


INTRODUCTION

 SELF-GOVERNING COMMUNE, bureaucratically administered city—this dichotomy has long dominated the study of medieval cities. The former term has come to describe European, the latter Asian cities, for communal associations have seemed crucial in accounting for differences in their experience. Our understanding of Asian, and of Muslim cities in particular, has suffered from this point of view. Idealizations of the European commune have so captured the imagination of historians that many have taken it to be the pure form of premodern city organization. The assembly of self-governing citizens or their chosen representatives has seemed to be the true, complete, and ideal fulfillment of city life. Communal associations enabled medieval European cities to overthrow imperial oppressors and other overlords, and to enjoy a vital and intense commercial life. Some of them sustained the crusades and the great adventures of European expansion, and formed within themselves the culture of the Renaissance.

By contrast, many historians have imagined the Muslim world as governed by empires whose great bureaucracies snuffed out the independence of the towns. In Muslim cities the antique heritage of communal independence and voluntary association for public ends had been eliminated. Muslim cities are never regarded as communities but as collections of isolated internal groups unable to cooperate in any endeavor of the whole, with notables capable of common action only on an exceptional and ad hoc basis—as cities governed by fixed administrative arrangements imposed by imperial regimes, and by the ascription, through unchanging tradition, of certain essential tasks to different classes and bodies of the society. Rarely have they been understood as living and vital organisms. Observers have studied the development of towns as a consequence of the establishment of the Muslim empires, or of broad economic movements, or of the presumed requirements of the Islamic religion for urban settings, and the interior life of the cities has been discussed as if it were but a complex of religious and commercial facilities. Students have stressed the physical formlessness of Muslim towns as an expression of communal lifelessness and lack of

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MUSLIM CITIES IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

public spirit. Who does not understand that the protean encroachment of home and shopowners on the public way, the twisting narrow streets of the quarters, and numerous blind alleys, cul-de-sacs, and blank walls connote that withdrawal from public concerns and public life which ultimately is said to distinguish cities in the oriental tradition from those in the classical?

One of the central problems of medieval history has been to explain the freedom of the western towns and the subordination of the eastern; why it was that European cities came to be autonomous and self-governing while eastern cities were bereft of inner life; why out of the essentially uniform ecological situation of the Mediterranean region, and the common historical and political experience of the Roman Empire, such great differences in the experiences of cities should have come into being.

But this definition of the problem is now itself under attack. The classic outline for the investigation of the medieval city has begun to fade, for it is too little founded in a precise appreciation of the factors which shaped both eastern and western cities. More recent insights and discoveries suggest similarities behind the apparent differences between European and Muslim towns. Contemporary sociologists insist on underlying uniformities in the social patterns of all preindustrial cities. Class and family structure, economic sophistication, technological competence, and forms of business enterprise express unities more profound than the apparent diversity of political forms. At the same time, historians of Muslim cities are beginning to discover elements of autonomy within the eastern towns. Far from being socially amorphous, Muslim cities spawned organized bodies demonstrating a solidarity and drive to independence from established imperial regimes similar to that found in the West. Civic spirit and the desire for autonomy were forces within the whole of the once-Roman world, and the forces which constituted a polity, formed a social order, and actually governed a population cannot be grasped in the simple dichotomy: commune-bureaucracy. Rarely in Europe did the commune become the universal expression of the needs, activities, and powers of the collectivity or the total context of urban experience. Rarely in the East did its absence actually entail a complete want of communal vitality.

Still, of these two recent lines of attack by sociologists and historians, the former overshoots the mark and the latter does not go far enough. The sociological approach stressing the similarities of premodern

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INTRODUCTION

societies overlooks and cannot account for the evident differences, while the historical search for analogous communal forces mistakes the comparative problem by accepting one feature of the urban experience as essential before establishing the larger context of relationships. We must look more deeply into the urban constitution, behind static social and economic structures and beyond the formal political methods of organizing the city and the struggle for local autonomy, into the total configuration of relationships by which organized urban social life was carried on: the structure of the classes and internal collectivities, their public roles, the nature of their organization, and the forces which shaped their interaction; hence the principles by which individuals, classes, and groups of men were made into functioning communities. Only in this way can we arrive at some of the fundamentals of city life, and expose the social relationships by which order and community were created.

