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## **MARITIME HISTORY: MAMLUK AND ITALIAN INTERACTIONS IN THE PORT CITY OF ALEXANDRIA FROM 1250 TO 1517**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the strategic role of Alexandria as a major port city during the Mamluk Sultanate from 1250 to 1517 and the dynamics of its interactions with the Italian maritime republics. Alexandria served as a crucial node in premodern global trade networks. The study also examines the condition of the port and its influence on urban development, maritime security, and state fiscal policy. Drawing on primary sources such as the chronicles of al Maqrizi and Ibn Taghribirdi, as well as secondary studies, the research shows that relations between the Mamluks and the Italian states were shaped by deep economic interdependence. The Mamluks relied on European precious metals and manufactured products, while the Italian states depended on spices, sugar, cotton, and other Eastern commodities that flowed through Alexandria. These interactions unfolded in a tense geopolitical environment marked by the legacy of the Crusades, competition among Italian states, church embargoes, and persistent piracy. The study argues that Alexandria functioned not only as an economic hub but also as a stage for coercive diplomacy, where the Mamluks used foreign merchant communities as instruments of negotiation to compensate for their limited naval power. Yet the reliance on trade monopolies, transit taxation, and the failure to adapt to global changes, especially the rise of Portuguese sea routes and Ottoman expansion, weakened this system and contributed to its fragility in the decades before the fall of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517.

**Keywords:** *Alexandria, Mamluk, Italy, Maritime trade, Mediterranean.*

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, Alexandria has occupied a central position as a meeting point between the Eastern and Western worlds, a role that became increasingly crucial from the Islamic period through the era of the Mamluk Sultanate. As a major port city in the Mediterranean, Alexandria functioned not merely as a transit hub for goods but as a vital nexus connecting two interdependent economic systems <sup>1</sup>. Its significance did not diminish despite political upheavals in the surrounding regions; the city remained a principal gateway for global commodity flows and cross-cultural interactions. In the context of maritime history, the vitality of Alexandria is reflected in its well-established commercial infrastructure, such as the *fondacos*, lodging houses and trading warehouses established by the Italian maritime republics, including Venice, which even maintained their own church and public baths to serve their merchant communities <sup>2</sup>.

The position of Alexandria also carried symbolic and religious dimensions that strengthened its appeal to Western powers. For Venice, Alexandria possessed strong historical and religious ties associated with Saint Mark. This narrative was so deeply rooted that it was reflected in Venetian art, such as Gentile Bellini's painting *St. Mark Preaching in Alexandria*, which projects Venetian architectural imagination onto the landscape of Alexandria <sup>3</sup>. This illustrates that Alexandria was not perceived merely as a marketplace, but as a space in which political, religious, and economic identities were intertwined.

The period from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century marked a profound shift in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The fall of Baghdad in the middle of the thirteenth century and the collapse of the last Crusader strongholds along the coast of the Levant, especially the capture of Acre by the Mamluk Sultan al Ashraf Khalil in the year 1291, signaled the conclusion of the Outremer era and the emergence of the Mamluk Sultanate as the new dominant power in the region. These events provoked a strong reaction from the Latin Christian world, including a complete trade embargo declared by Pope Nicholas IV in the year 1291 with the intention of cutting off the revenues of the Mamluks. Yet economic realities soon compelled political pragmatism. Venice, which depended heavily on trade with the East, quickly restored commercial relations with the Mamluk authorities shortly after the fall of Acre, demonstrating that maritime interests often surpassed ideological sentiment <sup>4</sup>.

On the opposite side of the Mediterranean, the fifteenth century witnessed Venice reaching the height of its power as the so-called ruler of the Mediterranean. Venetian merchant vessels traversed the sea carrying goods from distant lands, while their war galleys patrolled the waters to secure trade routes from pirates and other military threats.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice's Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and Syria" VIII, no. 2 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.6082/M1BG2M39>.

<sup>2</sup> Nevine Rateb, "Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria: A New Perspective" XXVI (2023), <https://doi.org/10.6082/r8hx-6w23>.

<sup>3</sup> Rateb.

<sup>4</sup> David Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria: Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period" XXI (2018), <https://doi.org/10.6082/c3th-qe08>.

Venice constructed a trading empire of unprecedented scale, appointing its officials in various economic centers to maintain diplomatic relations and supervise its merchant communities. Meanwhile, Florence also began to pursue an assertive maritime expansion at the beginning of the fifteenth century after conquering Pisa along with its port. This development enabled the City of Flowers to build a fleet of commercial galleys and establish direct diplomatic relations with the Mamluk Sultan. Archival documents from Florence reveal the intensity of this diplomacy, which constitutes the only surviving historical evidence for the framework of commercial and political relations between the two entities during that period <sup>5</sup>.

The paradox of power is clearly visible in this relationship. Although Venice possessed immense naval strength and a superior economic structure, it often had to submit to the demands and threats issued by the Mamluk Sultanate, which was comparatively weaker at sea. The Mamluk sultans frequently threatened the Venetian merchant communities within their territories whenever their demands were not met, creating a complex balance of power in which naval superiority did not necessarily guarantee dominance on foreign soil. At the center of Mamluk relations with the Italian states was the trade in high value commodities. Venice and the Mamluk authorities were bound by an economic partnership based on a fundamental interdependence between the two economic systems (Arbel, 2004). Venetian merchants acted as principal intermediaries who transported goods from Mamluk territories to Western Europe <sup>6</sup>.

The key commodities that passed through Alexandria were highly varied. On one side, the Mamluks exported spices, especially pepper, which was the most sought after item in the trade. The monopoly policy implemented by Sultan Barsbay in the decade of the fourteen twenties, for example, forced Venetian merchants to purchase pepper in large quantities from the sultan's warehouses at inflated prices, often becoming a source of diplomatic tension <sup>7</sup>. In addition to spices, there was also significant trade in other products such as alum from Egypt, which was essential for the European textile industry <sup>8</sup>.

Conversely, Venice was not only an exporter of European goods but also a vital supplier for the Mamluk market. The flow of precious metals, both gold and silver, in the form of ingots as well as coins, moved in great volume from the West to the East through Venetian merchants. This movement greatly influenced monetary evolution and economic developments in Egypt and Syria <sup>9</sup>. In addition to precious metals, Venice also imported a wide range of goods into Mamluk territories, including textiles known as *panni*, oil, copper, tin, and luxury items such as animal furs known as *zibelini* and amber.

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<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Rizzo, "Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies : A Survey of Florentine- Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources ( Fifteenth - Sixteenth Centuries )" XXIV (2021), <https://doi.org/10.6082/m3kr-fj76>.

<sup>6</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice ' s Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria."

<sup>7</sup> Arbel.

<sup>8</sup> Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria : Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period."

<sup>9</sup> Jacoby.

Trade documents record an extensive variety of products sent to the East, from oil originating from Puglia to white soap produced in Venice, illustrating the depth of Western commercial penetration into Eastern markets <sup>10</sup>.

The intensity of this trade persisted despite numerous challenges. Even in the final years of the Mamluk Sultanate, when internal political instability increased after the death of Sultan Qaytbay and external threats from the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean began to rise, Venetian ships continued to visit Mamluk ports on a regular basis <sup>11</sup>. This continuity affirms that commerce through Alexandria was not merely an occasional economic activity but rather the lifeline of both parties.

Studying the interactions between the Mamluk Sultanate and Italian city states such as Venice and Florence offers crucial insights for understanding global maritime history. These interactions went beyond the simple exchange of goods; they formed an arena in which identity, diplomacy, and political survival were continuously negotiated. First, this study reveals how foreign merchant communities, often described as strangers in a foreign land, maintained their identities and roles within environments that were frequently hostile. Venice, despite its strength at sea, was compelled to navigate the political volatility of the Mamluk realm with great caution, a dynamic that shaped both its self-perception and the manner in which it projected itself to the outside world <sup>12</sup>. Second, these relations highlight the importance of Western archival sources for reconstructing the economic history of the Islamic world. Documents from the Florentine chancery and commercial records from Venice provide detailed information on Mamluk monetary policy, tax regulations, and diplomatic practices, which are often absent from contemporary Arabic sources <sup>13</sup>. Trade agreements, for example, frequently contain unique information on the movement of precious metals and the mechanisms of the market that cannot be found elsewhere <sup>14</sup>.

Third, these interactions serve as a reflection of pragmatic tolerance and cultural exchange. Gentile Bellini's painting of Alexandria is not merely a work of art, but a visual document that records how Venice perceived its Eastern trading partner, combining empirical observation with political projection. The Mamluk Sultanate was the only Eastern state in which Venice could construct its own imagined image, and the eventual fall of the Mamluks contributed to a transformation in Venice's own conception of the East <sup>15</sup>. Finally, this period demonstrates the resilience of maritime networks in the face

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<sup>10</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice's Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and Syria."

