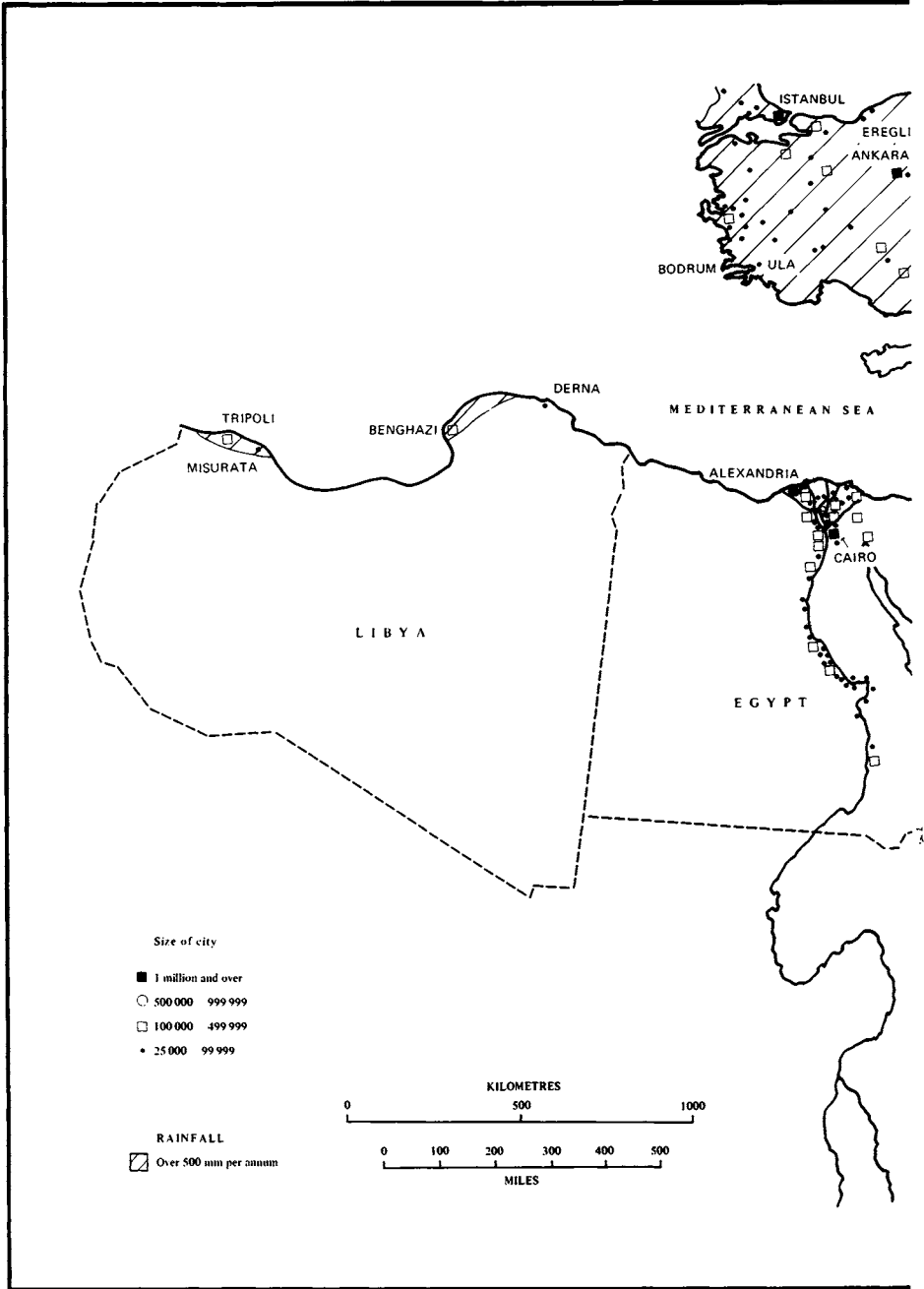


1. Environment and society in the Middle East

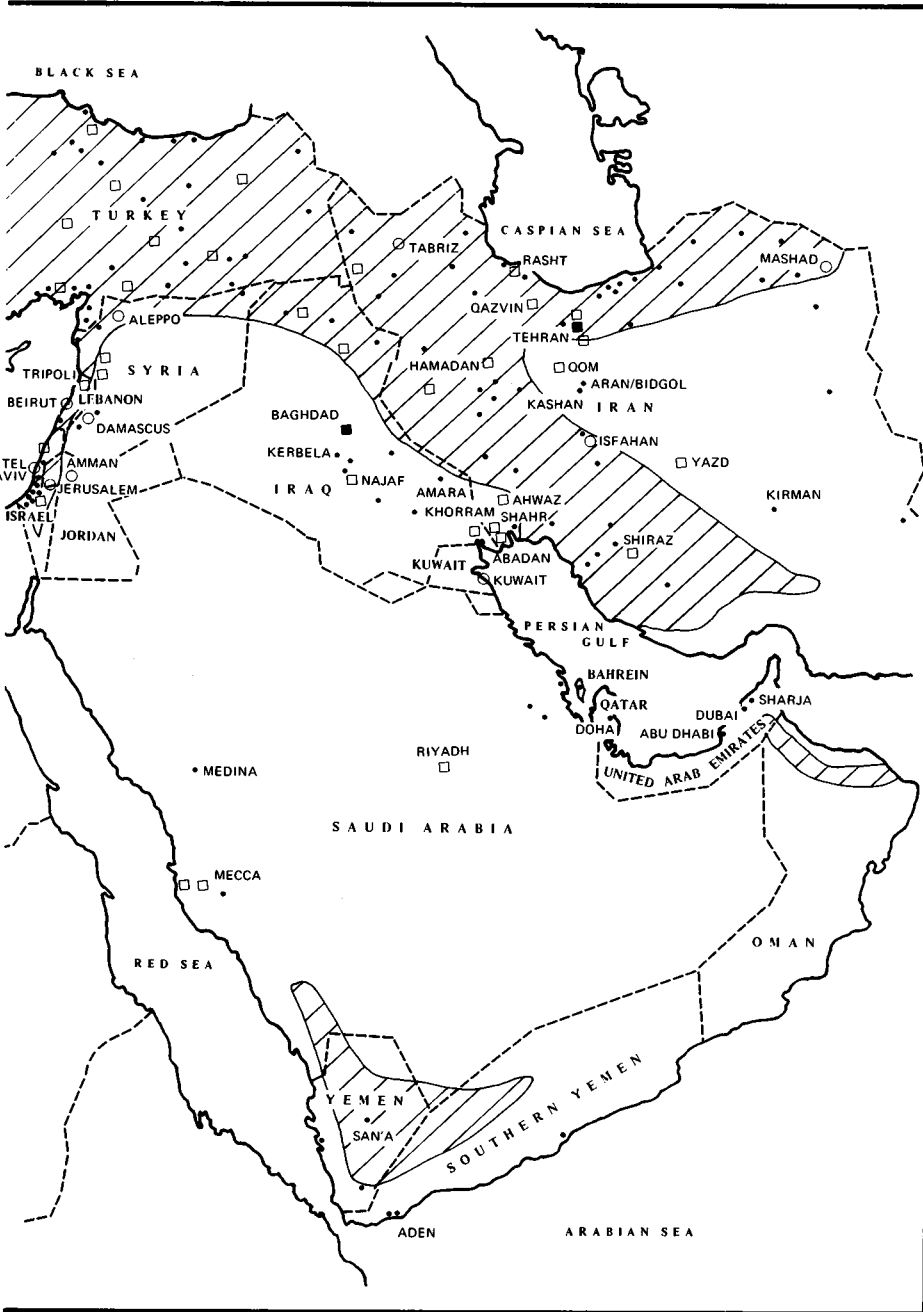
In so large a region as the Middle East there is naturally great diversity in ways of life and social organization, but there are also common religious, cultural and economic elements making for unity. One common element is Islam, the religion that predominates throughout the region except in Israel and Lebanon. Another unifying element is the Arabic language and Arab nationalism, again with exceptions in the cases of Turkey, Iran and Israel. The oil industry has brought great wealth to some countries while others are among the poorest in the world: in the early 1970s the wealth of states varied from \$70 per capita GNP to over \$3500. The size of states ranges from 30 sq. km. to 1760 000 sq. km.; their populations from 80 000 to 34 millions (Clarke and Fisher 1972: 18). A further element of diversity has been the amount of Western influence and penetration, varying from attempts at large-scale permanent colonization in Libya and Israel, to Saudi Arabia where European influence has been minimal until recently.

