

Solar and Lunar Eclipse in Egypt and their Connection with Prophecies in the Mamluk Society

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Abstract:

Eclipse is a natural phenomenon that happens from time to another based on scientific reasons, it is two types; solar and lunar. Arabs registered this phenomenon and tried to connect it with prophecies related to the society. The subject of this study has been chosen as it deals with a special natural phenomenon that affected the society at that time. Researchers tackled this subject in earlier studies as a kind of registration of the eclipse itself.¹ Therefore, this study proposes to examine the different occurrences of eclipse chronologically and the prophecies based on them during the Mamluk Period in order to analyze and interpret these incidents.

Keywords:

Solar eclipse- lunar eclipse- prophecy- good omen- bad omen- astrologer- prediction- interpretation- eclipse prayer.

Introduction:

In general, solar, and lunar eclipses were among the natural phenomena that happened in the Mamluk period. They were of a less important in the society compared to the other destructive phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, epidemics. But eclipse of both sun and moon was of a great importance in Islam as a special prayer called "the eclipse prayer" is performed from after an eclipse is first noticed until it ends. Regarding the place of the prayer during the Mamluk period, it was held in al-Azhar mosque.²

Therefore, many Muslim historians were especially interested in reporting these events because of their religious significance in addition to their historical value.

¹ Aḥmad Yaḥya al-ʿĀmer, *al-Manḥağ fī tadwīn zāhirati al-kusūf wa-l- ḥusūf min ḥilal baʿd maṣādir al-ʿaṣr al-mamlūkī*, Faculty of Arts, Bagdad University, Bagdad, 123(2017) pp. 303-316.

² See: ʿAbd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhiri, *Nail al-amal fī ḍail al-dūwal*, Beirut, 2002, IV, p.33; see also Ibn Taḡribirdi, *Muntaḥabāt min ḥawādīṭ al-duḥūr fī mada al-āyām wa-l- ṣūhūr*, California, 1990, p.130.

On the other hand, Egyptians connected between the solar and lunar eclipse and prophecies such as the death of a sultan, the end of his reign or sedition in the country. It is noticeable that these incidents were sometimes interpreted as a good omen while other times as a bad omen without a clear criterion in interpretation.

Therefore, in this study we will connect between these phenomena and how far was it associated with prophecies.

Methodology:

The researcher followed a descriptive method to an analytic approach to the historical events. The researcher also followed a methodology based on a hypothesis of inductiveness to display the phenomenon of the eclipse chronologically and analyze its connection with prophecies in the Mamluk society.

In this context the researcher depended on more than a chronicle for each incident to compare as some sources used to mention the eclipse without the prophecy connected with.

Objectives:

The study aims to display the solar and lunar eclipse in Egypt and their connection with prophecies in the Mamluk society.

Hypothesis:

- The prophecies were mostly political.
- Prophecies were not always come true.
- Common people also shared in prophecies besides astrologers as well.
- Prophecies were based sometimes on astrologers' personal wishes or they were getting paid for these interpretations by the sultans or whoever in charge.

Medieval Arab chronicles use the term *kusūf al-šams* for the eclipse of the sun³ and *husūf al-qamar* for the eclipse of the moon.⁴ Simply to define solar eclipse without involving

³ Encyclopedia of Islam, New editions, Brill, E.J. & Luzac & Co., Leiden, 1986, V, Art. *Kusūf*, p.535.

⁴ F. Richard Stephenson and Said S. Said, Records of Lunar eclipses in Medieval Arabic chronicles, BSOAS, 60/1(1997), p.1.

into scientific details⁵, it is a phenomenon happens when the new moon comes between the sun and the earth, it blocks out the sun rays. It can be total, partial, or annular⁶.

As for lunar eclipse, it occurs when the moon passes directly behind the earth and into its shadow.⁷ It is only connected with four days per month 13, 14, 15 and 16, as it should be a full moon.⁸ It could be either partial or total.⁹ Occasionally, chronicles only cite the month of occurrence, but this is probably on the understanding that lunar eclipses of the month only occur in the middle of a lunar month Islamic sources recorded so many incidents in which solar or lunar eclipses happened, sometimes even the two phenomena occurred at the same day¹⁰.

Egyptians believed that eclipse- with its two kinds- has something to do with an incident that is going to happen, whether it is good or bad but it has a significant. Therefore, the prophecy that is tackled was attributed to astrologers and common people as well.