<sup>11</sup> Arbel.

<sup>12</sup> By Adam Aaron, "Strangers in a Foreign Land: How Did the Circumstances of Venetian Merchants in Mamluk Territory Influence Their Role and Identity?," n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Rizzo, "Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies: A Survey of Florentine-Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources (Fifteenth - Sixteenth Centuries)"; Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria: Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period."

<sup>14</sup> Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria: Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period."

<sup>15</sup> Rateb, "Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria: A New Perspective."

of global disruption. The threat posed by the Portuguese fleets, which discovered the sea route to India by navigating around Africa, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean in the early sixteenth century, introduced existential challenges to the spice route that connected Alexandria and Venice<sup>16</sup>. Understanding how the Mamluk Italian axis responded to this crisis, through diplomacy, warfare, and economic adaptation, is essential for explaining the transition from the medieval Mediterranean economy to the early modern era.

This study is guided by the question of how Alexandria functioned as an exceptionally important port city within the international trading networks of the Mediterranean during the period of Mamluk rule from 1250 to 1517. To address this question, the first part of the discussion focuses on the condition of the port of Alexandria within its political, economic, and social context during this era. Alexandria served as one of the principal gateways for trade between East and West, where the Mamluk authorities centralized fiscal regulation and port administration in order to control the flow of high value commodities such as pepper, sugar, cotton, and precious metals<sup>17</sup>. The institutional structure of the port, customs policies, maritime security oversight, and the presence of Italian *fondaci* formed integral elements of Alexandria's dynamics as a cosmopolitan maritime city. The second question concerns the forms of maritime interaction between the Mamluks and the Italian merchants. These interactions took place through direct trade, diplomatic negotiation, commercial treaties, and fiscal regulations imposed by the sultan<sup>18</sup>. These contacts were further complicated by rivalries among Italian republics such as Venice and Genoa, as well as by papal embargoes that formally prohibited trade with the Mamluks but in practice did little to hinder the intense commercial activity that continued in Alexandria<sup>19</sup>.

The third question focuses on the impact of these maritime interactions on the economy, politics, and urban life of Alexandria. These interactions increased the revenues of the Mamluk state through port duties, strengthened the economic structure of the city, and generated social diversity through the presence of foreign communities<sup>20</sup>. Alexandria developed into a major center of international trade, characterized by an expanding network of markets, warehouses, foreign merchant quarters, and an increasingly complex port bureaucracy. These economic and social influences also reinforced Alexandria's political position as a central node in the maritime strategy of the Mamluk realm. The final question considers the reasons why the period from 1250 to 1517 serves as the historical phase of Mamluk interactions with the Italian states. After the fall of Baghdad in the year 1258, the center of economic activity in the Islamic world shifted to Egypt

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<sup>16</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice's Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and Syria."

<sup>17</sup> Eliyahu Ashtor, "Levant Trade in the Middle Ages," 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Amalia Levanoni, "The Mamluk Conception of the Sultanate," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 3 (1994): 373–92.

<sup>19</sup> Frederic Chapin Lane, *Venice, a Maritime Republic* (JHU Press, 1973).

<sup>20</sup> Carl F Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

under the Mamluk dynasty <sup>21</sup>. eventually ending with the fall of the Mamluks to the Ottoman Empire. At the time of the rise of the Mamluks, the Italian republics were at the height of their maritime expansion, while the Portuguese sea route that would later redirect the Egyptian trading corridor had not yet emerged <sup>22</sup>.

Studies on Alexandria as a port city have been addressed in a range of classical and modern scholarship. Early research largely emphasized topographic features and urban history, whereas more recent studies have shifted their attention toward commerce and global trade networks. <sup>23</sup> offers an important analysis of Levantine trade and Alexandria's role in distributing Eastern commodities to Europe. However, much of this scholarship mentions Alexandria only within broader regional contexts and does not treat it as the central focus of in-depth analysis. Literature on Mediterranean maritime history provides a rich conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics between the Islamic world and Europe. <sup>24</sup> presents a detailed account of Venetian maritime activities, while <sup>25</sup> illustrates the shifts in trade routes following the rise of Ottoman and Portuguese maritime power. These works place Alexandria within a wider and interdependent system of commercial exchange.

Specialized studies on Mamluk–Italian interactions have been developed by scholars such as Ayalon, Levanoni, Petry, and Raymond, who highlight trade relations, state policies, and socioeconomic structures during the Mamluk period. Yet much of this research tends to focus on administrative centers like Cairo or on Levantine commerce more generally, leaving Alexandria insufficiently explored <sup>26</sup>. Taken together, this literature reveals a clear research gap concerning Alexandria as a concrete and intensive site of maritime interaction between the Mamluks and the Italian states. Most studies address macro relations between the two regions without positioning Alexandria as the primary point of contact that directly reflects their social, economic, and diplomatic dynamics. This study seeks to fill that gap by situating Alexandria at the center of Mamluk–Italian interactions during the period 1250 to 1517 CE.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs the historical method, a systematic procedure used to reconstruct the past objectively and chronologically. Following the framework articulated by Dudung Abdurrahman<sup>27</sup> in *Metode Penelitian Sejarah*, the research process proceeds through four sequential operational stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>23</sup> Ashtor (2014)

<sup>24</sup> Lane (1973)

<sup>25</sup> Casale (2010)

<sup>26</sup> André Raymond, *Cairo* (Harvard University Press, 2000); Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*.

<sup>27</sup> Dudung Abdurrahman, *Metodologi Penelitian Sejarah* (Ar-Ruzz Media, 2007).

The first stage is Heuristics, which involves the collection of historical traces. In accordance with the principle of source completeness emphasized by Kuntowijoyo<sup>28</sup>, this research integrates both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources rely on contemporary chronicles, particularly *Al-Mawa'iz wa al-I'tibar* by al-Maqrizi for topographical and socio-economic data on Alexandria, as well as *Al-Nujum al-Zahira* by Ibn Taghribirdi, which records the political dynamics of the Mamluk court. These primary materials are supplemented selectively by secondary literature as supporting data, such as Eliyahu Ashtor's trade statistics and David Ayalon's analyses of military structures.

The second stage is Source Criticism (verification), which examines the authenticity and credibility of the data. This step applies the principle of internal criticism as outlined by Gottschalk<sup>29</sup>, whereby the researcher must distinguish "factual truth" from the "author's opinion." In this context, narratives found in Arabic chronicles that tend to be centered on the Cairo court are cross-checked with findings from Italian commercial archives discussed in the works of Benjamin Arbel and Alessandro Rizzo. This process is crucial for minimizing subjective bias, for instance when assessing whether a Mamluk sultan's tax policy constituted "extortion" (according to Venetian sources) or a strategy of "monetary stabilization" (according to internal Mamluk perspectives). The third stage is Interpretation (analysis and synthesis). At this point, disparate facts are woven into a coherent whole using the multidimensional approach formulated by Sartono Kartodirjo.<sup>30</sup> This approach enables the researcher to move beyond purely political events and incorporate dimensions of maritime economy, urban sociology, and regional geopolitics. The analysis focuses on how the hybrid interactions between Italian merchants and Mamluk authorities shaped the distinctive character of the port of Alexandria.

The final stage is Historiography, the rewriting of the reconstructed historical findings. In accordance with academic writing conventions, the results of the interpretation are presented in a descriptive-analytical narrative arranged chronologically. This narrative addresses the research questions concerning the central role of Alexandria as a space of geopolitical negotiation in the Mediterranean between 1250 and 1517, particularly in the interactions between the Italians and the Mamluks in Alexandria.