To find our way from these general considerations to a more precise formulation of the problems involved in a study of the social and political characteristics of Muslim cities and their differences from European cities, we must return to the prior history of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean worlds in which these cities had common roots. This history shows the dichotomy commune-bureaucracy to be an inadequate analytical formulation. The Greco-Roman experience suggests that social factors lying behind the forms of city political organization were crucial. Both communal and bureaucratically administered cities had common roots in the Greco-Roman urban heritage. While the forms of Greco-Roman city life were communal, in reality bitter struggles between the aristocracies and the populace shaped the history of the towns. Eventually the Roman Empire gave effective preponderance to aristocrats who, behind democratic and communal forms, came to select councillors and magistrates without regard for the popular assembly.* Aristocratic domination became the basis for the transformation of the free ancient communes into administered cities, for as the towns grew less and less able to manage and finance their own affairs, Rome compelled local aristocrats to take up essential administrative burdens as a class responsibility. Local administration was preserved but not local

* The situation is reminiscent of the way in which the medieval communes were not assemblies of the whole, but unions of the most wealthy and powerful members of the community, towns which experienced similar bitter struggles between their patricians and plebeians, the merchants and artisans.

MUSLIM CITIES IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

autonomy. The municipality became a cog in the machine of the Roman state, and its leading citizens functionaries in the Roman bureaucracy. In one uninterrupted movement, without interregnum and without revolution, the Greco-Roman city evolved from one to the other of the city forms which we find in the later middle ages. While formal institutions changed, inner mechanisms of rule remained the same. The cities were not intrinsically different in political character, but varied along a continuum of possibilities created by common underlying factors.

The first of these was the role of the notables. No city, whatever the form of its assemblies, was entirely democratic; and no city, however developed the bureaucratic apparatus of the world in which it found itself, was entirely governed from without. The cooperation of people who were familiar with the populace and its legal and financial affairs was essential for effective local administration. The urban polity was neither administered nor communal as such, but was defined by the roles of regimes externally-based and notables rooted within the town, by the way in which influence was divided between them, and by the degree of their cooperation or antagonism. The place of the urban polity on the continuum of forms from pure communal democracy to pure oppression and tyranny was basically defined by the actions of these notables.

A second factor was the roles of the common people and the relations between the notables and the masses. The common people were not an inert and thoroughly malleable mass, but on the contrary, because of their organization into families, quarters, guilds, or other associations, and because of their numbers and capacity for violence, played a decisive part in the actual politics of the cities if not in their formal councils. The government of any city depended on the actions and reactions of the populations, patricians and plebeians both, be they formally empowered to govern, be they organized into communes, or not.

Thus, the ancient heritage of medieval cities suggests that the two poles of notables and masses, and the fields of force created between them in which social, economic, and political considerations were inexorably intertwined, are central to our study. But in the Islamic world and in the cities of Egypt and Syria in the Mamluk period, the problem of notables and masses appears in a form complicated by a long and specifically Islamic development. To understand the immediate form of the political and social problems of Muslim cities in the Mamluk period, we must digress briefly to examine the fundamental legacy of the Arab-

INTRODUCTION

Islamic empires and the evolution of the Muslim community life up to the Mamluk period.