Let us begin by examining the varied physical and social geography of the region. The principal feature of the Middle East's physical geography is a plain of low-lying undulating country running east from North Africa into south west Asia. Three long arms of the sea penetrate this plain, the Mediterranean from the west, the Persian Gulf from the east and the Red Sea from the south. The proximity of these seas to one another and the plain's relative flatness have allowed easy inter-communication between them. To the north, however, is an east--west line of mountains running from the Baltic Peninsula, through Turkey, where they enclose the Anatolian plateau, east to Iran, where they divide to enclose the Iranian plateau. There are other small but locally very important mountain masses: one running north to south through Syria, Lebanon and Israel, and others in the south-western corner and the eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Broadly, the Middle East's climate is divisible into a moist north and a dry south, but with considerable local differences associated with altitude and aspect. Summer temperatures in the south may average 30- 35 °C and rise to over 50 °C, but further north and at higher altitude they decrease to an average below 27 °C. Winters in most areas are mild and warm, except at the high altitudes of the Turkish and Iranian uplands, where they are severely cold. Aridity is perhaps the greatest unifying element in the physical geography of the region, in particular reducing levels of population density throughout; yet diversity is introduced by restricted areas of higher water availability where much more intensive agriculture and denser populations are possible, as along the Nile valley and the coastlands of the Black Sea, Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean. Snowmelt on the mountains of the north is an important part of the



1. Cities of the Middle East

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water budget in the lowlands of Turkey, Iran and the Fertile Crescent, while rainfall outside the Middle East, in the mountains of Ethiopia, is the major source of water for the settled population of Egypt along the Nile. The human response to this varied environment has been three contrasting, but complimentary, ways of life: nomadism, settled agriculture, and the life of towns.

Nomadism, defined as a way of life involving movement of men and animals in which cultivation plays little part, is of particular significance in the Middle East; less for the number of people directly involved, since this cannot be more than one per cent of the population, than for the imprint of nomadic, especially nomadic Arab, social structures on present sedentary populations. There are two types of nomadic response to the climatic regime of the Middle East, with its winter rains and summer drought: true desert nomads in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Libya and the Bedouin of the Arabian Peninsula, move into lowland deserts in the winter, returning in the summer; while in the mountains of the northern zone nomadic tribes such as the Qashqai of Iran move up to mountain pastures in the summer, returning to the lowlands for winter in a rhythm of movement that is called transhumance. Environmental conditions vary a great deal but in general the more limited the livestock of a nomadic group, the greater the distances it must travel. Nomadic communities are never completely independent in their economy. Animal products are their main source of wealth, but wheat is usually their staple food and this must be acquired through exchange with farming communities. Nomadic pastoralism may in places represent a specialized dynamic response to environmental conditions rather than a decline from a more advanced state of settled life, or the halfway stage between primitive hunting and collecting, and agriculture.

The basic unit of economy is the family household, which enjoys relatively great independence and self sufficiency. The size of social groupings is sharply limited by natural resources in a given district. The next unit above the family household is the tribe, and the more restricted the resources the smaller is the tribal unit. Family relationship within the tribe is strong, maintained by inter-marriage. Control of the life of the tribal community rests on one man, the shaikh, who is the focus of the tribal solidarity and discipline necessary for survival in a harsh environment. The mobility of nomads is usually governed by regulations mutually agreed between tribes, but there is a constant tendency to dispute rights of pasture and occupation, and as a result political combinations larger than the tribe tend, though with some notable exceptions, to be loose and short lived. Some further aspects of tribal society are worth noting at this point: first, hospitality is highly regarded and ordinary social intercourse has been elaborated into a very formal code of manners and conduct; next, women in this patriarchal society have low status and are regarded in Arab nomadic society as inferior to men in all things; finally, as a result of frequent invasions and conquests of settled communities by nomads throughout the history of the region, many of the nomads' ways and social characteristics have been carried over into settled life.

