documented by

95 Monastery of St. Catherine, docs. 269 (860/1456), 267 (864/1459), 305 (865/1461), 306 (same year; published in Ibrāhīm, "Thalāth wathā'iq," 105–109), 307 (same year), 308 (same year), 309 (same year), 277 (867/1463; published in Ibrāhīm, "Thalāth wathā'iq," 97–100), 274 (874/1469), 280 (879/1474), 282 (882/1477), 285 (same year; published in Ibrāhīm, "Thalāth wathā'iq," 101–104), 290 (883/1478), 291 (883/1479), 292 (884/1479), 294 (same year), 296 (same year), 299 (same year), 293 (884/1480), 312 (887/1482), 325 (911/1506), 239 (922/1516).

96 As found in many traditional houses in Egypt. See EL-SAID BADAWI and Martin HINDS, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic. Arabic-English*, Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1986, 826.

97 IBRĀHĪM, "Thalāth wathā'iq," 106.

98 ERNST, *Die mamlukischen Sultansurkunden*, 196 (no. LI). Al-Jazīrī, speaking of the costs linked to the pilgrimage caravan in his time (first half of the tenth/sixteenth c.), mentions the expenses due for the renting of storerooms (*shuwan*) and storehouses (*ḥawāṣil*) in al-Ṭūr as being tantamount to 100 *nisf fiddah*, that is, paras. Al-Jazīrī, *al-Durar al-farā'id al-munazzamah*, 2:19.

99 Ibn Duqmāq (d. 809/1406) already describes al-Ṭūr as a port where there was a market frequented by the merchants. See Ibn Duqmāq, *al-Intiṣār li-wāṣiṭat 'iqd al-amṣār*, ed. Karl Vollers, 2 vols., Cairo, 1893, 2:54. Four decades later, in his *al-Taghr al-bāsim*, completed before 846/1442, al-Saḥmāwī describes the port of al-Ṭūr as *furḍat Miṣr bi-baḥr al-Qulzum* ("the port and customhouse of Egypt in the Gulf of Suez"). See al-Saḥmāwī, *al-Ṭaḥḥir al-bāsim fi ṣinā'at al-kātib wa-l-kātim al-ma'rūf bi-ism al-Maqṣid al-rafi' al-munsha' al-hādī li-dīwān al-inshā' lil-Khālīdī*, ed. Ashraf Muḥammad Anas Mursī, 2 vols., Cairo, 2009, 1:286.

100 Al-Ẓāhīrī, *Zubdat kashf al-mamālik wa-bayān al-ṭuruq wa-l-masālik*, ed. Paul Ravaisse, Paris, 1894, 16. See MELOY, *Imperial Power*, 127.

Joos van Ghistele in 1482–3,<sup>101</sup> and Piloti, describing the circumstances around 1420, indicates that these taxes constituted 10 % of the total value of the commodities.<sup>102</sup> The quantity of spices that transited via the port can be approximated based on the data provided at the conclusion of the ninth/fifteenth and the early tenth/sixteenth century. Arnold von Harff (d. 1505), who was in al-Ṭūr in 1497, mentioned that between 300 and 400 individuals departed from Cairo each month with the objective of reaching al-Ṭūr and procuring the recently unloaded spices from the port.<sup>103</sup> The Venetian Marino Sanudo provides further indications in his diaries. In 1498, intelligence was received in Cairo indicating the imminent arrival of a sizable caravan en route from al-Ṭūr, and that six vessels laden with spices had already reached the port, with another six expected.<sup>104</sup> One year later, five additional vessels, along with two more carrying pepper destined for the sultan, entered the port.<sup>105</sup> Other mentions corroborate the prominence of al-Ṭūr in the trade in spices, particularly, and commodities in general.<sup>106</sup>

With regard to the protection of the port during the Mamlūk period, there is no evidence to suggest that any kind of defense system was truly necessary at the beginning of its development. Still in 1482–1483, Joos van Ghistele noted that the port was not fortified by a wall with gates.<sup>107</sup> The earliest known representation of the port of al-Ṭūr can be found in Bernhard von Breydenbach's (d. 1497) travelogue. In 1483, he visited al-Ṭūr. In the map representing the view of Palestine and Egypt published at the end of his travelogue in 1490, the port is depicted with an accompanying description saying (see Figure 3): "The port of al-Ṭūr where vessels from India land."<sup>108</sup> The author appears to limit himself to representing a row of houses with

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101 Van Ghistele, *Voyage*, 181.