The incidents were tackled chronologically; cases connected with interpretations came true, and others connected with interpretations that didn't come true. Then, these incidents will be interpreted in accordance with the circumstances of the society at that time.

In this context, an incident happened in 676AH/1277 AD, when the moon was totally eclipsed till it became too dark, it was interpreted by interpreters as a prominent man in Damascus would die. Sources indicated that sultan al-Zāher Baybars was so annoyed as he believed strongly in astrology. Therefore, he tried to look for a substitute as a ransom in the referred year. He sent for a prominent man from the descendants of the Ayyubid dynasty, whose name is sultan al-Qāher Baha' al-Dīn b. al-Mu'azzam 'Isaa, and invited him to have a drink together. He ordered his cupbearer to poison the guest's cup, but it

⁵ For more details see: Stephen P. Blake, *Astronomy and Astrology in the Islamic World*, Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2016, pp.1-3.

⁶ Ya'qūb Sharūf and Fāres Nemr, *Al-Husūf wa-l- kusūf, al-Muqtaṭaf*, 3/ 4 (1879), p.61.

⁷ Ya'qūb Sharūf and Fāres Nemr, *Al-Husūf wa-l- kusūf, al-Muqtaṭaf*, 3/4 (1879), p.58.

⁸ Al-Ṣayrafi, *Inbā' al-haṣr bi-anbā' al- 'aṣr*, Cairo, 1970, p.10.

⁹ F. Richard Stephenson and Said S. Said, *Lunar eclipse*, BSOAS, 60/1(1997), p.1.

¹⁰ Ibn Taḡribirdi, *al-Nuḡūm al-zāhirah fī mulūk miṣr wa-l- qāhirah*, Cairo, 2005, IV, pp. 36-37.

was mixed up mistakenly and sultan al- Zāher himself drunk from the poisoned cup, he suffered for thirteen days then died.¹¹

It is obvious in the previous incident that the predictions of the astrologers were taken seriously as sultan al- al-Zāher Baybars tried to protect himself by killing another prominent man as if he is quite sure that the prophecy will come true somehow. We can also notice here that lunar eclipse was interpreted as a bad omen. According to Mamluk sources, sultan al- al-Zāher Baybars died likely by being poisoned in 676 AH /1277AD¹² as stated¹³.

Islamic chronicles related another incident at which the lunar eclipse was connected with a prophecy that came true. On the night of 13th of Ša'bān 801 A.H/ 20 of April 1399 A.D, the moon was totally eclipsed according to the visibility of the crescent moon¹⁴, and people interpreted this incident as a good omen that the demise of the sultan is getting closer. Two months later (on 15th of Šawwāl), sultan Barqūq died¹⁵, and his son Farağ took after.¹⁶ In this case we notice that people interpreted the eclipse as a good omen in their point of view. But sources did not mention anything about the interpretation of astrologers. So, it is obvious that common people also shared their prediction about the eclipse, or maybe it was all about their wishes as they were pessimistic about the death of the sultan. In other words, the sultan was a disliked figure for them; therefore, they connected the eclipse with getting rid of him without any scientific calculations if we assumed that the astrologers did so.

¹¹ Baybars al-Manšūri, *Zubdat al-fikrah fī tāriḥ al-ḥiğrah*, Cairo, IX, 2001 , pp. 159-160; al-Maqrizi, *Kitāb al-sulūk li-ma'rifat dūwal al-mulūk*, Cairo, 1970 , III, p.932; Ibn Tağribirdi, *Nuğūm* ,VII, p.177; Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āšūr, *al- Zāhir baybars*, Cairo, 2001, pp.203-205.

¹² Baybars al-Manšūri, *al-Tuḥfah al-mulūkīyah fī-l- dawlah al-turkīyah*, Beriut, 1987, p.86.

¹³ It is worth mentioning here that Ibn Tağribirdi displayed two opinions in the death of al-Zāhir; firstly, he died after he drank too much, secondly, he died after he was poisoned. But, he suggested the second opinion that was mentioned by Baybars al-Manšūri in *Zubdat al-fikrah and al-Tuḥfah al-mulūkīyah* is likely accepted. See: Baybars al-Manšūri, *Zubdat*, IX, 2001, pp. 159-160; *al-Tuḥfah al-mulūkīyah*, p.86; Ibn Tağribirdi, *Nuğūm* ,VII, p.177.

