

Knowledge and social practice in medieval Damascus, 1190–1350

MICHAEL CHAMBERLAIN

University of Wisconsin



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Introduction

General statement of the problem

This book is about the social uses of learning in high medieval Damascus. The topic offers an opportunity to address two problems that historians of the period have puzzled over but not resolved.

The first arises out of the methodologies Western historians have applied to high medieval Islamic societies. Over the last two generations a number of historians have applied various methodologies of European social and institutional history to the period. The medieval Middle East would appear to be a suitable object of these approaches. The apparently undivided sovereignty of its rulers, the role of law in the regulation of its social life, the relatively high monetization of its economies, the existence of bureaucracies and large urban garrisons of standing armies – collectively these give the high medieval Middle East the characteristics of a highly complex and urban society on a par with early modern Europe. It should be not surprising perhaps that appearing frequently in studies of the period are familiar entities such as “government,” “the state,” “higher education,” “the army,” “bureaucracy,” and “administration.” Notions such as “dynastic legitimacy” and the distinction between the private and public spheres also find their way into the field. Historians often employ these concepts casually, but uncritical use has often put the field in danger of anachronism and confusion. Another problem with this approach is that it often leads historians to use “corruption,” “usurpation,” and “illegitimacy” as explanatory devices when the entities and institutions they study do not function as expected.

Several recent historians have acknowledged that the formal objects of social and institutional history have often eluded us. The most sensitive accounts of the period have stressed the informality of social practices and groups, while others have described informal analogues to the permanent hierarchical institutions and social bodies characteristic of other medieval societies. This notion of informality is useful to the extent that it distinguishes the high medieval Middle East from societies that had permanent hierarchical institutions and groups. But the observation is largely negative. It does little

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but reiterate that the high medieval Middle East was not characterized by some of the structural characteristics of some other Eurasian societies of the period. Also, in its implicit comparison to Europe, the focus on informality has often concentrated less on what was there than what was not. This first problem led to the principal issue that this book seeks to address. In looking for the defining possibilities and constraints on culture, social life, and politics, can we be satisfied with describing either the “corruption” of the formal institutions of other societies or their “informal” analogues?

The second problem concerns the evidence that has come down to us from the high medieval Middle East. The period is rich in sources. It also had abundant supplies of cheap paper, a dry climate, and administrative traditions stretching back to late antiquity. However, in spite of conditions conducive to the production and preservation of document collections comparable to those of the Latin West, the period is surprisingly poor in original document collections. George Duby’s memoirs might tempt medieval Islamic historians to lament the past’s unfairness to the field.¹ To the ten thousand original documents Duby exploited from the archive of the Abbey of Cluny alone a historian of the high medieval Middle East might counterpoise a much smaller number from some very large empires.

Given the small number of original documents that have survived from the high medieval Middle East, and the inadequacy of concepts derived from European historiography, it might seem reasonable to question whether a social history of the period is possible at all. The point of departure of this study is the similarity between the historiographical and conceptual problems. Where the sociological emphasis has been on the “lack” of formal institutions and group structures, the historiographical problem has been to grapple with the “scarcity” of original document collections. Given that in both cases the somewhat artificial standard of comparison is Europe, a reexamination of the methods of social history as applied to the Middle East might lead to new perspectives on these lasting problems.

The line of inquiry that this study proposes is to examine the practices by which power and status were acquired, exerted, and asserted. In the high medieval Middle East, this study will argue, it was the elite household (*bayt*, pl. *buyūt*), and not the state, the agency, or the autonomous corporate or religious body, that held power, and that exercised it in most of its social, political, cultural, and economic aspects. When we compare the medieval Middle East with other Eurasian societies of the period, a more productive approach is to examine the practices by which powerful households acquired power and prestige and passed them on to their descendants. Studying the practices of the patriarchal household – “economy” in the Aristotelian sense – also brings together various fields that historians have dealt with as separate conceptual

¹ G. Duby, *L'histoire continue* (Paris, 1991), 37.

unities.² Attention to the strategies of households rather than the taxonomy of formal institutions also helps us compare the Middle East with other societies without treating Europe as a privileged standard. It also helps us to understand how the exercise of power in the period formed the inescapable environment of elite households, both civilian and military, and shaped their strategies within it in similar ways.

This approach in turn allows us to examine the surviving “literary” sources in a new light. If we ask how elite strategies of survival made use of writing, we can exploit in a new way those written materials that were preserved in large numbers. Is the relative scarcity of collections of original documents due to accidental (and therefore unproblematic) loss, or to another reason that we have overlooked? If archival administrative, household, or corporate documents survived only in small numbers, what accounts for the preservation of the large number of sources, especially the biographical dictionaries, that social historians have seen as “literary” and “formulaic”? Why were these sources composed, stored, and preserved? What ends did the effort and money invested in these materials serve?