102 Piloti, *Traité*, 105. During the excavations led by the Japanese team, a dinar from Jaqmaq was unearthed on the site. See KAWATOKO, "Multi-Disciplinary Approaches," 854.

103 Arnold von Harff, *The Pilgrimage of Arnold von Harff, Knight from Cologne, Through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France and Spain, Which He Accomplished in the Years 1496 to 1499*, trans. Malcolm Letts, London, 1946, 136.

104 Sanudo, *I diarii*, 1:913.

105 *Ibid.*, 2:1041 and 1042.

106 *Ibid.*, 4:343 (1502: 1,600 *schibe*, that is, *zakībah*, a measure of capacity (see William POPPER, *Egypt and Syria Under the Circassian Sultans, 1382–1468 A.D.: Systematic Notes to Ibn Taghrī Birdī's Chronicles of Egypt*, 2 vols., Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955, 2:39), 418 (same year), 492 (same year: six vessels with 2,000 *schibe*), 650 (same year: arrival of spices), 691 (same year: nine vessels); 6:246 (1505: 1,500 *colli* of spices); 7:355 (1508: a good quantity of spices); 9:112 (1509: 30 vessels with spices); 11:104 (1510: a good quantity of spices), 829 (same year: 17 vessels with spices); 12:155 (1511: arrival in Cairo of a caravan with spices from al-Ṭūr), 236 (same year: spices); 18: 155 (1514: some vessels with spices).

107 Van Ghistele, *Voyage*, 181.

108 Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam* (1490): "Porta thor ubi applicant naves ex India."

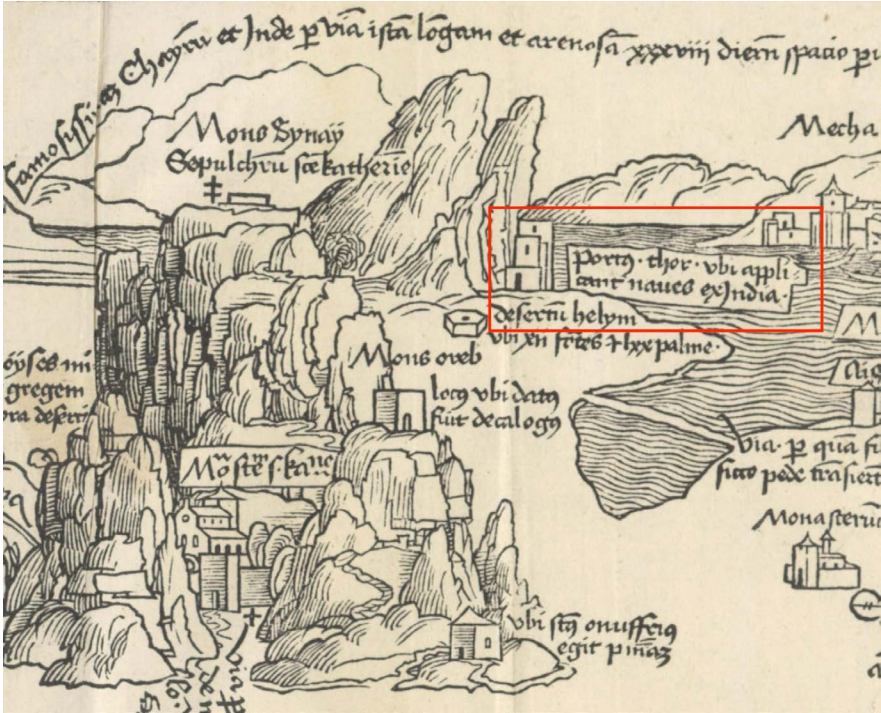


Fig. 3: View of the port of al-Ṭūr as depicted by Bernhard von Breydenbach, *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam* (1490)

