

# **The Muslim Jewish Relations in Ayyubid Egypt (1171-1250)**

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## **Introduction:**

Egypt had a very sizable Jewish population during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Over ninety cities, towns, villages, and hamlets with Jewish inhabitants are known. Fustat had a Rabbanite Jewish community numbering some 3,600 souls. In addition, there were the much smaller Karaite community and a small congregation in nearby Cairo, bringing the total Jewish population in the capital to well over 4,000.

The history of the Jews in Egypt since the Arab conquest (630-41) till Jauhar's entry into Fustat at the head of the Fatimid army (969) is almost entirely shrouded in obscurity. The earliest reference to the Jews in Fustat, so far known, is a document of the year 750 C.E. But very little indeed do we know of the life of the important Egyptian Jewry during more than three centuries.

Many of the Jewish communal officials in Egypt were connected in some way or other with government. The Jews no doubt were treated in the same manner as the other non-Muslim inhabitants, the people of the tribute (*ahl-al-dhimma*). The Fatimids

and their successors, the Ayyubids (1171-1250), employed *ahl-al-dhimma* in their administrations far beyond their proportion in the general population. The Jews in Egypt used to be distinguished in this period by a different dress.

The Jewish community of Egypt in the High Middle Ages was affluent, influential, and on the whole stable and secure. The Jewish community of Egypt was well organized. In short, it was bourgeois but not particularly creative in the spiritual or intellectual spheres. The Jews of Egypt were pious and hardworking, and they took care of the less fortunate among them through admirable social services. They were generous in supporting Jewish institutions at home and in the spiritual centers of Palestine and Iraq. There were some men of learning among them, none truly outstanding, and even some of these had come from elsewhere.

This paper deals with the Egyptian Jews under the Ayyubid (1171 - 1250) rule. There were three prominent Jewish sects in Egypt during that time: Rabbanites, Karaites, and Samaritans. The history of the Jews in Ayyubid Egypt occupies an important part in the general course of Egyptian history. The Jews, at that particular period, were not isolated from the whole community, either politically, economically, or socially. In general, they performed their role freely, like all other society segments. During that time, the Jews constituted an inseparable part of the Egyptian society in its entirety. It is very important to know how the Jews lived in Egypt among non-Jews : Muslims and Christians, to study the relations between Egyptian Jews and others.

## **The Protected People (*ahl-al-dhimma*):**

The Protected People (*ahl al-dhimma*), in Islamic countries, were the members of the revealed religions, namely the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians, who had entered into covenant with the Muslims. As believers in the true God, they were tolerated by Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] but were disarmed and made to pay tribute for the protection afforded them.

Thus, the *Dhimmi* is the Arabic term that refers to the non-Islamic embracing population. In a similar manner to the Jewish reference to a non-Jew as being a *goy* (גוי), so too the term *dhimmi* refers to non-Muslims.<sup>1</sup> According to Islamic law, both Christians and Jews were merely promised protection in return for the payment of a tribute.<sup>2</sup>

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) first codified the treatment of minority religions (the "People of the Book") in Islamic territories with the institution of special taxes on unbelievers. The relevant passage in the Qur'an (IX, 29) states:

(قَاتِلُوا الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَلَا بِالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَلَا يُحَرِّمُونَ مَا حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَلَا يَدِينُونَ دِينَ الْحَقِّ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ حَتَّى يُعْطُوا الْجِزْيَةَ عَنْ يَدٍ وَهُمْ صَاغِرُونَ)<sup>3</sup>.

"Fight against those who do not believe in God or in the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and his Prophet have forbidden or

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<sup>1</sup> Jews and Christians Under Islam ,Dhimmi, a book written by Bat Ye'or, Reviewed by Aviv Goldstein: Jewish Magazine, <http://www.jewishmag.com/57mag/dhimmi/dhimmi.htm> , Accessed on 7 Sept., 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Landshut (S.), *Jewish Communities in the Muslim Countries of the Middle East*, Westport (Connecticut, USA): Hyperion Press, INC., 1976, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> [التوبة 9: 29].

practice the true religion, among those who have been given the Book, until they pay the *jizya* [poll tax] from their hand, they being humbled." This passage has traditionally been interpreted to indicate that the *jizya* was intended as a symbolic expression of humiliation and subordination of those who rejected Prophet Muhammad and Islam.<sup>4</sup>