¹⁴ Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, III, p.932; 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhiri, *Nail al-amal*, III, p.20; F. Richard and Said S., Lunar eclipse, BSOAS, 60/1(1997), p.15.

¹⁵ Ibn Iyās, *Badā' i' al-zuhūr fī waqā' i' al-duhūr*, Cairo, 2008, I/II, p. 521.

¹⁶ Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, III, p. 936; Aḥmad 'Abd al-Rāziq, *Tāriḥ w-āṭār miṣr al-Islāmīyah*, Cairo, 1993, p.117; Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāḥ 'Āšūr, *al-Ayyūbiyūn wa-l- Mamālīk fī miṣr wa-l- šām*, Cairo, 1998, p.271.

A year later, there was a solar eclipse¹⁷, the thing that was interpreted as a good omen by both;¹⁸ people¹⁹ and astrologers²⁰. In this context, historians mention that a few good things happened after that eclipse without referring to these things.²¹ We can notice that historians in some incidents used the expression pessimistic while in others used the expression optimistic referring to the popularity of the sultan to his people. Accordingly, we can deduct that the eclipse itself was sometimes connected with the demise of the sultan, whether they used the term good omen or bad omen referring to his popularity.

Once more, the same political prophecy of a sultan's end was repeated on 15th of Šafar 824 A.H/ 17-18 February 1421 A.D, when the moon was totally eclipsed.²² People were optimistic about this and expected the sultan al- Muẓaffar's demise.²³ Shortly, sultan al-Muẓaffar Aḥmad was deposed on Ša'bān.²⁴ We notice here in this case that the historians used the term optimistic referring to the desire of people or the author or even both, to get rid of the sultan, as an indication of being totally unpopular or inappropriate figure to them. In this context, it worth mentioning here that sultan al-Muẓaffar was a child of two-year-old who followed his father al-Mū'ayyad. Six months after the eclipse, he was deposed from power.²⁵

A year later, the moon was totally eclipsed on Muḥarram²⁶so, people believed that it would be a good sign of the sultan's demise,²⁷ the thing which shortly happened on Rabi' II when sultan Muḥammad b. Ṭaṭar was deposed and sultan Barsbāy was nominated instead.²⁸

¹⁷ Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, III, p.984.

¹⁸ We notice that Ibn Iyās mentioned that people who interpreted the prophecy, while 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhiri mentioned astrologers instead of people. See: 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhiri, *Nail al-amal*, III, p.32; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, I/II, p.555.

¹⁹ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, I/II, p.555.

²⁰ 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhiri, *Nail al-amal*, III, p.32.

²¹ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, I/II, p.555.

²² Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, IV, p.570.

²³ 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhiri, *Nail al-amal*, IV, p.82.

²⁴ Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, IV, p.581.

²⁵ Aḥmad 'Abd al-Rāziq, *Miṣr al-islāmīyah*, p.118.

²⁶ It was on 14 šafar according to Ibn Ḥaḡar. See: Ibn Ḥaḡar al-'Asqalānī, *Inbā' al-Ġumr bi-abnā' al-'omr*, Cairo, 1994, III, p.266.

²⁷ 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhiri, *Nail al-amal*, IV, p.107; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, II, p.78.

²⁸ Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, IV, p.607; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, II, p.79.

Regarding the previous incident, we refer to sultan Muḥammad b. Ṭaṭar as a ten-year-old child who was nominated according to the will of his father.²⁹ Therefore, he was expected to be deposed soon due to his immaturity, and that is why people wished to get rid of him even through a prophecy they believed in.

Once more, historical sources refer to the eclipse in other incidents as a good omen according to Ibn Iyās³⁰. In this context, Sources stated that in 842 AH/1438 AD there was a partial solar eclipse till the land became yellow, people did not gather to pray for *al-kusūf*³¹, so astrologers predicted that people in the Levant and Upper Egypt will plot against the sultan³², the thing that happened shortly after as sources stated that a military campaign was launched towards Upper Egypt to fight the people of Hawwārah.³³ Regarding the Levant, there was a sedition happened by the deputy of the Levant who disobeying the sultan.³⁴ In the previous incident, astrologers were used mostly as a political tool to motivate people to plot against the unpopular sultan. Maybe they got paid for that prophecy as well by the opponents of the sultan.

In 865AH/1461 AD the moon was totally eclipsed and turned dark to the extent that Ibn Tagribirdi mentions that he did not see in his entire life such as this eclipse.³⁵ This eclipse was interpreted by people as the reign of their sultan would be ended.³⁶ Actually, at the same month of Ramaḍān, al-Mū'ayyad Aḥmad was deposed as the Amirs announced their disobeying of the sultan and it was a great sedition.³⁷ Anyhow, it seems that people wished to get rid of the sultan.

