CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The social history of the premodern Middle East is a subject in its infancy. Despite the path-breaking work of a few scholars such as Claude Cahen, Ira Lapidus, and Saʿīd ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ ʿĀshūr, we know remarkably little about the development of these societies before the twentieth century. This ignorance can be traced to two sources. On the one hand, the agenda of scholars of Islamic history has centered on the study of elites, that is, rulers and scholars. While there are many good reasons to study the role of elites in society, one often wonders what sort of society produced these elites. Another hindrance to the development of social history has been the absence, or perceived absence, of source material. When I mentioned this project to a number of scholars, I was asked more than once whether there were any sources for such a project. It is my hope that my findings will encourage others to further investigate the topic of poverty in the medieval Middle East. After more than five years of work on the subject, it is my firm conviction that the sources are far from exhausted. This observation is particularly valid for Mamluk Egypt, for which we possess especially rich and varied source material, but I am convinced that material for the study of poverty exists for a number of other premodern Islamic societies.

If social history has received little attention from scholars of the medieval Middle East, the study of poverty has received almost none, at least until recently. While Ira Lapidus included a chapter on the "common people" in his *Muslim Cities in the Middle Ages*, and a few other scholars such as William Brinner and Eliyahu Ashtor have written articles of interest, the study of poverty as a subject in its own right is only just beginning.[1] Furthermore, despite the substantial literature generated on the subject of pious endowments, the role of charity in medieval Muslim societies has not been studied. Until recently, anyone interested in this topic had to make do with Norman Stillman's short article, supplemented by brief discussions by Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn in his study of

[1] See especially Ira M. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1967, which contains an extensive bibliography.

waqf.[2] One of Amīn's students has written a dissertation on the social services provided by the endowments, but this dissertation has not been published and is not easily available.

One major exception to this rule of neglect is the Jewish community of the Cairo Geniza, whose social services have been the subject of study. S. D. Goitein first detailed the "community chest" which provided for the poor of this community in his landmark work *A Mediterranean Society*.[3] Since then the endowments of the Geniza community have been studied by Moshe Gil.[4] Most recently, Mark Cohen has studied the petitions of poor Jews to receive aid from their community.

In Islamic history proper, there are also signs of progress. Poverty in the Abbasid period is the subject of research being carried out by Michael Bonner.[5] Poverty and marginality in nineteenth-century Egypt are the subjects of current research by Mine Ener and Khaled Fahmy. Combined with increasing interest in Ottoman social history, including work on poverty and charity by Amy Singer and Heath Lowry, these studies give one reason to believe that our knowledge of the social history of the peoples of the Middle East will increase substantially in the next decade.

Despite these signs of progress, however, full-scale studies of poverty in the premodern Middle East are virtually non-existent.[6] To my knowledge, this book is the first monograph-length study of the poor in the premodern (prenineteenth-century) Middle East. As I mentioned earlier, this gap in the field of Middle Eastern history can be attributed to the general lack of interest in social history among scholars in this field, at least until recently.

It is useful to contrast the study of the social history of the Middle East with the analogous field in medieval and early modern European history. The rise of social history, which began in the 1960s, produced a huge number of works, including a large number of studies of poverty and charity, subjects that continue to attract scholars' interest. Indeed, it was one such work, Michel Mollat's *The Poor in the Middle Ages*, that inspired me to attempt this study of poverty in Mamluk Cairo.[7] More recently,

[2] Norman A. Stillman, "Charity and Social Service in Medieval Islam," *Societas* 5 (1975), pp. 105–15.
[3] S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, Berkeley, 1967–93.
[4] Moshe Gil, *Documents of the Jewish Pious Foundations from the Cairo Geniza*, Leiden, 1976.
[5] Michael Bonner, "Definitions of Poverty and the Rise of the Muslim Poor," *JRAS* Series 3, 6, 3 (1996), pp. 335–44.
[6] This is not true for the twentieth century, however. Cairo's poor, in particular, have been the subject of a number of recent studies. In addition, the problems posed for governments by "development" have placed the urban poor on the political agenda, leading to a number of detailed studies. The rural poor have not been so heavily studied, but the tendency towards privatizing agricultural land in countries such as Egypt may thrust them into the limelight as well.
[7] Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*, New Haven, 1986.