The basis of the Islamic legal approach to *dhimmis* is to be found in the Quran and continued in the Pact of Umar<sup>5</sup> which is a form of agreement in which non-Muslims agree to a host of regulations - such as the payment of the *Jizya* tax, the wearing of special clothes, and the exclusion from public office<sup>6</sup> - in return for protection. However, with the exception of the *Jizya*, these were often honoured more in their breach than in their observance. Indeed the ubiquitous presence of *dhimmis* in Arab ruling circles involved them in the business of state in ways unimaginable for Jews in Christian northern-Europe.<sup>7</sup> Mark Cohen says that the Pact of Umar operated differently from the charters of privileges granted to the Jews in Europe, and it was more beneficial to the Jews than the European charters because it did not have to be renewed with each change of ruler, and thus offered a certain stability in the basic law

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<sup>4</sup> The Relationship of Islam to Its "Dhimmi" Minorities: Peace with Realism, <http://www.peacewithrealism.org/jewarab6.htm> , Accessed on 9 Sept., 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Attributed to Umar Ibn al-Khattab 634-644.

<sup>6</sup> The first Muslim ruler to order non-Muslims expelled from government office was Umayyad caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz. – See: Cohen (Mark R.), *Under Crescent and Cross -The Jews in the Middle Ages*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1994, pp. 65- 66.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

regarding the legal status of Jews in the Muslim world which had no parallel in Christendom.<sup>8</sup>

The need to maintain undisturbed relations with those on whom the existence of an economic structure depended gradually shaped the Moslem attitude towards the 'peoples of the Book' who refused to accept Islam. The attitude toward these non-Moslems in the Islamic territories was shaped in principle in accordance with the concept of *dhimma*, meaning protection granted to them by agreement or treaty<sup>9</sup>.

The major expressions of *dhimmi* status were the poll-tax or *jizia*, which all male non-believers above the age of fifteen had to pay, and the special land-tax, known as the *kharaj*. In return, their lives and property were protected and, in accordance with the general attitude of Islam to unbelievers, they were assured liberty of faith and worship. They were also permitted to organize themselves as they wished, and the Jews fully availed themselves of that permission. Naturally there were changes for the better or for the worse in various places and at various times; but the principles established in the early days of Islam continued to serve as the basis for the relations between Moslem and *dhimmi* throughout the ages<sup>10</sup>.

## **Muslims and Jews in the Ayyubid Egypt:**

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 73. ; A critical review of Mark Cohen's, *Under Crescent & Cross: Terry Newman's* website, [http://www.terrynewman.com/Life\\_Under\\_Crescent\\_and\\_Cross-a\\_critical\\_review.htm](http://www.terrynewman.com/Life_Under_Crescent_and_Cross-a_critical_review.htm) , Accessed on 9 Sept., 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Muhajabah's Islamic Pages, <http://www.muhababah.com/docstorage/jewsofislam-cite.htm> , Accessed on 7 Sept., 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Muhajabah's Islamic Pages, <http://www.muhababah.com/docstorage/jewsofislam-cite.htm>

By 1171, the Fatimids had lost power to an expanding group of Kurdish-Turks from Syria, called the Ayyubids. The Ayyubid Sunnite Muslim dynasty was founded by Saladin (Salah al-Din), that ruled over Egypt and what became upper Iraq, most of Syria, and Yemen in the late 12th and early 13th centuries.<sup>11</sup>

When Saladin became the ruler of Egypt, he left a great impression on Cairo. He refused to live the grand life of the Fatimid caliphs, and he did not want to be seen as a religious ruler.

It has often been emphasized that the Fatimid period was the golden age of government officials coming from the minorities.<sup>12</sup> The same was true for the subsequent Ayyubid period. Both in number and power the Christian government servants far outstripped the Jewish - a fact fully evidenced in the Geniza records. Still, Jews frequently attained positions of powerful influence, as illustrated in the following often quoted verses of an Egyptian poet:

"The Jews of our time have attained the goal of their aspirations:  
The honors are theirs and so are the riches.  
Counsellors and kings are taken from their midst.  
Egyptians! I advise you, become Jews, for Heaven itself has turned Jewish."<sup>13</sup>

Christians, Muslims and Jews have always had a close relationship in Egypt. The Jews under Fatimid and Ayyubid rule were integrated into contemporary society, buying, selling and renting property from their neighbors and practicing the same

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<sup>11</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9011523/Ayyubid-Dynasty>, Accessed on 7 Sept., 2007.

<sup>12</sup> قاسم (قاسم عبده)، أهل الذمة في مصر العصور الوسطى - دراسة وثائقية، دار المعارف، القاهرة، طبعة ثانية، 1979، ص 52.