In 876 A.H/1471 AD the moon was totally eclipsed, so astrologers predicted that the demise of the sultan became near, they determined the month and even the day as 6 of

²⁹ 'Āšūr, *al-Mamālīk*, p.275.

³⁰ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, II, p.201.

³¹ According to Ibn Iyās, people prayed in al-Azhar mosque, he also mentioned the prophecy as a big sedition will happen. See: Ibn Iyās, *Bada'ī*, II, p.201.

³² Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, IV, p. 1090; 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhirī, *Nail al-amal*, V, p.56; al-Ṣayrafī, *Nuzhat*, IV, p.27.

³³ Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, IV, pp.1101-1102.

³⁴ Al-Maqrizi, *Sulūk*, IV, pp.1109-1111.

³⁵ Ibn Tagribirdi, *Nuḡum*, XVI, p. 231.

³⁶ 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhirī, *Nail al-amal*, VI, p.110 ; al-Saiyed Ṣalāḥ al-Dabiki, *al-Ḥurāfah wa-l- ša'wāḍah fi-l- muḡtama' al-miṣrī 'aṣr salāṭīn al-mamālīk*, Cairo, 2019, pp. 57-58.

³⁷ 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhirī, *Nail al-amal*, VI, pp.110-111.

Rağab, but Ibn Iyās described them as liars. Nothing happened to the sultan who ruled the country for more than twenty years after this incident, referring to sultan Qāitbāy³⁸.

Another eclipse related to the same sultan as in 892 AH/1487 AD the moon was eclipsed, and the sky was darkened.³⁹ People were saying that the demise of the sultan became near. Nothing of what they said happened and the sultan stayed in power for a long time after that.⁴⁰ According to the previous incident, Ibn Iyās was talking about sultan Qāitbāy who was in the office during the mentioned date, and sultan Qāitbāy died in 901 AH/1496.⁴¹

On 13th Jumāda II 922 A.H/ 1516 AD the moon was totally eclipsed so that the earth was darkened.⁴² It remained in eclipse for two hours. Consequently, astrologers predicted that sultan Qānṣūh al-Ġawrī is going to be defeated in his wars with the sultan Selim Ḥān⁴³, the thing that happened a few months later in the battle of Marğ Dābiq, north of Aleppo⁴⁴ by the Ottomans.⁴⁵ The previously stated case was interpreted by astrologers, and their predictions came true. The previous political prophecy might be used by one of his mamluk betrayers to weaken the morale of the army before his wars, especially that conditions in Egypt were very bad at that time.

Analysis:

According to the previous study, we conclude that Mamluk chronicles registered only ten incidents of eclipse were connected to prophecies as follows:

Timetable:1

Serial	Date	Sultan	Type	Type of	Announcer of	prophecy
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³⁸ 'Abd al-Bāsiṭ al-Zāhirī, *Nail al-amal*, VII, p.22; Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, III, p.66; al-Dabiki, *al-Ḥurāfah*, p. 58.

³⁹ Al-Saḥāwī, *Wağiz al-kalam*, III, p.992.

⁴⁰ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, III, p. 238; F. Richard Stephenson and Said S. Said, Lunar eclipse, BSOAS, 60/1(1997), p.22.

⁴¹ Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, III, pp.324-325.

⁴² Ibn Iyās, *Badā'ī*, V, p.54.

⁴³ Ibn Ṭulūn, *Mufākahat al-ḥillān fī ḥawādīṭ al-zamān*, Cairo, 1964, II, pp. 22-23; al-Dabiki, *al-Ḥurāfah*, p. 58.

⁴⁴ Nasser Rabbat, Mamluk history through architecture monuments, culture, and politics in Medieval Egypt and Syria, AUC press, Cairo, 2010, p.71.