## RESULT and DISCUSSION

### A. Alexandria as the Principal Port City during the Mamluk Era

Historically, Alexandria's position has long been recognized as a crucial meeting point between Eastern and Western trade routes, a fact emphasized in modern logistical studies that highlight the city's comparative advantage derived from its unique location at the intersection of the Mediterranean Sea and access to the Indian Ocean via the Nile River. However, during the Mamluk era, a distinct shift in orientation occurred<sup>31</sup>. The

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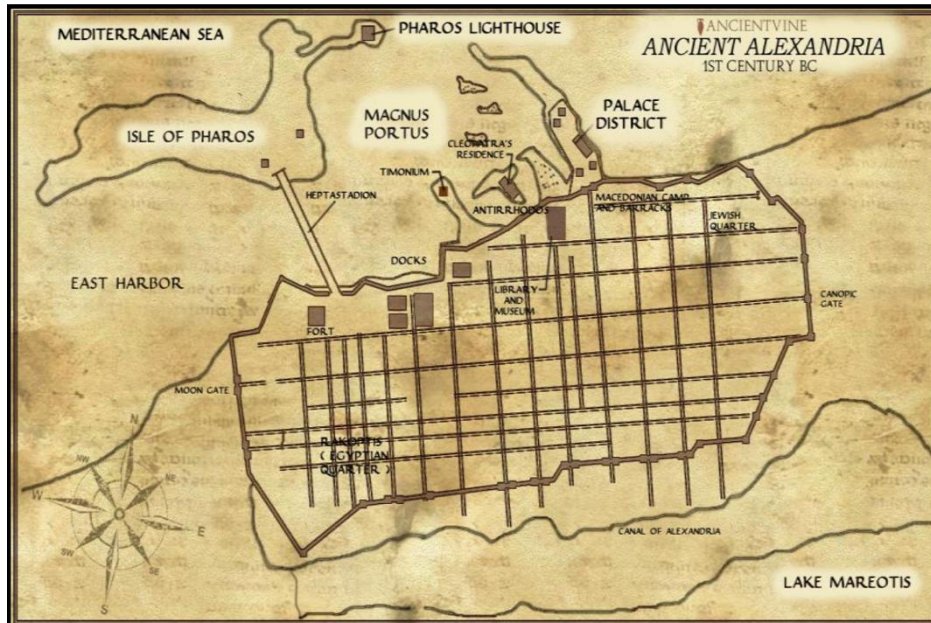
<sup>28</sup> Kuntowijoyo, *Pengantar Ilmu Sejarah* (Bandung: Bentang Pustaka, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Louis Gottschalk, "Mengerti Sejarah (N. Notosusanto, Trans.);" (Jakarta: UI Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Sartono Kartodirjo, *Pendekatan Ilmu Sosial Dalam Metodologi Sejarah* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> Aya Mostafa ElGarhy, "An Analysis of Policy Making for Dry Port Location and Capacity: A Case

city underwent a significant “functional reorientation”; whereas in earlier periods its orientation was centered toward the Nile Delta and Cairo, under the Mamluks Alexandria increasingly established itself as a “Gateway City” facing westward toward Europe and the Maghrib<sup>32</sup>. This reorientation was not merely a rerouting of connections but a deeper transformation of economic identity that positioned Alexandria as both a buffer zone and a vital intermediary facilitating the flow of global wealth, even as it remained administratively subordinate to the sultan’s authority in Cairo<sup>33</sup>.



Old Map of the City of Alexandria<sup>34</sup>

The physical landscape of Alexandria during this period reflected the duality of its function as both a commercial hub and a military outpost. Urban development received minimal state investment in civil public facilities. From the perspective of Cairo, Alexandria was regarded as a frontier city vulnerable to naval attacks. As a result, rather than beautifying the city, the Mamluk authorities prioritized military architecture, most notably the construction of the massive Qaytbay Fortress. This imbalance of priorities produced a paradox in which grand commercial warehouses stood alongside defensive structures, while other civic infrastructures were frequently neglected by the central government<sup>35</sup>.

Study on Alexandria,” 2016; Engy Mahmoud and Helmy Awad, “The Maritime Commons : Digital Repository of the World Maritime Measuring Logistics Performance in Ports : A Case of Alexandria in Egypt Measuring Logistics Performance in Ports : A Case of Alexandria in Egypt By In,” 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Miriam Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City” 26, no. 1 (2014): 5–35.

<sup>33</sup> Frenkel; Mahmoud and Awad, “The Maritime Commons : Digital Repository of the World Maritime Measuring Logistics Performance in Ports : A Case of Alexandria in Egypt Measuring Logistics Performance in Ports : A Case of Alexandria in Egypt By In.”

<sup>34</sup> Khaled Heba, “Alexandria and Urban Challenges Evaluation Of The City Comprehensive Planning Projects,” *Journal of Al-Azhar University Engineering Sector 7* (May 14, 2012): 2001–26.

<sup>35</sup> Rateb, “Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria : A New Perspective”; Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria –

Alexandria did not stand in isolation but functioned as a principal node within a wider maritime network. It operated on scheduled routes to transport high-value spices within the international maritime trade system. Yet, the dynamics of navigation across the region were fluid and deeply interconnected with Levantine ports. When political conditions or taxation policies in Alexandria became unfavorable, European merchants often rerouted their fleets to Beirut, which served as the port for Damascus. The synergy between Alexandria and Beirut reveals a deliberate strategy of risk diversification among foreign merchants, who exploited competition among Mamluk provincial governors to secure optimal trade terms. Consequently, Alexandria formed part of a “dual-port system” together with Beirut, sustaining Mamluk hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean <sup>36</sup>.

Behind the glitter of the spice trade and the bustling port activity lay a bleak political reality for the local population and certain political elites. Under the Mamluk regime in Cairo, Alexandria frequently functioned as an “open-air prison” and a place of exile for political opponents or disliked amirs. Its considerable distance from the political center (Cairo), yet still within the reach of state control, made it an ideal location to banish figures considered dangerous without resorting to execution. This status as a site of exile, combined with the constant threat of Frankish pirate attacks, discouraged Mamluk elites from making long-term investments in the city’s social development. This dynamic underscores that although Alexandria prospered economically due to its global interactions, it was politically marginalized and viewed with suspicion by the central authorities <sup>37</sup>.

Despite these political tensions and its militarized function, Alexandria endured because of the fundamental interdependence between Europe and the Mamluk state. The city became a “contact zone” where Europe’s need for spices intersected with the Mamluks’ need for precious metals (gold and silver) and other strategic commodities such as timber and iron <sup>38</sup>. The port of Alexandria also served as a foundation for the later development of modern logistical policies, demonstrating that its role as a hub never truly disappeared even as political regimes changed <sup>39</sup>. This intense interaction produced a distinctive social environment in which merchants, consuls, and local residents lived in a condition of pragmatic tension, ideologically opposed yet economically dependent on one another for their continued survival <sup>40</sup>.

## **B. Mamluk–Italian Interactions**

The interaction between the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria and the Italian

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Life in a Port City.”

<sup>36</sup> Arbel, “The Last Decades of Venice ’ s Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria”; Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City.”

<sup>37</sup> Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City.”

<sup>38</sup> Arbel, “The Last Decades of Venice ’ s Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria”; Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City.”

<sup>39</sup> ElGarhy, “An Analysis of Policy Making for Dry Port Location and Capacity: A Case Study on Alexandria.”

<sup>40</sup> Arbel, “The Last Decades of Venice ’ s Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria”; Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City.”

maritime republics, particularly Venice, Genoa, and Florence, represents one of the most complex economic phenomena in the late medieval Mediterranean. This relationship was not merely transactional or limited to buying and selling, but rather constituted a system of fundamental interdependence in which both sides relied on each other for the maintenance of their domestic economies. For Venice, access to the ports of Alexandria and Beirut functioned as the lifeline that secured its position as the dominant commercial power in Europe. Conversely, for the Mamluks, the presence of Italian merchants was the only mechanism that enabled the conversion of agrarian wealth and transit taxes into precious metals such as gold and silver, which were essential for paying the army and preserving monetary stability <sup>41</sup>.

### **1. Spice Trade and Major Commodities in Alexandria**

The spice route that connected the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea constituted the backbone of the global economy between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Mamluk Sultanate, which controlled Egypt and Syria, held a pivotal position as the gatekeeper of this transit corridor. In the final decades of this commerce, Alexandria was not merely a local marketplace but the terminus of a long and complex global supply chain <sup>42</sup>.

The journey of spices, particularly pepper and ginger, began on the Malabar Coast of India and in the spice producing islands of Southeast Asia. These commodities were transported across the Indian Ocean by Muslim, Indian, and Chinese merchants to ports on the Red Sea such as Jeddah and Tor. From there, the goods did not immediately reach the hands of European traders. Although the Mamluks lacked a naval force capable of projecting power into the Indian Ocean, as evidenced by their later failure to halt the Portuguese, they controlled crucial overland nodes. Goods arriving from the Red Sea were transported across the desert to the Nile River and from there shipped downstream to Alexandria. At this port, two logistical systems converged: the Mamluk caravan and river system and the Italian maritime system <sup>43</sup>.