Bronislaw Geremek and Robert Jütte have published important surveys of the scholarship on poverty in European history.[8]

One challenge that faces the scholar who wishes to study the history of poverty and charity in the premodern Islamic world is the problem of identifying sources. As one might expect, the sources available to the historian of the Islamic world for the period prior to AD 1500 differ from those available to the historian of Europe in the same period, so a different approach to the sources is needed. Nor does the historian of that period of Middle Eastern history have access to the sort of archives that are so important to the writing of Ottoman history. Still, the Mamluk period does have much to offer, perhaps more so than any prior period in Islamic history. As we will see, many valuable documents relating to the pious endowments have survived. In addition, most of the chronicles written in the period are extant, and form a rich body of historical works. A number of the Mamluk chroniclers took an interest in the society around them, and their writings are valuable sources for social history. Perhaps most importantly, the Mamluk authors were heirs to the entire Islamic scholarly tradition, with all of its conceptual development.

One point that will be immediately apparent to anyone familiar with the study of poverty and charity in medieval and early modern Europe is that religion is fundamental to the formation of the concepts of poverty and charity. The New Testament provided a basic source on which Christian thinkers could elaborate their theories of poverty – theories which underwent significant changes over the centuries as social circumstances and the interpretation of many aspects of Christain belief changed. Furthermore, the concept of "charity" is a Christian one, and there is no equivalent term in Muslim thought. In this work, I have used the term charity to refer to the practice of the wealthy aiding the poor, disregarding the specifically Christian meaning of the term in favor of a more general, and universally applicable, meaning.

In the case of Islam, moreover, almost no work has been done on the concepts of poverty and charity, in this case almsgiving, in the religious literature. Thus, I begin this work with an attempt to fill that gap. Chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of theories of poverty in the medieval Islamic Middle East and to a comparison of these concepts to what we know about the poor of Mamluk Cairo. From at least the ninth century, if not earlier, up to the Mamluk period (1250–1517), a debate occurred, particularly among sufi circles, concerning the meaning and value of poverty. Two points emerge from this chapter. First, the designation of poverty as a spiritual state did not go uncontested in medieval Islamic society. While

[8] Bronsilaw Geremek, *Poverty: A History*, Oxford, 1994; Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, 1994. Another important work is Evelyne Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté social à Byzance, 4e–7e siècles*, Paris, 1977.

some thinkers gave poverty an important role in their spirituality, others were much more cautious in their evaluations of the holy poor. Second, insofar as such idealizations of poverty were applied to the real poor of Mamluk Cairo, they also produced an ambivalent picture. On the one hand, the poor were despised and even feared by the upper classes. On the other, they were thought to hold a special spiritual status, and one who gave them alms could expect to be rewarded for his actions.

The following chapter addresses the practice of almsgiving in detail. As in the case of poverty, medieval Muslim thinkers developed a complicated discourse on the subject of almsgiving. The behavior and motives of the almsgiver and recipient were subjected to considerable examination in order to guarantee the spiritual status of the exchange of alms for prayers. Again, I try to bring such idealizations down to earth by comparing them with what we know of attempts by the Mamluk state to regulate begging in Cairo or to intervene to aid the poor. The main conclusion that results is that almsgiving was primarily a private affair, carried on by individuals in anonymity. The state did intervene in certain cases, such as to free debtors from prison or supervise orphans' property, but these were exceptions that prove the rule. Sporadic attempts to remove beggars from Cairo's streets or prevent able-bodied men from begging were a complete failure, and do not seem to have constituted any sort of a sustained policy.