Courtesy: Library of Congress, Washington

an upper level. By 1497, von Harff's own account of his stay, which lasted several days, demonstrates that the situation had not changed.<sup>109</sup> A fort was eventually constructed in al-Ṭūr during Qāniṣawh al-Ghawrī's reign (906–922/1501–1516). This was part of a wider policy of fortification and repair of various fortresses and forts, initiated by the sultan. Such works were undertaken from 914/1508 onward in a number of locations, including al-Ṭinah, Rosetta, Suez, Nakhl, al-Ṭūr, Nuwaybi', Aqaba, Yanbu', and Jedda.<sup>110</sup> In the Red Sea, the threat posed by the Portuguese became a tangible reality from 1502 onward. In 1505, a vessel laden with spices and bound for al-Ṭūr was captured by the Portuguese fleet.<sup>111</sup> In his 1547 account, the French traveler Pierre Belon (d. 1564) described the structure as a small castle

<sup>109</sup> Von Harff, *The Pilgrimage*, 149.

<sup>110</sup> On these fortifications, see PRADINES, "The Mamluk Fortifications."

<sup>111</sup> Sanudo, *I diarii*, 6:249.

made of cut stone and defended by towers placed at its corners. The structure was 60 steps in width and 80 in length.<sup>112</sup> Six years prior to Belon's visit, the port had been attacked by Estêvão da Gama, and João de Castro provided a comprehensive representation of the port. Under letter E (see Figures 5, 7, and 9), one can discern a fortified structure with an elevated level in its center.

The imposition of taxes and levies on commodities entering or exiting the port, along with the management of their storage and transportation, necessitated the involvement of a number of officials.<sup>113</sup> It appears that during the initial stages of the port's development these officials only traveled from Cairo when news of the arrival of vessels reached the capital. As Piloti notes, upon the arrival of vessels at al-Ṭūr messengers were dispatched to Cairo. Subsequently, various officials were then sent to al-Ṭūr. The vessels were not unloaded of their contents until their arrival. The loads were then weighed, and based on their value, the requisite levies were paid. Thereafter, all the officials returned to the capital.<sup>114</sup> The decrees issued for the monks of St. Catherine demonstrate that by the mid-ninth/fifteenth century the situation had changed significantly. It is evident that the volume of commodities transiting the port must have increased considerably since Barsbāy's policies were implemented. This must have necessitated the presence of officials for longer periods, if not all year round. The decrees, dated between 850/1446 and 898/1493, as well as an additional decree dated 907/1501 recently published,<sup>115</sup> provide evidence of the presence of a judge (*qāḍī*) and a market inspector (*muḥtasib*). Additionally, the documents lists various other officials, including an inspector (*nāzīr*), an intendant (*shādd*), safety officers (*arbāb al-adrāk*), watchmen (*khufarā*),<sup>116</sup> bureau officials (*mubāshirūn*), administrators (*mutaḥaddithūn*), and various employees (*mutaṣar-rifūn*).<sup>117</sup> As demonstrated by the 907/1501 decree, these officials were obligated to respond to the inspector of the Privy (*nāzīr al-khāṣṣ*), located in Cairo. Al-Sakhāwī

112 Pierre Belon, *Voyage en Égypte de Pierre Belon du Mans, 1547*, Cairo, 1970, 130a. This depiction coincides with the description given by Linant de Bellefonds in the nineteenth century. See PRADINES, "The Mamluk Fortifications," 53 and fig. 24. In the meantime, the fort had certainly been repaired by the Ottomans.