The efficiency of spice transport from Alexandria to Europe depended heavily on the sophisticated Venetian logistical system known as the *mude*, state owned merchant galley convoys operating on strict schedules. These galleys, protected by archers and soldiers, sailed twice a year, typically in spring and autumn, to collect spice cargoes in Alexandria and Beirut. Timing was crucial; delays in the arrival of Venetian galleys could lead to the accumulation of goods in Alexandria's warehouses or, conversely, to shortages of spices in the Rialto market in Venice. In addition to the state galleys, privately owned round ships, also called *cogs*, transported bulky and lower value commodities such as

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<sup>41</sup> Mohammad Rozi Indrafuddin, "Kekuasaan Mamluk Dan Sumbangannya Terhadap Dunia Islam," in *Proceeding of The 3rd FUAD's International Conference on Strengthening Islamic Studies (FICOSIS)*, vol. 3, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Khalid Mohammed Azab, "Overview Of Economic Relations Between The Islamic World And The West," *مجلة المجمع العلمي المصري* 92, no. 92 (2017): 1-12.

<sup>43</sup> Albrecht Fuess, "Beirut in Mamluk Times (1291-1516)," *ARAM Periodical* 9, no. 1 (1997): 85-101.

cotton<sup>44</sup>.

One of the most overlooked aspects of this route is the west to east return flow. In the movement of precious metals, the Mamluk and Venetian trade balance was consistently in favor of the Mamluks. Europe's demand for spices far exceeded the value of its exportable goods, such as woolen cloth. Consequently, Italian ships carried large quantities of silver and gold, both in the form of bullion and coinage, to settle trade accounts. Jacoby observes that the flow of silver from Central European mines to Alexandria through Venice was vital for the Mamluks. Without this influx of silver, the Mamluk monetary system, which relied heavily on the dirham, frequently faced liquidity crises. Thus, the India to Suez to Alexandria to Italy spice corridor functioned as a dual route: spices moved westward while silver moved eastward<sup>45</sup>.

Although spices dominate the historical narrative, the structure of Mamluk and Italian trade was in fact highly diversified. Agrarian and industrial commodities played equally significant roles in sustaining the economic relationship between the two regions. Before the discovery of the New World, the Middle East was a major sugar producer for Europe. The Mamluks developed advanced sugarcane processing industries in Egypt and the Jordan Valley. Mamluk sugar, available in various grades such as loaf sugar and powdered sugar, was considered a luxury item in Europe and was imported in large quantities for redistribution to German and Northern European markets. By the late fifteenth century, however, Mamluk sugar production faced growing competition from Cyprus and Sicily, signaling an early shift of the sugar production center westward<sup>46</sup>.

In addition to sugar, cotton was a strategic commodity. The expanding textile industries of northern Italy, particularly in Lombardy, and in southern Germany in cities such as Ulm and Augsburg, depended heavily on raw cotton supplies from Syria. The ports of Beirut and Tripoli often served as centers for shipping this cotton. Venetian round ships were frequently dedicated to transporting the large bales of cotton. The dependence of European textile production on Syrian cotton granted the Mamluks significant economic leverage beyond the spice trade<sup>47</sup>.

Wheat occupied a unique position in Mamluk and Venetian relations. Egypt had long served as the breadbasket of the Mediterranean. Yet the export of wheat was often a politically sensitive issue. The Mamluk sultans frequently imposed export prohibitions to ensure domestic food security and prevent unrest in Cairo. Venice, however, as a city built on water with limited agricultural land, was extremely vulnerable to famine. During food crises in Italy, Venice often petitioned for special permission to import Egyptian

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<sup>44</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice's Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and Syria."

<sup>45</sup> Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria: Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period."

<sup>46</sup> Wan Kamal Mujani, "Kemosotan Sektor Perindustrian Pada Zaman Mamluk-Suatu Analisis Sejarah Dari Tempoh 872 H/1468 M Hingga 922 H/1517 M," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 3, no. 1 (2008): 151-85.

<sup>47</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice's Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and Syria."

wheat. The Mamluk sultans used wheat as an instrument of diplomacy; export permissions were granted in exchange for Venetian naval assistance or for supplies of prohibited military materials such as iron and timber, which the Mamluks needed to confront their enemies <sup>48</sup>.

Textile trade reflected the complexity of consumer preferences in both regions. On the one hand, the Mamluks imported fine woolen textiles (*panni*) from Europe, particularly from Florence and Flanders, which were transported by Italian merchants. These brightly colored woolen fabrics were highly valued among the Mamluk elite and the urban middle classes of Cairo and Damascus. On the other hand, the Mamluks exported exotic fabrics such as *camlet*, made from camel or goat hair, as well as silk produced in weaving workshops (*tiraz*) in Alexandria and Damietta. This textile exchange demonstrates that the Mamluks were not merely exporters of raw materials, but possessed a manufacturing base whose products were appreciated in international markets <sup>49</sup>.

Although trade benefited both sides, the mechanisms of exchange did not operate within a framework of free markets. Instead, the Circassian Mamluk period, especially in the fifteenth century under Sultan Barsbay (1422 to 1438) and Sultan Qaytbay (1468 to 1496), was marked by aggressive and extractive state intervention. During the earlier Bahri Mamluk period, the spice trade had been largely managed by wealthy private merchants known as the *Karimi*. However, fiscal crises pushed the sultans to dismantle their independent economic power. Sultan Barsbay systematically marginalized the *Karimi* merchants and transformed the spice trade into an exclusive state monopoly <sup>50</sup>.

The state became the sole merchant; the Sultan purchased the entire supply of spices arriving from the Red Sea and unilaterally set the resale price for Venetian merchants in Alexandria. This policy altered Alexandria's economic structure from a competitive trading city into a center of state-controlled monopoly. The practice of compulsory purchase became a major point of tension. The Mamluk sultans often required Venetian merchants to buy fixed quantities of pepper from state warehouses at prices far above market levels. This practice functioned as a disguised form of taxation. If Venice refused, the Sultan would not hesitate to detain the Venetian consul, confiscate merchandise, or close the port. Although Venice frequently protested and threatened to suspend the dispatch of its galleys, it rarely held this position for long because the demand for pepper in Europe was too urgent. The Mamluks understood well that they controlled a commodity for which no substitute existed in European markets at that time <sup>51</sup>.

Beyond monopoly pricing, the taxation structure at the port of Alexandria was

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<sup>48</sup> Michael J Reimer, "Century Arab Provinces Ottoman Alexandria : The Paradox Of Decline And The Reconfiguration Of Power In Eighteenth-Century Arab Provinces By" 37, No. 2 (2014): 107-46.

<sup>49</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice ' s Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria"; Rizzo, "Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies : A Survey of Florentine- Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources ( Fifteenth - Sixteenth Centuries )."

<sup>50</sup> Frenkel, "Medieval Alexandria - Life in a Port City"; Albrecht Fuess, "Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*" V (2001): 32-34, <https://doi.org/10.6082/M1KH0K GK>.

<sup>51</sup> Wan Kamal Mujani, "Faktor Kemerosotan Sektor Perdagangan Mamluk (872-922H/1468-1517M): Suatu Analisis Berdasarkan Sumber Sejarah," *Jurnal Antarabangsa Kajian Asia Barat* 1 (2009): 1-22.

multilayered. Every imported and exported item was subject to customs duties, known as ushr. Yet the financial burden did not end there. Foreign merchants were required to pay bribes to port officials, the city governor, and the market inspector to ensure the smooth processing of their goods. This legal uncertainty, in which regulations could shift according to the Sultan's preferences or the urgent need for cash to suppress military revolts known as julban, created a business environment defined by high risk and high return. These monopoly and heavy tax policies, although profitable for the Sultan's treasury in the short term, had detrimental long term consequences<sup>52</sup>. The state suppressed private initiative and hindered organic integration between foreign and local merchants. Alexandria became a type of extraction zone for Cairo. When the Portuguese discovered the Cape Route at the end of the fifteenth century and bypassed the Mamluk spice corridor, the fragility of this monopoly-based system became apparent. Having overburdened its principal trading partner, Venice, for decades, the Mamluk state found itself lacking strong alliances and lacking the naval resources needed to confront the new threat in the Indian Ocean<sup>53</sup>.

## **2. Mamluk Relations with Venice**

The relationship between the Mamluk Sultanate, which ruled Egypt and Syria, and the Republic of Venice (La Serenissima), the dominant power of the Adriatic Sea, constituted the most vital axis sustaining the economic structure of the late medieval Mediterranean. This interaction extended far beyond commercial exchange; it was a complex geopolitical phenomenon in which two major powers with opposing religious ideologies, Sunni Islam and Latin Christianity, were bound together in a form of fundamental interdependence essential to the survival of both states. Venice relied on the Mamluks as the gateway to the riches of the East, while the Mamluks depended on Venice as a provider of silver and copper liquidity. Beneath this vibrant current of trade, however, lay constant structural tension that oscillated between diplomacy, commercial treaties, and military confrontation. The discussion below outlines in detail how commercial agreements were administered, how conflicts were contained, and how the Venetian merchant community played a central role at the heart of Alexandria<sup>54</sup>.