This book is an exploratory essay that works out these two problems together. It ceases lamenting the absence of original documents, or squeezing what can be got out of the small number that have survived. Rather, this study interprets the surviving “literary” sources as a means of understanding the cultural practices by which households attempted to survive in time. By reading these sources in this way, we come to understand issues that have long eluded medieval Islamic historians. How did our subjects imagine the nature of the social universe and maneuver within it? How did households acquire status and power and hold onto them over time? In the absence of stable and hierarchical institutions, how are we to understand the exercise of power in the period? The interior of the household was defined by the silence that respected its sacred and untouchable character. However, our sources, often written by members of these households, and many more describing the careers of their members in some detail, give us a unique if oblique view into how households survived in the larger world. This study will attempt to show that these elusive, “formulaic,” and literary sources were not merely spared the accidents that somehow befell other more “serious” sources, but rather that they should be interpreted as repositories of the practices by which households survived over generations.

By using these sources to understand how elite households made use of cultural practices for social ends, we accomplish three things. First, we begin to exploit the sources that are available to us in a more critical and productive manner. Second, we may compare the medieval Middle East to other agrarian

² See O. Brunner, *Neue Wege der Sozialgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1956), 7–32 for the development of the Aristotelian concept of “economics” out of household management.

civilizations of medieval Eurasia with greater sensitivity – though this study will suggest more than it settles in this respect. And finally we can reach a more precise understanding of the accurate though non-specific notion of the “informality” of high medieval Islamic societies.

Social survival in the high medieval Middle East

European observers of the medieval Middle East have long been interested in, and often horrified by, the precarious conditions of social survival of its elites. Beginning in the early modern period, and continuing into the present, European writers have searched the Middle East for the mechanisms which reproduced European feudal, aristocratic, or bourgeois society. Failing to find what they expected, many have experienced the Middle East as the nightmarish reversal of the European social order.³

In a subjective sense these writers were correct. There is no doubting the rarity in the Middle East of the formal mechanisms of transmitting status that Europeans have prized.⁴ Civilian elite (aʿyān) households could not make use of such European institutions as inherited rights, immunities, franchises, charters, deeds, titles or patents of nobility or office, or hereditary privileges. Nor could the aʿyān restrict their status to small groups through the cultural strategies of elite groups elsewhere. They had little of the “natural” taste and “good breeding” of hereditary aristocracies, nor the ideology of bureaucrats and professional associations. Moreover, unlike elites in the Ottoman empire or Sung China, to mention just two examples, they were unable to insert themselves into state agencies to acquire or transmit elite status. As the aʿyān “lacked” these legal, corporate, or state mechanisms of household survival, there seems little reason to reject the traditional European perception of them as the “servants” or “slaves” of despots, and of the social order generally as either “despotic,” “disorderly,” or “corrupt.”

³ See for a classic example de Montesquieu, who believed that the absence of private property and a hereditary nobility in the Middle East were the determining characteristics of “Oriental despotism,” C.-L. de Montesquieu, *L'esprit des Lois*, vol. I (Paris, 1867), 64–5. Also N. Daniel, *Islam, Europe, and Empire* (Edinburgh, 1966), 3–18, 30; A. Grosrichard, *Les Structures du sérail, la fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'Occident classique* (Paris, 1979); P. S. Springborg, “The Contractual State. Reflections on Oriental Despotism,” *History of Political Thought*, 8, no. 3 (Winter, 1987), esp. 414–31; Springborg, *Western Republicanism and Oriental Despotism* (Austin, TX, 1992); L. Valensi, *Venise et la Sublime Porte. La Naissance du despot* (Paris, 1987).

⁴ As it has become common scholarly usage, I use the term *aʿyān* to refer to civilian elites, and in the case of Damascus in the period those civilians who were capable of competing for stipendiary posts (*manṣabs*) through their acquired learning and manners. The use of the term should be qualified, however, even as it retains its descriptive utility. The sources for Damascus and elsewhere could refer to both civilians and warriors as aʿyān (the *aʿyān al-umarāʾ* for example); and civilian elites had a number of other terms denoting their conviction of their superiority over others: *khāṣṣa* (“elect”), *akābir* (“great”), *ashrāf*, and many others. The absence of a single and specific term for elite status is another indication that Damascus was not a society with estates or formal grades of rank. But with these reservations I will use the term for simplicity's sake and to conform to standard usage.

However, what this perception fails to account for is the successful survival of aʿyān households throughout the high medieval Middle East. In Damascus (which added to these apparent impediments to social reproduction a number of its own) some households transmitted their status from the early sixth/twelfth century to well beyond the middle of the eighth/fourteenth. Many others passed on their status more modestly but just as certainly for two or three generations. This book asks how these households, living in a turbulent period, able to control property only with difficulty, made use of cultural practices associated with knowledge (ʿilm) in their strategies of social survival.