This absence of government interference in the lives of the poor tells us something about the state in Mamluk Egypt. For the most part, the Mamluk state was quite unable to, and was perhaps uninterested in, involving itself in social problems, unless it feared that, in the absence of such intervention, violence or mass suffering would occur. The state did not attempt to regulate most of the day-to-day affairs of the poor or, indeed, of much of the urban population.

The use of the term "state" in this context may also require some explanation. When one considers the concept of a "state," three functions immediately spring to mind: taxation, the military, and the judicial system. This is especially true in the case of premodern states, such as that of the Mamluk empire, which did not possess permanent diplomatic missions or social welfare ministries. The judicial system in Mamluk Egypt was in the hands of the religious scholars, although the actual sentences were frequently carried out by the secular authorities. Taxation focused on the rural part of the country in Mamluk Egypt, while the military was a closed class, to which the citizenry could not gain admission. Consequently, the mass of urban dwellers had little interaction with the authorities, with the possible exception of the courts.

This did not prevent the religious scholars from developing a theory of the sultan's responsibility for the lower classes of the Muslim population, nor did it stop the sultans from buttressing their legitimacy by taking a

special interest in the fate of the urban poor.[9] As the biggest land holders in Egypt, the sultans had access to plentiful supplies of what the poor needed most, namely food, as well as to lands which could be dedicated to foundations which provided charitable services.

Chapter 4 is devoted to examining these foundations, known as *waqf* (pl. *awqāf*).[10] Fortunately, some 250 endowment deeds for these waqfs have survived from the Mamluk period and are available to the modern researcher. These documents are housed at the Egyptian National Archives (Dār al-Wathā'iq al-Qawmiyya) and the Ministry of Pious Endowments (Wizārat al-Awqāf). The latter institution holds two collections, an older one (*qadīm*), and a newer one (*jadīd*).[11]

Based on a systematic reading of these documents, one can arrive at a reliable estimate of the role of the waqfs in providing services to the poor. First, one can describe the various services made available by these endowments to the poor in such areas as medical care, education, the provision of food and water, and burial of the dead. Second, it is possible to identify, at least in general terms, the patrons who endowed them. Sandra Cavallo has argued that poverty studies have focused on the necessity for poor relief without properly examining the identities and motives of the benefactors.[12] While one must be careful not to reduce charity to an intramural sport played by the rich, Cavallo makes an important point. The wealthy not only responded to a social need, they had their own motives for charitable giving.

A number of factors are relevant to understanding the motives of the founders of waqfs in Mamluk Cairo. In some cases, private interests were most important. Waqfs were used to protect one's property from confiscation and to guarantee that one's descendants would be provided for. This motive was of particular importance for the *awlād al-nās*, the children of the Mamluks, whose status fell considerably during the ninth/fifteenth century. In addition, founders were concerned for their souls, and gifts to the poor were intended to win God's favor through the medium of prayers by the poor on behalf of the wealthy. At times, however, these private motives became enmeshed with the interests of the state. This is especially true of the monumental waqfs founded by the sultans, such as hospitals. In these cases,

[9] Our sources, literary and documentary, take relatively little interest in rural affairs. Thus it is difficult to know what, if any, measures the sultans or amirs took to relieve poverty in the countryside.

[10] For important contributions to the study of waqf in Mamluk Egypt, see Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, *al-Awqāf wa l-ḥayāt al-ijtimā'iyya fī Miṣr, 648–923/1250–1517*, Cairo, 1980; *Catalogue des documents d'archives du Caire de 239/853 à 922/1516*, Cairo, 1981. The study of waqf has produced a bibliography too large to be cited here.

[11] In the notes, DW marks documents from the National Archives, while WA marks documents from the Ministry of Pious Endowments, with a "q" or "j" following the number to indicate which collection they belong to.