The legal foundation for the presence of Venetian merchants in Muslim territories was regulated through diplomatic instruments known as aman, or security guarantees, and peace treaties. These documents were not mere formalities but political contracts negotiated under intense pressure, often in the shadow of potential war. Within the framework of Islamic law applied by the Mamluks, Venetian merchants were classified as harbi, enemies from the lands of war, who were granted temporary status as musta'min,

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<sup>52</sup> Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages*.

<sup>53</sup> Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration*; Fuess, "Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors: The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*."

<sup>54</sup> Cristian Caselli, "Strategies for Transcultural Trade Relations: Florentine Attempts to Reproduce the Venetian Commercial System in the Mamluk Empire (First Half of the Fifteenth Century)," *Union in Separation: Diasporic Groups and Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean (1100-1800)*. (Viella Historical Research; 1), 2015, 267-84.

recipients of guaranteed protection. This status was conferred by a decree of the Sultan that granted safety for their lives, property, and freedom of worship within specified territories. Trade agreements between Venice and the Mamluks often contained extremely detailed provisions, including fixed customs tariffs, commonly around ten percent for general goods but lower for precious metals, as well as legal protections ensuring that the property of a merchant who died in Mamluk lands would not be confiscated by the state<sup>55</sup>.

Officials of the Diwan al Khass, the Sultan's private bureau, and the Nazir al Khass in Alexandria were responsible for overseeing taxation and ensuring that foreign merchants complied with the prescribed regulations. Al Maqrizi frequently criticized corruption among port officials who manipulated measurements or added illicit fees beyond the terms of the treaties, which he described as mukus, illegal exactions that often became sources of diplomatic friction. Nevertheless, these written agreements remained the primary protective framework; without them, large scale trade would have been impossible. Venice carefully documented every privilege it obtained, and Venetian archives contain numerous copies of letters from Mamluk sultans reaffirming old rights whenever political power shifted in Cairo<sup>56</sup>.

Although bound by treaties, Mamluk and Venetian relations were shaped by structural tensions arising from asymmetric military power. Venice possessed superior naval strength, whereas the Mamluks were a land-based power with limited maritime capability. In theory, the Venetian war galleys had the capacity to blockade Alexandria and paralyze the Egyptian economy. In practice, however, the Mamluks possessed a more immediate and potent bargaining tool: the taking of hostages<sup>57</sup>.

The chronicle of Ibn Taghribirdi, *Al Nujum al zahira*, records multiple incidents in which the Mamluk Sultan ordered the arrest of the entire community of "Franks," meaning European merchants, in Alexandria and Damascus as retaliation for attacks by Christian pirates. Ibn Taghribirdi recounts in detail episodes of tension, including raids by pirates from Cyprus or Rhodes against Muslim ships or Levantine coastal settlements. Lacking a naval force capable of pursuing pirates on the open sea, the Sultan directed his anger toward Venetian merchants within his reach. The Venetian consul was often chained and imprisoned in Cairo until Venice paid compensation or pressured the offending pirates to cease their attacks. This dynamic as hostage diplomacy, in which Venice was compelled to comply with Mamluk demands for the sake of its citizens, demonstrating that maritime supremacy did not automatically translate into political power on foreign soil<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Rizzo, "Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies : A Survey of Florentine- Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources ( Fifteenth - Sixteenth Centuries )"; Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria : Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period."

<sup>56</sup> Maqrizi, *Al-Mawa'iz Wa Ali'tibar Fi Dhikr Al-Khitat Wa Al-Athar. T.3, Part 2, Chapter. I-XLIX*, ed. M. Gaston Wie (Cairo: L'institut Français D'archéologie Orientale, 1922).

<sup>57</sup> Fuess, "Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*."

<sup>58</sup> Ibn Taghribirdi, *Al Nujum Al Zahira Fi Muluk Misr Wa Al Qahira* (Cairo: Dar al Kutub al Misriyya,

Tensions reached their peak in the second half of the fifteenth century under the rule of Sultan Barsbay and his successor, Qaytbay, when the Mamluk economic system shifted from an open-market structure to a state-controlled monopoly. In an effort to finance military campaigns and cover budget deficits caused by the depreciation of the currency, Barsbay compelled Venetian merchants to purchase pepper directly from state warehouses at fixed prices that were significantly higher than the market rate. This policy, known as *tarh* (forced purchasing), became a hallmark of his fiscal strategy<sup>59</sup>. Ibn Taghribirdi provides internal context for this policy. In his *Al-Nujum al-Zahira*, he describes how the state treasury was frequently empty and how the Julban troops (recent recruits) often rebelled over unpaid salaries. For the Sultan, pressuring Venetian merchants represented the fastest solution compared to raising taxes on an already burdened populace<sup>60</sup>. Venice responded by threatening boycotts through the suspension of its galley convoys, yet the Mamluks were well aware that Europe was “addicted” to Eastern spices. Ultimately, Venice often acquiesced and paid these imposed “protection fees.” This constituted a form of coercive diplomacy, in which commercial treaties were routinely sidelined to meet the Mamluk state’s urgent fiscal needs, producing a recurring cycle of negotiation and crisis<sup>61</sup>.

Amid this broader macro-political tension, the Venetian merchant community in Alexandria maintained a distinctive daily life. They were not merely economic agents but social actors who contributed to the cosmopolitan character of the city. The center of Venetian commercial and social activity was the *Fondaco* (Arabic: *Funduq*). Al-Maqrizi, in his *Khitat*, offers valuable topographical descriptions of the various *funduqs* in Alexandria designated for foreign communities, including Venetians, Genoese, and Catalans. He portrays these buildings as large, fortress-like structures located near the sea gate to facilitate loading and unloading.

The *Fondaco* functioned as a microcosm of Venice on Egyptian soil. Within it were residential apartments, secure storage rooms for valuables, a small chapel for daily worship, a bathhouse (*hammam*), and a communal bread oven. The *Fondaco* also possessed a limited degree of legal autonomy: disputes among Venetian merchants were settled by the Venetian consul according to Venetian law rather than Islamic law. Yet this autonomy operated within strict limits. Each night, the building’s gates were locked from the outside by Mamluk guards and reopened only at dawn. This practice underscores the community’s ambiguous status, they were honored guests yet simultaneously potential detainees under close surveillance by the state<sup>62</sup>.

The primary economic function of Venetian merchants in Alexandria was to serve as converters of assets and sources of monetary liquidity. The Mamluk economy was

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<sup>59</sup> Miriam Frenkel, “Travel and Poverty: The Itinerant Pauper in Medieval Jewish Society in Islamic Countries,” *Jews and Journeys: Travel and the Performance of Jewish Identity*, 2021, 154–70.

<sup>60</sup> Taghribirdi, *Al Nujum Al Zahira Fi Muluk Misr Wa Al Qahira*.

<sup>61</sup> Arbel, “The Last Decades of Venice’s Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and Syria.”

<sup>62</sup> Rateb, “Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria: A New Perspective.”

heavily dependent on precious metals<sup>63</sup>. With Nubian gold mines no longer productive, the Mamluks relied on imports of silver and copper from Europe to mint dirhams and fals coins. Venetian merchants arrived with silver ingots and gold ducats. Al-Maqrizi, highly critical of Mamluk monetary policies as expressed in his *Ighathat al-Ummah*, notes how the influx of foreign coins particularly the Venetian ducat, known locally as *ifrantiyya* or *duqariyya* had a significant impact on local markets. The ducat's consistently high purity made it more trusted by local merchants than the Mamluk dinar, which frequently suffered from debasement and inconsistent alloy mixtures. Venetian merchants exchanged these precious metals at the Alexandria mint (Dar al-Darb) or used them directly to purchase spices. Without this flow of foreign bullion, the monetary system in the major Mamluk cities would have stalled<sup>64</sup>. Thus, Venetians were indispensable "middlemen": not merely buyers of spices but vital suppliers of the financial lifeblood of the Mamluk economy<sup>65</sup>.

