

Some Notes on The *Iqta'* System in Mamluk Period

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyse the problems of *Iqta'* system in Egypt during the Mamluk period especially 50 years before the fall of kingdom. This article found that several human factors affected the *Iqta'* system during that time which affected the level of agricultural productivity.

Key words: *Iqta'* · Mamluk · Egypt

INTRODUCTION

The *iqta'* [1-5]¹ was the land (or rarely the taxes) allocated by the great amir or sultan to soldiers in return for military service [6-10].² In exchange for the benefits derived from the *iqta'* the *muqta'* (i.e. *iqta'* holder) had a number of responsibilities. These included military duties such as supplying troops in times of war and a number of non-military functions such as the supervision of cultivation and irrigation, in addition to some personal services to the sultan [11-12]. The *muqta'* also paid the soldiers under his command and paid for their equipment and supplies from the revenue from his *iqta'* [13].

The sultan, who was the supreme ruler and the head of all branches of the government, owned the lands with the highest yield as his *iqta'*. These lands were known as *al-khass al-sultani* [14]. The amirs, on the other hand, were conferred an *iqta'* based on their rank and favour with the sultan [15].³

For the purpose of distribution and allocation of the *iqta'*, the cultivated lands in Egypt were divided into twenty-four *qirats* (*qirat* simply means a twenty-fourth part). In the early Mamluk period, four *qirats* were in the hands of the sultan including his Mamluks (*al-mamalik al-sultaniyya*), ten were in the hands of the amirs and the last ten were in the hands of the *ajnad al-halqa* (a free

corps) [16-18]. These proportions were subsequently changed as a result of the *husami rawk* (cadastral survey) [19] in 697/1298 and the *nasiri rawk* in 715/1315 [20-22].⁴ In the latter *rawk*, the sultan received ten *qirats* with the remaining fourteen *qirats* being reassigned to the amirs and the *ajnad* [23].

It is clear from the above that the main objective of Sultan al-Nasir Mu'ammad was to strengthen his position by two means, firstly by weakening the power of the Mamluk amirs by decreasing the extent of their *iqta'* holdings and secondly by cementing his own power by increasing the area of his *al-khass al-sultani* [24-26].⁵ In addition, al-Nasir is reported to have conferred a large area of *iqta'*s on his family and his loyal amirs. Thus, it was reported that he conferred an *iqta'* on amir Yashbak and that its annual yield was more than the yield from the *iqta'*s belonging to seven amirs and seventeen *tabalkhana*.

There is no official *rawk* mentioned by historians after the *nasiri rawk* until the fall of the kingdom. The data provided by the *rawk al-nasiri* were copied without modification from its register until the end of fifteenth century or even later. However, Ibn Iyas mentions that the sultans during the period of 872-922/1468-1517 occasionally confiscated the *iqta'*s belonging to the amirs and the Mamluks [27].

Problems in the *Iqta'* System: The period under discussion was subject to the impact of the changes in the *iqta'* system in Egypt. The abolition of the hereditary character of the *iqta'* forced a number of *muqta'*s to abandon their agricultural lands or at least to make no effort to maintain them. This was simply because the land could not be transferred to their heirs. Moreover, the *muqta'*s were only concerned to get as much revenue as they could while still in possession of their *iqta'*s [28]. Thus, in order to obtain the maximum revenue they imposed high taxes on the peasants. In this environment, the peasants could not be productive labourers and some of them fled [29].

Some of the *muqta'*s also successfully avoided their lands being taken away by the sultan [30] by converting them into *waqf*-land (pious endowments). In this way, the lands continued to benefit their descendants [31].⁶ The consequence of this transformation of agricultural land from *iqta'*s to another category of land tenure like *waqf* affected the *kharaj* (land tax) that was one of the main sources of income for the state treasury (*bayt al-mal*) at that time [32-33].⁷

Another factor which affected the *iqta'* system was the geographical scattering of *iqta'*s. From 715/1315, the Mamluk sultans conferred upon the amirs *iqta'*s scattered over many provinces of Lower and Upper Egypt. This was intended to reduce the influence of the *muqta'* in his *iqta'* and to prevent any move towards independence or rebellion. However, the distance from the *muqta'*s residence, which was normally in the vicinity of Cairo and his *iqta'* had the undesirable effect of encouraging him to make little effort to manage his lands [34]. The *muqta'* also needed to employ a separate agent and staff of clerks in each part of his *iqta'* [35]⁸ and the cost of their salaries, as well as the frequent dishonesty, affected the revenue derived from the *iqta'*. This state of affairs was untenable and did not benefit the small *iqta'* holder [36]. At the same time, the *iqta'*s which were situated in the countryside and far from the city were exposed to the pillaging of the Bedouin. As a result of these developments, Sultan al-Nasir Faraj created the *diwan al-musta'jarat wa al-himaya* (The Bureau of Lease and Protection) which was intended to give protection to the *iqta'*s. The *muqta'* had to pay a tax (*dariba al-himaya*) to this *diwan* for the service [37].