<sup>13</sup> Goitein (S. D.), *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. 2: *The Community*, University of California Press: Berkeley- Los Angeles, 1971, p. 374;

قاسم (قاسم عبده)، اليهود في مصر من الفتح العربي حتى الغزو العثماني، دار الفكر للدراسات والنشر والتوزيع، القاهرة - باريس، ط1، 1987م، ص 60.

trades. Many of the documents found were written in Judeo-Arabic, a form of medieval Arabic written with Hebrew letters, indicative of the Jewish integration within the greater Arabic-speaking community<sup>14</sup>.

"During medieval times, the Jews were attacked in Europe. But life was easier in Middle Eastern countries then, so we see a huge migration from Europe and a corresponding proliferation of synagogues and Jewish scientists". This includes Maimonides<sup>15</sup>, who settled in Egypt after he was forced out of Spain, later becoming the personal physician of Saladin.<sup>16</sup>

Jews did not serve in the army, but neither did the Muslims and Christians belonging to the sedentary local population. The Ayyubids, who were Kurds themselves, maintained a predominantly Kurdish and Turkoman officers corps with mercenaries drawn from many different ethnic groups. We find Jewish physicians attached to the Egyptian army and navy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Jerusalem Post, Online Edition,

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1143498907121&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FPrinter> ,  
Accessed on 20 April 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Maimonides or Moses ben Maimon, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Hebrew: רבי משה בן מיימון; Arabic: Mussa bin Maimun ibn Abdallah al-Kurtubi al-Isra'ili; March 30, 1135—December 13, 1204), b. Córdoba, Spain, d. Cairo, was a Jewish rabbi, Jewish scholar, physician, and philosopher, the most influential Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages. Maimonides was a physician to the Muslim ruling elite, intellectual equal and friend of many a Muslim scholar, and head of the Egyptian Jewish community. Maimonides' coming to Egypt and his accession to the position of communal leader there corresponded with the end of Isma'ili (Shi'i) Faimid rule and the rise of the Sunni Ayyubid dynasty under Saladin. For more details, see: Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, p. 199; Kraemer (Joel L.) Ed., *Perspectives on Maimonides- Philosophical and Historical Studies*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991, P. 8. ولفسون (إسرائيل)، موسى بن ميمون – حياته ومصنفاته، لجنة التأليف والترجمة والنشر، القاهرة، 1355هـ / 1936م، ص 1- 25. أوريנوبסקי (אהרן), רבנו משה בן מיימון (רמב"ם): חייו, מפעליו, וספריו, הוצאת "דביר", תל-אביב, תרצ"ה (1935), עמ' 4. דינבורג (בן- ציון), רבנו משה בן מיימון: חייו וספריו, פעולותיו, והשקפותיו (מקורות ותעודות בתוספת ביאורים והערות), הוצאת "דביר", תל-אביב, תרצ"ה (1935), עמ' 2.

<sup>16</sup> The Jerusalem Post , Online Edition ,

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1143498907121&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FPrinter>

انظر: القوصي (عطية)، اليهود في ظل الحضارة الإسلامية، سلسلة فضل الإسلام على اليهود واليهودية، العدد (2)، مركز الدراسات الشرقية، جامعة القاهرة، 1422هـ / 2001م، ص 148-150.

<sup>17</sup> Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. 1: *Economic Foundations*, 1967, PP. 72- 73.

At that time, Egyptian Jews possessed agricultural land and sometimes supervised in person the harvest and of course such operations as grape pressing and cheese making which involved religious taboos, but the soil was tilled by non-Jewish fellahin exclusively. Even orchards belonging to the Jewish community were leased to Muslims against a yearly payment. Jews had an important part in the processing of flax, the staple export of Egypt, but only after the peasants had cut, soaked, and dried it. The manual occupations of Jews were those of artisans and craftsmen.<sup>18</sup>

Tanning and dyeing are very conspicuous occupations, because the hides and textiles treated are spread out for drying in open spaces in or outside a city. Muslims normally did not pay much attention to Jews, but the Jewish tanners and dyers could not escape them because of the very conspicuousness of their trade. Thus Muslims were prone to assume that most Jews were engaged in these occupations.<sup>19</sup>

From Muslim descriptions of Old Cairo it was already evident that sugar production must have been one of the major, if not the greatest, industry in that town during the Fatimid and Ayyubid periods, and from the same sources it appears also that the share of the Jews in this field was very extensive.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Goitein (S. D.), "Jewish Society and Institutions Under Islam", in: *Jewish Society Through the Ages*, Ed. H. H. Ben Sasson and S. Ettinger, New York 1973, P. 175.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., P. 176.