113 For the various positions found in the ports of the Red Sea, see AL-'AMĀYIRAH, *Mawānī' al-baḥr al-aḥmar*, 149–162, and more specifically for Yanbu', AL-GHĀMIDĪ, *al-Tijārah wa-l-milāḥah*, 165–173.

114 Piloti, *Traité*, 105.

115 BAUDEN, "An Unpublished Decree."

116 The responsibility of these watchmen was to ensure the security of the commodities from the moment of unloading until their transfer to the storehouses and warehouses, and subsequently to the camels for transportation. See al-Jazīrī, *al-Durar al-farā'id al-munazzamah*, 2:18.

117 ERNST, *Die Mamlukischen Sultansurkunden*, 126 (no. XXV), 160 (no. XXXVI), 174 (no. XLII), 180 (no. XLIV), 184 (no. XLVI), 188 (no. XLVIII), 196 (no. LI), 197 (no. LII); BAUDEN, "An Unpublished Decree," 383.

provides the names of individuals who held responsibility for these roles. These include two inspectors (*nāzir*) and one intendant, all of whom were active in al-Ṭūr toward the end of the ninth/fifteenth century.<sup>118</sup> One of these individuals amassed considerable wealth as a consequence of his position.<sup>119</sup> In Ramaḍān 906/March-April 1501, it is known that ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Ḥasan al-Imām had been appointed inspector in the port of al-Ṭūr.<sup>120</sup> In a deed of purchase dated 922/1516, Ḥassān b. Shibl b. Ḥassān, a Christian Melkite, is identified as one of the officials employed by the bureau of the Privy in the port of al-Ṭūr. This evidence demonstrates that local Christians were appointed to work for the administration.<sup>121</sup> It also corroborates the information provided by the 907/1501 decree, which indicates that officials working in the port appointed a Christian Melkite as their representative.<sup>122</sup> Besides these officials, a number of other occupational groups were active in the port area. These included porters (*ḥāmīlūn* or *‘attālūn*), whose duties included loading and unloading vessels.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, individuals were tasked with the responsibility of sewing the parcels.<sup>124</sup>

Merchants were also present and active in the port area. One such merchant, a Christian from Shawbak, who was known as a long-distance trader (*al-tājir al-saffār*), is attested in a document from 854/1450.<sup>125</sup> Additionally, European merchants utilized al-Ṭūr as a transit point, capitalizing on their pilgrimage to the Monastery of St. Catherine or their journeys to and from Asia. Around 1437, Pero Tafur (d. ca. 1487) encountered in the port of al-Ṭūr the Venetian merchant Niccoló de Conti (d. 1469), who was on his way back from India and Indonesia after a journey that lasted approximately 20 years.<sup>126</sup> In 1482–1483, Joos van Ghistele made the acquaintance of two merchants, one from Venice and the other from Milan, who

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118 Karīm al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Ibrāhīm al-Muqsimī was inspector of al-Ṭūr before he was appointed to the money changing house in Jeddā in 886/1481–1482. Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmī*, 4:306–7 (no. 827). Qarājā al-Zāhirī Jaqmaq worked for the inspector of the Privy of Jaqmaq’s son, Jamāl al-Dīn Yūsuf, in the quality of intendant of al-Ṭūr. This must have been during Jaqmaq’s reign. *Ibid.*, 6:215 (no. 719). Lastly, ‘Alī b. Ḥasan al-Sunbāṭi was appointed inspector of al-Ṭūr after 896/1490–1. *Ibid.*, 5:213 (no. 714).

119 This was Qarājā (see previous footnote). *Ibid.*, 6:215.

120 See BAUDEN, “An Unpublished Decree,” 382–383. He was later appointed inspector of the Privy. Ibn Iyās, *Badā’i’ al-zuhūr*, 4:22; Ibn al-Ḥimṣī, *Ḥawādith al-zamān*, 2:140.

121 Monastery of St. Catherine, doc. 239 (*aḥad al-mubāshirīn bi-dīwān al-khāṣṣ al-sharīf [bi-banda]r al-Ṭūr al-mubārak*).