The short duration of control of the *muqta'* over his *iqta'* also had an effect on the level of agricultural productivity. A stable ownership system would provide a stimulus for improving cultivation, while on the other hand, rapid changes in ownership inevitably resulted in negligence. Statements in contemporary chronicles reveal that an *iqta'* sometimes tended to pass rather rapidly from one *muqta'* to another [38]. This was especially the case during the fifty years before the fall of the kingdom, when five sultans reigned in a short period. The situation became worse during the outbreaks of plagues in this period, when one *iqta'* could have several owners in the course of a few days [39].⁹ Other reasons for the rapid transfer of *iqta'*s included the arrest or execution of *muqta'*s [40-41].

During Qaytbay's reign, several *iqta'*s no longer yielded the sums recorded in cadastral surveys decades earlier. A number of *iqta'*s had been so subdivided in order to provide allotments for new officers that they now produced insufficient yields for the amir's needs [42]. Ibn Iyas mentions that in Dhu al-Hijja 893/November-December 1488 an impoverished Amir of Ten whose *iqta'* no longer produced its stated yield, petitioned for a new grant by pleading the poverty of his family and retainers and hanged himself when his request was refused [43]. In describing the *iqta'*s belonging to the *awlad al-nas*, al-Sayrafi remarks:

their *iqta'* yielded them no protection money (*himaya*) nor cultivated produce... Indeed, some [officers] sought to deprive some of them of their fiefs since they no longer yielded any [tax]. The accountants (*mubashirin*) did not know whether their land was productive or unproductive. Even if some owned estates, they still resembled these wretched [landless] types [44-47].

CONCLUSION

Some of the human factors were identified as affected the *Iqta'* system such as the abolition of the hereditary character of the *Iqta'*, the transformation of agricultural land from *Iqta'* to another category of land tenure, the geographical scattering of *Iqta'* and the short duration of control of the *Muqta'* over his *Iqta'*. All of these factors caused the decrease of the level of agricultural productivity.

- ¹ The term *iqta'* in the plural is *iqta'at* or *aqati'* and the *iqta'* holders were called *muqta'un* (plural of *muqta'*), *arbab al-iqta'at* and *ulu al-iqta'at*. The Mamluks were not the first government to introduce the *iqta'* system in Egypt. al-Maqrizi implies that this system was introduced under the Ayyubids by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi. and When the Mamluks came to power, they inherited the Egyptian *iqta'* system as it had developed under the Ayyubids. Nevertheless, they made changes to it by abolishing its hereditary character. When the *muqta'* retired, died or was dismissed, his *iqta'* would be returned to the sultan to be conferred on another *muqta'*.
- ² Carl F. Petry defined *iqta'* as a revocable allotment of revenue yield from a tract of agrarian land to provide an officers with resources to support his troop contingent and personal expenses.
- ³ The amir received an *iqta'* consisting of one to ten villages, each of the *mamalik al-sultaniyya* received one or a half village, and each of the *ajnad al-halqa* received the land yielding least revenue. This allocation was not, however, permanent and was always changing, especially the *iqta'* which was conferred on the amir.
- ⁴ The *husami rawk* was instituted by Sultan Husam al-Din Lajin and the *nasiri rawk* was instituted by Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad.
- ⁵ This was sultan's bureau overseeing his personal fund that maintained the court, distributed gifts and purchased arms.
- ⁶ These *waqfs* were also exempt from taxes.
- ⁷ The number of *iqta's* which were transformed into *waqf* lands increased at the end of the Mamluk period. According to Muhammad Muhammad Amin, ten *qirats* of the Egyptian land were found in the *waqf* category when the Ottomans occupied Egypt.
- ⁸ According to Sato Tsugitaka, these agents or staffs were often covetous of revenue without considering the conditions needed for successful cultivation (*'imara*).
- ⁹ In Ramadan 897/June-July 1492, Ibn Iyas says that even allotments freed by plague deaths and held in reserve could not satisfy the recruits, since their maximum annual output now rarely exceeded 30,000 *dirhams*.

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