<sup>20</sup> Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. 1: *Economic Foundations*, 1967, PP. 125- 126.

In this respect it is necessary to dispel certain notions that appear again in some historical writings, namely that the Jews were concentrated mainly in occupations despised by Muslims.<sup>21</sup>

The Jewish [and Christian] populations were allowed to go on living under the same laws as had been enforced before their conquest, except that these laws were now administered by religious, instead of civil, authorities. The head of each community was thus able to perform a very useful function in that it was on him that rested the responsibility for the collection of taxes had been imposed by the Muslim conquerors.<sup>22</sup>

### **Saladin and the Egyptian Jews:**

The early period of Islamic rule had been one in which relations between Christians, Muslims, and Jews were generally fruitful. The Ayyubid government adopted a new attitude toward the non-Moslem communities. The ancient discriminatory laws were renewed or their renewal was attempted, while the Sultans and their entourage were still in close contact with people of other creeds, and amiable, and sometimes even cordial relations existed between both sides.<sup>23</sup>

The greatest figure of medieval Judaism, Maimonides, traveled east to Egypt where he thrived as a court physician to members of the Ayyubid dynasty and its most famous son,

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<sup>21</sup> Goitein, "*Jewish Society and Institutions Under Islam*", PP. 175.

<sup>22</sup> Landshut, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Goitein (S. D.), *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. 1: *Economic Foundations*, 1967, P. 38.

Saladin.<sup>24</sup> Shortly after the abolition of the Fatimid caliphate, Maimonides was recognized by the new regime as the *reshut*, or official authority, and was even acclaimed as *ra'īs al-yahūd* (head of the Jews).<sup>25</sup>

Maimonides clearly found a freer environment in Cairo under the Ayyubids than in the Andalus from which he came. His *Guide of the Perplexed*, written in Arabic, philosophical interpretation of religion and other works in Arabic and Hebrew. His life a thought gives evidence of easy relations between Muslims and Jews of education and standing in Egypt of his time<sup>26</sup>.

Maimonides was a protégé of Saladin's minister al-Qadi al-Fadil. In the last years of his life Maimonides treated the members of the royal house.<sup>27</sup> There were a number of Jewish physicians attended Saladin personally. But, in addition, there were court-physicians who had the care of the king's wives, children and domestics. Naturally these physicians got monthly salaries, and their posts were eagerly covered. One of them was Saladin's personal physician and one of the most important person in the Jewish history, Maimonides.<sup>28</sup> Jewish physicians had private patients who were Muslim, both dignitaries at court and ordinary people.<sup>29</sup> Other Jewish physicians were appointed to posts in the

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<sup>24</sup> Only Connect: Reconsidering Jewish-Muslim History:

[http://politicscentral.com/2006/11/10/only\\_connect\\_reconsidering\\_jew.php](http://politicscentral.com/2006/11/10/only_connect_reconsidering_jew.php), Accessed on 9 Sept., 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Kraemer, *op. cit.*, P. 8; Ehrenkretz (Andrew S.), *Saladin's Egypt and Maimonides*, An article in: *"Perspectives on Maimonides- Philosophical and Historical Studies"*, Edited by Joel L. Kraemer, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991, p.305.

<sup>26</sup> Deep Field, <http://www.deepfield.com/anoot/essay/Saladin.htm>, Accessed on 7 Sept., 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Ashtor-Strauss (E.), *Saladin and the Jews*, Article in: *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. xxvll, Jerusalem, 1956, P. 312.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Abi Usaibi'a, *'Uyun al-anba' fi tabaqat al-atibba'*, Beirut, 1965, p. 538.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, p. 134.

public hospitals which had been founded at that period in the large towns.<sup>30</sup>

"In a famous passage of his *khitat*, al-Maqrizi enumerates eighty- eight noncanonical dues and taxes levied by the Fatimids and abolished by Saladin when he assumed power in Egypt. The total revenue from these *mukūs*, collected in the twin cities of Cairo and Fustat, amounted to 100,000 dinars per year. Saladin's action was by no means exceptional. The caliph al- Hakim (996- 1021) had made the same pious gesture before, and the ostentatious abolition of taxes not recognized by Islamic religious law because a standard practice for rulers on ascending the throne."<sup>31</sup>