122 BAUDEN, “An Unpublished Decree,” 381.

123 See al-Jazīrī, *al-Durar al-farā’id al-munazzamah*, 2:18 and 19.

124 An operation known as *tafriq*. See *ibid.*

125 Monastery of St. Catherine, doc. 262 (Mūsá b. Sa’id b. Ilyās al-Naṣrānī al-Shawbakī al-Malakī al-tājir al-saffār al-ma’rūf bi-Ibn Ṭarkhān).

126 Pero Tafur, *Travels and Adventures, 1435–1439*, trans. Malcolm Letts, London, 1926, 84.

were awaiting a vessel to travel to the Persian Gulf.<sup>127</sup> Retailers (*mutasabbibūn*) are mentioned in some deeds of purchase held in the archives of the monastery as well.<sup>128</sup> These retailers were engaged in the sale of low-value merchandise. Their activities could only be profitable if there was sufficient population residing in or passing by the port on a year-round basis.

## Conclusion

It is evident that the port of al-Ṭūr underwent a significant expansion at the end of the eighth/fourteenth century. However, it is known that the port was already in use on a sporadic basis since the end of the seventh/thirteenth century. This was a period when the port of al-Rāyah, situated eight kilometers further south, began to lose its prominence. It is plausible that the port of al-Rāyah was gradually silting up, which may have contributed to its decline. With the policies established by the Mamlūk sultans at the beginning of the ninth/fifteenth century, and more particularly during the reign of Barsbāy, the port became a significant transit point for pilgrims, merchants, commodities, and merchandise. Additionally, it was occasionally utilized as a departure point for military vessels, particularly toward the conclusion of Mamlūk rule, when the Portuguese were perceived as a threat to the exchange of trade. A review of the available narrative and documentary sources indicates that the port's activities experienced a period of significant growth from the mid-ninth/fifteenth century onward. It is probable that the port was then utilized on a year-round basis, rather than during a specific peak period of the year, which would have been dominated by the arrival of merchants from the Indian Ocean. The decrees and deeds of purchase held in the archives of the Monastery of St. Catherine are invaluable for supplementing the information provided by the narrative sources, which often fail to mention al-Ṭūr. The documents illustrate the importance of the local Christian community and the monks in the port's daily operations. They owned warehouses and storehouses where spices from the sultan's treasury, along with other commodities brought by merchants, were stored in exchange for rent. Some of them also held official positions.

<sup>127</sup> Van Ghistele, *Voyage*, 181.

<sup>128</sup> Monastery of St. Catherine, doc. 269 (dated 860/1456: Ishāq b. Faḍl b. Ishāq al-Naṣrānī al-Malakī al-Shawbakī *al-mutasabbib bi-Bandar al-Ṭūr*); 277 (dated 867/1463, see Ibrāhīm, “Thalāth wathā’iq,” 57: *al-mu’allim* Sālim b. Bishārah b. ‘Amir al-Naṣrānī al-Malakī al-ma’rūf bi-Ibn ‘Uwaynah *al-mutasabbib bi-bandar al-Ṭūr*), 310 (dated 894/1489: Wahbah b. Sulaymān b. Fahd b. Sa’d al-Naṣrānī al-Malakī *al-mutasabbib bi-bandar al-Ṭūr al-mubārak al-ma’rūf bi-Ibn Fahd*).