The Islamic political heritage was shaped by the solutions adopted by the Arab Caliphates to rule the territories and peoples they had conquered. The essential political problem of both the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates was to unify the incredibly diverse provinces of their empire. The peoples of the western provinces were mainly Christians and Jews and spoke various Semitic and Berber languages. In the eastern provinces, Zoroastrianism and other Iranian religions and Iranian languages prevailed. The diversity of these populations can scarcely be evoked, for the provinces were themselves subdivided into innumerable tiny communities, villages, town quarters, and nomadic tribes and clans each of which bore its own variation of the greater regional culture. The task of the empires, especially under the Abbasid dynasty, was to create one system of rule and to convert these peoples to a single religious culture.

Their solution, in a word, was bureaucracy—a hierarchy designed to connect each of the tiny communities of the Middle East to some provincial, regional, and ultimately imperial center. To create this organization the Caliphs did not impose their own cadres, but cooperated with the existing order by drawing the socially powerful and technically skilled families of the realm—the landowning families, the secretarial and administrative dynasties of both the Byzantine and Sassanian ancestor empires, Arab tribal chieftains, and Muslim religious leaders—into the hierarchy which they commanded and at whose summit they stood. A common cultural idiom, a common style of life, and conformity in religious convictions welded a coherent governing elite out of these disparate elements. This elite governed with the cooperation of the classes of provincial notables and officials from which it had come. Without the loyalty of village headmen, elders, landowners, and divines the system could not have been formed. The bureaucracy then served to organize the cooperation of men of prominence throughout the empire on behalf of a single Middle Eastern polity.

Metaphorically, we can describe Abbasid society as vertically organized. Its communities had no ties to each other, but were bound directly to some higher center of coordination. Authority and privilege of office were conferred by the Caliph and could not in theory be assumed without express delegation. In principle, controls over financial and military resources were also vested in the Caliph or his designated

MUSLIM CITIES IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

substitutes. Privilege in landowning, taxation, or class status was similarly ratified by association with the state.

The idea of a unified polity, exclusive in political authority and centralized in this way, gave shape to statecraft in the Middle East long after Abbasid power was shattered. Even though the empire was fragmented, characteristic relations within the official classes and their relations to the rest of the population did not basically change. Though power was no longer centralized in Bagdad, at whatever level it was held it was exercised in much the same way.

Nonetheless, radical transformations in political life took place. The breakdown of the empire in the tenth century permitted the heartlands of West Asia to be invaded by Turkish nomads from Central Asia. For over two and a half centuries repeated infiltrations and invasions shattered efforts to restore a Middle-Eastern-wide empire. Turkish chieftains supplanted the old Arab-Persian bureaucratic elites, evolved a new military and landholding system, and gradually worked out a fresh accommodation with the conquered peoples.

From our present point of view, the crucial development of this period was the almost universal extension of the Mamluk military system. To sustain the new principalities, slaves, imported as youths from peripheral regions, were trained at the court of their masters to be a fighting and administrative elite loyal to them alone and to their comrades in arms. This Mamluk system had its origins in the reigns of the Abbasid Caliphs, but became a general practice only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Almost universally in West Asia the ruling military elites were minorities alien in race, language, ethos, and duties from the Arab and Persian populations whom they ruled. These superbly organized Turkish armies mastered the resources and people of the area and towered over the subject societies in power and wealth.

In the same period, the communities of the area evolved a stable social and religious life which preserved their integrity in the face of Mamluk military regimes. The practices and beliefs which may be called Islamic had been developing for centuries, and though the consolidation of the faith owed much to the patronage of the state and its protection, never were the religious communities entirely subordinate to its claims. Muslim religious leaders had rejected the efforts of the state to define orthodox religious beliefs and to subordinate the administration of judicial and ritual affairs entirely to the interests of the

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INTRODUCTION

state. They remained free to mold the life of the community as conscience, circumstance, and, above all, revelation required.