The Fatimids who mistrusted the orthodox Moslem population of Egypt relied, to some extent, on the support of the Christians and the Jews. The Fatimids therefore spent money on the religious establishments of Christians and Jews, allowed them to build new churches and synagogues, and even participated in their ceremonies. All this changed when Saladin took the reins of government. The new ruler of Egypt endeavored to arouse in the Moslem masses the feeling of superiority over the non-Moslem and took measures aiming at the separation of "believers" and "unbelievers."<sup>32</sup>

The discriminatory laws against the non-Moslems, which were issued by the Caliphal government in the ninth century, had fallen in abeyance for a long time. Now they were put into operation once

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<sup>30</sup> . Ashtor-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

No reference to a Jewish hospital has been found thus far in the Geniza. This is somewhat surprising, for many Jewish doctors are mentioned both by the Geniza and in Arabic sources as working in what could be called government hospitals, namely those erected by Muslim rulers, whereas Jewish patients are never mentioned in Geniza documents as making use of them. – Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. 2: *The Community*, 1971, p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Vol. 1: *Economic Foundations*, 1967, P. 270.

<sup>32</sup> Ashtor-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

more. According to the Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi, among the events of the month Sha'ban 564 of the Hijra [May 1169], the Sultan ordered the Christians and Jews enjoying protection under tribute to be dismissed and forbidden employment in affairs concerning the state, and in any *dīwān*. Some were in fact dismissed, but not one of them left the offices of the Ghuzz. The report spread of their being driven from the country and of their dwellings being taken. During the same month, certain of their leading men were dismissed from government employment, but others remained. However, those employed in offices of the Ghuzz remained undisturbed, because their masters refused to dismiss them on the ground that they were practiced in the management of their affairs and that if these men were discharged their interests would miscarry.<sup>33</sup>

The reign of Saladin was a period of transition. He turned away from the tolerance which the Fatimids showed in matters of religion. But the Ayyubids were highly educated and far from being hypocrites as were their successors, the Mamluks; and the people were not yet imbued with fanaticism. Therefore social relations between Moslems and Jews continued. Al-Qadi al-Fadil paid a visit to “the physician Musa” (i.e. Maimonides) when he fell ill. In the days of Saladin, Oriental Jews were not an isolated group, like the ghetto-dwellers in Europe.<sup>34</sup>

From the days of Saladin, Jews and Christians could ride on donkeys only. Furthermore, they had to use packsaddles, as an ancient Moslem law prescribed. In previous periods those members

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<sup>33</sup> Broadhurst (R. J. C.), *A History of the Ayyubid Sultans of Egypt*, Translated from the Arabic of al-Maqrizi With Introduction and Notes, Twayne Publishers: Boston, 1<sup>st</sup> Printing, 1980, pp. 40-41.

المقرزي (تقي الدين أحمد بن علي)، كتاب السلوك لمعرفة دول الملوك، صححه ووضع حواشيه محمد مصطفى زيادة، ج 1، القسم الأول، مطبعة دار الكتب المصرية، القاهرة، 1934م، ص 47-48.

<sup>34</sup> Ashtor-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

of the non-Moslem communities who belonged to the high-ranking classes of the physicians and government officials were allowed to ride on horses; now they were subjected to the same law as other Jews and Christians.<sup>35</sup>

According to al-Maqrizi, the government proclaimed that henceforth Jews and Christians should not ride on horses and mules and that even physicians and government officials should not be exempted from this law. Al-Maqrizi mentions the promulgation of this law among the events of the year 577 of the Hijra<sup>36</sup> which corresponds to 1181/82. The ordinance of Saladin was an important step in the social degradation of the non-Moslem communities.<sup>37</sup>

Under the Ayyubids, the Christians and Jews in Egypt had been left largely alone: so long as they paid the poll tax, they were not mistreated on the basis of their religion. Christians and Jews would serve in the government, often at high positions of power.<sup>38</sup>

The German Vitztum Burkhard, the envoy of Frederick Barbarossa, who came to Egypt in 1175, judged the state of affairs quite well, when he said that, in this country, everybody could follow his creed as he liked.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ashtor-Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

Broadhurst, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>37</sup> Ashtor-Strauss, pp. 305- 306.

<sup>38</sup> AL-QAHIRA 969- 1517 CE: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, <http://menic.utexas.edu/cairo/history/qahira/qahira.html> , Accessed on 9 Sept., 2007.

<sup>39</sup> See: Ashtor-Strauss, p. 309.

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<sup>36</sup> المقرزي، كتاب السلوك لمعرفة دول الملوك، ص 77.