One of the names used by Arabic-speaking nomads for settled cultivators was a

word that means simply 'cattle', and truly the life of villagers tethered to the land contrasts strongly with the freedom of the nomadic life. Like nomadism, agriculture in the Middle East is controlled by a variety of climatic regimes. It varies from occasional cultivation in even the most arid parts through temporary irrigation by flash flooding to permanent cultivation of intensively irrigated lands in the Nile valley, or on the humid coastlands of the Caspian shore. Because of the strict climatic regime in most parts of the region the management of land and water resources must usually be highly organized and therefore centralized. Whether by village community or by landlord, control of water, the region's scarcest commodity, is vital to agriculture, and there are often disputes regarding the use of water, whether between countries or at the level of the individual.

The allocation of land and water rights follows no single pattern, but in nearly every part of the Middle East agriculture focusses on the village. The village functions as a centre for working the land. Farm holdings are usually scattered in small plots at various distances from the village. Access to the holdings and to water is subject to carefully worked out agreements. Much time may be spent getting from one tiny plot to another and to and from the village. Apart from the natural hazards of drought and disease traditional farming still suffers in many areas from oppressive land tenure systems. Among the most iniquitous was the system whereby landlord and tenant took shares of the crop in proportion to the number of types of input they provided. Thus where the landlord provided land, water, seed, credit and draught animals, and the tenant provided his labour, the landlord took five parts of the crop to the labourer's one. Where the farmer sold his crop or part of it to a market he often found that distance, poor communications and the cost of transportation, plus possible cornering of the market by city merchants, barely left him any better off. Until programmes of Land Reform were introduced by far the greater number of Middle Eastern peasants lived on the extreme margin of subsistence; and so do many still.

The third component in Middle Eastern society is the life of towns. The great variety of geographical environment, with coastal plain, mountain, desert, oasis, steppe and forest, has given a diversity of economic production, and so provided opportunities for exchange and the need for a market centre. The population of the Middle East is distributed very closely in relation to physical resources of water and usable land; the urban population in the past was found in intensively cultivated nuclei, with long stretches of sparsely inhabited or uninhabited land between. Even from the earliest times, however, towns in the region seem to have performed a number of functions in addition to being market centres; they were the focus for religious practices and administration, and appear to have been proportionally more influential in comparison with other regions. A further reason for this influence has been the defence role, significant in maintaining cities such as Aleppo, Ankara and Tabriz, while small groups have often seized power and ruled from an urban base, the Mamluks and Ottomans being good examples, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Furthermore, the major religions of the Middle East, Judaism, Christianity, and

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Islam, have close urban associations, with the religious role being the main function of cities like Jerusalem, Mecca, Qom and Kerbela. Cities have also acquired wealth from their hinterlands through absentee landlords, and from time to time the region's position at the cross roads between three continents has helped the development of external city-based trading contacts: west to the Maghreb, by land and sea as far east as China; across the desert or down the East African coast to sub-Saharan Africa; by the Mediterranean Sea or through the Balkans to Europe.

Historically, cities such as Cairo, Istanbul and Baghdad have maintained the widest external contacts and at times their populations were numbered in hundreds of thousands, but their fortunes fluctuated with political and commercial changes. It is these great caravan cities of the Middle East that are best known outside the region. They were not, of course, at any time in the past supplied with the immediate necessities of life, food and drink, by caravan or overseas trade. They relied on their local region for these. The social and economic relations between the city and its surrounding affect considerably the internal social structure of the city. The relations between one city Kirman, and its region will serve as an illustration.

Kirman City was the administrative, social and economic capital of south-east Iran in the early 1960s (English 1966), located in an arid desert basin, of which some 900 sq. km. were permanently inhabited. Because of the scanty rainfall the city depended on an elaborate and extensive system of *qanats* (underground irrigation channels). Qanats are expensive to build and maintain and therefore require large amounts of capital. There are complex regulations about ownership and use. Capital was supplied in the past by wealthy inhabitants of Kirman City, who then controlled the water rights and received a return. The city is the focal point of an organized regional settlement pattern. The oldest settlement, Kirman City, is the largest in the region, at the lowest elevation, and has the widest catchment area for its qanats. Villages in the Kirman Basin may be ranked according to their age, size, elevation and water rights, the newest being smallest and furthest from Kirman City. This hierarchic pattern of settlement is, then, highly organized, and is maintained by continuous communication between its parts. Isolated, self-subsistent village settlements do not exist in the Kirman Basin. A number of other regions on the margins of Iran's arid central plateau showed similar patterns until the recent past (Costello 1976). This is not to say of course that all villages in the Middle East are in the same relation to urban centres as those of the Kirman Basin. Here an urban-based upper-class of officials, landowners, merchants and creditors has maintained its economic and social dominance over the Kirman region through the control of land, water and credit, and through the exercise of political power.