Because permanent embassies in the modern sense did not exist, the Venetian consul and senior merchants in Alexandria served a dual role as diplomats. They were the front line of the Republic of Venice's diplomatic apparatus. Their responsibilities were immense: they had to maintain good relations with the Governor of Alexandria and the Sultan in Cairo, bribe corrupt officials to ensure the release of goods from the port, and transmit confidential messages from the Venetian Senate. Years of residence in Alexandria led many Venetian merchants to adopt hybrid cultural practices. They learned Arabic to negotiate in the *suq* (market), wore Eastern-style robes to avoid standing out in the city, and even forged friendships with local Muslim traders. Yet they had to remain cautious not to cross religious boundaries, as doing so could have fatal consequences. Ibn Taghribirdi occasionally records incidents involving Franks who converted to Islam or, conversely, were accused of insulting Islam, events that often sparked public unrest. In such moments, the Venetian consul had to act swiftly, using money and diplomacy to save the lives of his compatriots. The psychological pressure of living under constant threat, combined with the extraordinary profits of the spice trade, shaped Venetian merchants in Alexandria into a resilient, pragmatic, and highly adaptive community<sup>66</sup>.

### 3. Relations with the Republics of Genoa and Pisa

The historical narrative of trade in the Eastern Mediterranean during the late Middle Ages is often dominated by accounts of the triumph of Venice, the "Queen of the Adriatic," as if it monopolized all economic interactions with the Islamic world. However, the historical reality in the port of Alexandria was far more diverse and turbulent. Alongside Venice, two other Italian maritime powers played crucial roles: the Republics

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<sup>63</sup> Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria : Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period."

<sup>64</sup> Maqrizi, *Al-Mawa'iz Wa Ali'tibar Fi Dhikr AlKhitat Wa AlAthar*. T.3, Part 2, Chapter. IXLIX.

<sup>65</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice 's Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria."

<sup>66</sup> Taghribirdi, *Al Nujum Al Zahira Fi Muluk Misr Wa Al Qahira*.

of Genoa and Pisa. The Mamluk Sultanate's relations with these two entities differed significantly from its relations with Venice. Whereas ties with Venice were characterized by stability and the routine state-run convoy system (*mude*), relations with Genoa and Pisa were marked by sharp fluctuations between strategic collaboration, particularly in the supply of military slaves—and open maritime aggression (*piraterie*). This discussion explores in depth how commercial rivalry between Genoa/Pisa and Venice shaped Mamluk foreign policy, and how the status of their respective communities in Alexandria reflected shifting geopolitical power dynamics in Italy and the Mediterranean. The rivalry among the three Italian maritime powers such as Venice, Genoa, and Pisa in Mamluk waters was not merely a struggle over spice-market share, but a manifestation of broader conflicts in maritime ideology and geopolitical strategy. Unlike Venice, whose primary pursuit was commercial profit through the trade of spices and precious metals, Genoa held a unique position within the Mamluk power structure. Albrecht Fuess, in his study *Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors*, highlights that during the early Mamluk (*Bahri*) period, Genoa was an indispensable strategic partner. The key to this relationship was the slave trade. As a military caste that did not reproduce biologically but was replenished through the recruitment of slaves, the Mamluks depended heavily on a steady supply of young Turkic and Circassian males from the Black Sea region. Genoa, which controlled trading colonies in Kaffa (Crimea), monopolized this supply route <sup>67</sup>.

However, by the fifteenth century, when commercial routes in the Black Sea became increasingly disrupted by Ottoman expansion and when commercial dominance shifted toward the spice trade, Genoa's position moved in a more assertive direction. Adam Aaron notes that Genoese vessels often operated as private corsairs who attacked Venetian merchant ships in the eastern Mediterranean. For the Mamluk Sultan, this created a double dilemma. On the one hand, the Mamluks continued to depend on Genoa, or at least wished to avoid open hostility with them. On the other hand, Genoese assaults on Venetian convoys transporting silver to Alexandria directly harmed the fiscal revenues of the Mamluk state. Ibn Taghribirdi records several incidents in which groups of "Franks" attacked Mamluk ports or seized pilgrim vessels in the Red Sea and Mediterranean. Although he frequently employed the general term "Franks," the historical context indicates that the main perpetrators of such aggressive acts were often Genoese or Catalan sailors, rather than Venetians, who preferred to avoid conflict in order to protect their commercial operations <sup>68</sup>. Consequently, Genoa was viewed with far greater suspicion by authorities in Cairo than Venice. If Venice represented a "greedy commercial partner," Genoa was regarded as a "dangerous partner carrying arms" <sup>69</sup>.

The case of Pisa presents the narrative of a declining maritime power. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Pisa had been one of Venice's principal rivals in Alexandria. However, military defeat in Italy and the conquest of Pisa by Florence in the early fifteenth century (1406) reshaped the political landscape. Alessandro Rizzo explains

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<sup>67</sup> Fuess, "Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*."

<sup>68</sup> Taghribirdi, *Al Nujum Al Zahira Fi Muluk Misr Wa Al Qahira*.

<sup>69</sup> Fuess, "Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*."

that although the Pisan state had collapsed, Pisan commercial networks in Alexandria did not vanish immediately. Many Pisan merchants continued their activities, but they now often operated under the protection of other banners or reinvented themselves as agents serving the interests of Florence <sup>70</sup>.

Competition with Venice in Alexandria became markedly unequal. Archival statistics from Venice show its overwhelming dominance in trade volume compared to the combined total of all other Italian communities. Venice successfully secured a monopoly over the purchase of pepper through exclusive agreements with the Sultan, a policy that frequently pushed Pisan and Genoese merchants to the margins of the market, restricting them to secondary commodities such as cotton and dyes. Venice's strategy was clear: to use its financial power to acquire privileged rights from the Sultan, thereby neutralizing competition from Genoa and Pisa without resorting to armed conflict in the port <sup>71</sup>.

This rivalry also manifested itself in tariff disputes and diplomatic maneuvering at the Sultan's court. Al Maqrizi in *Al Khitat* provides insight into how the Mamluk bureaucracy, the *Diwan*, exploited this rivalry. Mamluk officials often employed a strategy of divide and rule. When Venice refused to comply with state-imposed prices for pepper, the Sultan would threaten to sell the stock at a discounted rate to the Genoese consul. Such threats were usually effective in compelling Venice to submit. Nevertheless, this tactic had limits, since the financial capacity of Genoa in the fifteenth century was significantly weaker than that of Venice. Maqrizi documents frequent complaints from merchants regarding unstable prices and arbitrary taxes known as *mukus*, which were exacerbated by competition among European groups who attempted to undermine one another before Alexandria's customs officials <sup>72</sup>.

The physical presence of Genoese and Pisan communities in Alexandria was reflected in the city's urban landscape, yet their social and political standing was far more precarious than the general image of "dominant European merchants" might suggest. Similar to the Venetians, the Genoese and Pisans resided in special compounds known as *funduq*. Al Maqrizi explicitly mentions the existence of *Funduq al Janawiyya* for the Genoese and *Funduq al Bisan* for the Pisans in his descriptions of Alexandria's commercial districts <sup>73</sup>. The *funduq* functioned as fortified commercial structures, and the locations of the Genoese and Pisan *funduqs* were typically close to the sea gate (*Bab al Bahr*), yet physically separated from the Venetian *funduq*. This separation was intentional; hostilities that took place in Italy frequently resurfaced in these overseas communities. Interaction among the Italian communities in Alexandria was often tense, and any sense of Christian solidarity easily fractured when commercial interests were at

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<sup>70</sup> Rizzo, "Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies : A Survey of Florentine- Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources ( Fifteenth - Sixteenth Centuries )."

<sup>71</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice ' s Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria."

<sup>72</sup> Maqrizi, *Al-Mawa'iz Wa Ali'tibar Fi Dhikr Al-Khitat Wa Al-Athar*. T.3, Part 2, Chapter. IXLIX.

<sup>73</sup> Maqrizi.

stake <sup>74</sup>.

Within their respective funduq, the consuls of Genoa and Pisa exercised legal jurisdiction over their own nationals. They maintained chapels, notaries, and internal courts. However, the physical condition of the Pisan funduq in the fifteenth century is described as increasingly precarious, reflecting the diminishing financial support from a homeland that had lost its independence. In contrast, the Genoese funduq often served as a center of intrigue, due to its connections with networks of slaves and privateers. One of the darkest aspects of the position of these communities was their vulnerability to the principle of collective responsibility. The assault on Alexandria by Cypriot forces under the Lusignan dynasty in 1365, known as the Crusade of Alexandria, left a profound trauma that influenced Mamluk policies for the following century. Following this event, the Mamluks became highly suspicious of Genoese ships, which were often associated with logistical support for Crusader armies. Consequently, Genoese merchants in Alexandria lived under heightened intelligence surveillance. They were frequently subjected to *avania*, a form of coercive fine, for even minor alleged offenses, such as smuggling weapons or spying on the city's fortifications <sup>75</sup>.