By the eleventh century, Islam had achieved a full sense of its inner character. Its basic idea was that the righteous life was embodied in a fundamental law, the Shari'a, whose principles—applying to all matters of religious, administrative, educational, commercial, social, and family life—were revealed to Muhammad in the Koran, clarified by the sayings and examples of the prophet, and elaborated by the efforts of the scholars and schools of law. The Shari'a was a complete vision of the good life. No distinction was made between church and society. The church was coterminous with the whole body of believers whose learned members took responsibility for the study of the Shari'a and Muslim traditions, for their application in everyday affairs, and for the organization of ritual worship. Scholars of the Koran, traditions, and legal sciences, who held the key to the divine intention elaborated the network of educational and religious institutions which consolidated the teachings of Islam down to the present time. Against the powerful and now alien state the communities of West Asia had developed an integrated, relatively little differentiated religious-social-political form which was their triumph, dignity, and bulwark in time of troubles.

The emergent strength of Islam was reflected in the social order of the cities. The ulama, or religious leaders, had emerged as the effective spokesmen and representatives of urban communities. The development of fraternal movements among the common people and the proliferation of convents and monasteries for Muslim mystics or Sufis also lent the cities a cohesiveness, not equal to the alien political regimes, but not a wholly ineffectual counterpoise. The Mamluk period represented the culmination of a centuries long evolutionary process by which this social form had been worked out.

Thus in Islamic society the problems of urban social and political organization were complicated by the ascendancy of an alien military elite, and the partial insulation of local urban society from the interventions of the rulers. The classic question of the relations between notables and masses must then be rephrased in terms of a triple interaction between alien military elites, local notables, and urban commoners. In Muslim cities both state or bureaucratic and local communal elements shaped a more complex urban configuration than historians have hitherto imagined. To analyze this pattern, this study will first present a brief history of cities in the Mamluk Empire focusing on

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Aleppo and Damascus to describe the political and economic environment of Muslim urban life in this period. Then, in subsequent chapters, the roles of the Mamluk elite, the structures of the Muslim urban community, and the manner in which its various elements interacted with each other and with the Mamluks will be analyzed. In conclusion an effort will be made to suggest a new view of Muslim cities and some of the reasons for the apparent contrasts with medieval European cities.

CHAPTER I · A HISTORY OF CITIES IN THE MAMLUK EMPIRE



IN 1250 A PALACE COUP snuffed out the Ayyūbid house which had ruled Egypt since the time of Saladin (1169–1193), and brought to the throne of the Sultans the chiefs of Mamluk regiments who were already the effective if not the recognized masters of the state. The moment was surely unpropitious for the establishment of a new regime, and not without enormous effort was its survival secured. Threatened by both Mongol invasions and Christian crusades and weakened internally because of their tainted possession of power, the Mamluks waged relentless wars against both the Mongols and the crusader principalities for over fifty years. By 1312 the greatest danger had passed on both fronts and the Mamluk Empire entered a period of stable prosperity which was to last almost until the end of the century. A peaceful and prosperous period, brilliant in cultural as well as economic attainments, succeeded the hardships of the first half century. This most splendid era in turn came to an end about 1388, when the ambitions of ruthless Mamluk factions plunged the empire into a quarter century of unrelieved civil wars. The weakness of the state encouraged bedouin and nomadic rebellions and Tatar and Christian assaults. In 1400 Tamerlane devastated Aleppo and Damascus while Christian pirates ceaselessly plagued Muslim shipping and coastal regions. Only from 1422, after the advent of Sultan Barsbāy, was order finally restored. The time of troubles cost heavily in permanent losses to both agricultural and urban productive capacity and in the vitality of civic and religious institutions, but from 1422 until about 1468 a period of partial recovery and reconstruction allowed the Mamluk domains to regain some of their former glory. From 1468, however, until the Mamluk Empire's absorption into the Ottoman Empire in 1517, forces beyond its control robbed the empire of even the shadow of its former security and prosperity. Northern wars against the Ottoman Empire or its satellites, and naval efforts to protect Muslim commerce and coasts from Christian pirates in the Mediterranean and later from the Portuguese in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, exhausted the re-