The main function of Kirman and cities like it was as central places engaged in collecting and processing raw materials from the hinterland, and distributing goods, materials and services to the hinterland. However, a purely functional discussion of cities gives only part of the reason for their existence. As well as local environmental relations life in cities is moulded by wider, large-scale social systems. In the Middle East the most significant of these is Islam, the religion of most of the region. It has

been argued that Islam has a preference for urban over rural societies, a preference rooted in doctrinal and historical conditions (de Planhol 1968). Islam was born in the seventh century A.D. in the urban and commercial environment of the Hedjaz in west-central Arabia, and it has been argued that its religious goals and rituals are more easily achieved in an urban context. For example, the basic ritual of communal prayer is difficult outside large sedentary communities, and it is not easy to maintain the custom of veiling women in rural or nomadic life. In short, the argument goes, the early Muslims looked on nomads and villagers as merely second-class recruits to Islam, and that attitude has been held ever since.

With their basis of trading activity, administrative control, and religious association Middle Eastern cities have been able to maintain an uninterrupted tradition over millenia, from the earliest urban settlements built by man down to the present day. When rapid urban growth and modern urbanization began in the region one and a half centuries ago, it was on a cultural base peculiar to the region.

2. Pre-industrial urban society in the Middle East

The Middle East can claim to have the world's longest history of continuous urban development, but those historical factors which continue to influence urban life in the region date back no further than the Islamic period, following the Arab conquests in the seventh century. When European urbanism was undergoing the so-called Dark Ages which followed the collapse of the Roman Empire of the West, the Arabs were busy founding new towns and regenerating the old Roman towns of Egypt and the Levant, and the Sassanian towns of Persia. The ensuing period of growth and prosperity was the last time when the Middle East led the world in urban culture, and throughout the Middle Ages the urban life of East and West diverged increasingly as each followed an entirely different evolutionary line (Hamdan 1962: 121). The Islamic religion was the principal influence in directing the development of the Middle Eastern Arab and Persian cities of the Middle Ages, though how far and in what ways has been the subject of much debate.

The Islamic city

When discussing the 'Islamic city' it is necessary to distinguish the variety of functions performed by the city: the functions of the market town, imperial capital, centre of pilgrimage, or military base; to distinguish also their origins: for example the cities created by the Arab conquerors and later dynasties differ from those which were more or less spontaneous; those in the western Islamic world between the Mediterranean and the Arab deserts with a common heritage from Greece, Rome and Byzantium, have a character different from those in the area of Persian culture between the Indian Ocean and the Turkic steppes and deserts (Hourani 1970: 9–10). In addition to such functional and cultural distinctions there are, of course, differences in the character of the Islamic city through time.

The concern here is to ask whether there were any common features in the Middle Eastern Islamic city and then to ask whether and how these influence the pattern of urban life today. To begin, it will be useful to compare the Islamic city with the medieval European city. Basing his ideas on the European city Weber has suggested that any city can be distinguished by its possession of fortifications, markets, a court administering partly autonomous law, distinctively urban forms of association and at least partial autonomy (Weber 1958: 88). While the pre-industrial Islamic city usually had a market and a wall, it had however no legal privileges and no charter; for Islamic law emphasized that all believers were equal, whether living in town or country; nor did the city have any form of autonomy, any recognition

of a distinct territorial status. The multifarious role of the city in Islamic society as a whole has been discussed by Hourani, who points out that the city and the rural hinterland from which it drew its food and to which it sold part of its manufactures may also be analysed as two mutually dependent components of government and society. The countryside needed a ruler, an army and an administration to secure law and order; the town needed a ruler to maintain control over the countryside, and to uphold the laws which allowed a complex urban life. On the other hand the government was able to maintain its administration and supporting army with the taxable wealth produced by the city. In the Islamic period in the Middle East such a relationship was given distinctive shape first by the virtual monopoly of political power for many centuries of politico-military groups, mainly of Turkish origin, who stood a certain distance from the Arabic- or Persian-speaking peoples whom they ruled, and secondly by the close connection between the commercial bourgeoisie and the *ulama* -- the class of interpreters of the Koran and the prophetic traditions, and of the laws derived from these two sources (Hourani 1970: 16- 18).