⁴⁵ Ibn Ṭulūn, *Mufākahat*, II, pp. 23-24; al-Dabiki, *al-Ḥurāfah*, p. 58.

			of eclipse	prophecy	the prophecy	came true/ not
1	676AH/1277 AD	Al-Zāher Baybars	lunar eclipse	political	Interpreters (Astrologers)	Came true
2	801AH/1399 AD	Al-Zāher Barqūq	lunar eclipse	political	people	Came true
3	802AH/1400 AD	Al- Nāṣir Farağ	solar eclipse	undetermin ed	People & astrologers	Came true
4	824AH/1421 AD	al- Muḥaffar Aḥmad	lunar eclipse	political	People	Came true
5	825AH/1422 AD	Muḥamma d b. Ṭaṭar	lunar eclipse	political	People	Came true
6	842AH/1438 AD	Al-Zāher Ġaḥmaq	solar eclipse	political	Astrologers	Came true
7	865AH/1461 AD	Al- Mu'ayyad Aḥmad	lunar eclipse	political	People	Came true
8	876AH/1471 AD	Al-Aṣraf Qaitbāy	lunar eclipse	political	Astrologers	Did not come true
9	892AH/1487 AD	Al-Aṣraf Qaitbāy	lunar eclipse	political	People	Did not come true
10	922AH/1516 AD	Qānṣūh al- Ġawrī	lunar eclipse	political	Astrologers	Came true

The previous timetable analyzes the incidents of eclipse were connected to prophecies during the Mamluk period; one case during the Bahari era, nine cases were during the Circassian era.

Eight cases were of a lunar eclipse, and two were of a solar eclipse. Also, all the prophecies were of a political aspect. Regarding the announcers of the prophecies, five were by people, four were by astrologers and one was mutual between people and astrologers. Finally, the study registered eight incidents at which the prophecies came true and two cases did not come true, both belong to the same sultan al-Ašraf Qaitbāy.

Conclusions:

According to the previous study we can conclude that:

- There was a connection between solar and lunar eclipse and prophecies during the Mamluk period as we registered ten incidents. Although being a small percentage compared to the total duration of the Mamluk period during which several incidents of eclipse were registered but, it confirms that cases of eclipse were not always connect with prophecies. As if astrologers or even common people would share with a prophecy from time to another but not with each incident of eclipse.
- The prophecies were political.
- Prophecies were not always come true, although eighty percent of the registered incident came true, but there were registered exceptions as well.
- Prophecies in some cases were based on scientific calculations.
- Common people also shared in prophecies besides astrologers, which indicates that these prophecies were not always based on a scientific source, but sometimes connect with their personal wishes as well.
- As for astrologers, their prophecies might be based sometimes on personal wishes or they were getting paid for these interpretations by the sultans or whoever in charge, or even to weaken the morale of the army in some cases.
- Mamluk sultans did not interfere in the prophecies, whether they were in the favor of the sultan or not. We could not trace any incident at which a sultan punished astrologers for a prophecy connected with death or deposition for example.

Finally, it is worth mentioning here the comment of Ibn Ḥaldūn who denied the prophecies based on astrology ⁴⁶ as Prophet Muḥammad states "The sun and the moon do not eclipse because of the death of someone from the people but they are two signs amongst the signs of Allah, when you see them stand up and pray."⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Ibn Ḥaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, Beirut, II, 1996, p. 22.

⁴⁷ Ḥadīṭ Šarīf.

- Al-Saḥāwī (Šams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān) d. 902/1496-1497. *Wağīz al-kalām fī-l- dail ‘alā dūwal al-islām*, Beirut, I-II, 1995. (*Wağīz al-Kalām*).
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ملخص

الكسوف والخسوف في مصر وعلاقتها بالنبوءات في المجتمع المملوكي

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معهد الألسن العالي للسياحة والفنادق

يُعد الكسوف والخسوف من الظواهر الطبيعية التي تحدث من وقت لآخر لأسباب علمية، وهو نوعان: كسوف شمسي وخسوف قمري. وقد دون العرب هذه الظاهرة وحاولوا ربطها بالنبوءات المتعلقة بالمجتمع. وقد اختير موضوع هذه الدراسة لتعامله مع تلك الظاهرة الطبيعية المميزة والتي أثرت على المجتمع في ذلك الوقت. وقد تناول الباحثون هذا الموضوع في دراسات سابقة كنوع من تسجيل الكسوف والخسوف نفسه. إلا أن هذا البحث تعني بدراسة حوادث الكسوف والخسوف المختلفة طبقاً للترتيب الزمني والنبوءات المرتبطة بها في العصر المملوكي، وذلك بهدف تحليلها وتفسيرها.

الكلمات الدالة:

الكسوف - الخسوف - نبوءة - فال حسن - فال سيء - منجم - تنبؤ - تأويل - صلاة الكسوف والخسوف

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