The fate of the Pisan community in Alexandria provides a compelling case study in identity transformation. After Pisa was conquered by Florence, the legal status of Pisan merchants became ambiguous. Alessandro Rizzo demonstrates how Florence, previously lacking a strong maritime tradition, began to appropriate the Pisan commercial network. Through astute diplomacy, Florence successfully persuaded the Mamluk Sultan to transfer the commercial privileges, or capitulations, that had formerly belonged to Pisa to the Florentine Republic <sup>76</sup>. The Pisan consul in Alexandria was gradually replaced by a Florentine consul, and the Pisan funduq came to be managed by agents of the Medici family and other Florentine bankers. Al-Maqrizi may not always have recorded the political changes in Italy with precision, often still using older terminology, but the reality on the ground indicates that the Pisan banner had fallen, replaced by the Florentine fleur-de-lis. This marked the end of Pisa as an independent power in Alexandria, although its people remained active as part of Florence's emerging commercial apparatus, aggressively pursuing gold and spices <sup>77</sup>.

### **C. Mamluk–Italian Political Dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean**

The relationship between the Mamluk Sultanate and the Italian maritime powers, particularly Venice, Florence, and Genoa, represents one of the most complex geopolitical phenomena in the late medieval Mediterranean. This interaction was driven not solely by economic calculations but operated on a fragile political foundation, shadowed by the legacy of the Crusades and internal rivalries among European states. In

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<sup>74</sup> Frenkel, "Medieval Alexandria - Life in a Port City."

<sup>75</sup> Fuess, "Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*."

<sup>76</sup> Rizzo, "Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies : A Survey of Florentine- Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources ( Fifteenth - Sixteenth Centuries )."

<sup>77</sup> Rizzo; Maqrizi, *Al-Mawa'iz Wa Al-i'tibar Fi Dhikr Al-Khitat Wa Al-Athar*. T.3, Part 2, Chapter. I-XLIX.

this context, diplomacy was not merely a matter of exchanging ambassadors; it functioned as a survival strategy. The Mamluk sultans used Italian merchants as political pawns to offset their naval weaknesses, while Italian city-states employed soft diplomacy, leveraging art and luxurious gifts to secure market access. This study examines three crucial dimensions of these interactions: geopolitical tensions stemming from the Crusader legacy and Italian rivalries, the central role of consuls as diplomatic actors, and crisis management mechanisms such as embargoes and deportations. Mamluk-Italian diplomacy did not take place in a vacuum but under the shadow of a long history of violence and sharp internal competition. Although the spice trade flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Mamluk perceptions of Europeans, or Franka, remained deeply suspicious. Alexandria was not only valued for its urban beauty but also as a strategic point for defensive mobilization against potential Frankish naval attacks. These fears were well-founded; the assault led by King Peter I of Cyprus on Alexandria in 1365 left a lasting political trauma. Consequently, Mamluk foreign policy always categorized Italian merchants as dual figures: welcomed economic partners, yet potential enemies to be closely monitored. Venetian merchants in Mamluk territories lived under an ambivalent identity as “strangers,” constantly subject to the latent threat of reprisal if Christian forces attacked at sea <sup>78</sup>.

The Mamluk sultans skillfully exploited political divisions in Italy to prevent any single power from dominating the market. While Venice remained the dominant player, the fifteenth century witnessed the rise of Florence as a serious challenger. After Florence conquered Pisa in 1406, it launched an aggressive diplomatic campaign to gain recognition from the Mamluk sultan. Florence’s chancery archives record the intensive efforts of Florentine ambassadors to persuade the Sultan to transfer privileges, or capitulations, formerly held by Pisa to Florence. This competition was not only documented in treaties but also manifested in artistic objects serving as instruments of diplomacy <sup>79</sup>. Florence commissioned Mamluk craftsmen to produce albarelli, or pharmaceutical jars, decorated with the Giglio, or Lily motif, the symbol of Florence. These objects were not mere decorations but visual assertions of Florentine political presence in Egypt, signaling the success of Florence’s diplomatic penetration into a market dominated by Venice <sup>80</sup>.

Political tensions were further intensified by asymmetries in military capacity. The Mamluks were a formidable land power but lacked naval strength, while Venice and Genoa dominated the seas. This paradox gave rise to hostage diplomacy: unable to defeat Italian fleets at sea, the Mamluk sultans leveraged Italian merchants on land in Alexandria as human guarantees. In disputes, Venice’s naval power became irrelevant because its citizens were literally at the mercy of the Mamluks in the funduqs <sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> Jelle Bruning, “A Call to Arms: An Account of Ayyubid or Early Mamluk Alexandria,” 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Rizzo, “Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies : A Survey of Florentine- Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources ( Fifteenth - Sixteenth Centuries ).”

<sup>80</sup> Jacklyn Haefner, “Giglio Albarelli: Cross-Cultural Exchange And The Florentine Identity In Mamluk Ceramic Art” (University Of Texas At Dallas, 2024).

<sup>81</sup> Fuess, “Beirut in Mamluk Times (1291-1516)”; Aaron, “Strangers in a Foreign Land : How Did the

In the absence of permanent modern embassies, Italian consuls in Alexandria held a vital hybrid role as community administrators, state diplomats, and cultural intermediaries. They were not mere commercial representatives; they carried the full authority of their respective Signorie. Their responsibilities included navigating the corrupt Mamluk bureaucracy, negotiating customs duties, ensuring the security of pilgrimage routes to Jerusalem, and presenting letters of credence and gifts directly to the Sultan at Cairo's Citadel<sup>82</sup>. Diplomatic failures could be fatal, as consuls were often the first to be arrested if relations deteriorated. Mamluk-Italian diplomacy also relied on cultural exchange and luxurious gifts, a form of soft diplomacy. Textiles and carpets were not only trade goods but also instruments of status and diplomacy. Complex Mamluk carpets with geometric patterns were presented as diplomatic gifts from the Sultan to European rulers, while fine European wool textiles, or *panni*, were highly prized in Mamluk courts. The exchange of artistic motifs between textiles and carpets reflected a visual dialogue between the two cultures. Possession of Eastern carpets in Venice symbolized both power and diplomatic access to the Islamic world<sup>83</sup>.

One of the consul's most critical duties was securing the flow of precious metals, as the Mamluk monetary system depended heavily on silver and copper imports from Europe. Consuls had to ensure that bullion carried by Italian merchants was not arbitrarily seized by port officials, or *nazirs*, and that it received fair exchange at the mint. Trade agreements often contained technical clauses regarding coinage, underscoring that economic diplomacy was central to consular duties<sup>84</sup>.

Despite these mechanisms, Mamluk-Italian relations were vulnerable to crisis. Conflict resolution often involved coercive measures, reflecting a hard-realist political environment. When negotiations stalled, the Mamluk Sultan frequently resorted to deportations and mass detentions. Alexandria often functioned as a trap; during crises for instance, if Venice refused to purchase spices at monopolized prices and the Sultan would order the closure of *funduq* gates. Consuls and merchants were imprisoned or deported to Cairo's Citadel. The constant psychological pressure on Venetian merchants created a climate of fear, exemplified by the arrest of the Venetian consul under Sultan Barsbay, which forced policy changes in Venice.

Italian powers responded with economic countermeasures, notably embargoes, such as suspending galley shipments. If Mamluk actions overstepped, the Venetian Senate prohibited its merchant fleet from sailing to Alexandria and Beirut, cutting off silver imports and customs revenue. However, embargoes were double-edged, as Venice also suffered from the disruption of spice supplies<sup>85</sup>. Crises were usually resolved through

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Circumstances of Venetian Merchants in Mamluk Territory Influence Their Role and Identity?"

<sup>82</sup> Michael Winter and Amalia Levanoni, *The Mamluks in Egyptian and Syrian Politics and Society*, vol. 51 (Brill, 2003); Zayde Antrim, "Jerusalem in the Ayyubid and Mamluk Periods," in *Routledge Handbook on Jerusalem* (Routledge, 2018), 102–9.

<sup>83</sup> Walter B Denny, "Carpets, Textiles, and Trade in the Early Modern Islamic World," 2017.

<sup>84</sup> Jacoby, "Between Venice and Alexandria: Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period."

<sup>85</sup> Arbel, "The Last Decades of Venice's Trade with the Mamluks: Importations into Egypt and

compromise: the Sultan released detainees, and Venice resumed trade. In such situations, Florence often served as a diplomatic alternative, benefiting when Mamluk-Venetian relations deteriorated. The Giglio symbol on Mamluk ceramics can be interpreted as a sign that when the Lion of Venice clashed with the Sultan, the Lily of Florence flourished in Alexandria's markets. The Mamluks' ability to shift trade privileges among Italian states was a key diplomatic strategy to prevent European monopolization<sup>86</sup>.