[12] Sandra Cavallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy: Benefactors and their Motives in Turin, 1541–1789*, Cambridge, 1995, pp. 1–3.

the waqfs, funded by revenues from state lands, served public interests by providing services needed by the Muslim community, as well as private interests embodied in the endowed tombs of the sultans' families. This use of property from the state treasury posed a major theoretical problem for the principal legitimators of the political system, the religious scholars. As we will see, they attempted to bridge this gap between private and public interests by arguing that the fact that these waqfs included services for the poor, and for the scholars themselves, justified their existence. In this way, studying the theory and practice of charity gives us insight into the ways in which the state legitimated its rule. We also learn how the elite protected their interests, and get some sense of how they conceptualized their patronage of the poor in religious terms.

Chapter 5 returns to the poor themselves. This chapter discusses the standards of living of the poor of Mamluk Cairo. Using a variety of sources, I examine the poor's food, clothing, and housing. I then compare salary data culled from the waqf deeds with price quotations which a number of scholars have collected from the chronicles.[13] The salary data deals with the income of "waqf servants," the men hired to clean, maintain, and guard Cairo's mosques, madrasas, and other institutions. Since salary data for laborers and artisans is relatively scarce, the approach I have employed is the best chance we have for estimating the standards of living of the working poor.

Chapter 6 is devoted to famines and food shortages. Despite some important studies of individual crises, the overall effects of these events and the means used by the state to combat them have not been studied systematically.[14] Thus, I examine each major food shortage that occurred during the Mamluk sultanate in an effort to determine why some shortages led to famine, while the majority did not. In addition to discussing the events of the shortages themselves, I look at the measures adopted by the state to combat these crises. Here again, we learn something about the composition of the Mamluk state and relations amongst the elite. In the late seventh/thirteenth and early eighth/fourteenth century, the sultans are able to organize food distributions in which the wealthy merchants, bureaucrats, and amirs take part. By the ninth/fifteenth century, however, the merchants are no longer a force within the elite, and the sultans are less effective at mobilizing the amirs to help in poor relief. This development left the sultans solely responsible for poor relief during times of crisis. At times, no help

[13] For information of price data and currency problems, see the works by Boaz Shoshan, Adel Allouche, Jere Bachrach, and Eliyahu Ashtor cited in the notes and bibliography.

[14] For studies of specific crises, see Thierry Bianquis, "Une crise frumentaire dans l'Egypte fatimide," *JESHO* 23 (1980), pp. 67–101; Mounira Chapoutot-Remadi, "Une grande crise à la fin du XIIIe siècle en Egypte," *JESHO* 26 (1983), pp. 217–45. For the significance of disease in causing demographic crises, see Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton, 1977.

was available to the poor at all. Since the poor often had to rely on their own devices in these situations, they developed a number of survival strategies which are described at the end of chapter 6. A final chapter presents the book's conclusions in a comparative framework, drawing on the historiography of the Ancient World, medieval and early modern Europe, and China.

Something should be said about the limits of this book. First, I have chosen to concentrate on poverty and piety as conceptualized by Muslims. Thus, I have little to say about the Jewish or Christian communities of Egypt. This omission does not result from a lack of interest in these religious communities and their history; it stems from a conviction that we must first understand the view of the majority culture before we can contextualize the role of religious minorities in that culture. Also, I have limited most of my comments to Cairo. Again, it is not that rural history is not important but, in this case, the sources for rural poverty are few and far between. Where the urban sources mention poverty in the rural areas, I have presented that information in the text or notes, but I do not attempt any systematic evaluation of rural poverty and charity as such. In addition, I have totally ignored charity that benefited other parts of the empire, particularly the shrine cities of Mecca and Medina. In this case, we have so much information in the chronicles and waqf documents that the subject deserves a separate study.

Finally, I should mention that this study in no way exhausts the sources available for the study of the poor in the medieval Islamic world. Sources like the popular epics of Baybars, Aḥmad al-Danaf and ʿAlī al-Zaybaq have been barely touched. No doubt a careful reading of the voluminous texts of Islamic law would yield more information. One suspects that many other sources could be brought into play, provided they were approached properly. It is not my intention to have the last word on this subject; rather, I hope that others will be encouraged to further examine the history of poverty in the medieval Islamic world.