The wealth, lineage, piety and culture of the bourgeoisie and the ulama provided them with prestige and patronage. The two groups were often connected by marriage and between them provided some urban leadership, but seldom such as could challenge the power of the ruler. The religious element had no hierarchy or priestly function and by itself could not integrate the elements of the city into a political whole. This was done by the ruler, who stood apart from the rest of society, governing through a group comprising his family, household, palace officials and the army, who were all loyal to his person alone. The ruling group in Egypt even lived in a separate administrative camp, in Cairo, while much of the commercial activity was in nearby Fustat.

Urban society was controlled through a governor and various officials, some responsible for public order, others for justice, while other functionaries supervised public acts of worship. The heads of villages, town quarters, crafts and the non-Muslim communities were each responsible to the government for the maintenance of order and the payment of taxes. The connection between government and subjects could be close, since officials might be drawn from the urban population, and between the ruler and the headmen of communities there were no intervening formal institutions. Indeed, during the Middle Ages, there was in Islam an absence of corporate institutions. Although some features of urban life, notably the baths, the market, the inn, the wall and the gate, had been carried on from the pre-Islamic period, nothing survived of the municipal corporate life of antiquity (Stern 1970: 29). The proliferation of corporations, craft guilds, monastic orders, city councils and other formal institutions is a characteristic peculiar to medieval Western civilization, and the lack of anything comparable is shared by medieval Islam with most other pre-industrial civilizations.

If Islamic law did not recognize the corporation, it did recognize, as a unit between the individual and the whole community of believers, the family as the holder and transmitter of property. The family had the right to live enclosed within

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its house once the basic necessities of water and sanitation were secured from the community. The individual demanded and secured complete privacy from the city within the family home. There was no sense of corporate identity by the urban population as a whole, and the great open spaces, piazzas and gardens of the cities, were the result only of the largely self-interested generosity of the ruling groups, or of some sense of community on the part of religious leaders (Scanlon 1970: 182).

The physical form of the Islamic city partly reflected its social structure, though the variety of functions performed by different cities, together with variations in site, climate, local building materials, and a multiplicity of cultural and temporal differences gave each city its own shape and personality. Some cities had an overall plan, imposed by some ruler at some time, but within this framework the residential areas were a jumble of twisting alleyways, with the occasional open square used as market, a recreation ground, or the scene for such events as public executions and public funerals. There were however a number of features common to most cities.

First, there was the seat of military power, the citadel, placed usually on a natural defensive site, and in many cases, like Khorramabad in Iran, surviving almost intact today. Next, in the larger cities there was a royal palace, home of the ruler and his numerous entourage, which might form a separate quarter. The royal quarter might be quite separate, as Cairo was from Old Cairo (Fustat), or it might be an enclave in an existing urban agglomeration, as the Topkapi palace was in Istanbul. Summer palaces were sometimes outside the walls, as at Fin near Kashan. A third major feature was the complex of institutions and buildings associated with the central mosque and the bazaar. The principal mosque functioned as a place of prayer, a court of justice and an intellectual and educational centre, and it might also be a place for secular activities such as eating, drinking and recreation (Ismail 1972: 117). The principal mosque had a dome and a minaret, and was usually the tallest structure in the city. Associated with the mosque were religious schools and monastic establishments. Apart from the mosque and the royal household where the administration was carried out, there were no official buildings accessible to the public. The court of the judge or the governor was architecturally indistinguishable from the bourgeois house (Graber 1970: 213). Close by the mosque might be a hospital, since medicine was an important branch of learning, together with public baths and latrines, the latter adopted from the Roman and Byzantine urban traditions. The bath house was a place of informal social contact, where ritual and hygienic cleansing was done, together with massage. In the privacy of the bath house women could meet in groups to discuss their own affairs.

Commercial premises were found in all cities, but their size and the range of goods and services offered varied with the size and function of the city. The bazaar, or *suq*, was a market usually covered for protection against the elements. Inside the bazaar complex were shops, numerous shrines, and in the larger commercial centres *khans*, or *caravanserais*, designed for the meeting of merchants and the storage of goods. The khans consisted of a courtyard, sometimes roofed, around which were rows of stores and offices, the whole protected by strong gates. Retail shops must