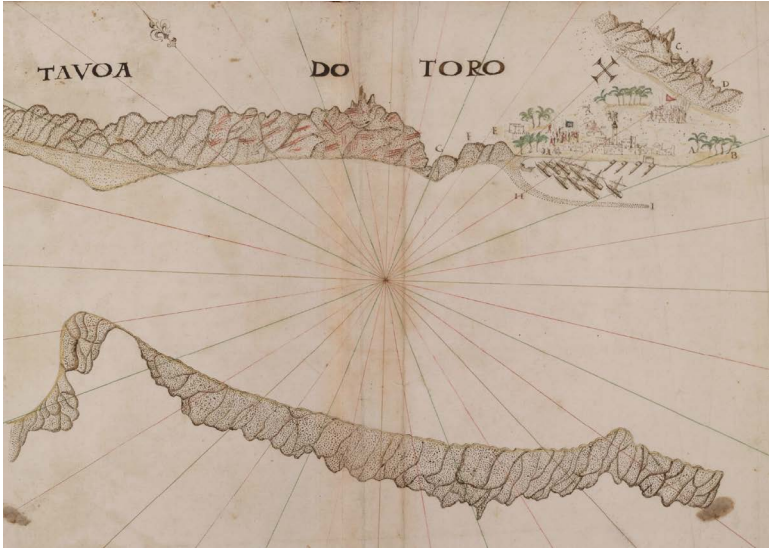
**Fig. 4:** View of al-Ṭūr in *Roteiro de Dom Ioam de Castro, da Viagem que Fizeram os Portugueses ao Mar Roxo no Anno de 1541* (dated 1543)

Courtesy: British Library, London, Cotton MS Tiberius, D. IX, fols. 75b–76a



**Fig. 5:** Detail of the view of al-Ṭūr in *Roteiro de Dom Ioam de Castro, da Viagem que Fizeram os Portugueses ao Mar Roxo no Anno de 1541* (dated 1543)

Courtesy: British Library, London, Cotton MS Tiberius, D. IX, fols. 75b–76a



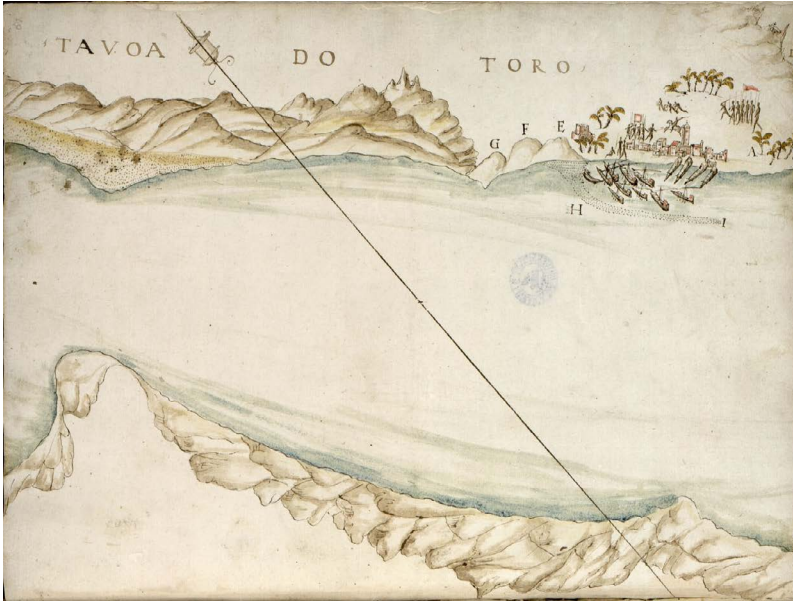
**Fig. 6:** View of al-Ṭūr in *Roteiro que fez dom João de Castro de viagem que fezeram os Portugueses desda India atee Soez* (ca. 1543)

Courtesy: James Ford Bell Library, Minneapolis, MS 1541 fCA, fols. 75b–76a



**Fig. 7:** Detail of the view of al-Ṭūr in *Roteiro que fez dom João de Castro de viagem que fezeram os Portugueses desda India atee Soez* (ca. 1543)

Courtesy: James Ford Bell Library, Minneapolis, MS 1541 fCA, fols. 75b–76a



**Fig. 8:** View of al-Ṭūr in *Tavoas dos lugares da costa da India* (ca. 1550–75)  
 Courtesy: Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra, Cofre 33



**Fig. 9:** Detail of the view of al-Ṭūr in *Tavoas dos lugares da costa da India* (ca. 1550–75)  
 Courtesy: Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra, Cofre 33

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