CHAPTER 2

Poverty: ideas and realities

Poverty, like any other concept, lives a double life. On the one hand, the word "poverty" evokes in the mind of the modern reader the stark reality of deprivation. In this case, poverty can be defined in any number of ways, according to one's income, one's material possessions, the community to which one belongs, etc. On the other hand, poverty is also an idea which had a number of different meanings for medieval Muslims. Furthermore, these meanings did not necessarily correspond to the reality lived by the poor themselves.

Given the absence of sources for statements by the poor of Mamluk Cairo, the ideal task of determining how the poor saw their own fate is next to impossible. Instead, the historian must be satisfied with examining how wealthier, better-educated persons, who left behind written records, perceived the poor and their place in society. In this respect, the Mamluk chroniclers can be quite helpful. Many of the chroniclers, in particular the most famous of them, Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, were interested in the different classes of Cairene society, and had at least a little to say about the poor. Thus, it is possible to get a sense of how the elites of Mamluk society perceived poverty and the poor in their own minds.

Poverty, however, was not only a social concept in medieval Islamic societies, it was also a religious ideal. Over the centuries, thousands of people adopted a life of voluntary poverty, even abandoning wealth and high rank in society in order to pursue full-time worship of God. Others took a less dramatic route, but still considered themselves "paupers" or "mendicants" who rejected materialistic values in favor of recompense in the next world. The tendency of Muslim scholars and of the mass of believers themselves to venerate such persons only further contributed to an idealization of poverty. Eventually, such attitudes, combined with the emphasis, present already in the Qurʾān, on the importance of almsgiving, came to color medieval Muslims' ideas about the poor in general.

This chapter deals with poverty as a social reality dealt with by the medieval chroniclers and literateurs, and as a religious ideal. I begin by examining the vocabulary of poverty prevalent in the Mamluk chronicles

and other sources, and then move on to an examination of the various social groups among the poor one encounters in the sources. In the following section, I examine poverty as an ideal form of piety. The most influential work on this subject is Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī's *Iḥyā' ʿulūm al-dīn* ("Revival of the Religious Sciences"), which contains a section entitled "the virtue of poverty" (*faḍīlat al-faqr*). In addition, I discuss how the ideas put forward by al-Ghazzālī and others were implemented in the Mamluk period.

Poverty as a social concept

The Arabic language contains a number of words which evoke the concept of poverty. First and foremost among them is the term *faqr*, which has two meanings: poverty and need. In the latter case, *faqr* is synonymous with *ḥāja*, and the *fuqarā'* are equivalent to *ahl al-ḥāja*. As we will see in more detail below, being in need is considered by Muslim thinkers to be a characteristic of humanity as a whole. All creatures are in need of their creator; hence, any believer may style himself *al-faqīr ilā llāh*[1] or *al-faqīr ilā rabbihi* (the one in need of God, the one in need of his Lord). Thus poverty can be the specific attribute of a person lacking material possessions or a general attribute of humanity as a whole, just as wealth (*ghinā*) can refer to an individual's possessions or to God's having no need for His creation. On the other hand, the term *tharwa*, which also means wealth, has strictly material connotations.

In the lexicographic tradition, the *faqīr* is always paired with the *miskīn*. Both refer to a person suffering from material deprivation which differs by degree. When confronted with the need to be more specific, however, the lexicographers were unable to agree as to which term denoted a person who was totally propertyless and which denoted a person who possessed a modicum of wealth.[2]

The importance of this distinction derives from the use of these terms in the Qur'ān to refer to those who deserve to receive alms: *innamā l-ṣadaqātu lil-fuqarā'i wa l-masākīn*.[3] In an effort to determine who the proper recipients of alms (*ṣadaqāt*, i.e. *zakāh* in this context) were, considerable ink was spilled in refining the definition of these two terms.