#### **D. The Impact of Mamluk–Italian Interaction on Alexandria**

During the Mamluk period, Alexandria functioned not merely as a transit port but evolved into a complex urban entity due to intensive interactions with Italian maritime powers. The city stood as a “hinge point” connecting the Indian Ocean economic system with the Mediterranean, generating dynamics that fundamentally transformed its economic structure, urban layout, and geopolitical position<sup>87</sup>.

Interactions with Italian merchants reshaped the fiscal foundations of the Mamluk state. Although the Mamluks were a land-based regime (iqta), cash revenues from customs duties (ushr) in Alexandria became a vital support for the sultan's treasury, especially during agricultural crises. Alexandria transformed into a massive fiscal engine, where the state implemented trade monopolies, particularly under Sultans Barsbay and Qaytbay, compelling Venetian merchants to purchase spices at elevated prices through state-run auction mechanisms<sup>88</sup>. This system was administered through the Dar al-Wakala (State Trade Agency), which managed the flow of goods, although it was frequently burdened by corrupt practices or illicit levies (mukus) imposed on merchants<sup>89</sup>.

Furthermore, Alexandria became the primary entry point for state liquidity. The Mamluk monetary system heavily relied on the import of precious metals (bullion) from Europe. Silver from Central European mines and Venetian ducats entered through this port to be re-minted into local currency at the Dar al-Darb (Mint) in Alexandria. Without the steady influx of bullion transported by Italian galleys, the Mamluk economy faced deflationary risks. From a modern logistical perspective, this historical role laid the foundation for Alexandria's function as a dry port and integrated transport hub connecting maritime and overland networks, a legacy that remains relevant today<sup>90</sup>.

The high demand from the Italian market encouraged industrial specialization in the hinterland of Alexandria. The city became a hub for packaging and finishing exported

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Syria”; Frenkel, “Travel and Poverty: The Itinerant Pauper in Medieval Jewish Society in Islamic Countries.”

<sup>86</sup> Haefner, “Giglio Albarelli: Cross-Cultural Exchange And The Florentine Identity In Mamluk Ceramic Art.”

<sup>87</sup> Arbel, “The Last Decades of Venice 's Trade with the Mamluks : Importations into Egypt and Syria.”

<sup>88</sup> Fuess, “Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*.”

<sup>89</sup> Maqrizi, *Al-Mawa'iz Wa Ali'tibar Fi Dhikr Al-Khitat Wa Al-Athar. T.3, Part 2, Chapter. IXLIX.*

<sup>90</sup> Mahmoud and Awad, “The Maritime Commons : Digital Repository of the World Maritime Measuring Logistics Performance in Ports : A Case of Alexandria in Egypt Measuring Logistics Performance in Ports : A Case of Alexandria in Egypt By In”; ElGarhy, “An Analysis of Policy Making for Dry Port Location and Capacity: A Case Study on Alexandria.”

goods such as sugar, which was shipped from mills in Fustat to Venice<sup>91</sup>. The craft sector also adapted to European tastes; Mamluk artisans produced carpets with intricate geometric patterns that became status symbols in Italian courts<sup>92</sup>. Even the ceramic industry began producing customized albarello jars adorned with the Giglio (Florentine Lily), signaling a high level of market integration between Mamluk producers and Italian consumers<sup>93</sup>. However, these interactions left negative impacts on strategic industries. The Mamluks failed to develop an autonomous shipbuilding industry in Alexandria. Despite importing timber and iron from Europe, they did not transfer modern shipbuilding technology, remaining dependent on Italian vessels for trade and weak in maritime defense<sup>94</sup>.

Morphologically, Alexandria underwent a “reorientation of gravity,” shifting from an inland focus on the Nile Delta (East) to a full orientation toward the Mediterranean Sea (West) to serve European trade<sup>95</sup>. Italian communities (Venice, Genoa, Pisa/Florence) were housed in mini urban fortresses equipped with churches, baths, and private apartments, yet their gates were locked from the outside at night. Power transitions in Italy also influenced urban space, as Florence later took over trading infrastructure previously controlled by Pisa<sup>96</sup>.

Urban development was marked by paradox. While trade generated wealth, the central government in Cairo often neglected Alexandria’s civil infrastructure, prioritizing military architecture instead. The city was constructed with a defensive mindset to counter the threat of Frankish naval attacks, as documented in early defensive texts<sup>97</sup>. The construction of Qaytbay Citadel on the site of the former Pharos Lighthouse exemplifies this military emphasis. Consequently, Alexandria was often perceived by Cairo as a “border city” or even a site for political exile rather than a cultivated cultural center<sup>98</sup>.

The Mamluks’ nautical inferiority compelled them to develop a “hostage diplomacy” strategy. The presence of thousands of Italian merchants in Alexandria provided the Mamluks with political leverage to counter the power of Venetian naval forces<sup>99</sup>. Historical chronicles note that whenever tensions arose at sea, the Sultan would order the detention of the merchant community in Alexandria as a guarantee<sup>100</sup>. This model ultimately collapsed when the Mamluks failed to adapt to global geopolitical shifts in the late fifteenth century, such as the Portuguese discovery of the Cape Route and Ottoman expansion. Passive dependence on transit taxation rendered Alexandria

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<sup>91</sup> Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City.”

<sup>92</sup> Denny, “Carpets, Textiles, and Trade in the Early Modern Islamic World.”

<sup>93</sup> Haefner, “Giglio Albarelli: Cross-Cultural Exchange And The Florentine Identity In Mamluk Ceramic Art.”

<sup>94</sup> Fuess, “Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*.”

<sup>95</sup> Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City.”

<sup>96</sup> Rizzo, “Reassessing the Significance of Archival Material in Mamluk Diplomatic Studies : A Survey of Florentine- Mamluk Relations through the Lens of Chancery Sources ( Fifteenth – Sixteenth Centuries ).”

<sup>97</sup> Bruning, “A Call to Arms: An Account of Ayyubid or Early Mamluk Alexandria.”

<sup>98</sup> Frenkel, “Medieval Alexandria – Life in a Port City.”

<sup>99</sup> Fuess, “Rotting Ships and Razed Harbors : The Naval Policy of the Mamluks \*.”

<sup>100</sup> Taghribirdi, *Al Nujum Al Zahira Fi Muluk Misr Wa Al Qahira*.

vulnerable. Following the Ottoman conquest in 1517, the city lost its privileged status as an equal partner to European powers and declined into provincialization, as the center of world trade shifted to the Atlantic <sup>101</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Alexandria played an extraordinary role as a pivotal node linking the international trading networks of East and West during the Mamluk period. Its geographical advantage as the logistical terminus of the Indian Ocean route into the Mediterranean positioned the city as a major redistribution center for spices, sugar, cotton, and other high-value commodities. Within the Mamluk economic structure, the port functioned not only as a gateway for imports and exports but also as a primary source of fiscal revenue through customs duties and as the main entry point for precious metals that sustained the state's monetary stability. The interactions between the Mamluks and the Italian republics were shaped by a complex relationship of mutual dependency. The Italians relied on Eastern commodities accessible only through Alexandria, while the Mamluks depended heavily on European silver, copper, textiles, and logistical expertise. Although Venice, Genoa, and Florence possessed superior maritime capabilities, the balance of power often favored the Mamluks, who exploited the presence of foreign merchant communities as instruments of political pressure. Trade treaties, *aman* mechanisms, state monopolies on key commodities, and coercive diplomatic practices such as the detention of consuls illustrate how these relations operated in a state of constant yet productive tension.

The presence of Italian merchant communities within the *fondaco* system reveals a unique socio-cultural dimension: pragmatic interactions conducted across boundaries of religion, language, and legal systems. The *fondaco* served as a space of exchange but also as a tool of state surveillance, reflecting an ambivalence between commercial openness and security concerns. From an urban perspective, Alexandria witnessed spatial reorganization, the strengthening of military infrastructure, and the growth of industries catering to European export markets. Yet this study also highlights how heavy dependence on transit trade produced an economically fragile structure. State monopolies, fiscal instability, and limited investment in maritime technology ultimately weakened Alexandria's competitiveness. When the Portuguese sea route bypassed Egypt and the Ottoman expansion reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Mediterranean, Alexandria lost its position as a global commercial hub. The fall of the Mamluk Sultanate in 1517 marked the end of the city's prominence in the pre-modern world economy. Thus, Mamluk–Italian relations in Alexandria represent not merely a history of trade but a vivid example of how economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural interactions shaped the dynamics of a port city and defined its strategic role in global maritime history.

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