Due to the importance of this terminology in determining the proper recipients of alms, the early jurists took sides in the dispute. Al-Shāfiʿī (150–204/767–820) took the view that it was the *faqīr* who was possessionless, while the *miskīn* possessed some property, whereas Abū Ḥanīfa

[1] *Sūrat Fāṭir*, v. 15, "*yā' ayyuhā l-nāsu antumu l-fuqarā'u ilā llāhi wa llāhu huwa l-ghaniyyu l-ḥamīdu*."
[2] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, Beirut, 1988, x, p. 299. A shortened version of Ibn Manẓūr's entry appears in al-Fayrūzābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, Cairo, n.d., ii, p. 115.
[3] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, x, p. 299; *Sūrat al-tawba*, v. 60.

(80–150/699–767) held the opposite opinion.[4] In al-Shāfiʿī's view, the presence of an illness which prevented a person from pursuing a trade was crucial to the definition of a *faqīr*, while a *miskīn* was someone who plied a trade, but could not earn enough to support himself and his family.[5] In practice, however, the distinction between the two terms tended to fade when confronted with reality. When we come to examine waqf documents from the Mamluk period, we will see that the two terms *al-fuqarāʾ wa l-masākīn* were always paired, and were treated as synonyms.

In one respect, however, the term *miskīn* does carry an additional meaning. It refers to a person worthy of pity, who may not actually be impoverished. The lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr gives the following example:

> So-and-so was beaten, the *miskīn*. The *miskīn* was treated unjustly. Though he is wealthy and lives a life of ease [*wa huwa min ahl al-tharwa wa l-yasār*], the noun *miskīn* is used for him with specific reference to [his] humiliation. His *maskana* does not derive from poverty, and it is forbidden to give him alms.[6]

Thus the term *miskīn* can be applied to any person who suffers misfortune of some kind and is worthy of one's pity or deserving of sympathy. In legal contexts, however, both *faqīr* and *miskīn* continued to refer to those sufficiently poor to receive alms (*zakāh*).[7]

In the accounts of the chroniclers, the various terms used to describe the poorer classes of society are rarely defined, but are more suggestive than the legal terms in some ways. Where the jurists are primarily concerned with how much a person possessed, the chroniclers were more interested in the social realities of Cairene society. The chronicler al-Maqrīzī, in particular, took an interest in the economic life of Egypt, no doubt motivated by his tenures as market inspector.[8]

It is al-Maqrīzī (766–843/1364–1442) who gives us the most detailed picture of how the elite of his time perceived the structure of their society. Faced with the terrible crisis which overtook Egypt in the early ninth/fifteenth century, al-Maqrīzī undertook to describe each category of Egyptian society, giving his estimate of how the crisis had affected them. The seven categories he lists are as follows:[9]

[4] al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Kitāb al-umm*, Beirut, 1996, iv, p. 264; al-Marghīnānī, *al-Hidāya* in Ibn Humām, *Sharḥ fatḥ al-qadīr*, Cairo, 1970, ii, p. 261. This debate is also reflected in the exegetical literature. See, *inter alia*, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, Cairo, AH 1327, x, pp. 110–11; Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, Beirut, 1993, v, pp. 58–9; al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, n.p., n.d., xvi, p. 107; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-taʾwīl*, Cairo, n.d., ii, pp. 287–8.

[5] al-Shāfiʿī, *Umm*, iv, p. 264.

[6] Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, x, p. 300.

[7] Almsgiving is discussed in detail in the following chapter.

[8] Adel Allouche, *Mamluk Economics: A Study and Translation of al-Maqrīzī's Ighāthah*, Salt Lake City, 1994, p. 4. For biographies of al-Maqrīzī, see al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍawʾ al-lāmiʿ fi aʿyān al-qarn al-tāsiʿ*, Cairo, A.H. 1353–5, ii, pp. 21–5; Ibn Taghrībirdī, *al-Manhal al-ṣāfī wa l-mustawfī baʿd al-wāfī*, Cairo, 1984– , i, pp. 415–20.

[9] Allouche, *Mamluk Economics*, p. 73; al-Maqrīzī, *Ighātha*, pp. 72–3. Allouche translates the