Knowledge, cultural capital, and social survival

Long before contemporary scholars began to look at knowledge as the “cultural capital” of elites, medieval Muslim writers associated knowledge with social survival. “The capital of the student,” wrote Ibn Jamāʿa, “is his thoughts.”⁵ Ibn al-Ḥājj also linked money and knowledge as forms of social capital: “knowledge (ʿilm) will protect you, while you have to protect your money. Knowledge judges others while money is adjudicated. Money decreases when it is spent, while knowledge is accounted as alms when it is dispensed.”⁶ As much as their “treasures of knowledge, not of gold” the words by which they represented themselves – *ulamāʾ* (“learned”), *ahl al-ʿilm* (“people of knowledge”) – affirmed their association of status with knowledge.⁷

Yet, as critical as understanding the social uses of knowledge is, how aʿyān households made use of learning in their strategies of social survival remains an open question. This is not due to any lack of interest in the subject of learning broadly defined. Since the Middle Ages, European scholars have studied Islamic scholastic, philosophical, scientific, and legal literatures, and a large and ever-growing body of scholarship on these subjects has appeared since. More recently intellectual historians have studied the lives and works of

⁵ Ibn Jamāʿa, *Tadhkira al-sāmiʿ wa al-mutakallim* (Beirut, 1974), 72. Metaphors associating learning with capital or money are a commonplace in the sources. See for example the shaykh who “spent all he had in the coffers of his knowledge” (mā ʿindahū min khazāna ʿilmihī), Ṣafadī, *Aʿyān al-ʿAṣr*, Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Atif Effendi MS 1809, 623b; also *ibid.*, 57b; Abū Shāma, *Tarājim rijāl al-qarnayn al-sādis wa al-sābiʿ al-māʾ rūf bi al-dhayl ʿalā al-rawḍatayn* (Beirut, 1974), 41. Knowledge was prized as the “inheritance of the prophets,” in ḥadīth, ditties, and commonplaces: Subkī, Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, preuss. Kulturbesitz Or. 8, no. 1440, fol. 33: “wa-lā irth ilā shirʿa Aḥmad.” Ignorance was occasionally referred to as being “short of merchandise in ʿilm” (qalil al-biḍāʿa fī ʿilm): Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya fī al-tāʾrikh* (repr., Beirut, 1982), 14/123; for similar metaphors see Subkī, Staatsbibliothek MS, 14; Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi-al-wāfayāt*, H. Ritter et al. eds., *Das Bibliographische Lexicon* (Istanbul, 1931-), 18/396. See also Zarnūjī, *Kitāb taʿlīm al-mutaʿallam ʿarīq al-taʿallum* (Beirut, 1981), 39; Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal al-sharʿ al-sharīf*, 4 vols. in 2 (Cairo, 1929), 1/87; Ibn Naṣir al-Dīn, *Tarājim Ibn Taymiyya*, British Library Or. MS 7714, fol. 11.

⁶ Ibn al-Ḥājj, *Madkhal*, 1/69.

⁷ For “treasures of knowledge, not of gold” (kunūz al-ʿilm lā adh-dhahab) see Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi*, 21/342.

exemplary scholars or important movements. They have been joined by institutional historians, who have traced the origins and diffusion of institutions related to the transmission of knowledge.

Social historians have also been interested in the a‘yān, for a variety of reasons. The a‘yān were the authors of our sources, which reflect their lives and concerns. The learned elite were also judges (*qādīs*), teachers, and communal leaders. Ira Lapidus has analyzed the social roles of the learned elite to criticize the notion that “Oriental despotism” atomized cities into isolated groups incapable of cooperating with one another.⁸ Historians following Lapidus have looked to the ‘ulamā’ to explain how a precarious social equilibrium was maintained in the face of ethnic and religious diversity and contradictory interests.⁹ Lapidus, Joan Gilbert, and Carl Petry have analyzed how the ‘ulamā’ mediated among military and ruling elites, merchants, artisans, and the common people; how they carried out administrative and judicial functions in the absence of bureaucratic state agencies; and how they ensured continuity from generation to generation in unsettled societies.¹⁰

However, even though a large body of literature has appeared on Islamic intellectual, legal, and institutional history, and a smaller one on the social functions of the learned elite in cities, these approaches have been less concerned with understanding how the a‘yān used knowledge for social and political ends. Legal and intellectual historians have considered social-historical questions to be on the margins of their central concerns. When they have studied the social aspects of knowledge, they have wanted to understand the contexts or origins of important ideas, and not the social and political uses of knowledge in historical time in specific places. Institutional historians, I will argue below, have often mistaken practices of social competition for institutional structures. Both groups have also seen the ‘ulamā’ as a natural and unproblematic social category throughout Islamic history, and have often been insensitive to local and temporal variations.

Social historians have been more alert to the specific character of the groups that referred to themselves as the a‘yān or ‘ulamā’. However, because these historians have been largely concerned with the ‘ulamā’'s social roles, they have emphasized the learned elite’s relational characteristics vis-à-vis other groups. The a‘yān’s intrinsic properties, their struggles with one another, how they made use of their learning and cultivation in social competition, all remain open issues.

Even though historians have long been interested in the study of learning

⁸ I. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 1–8, 185–91.

⁹ R. Bulliet, *The Patricians of Nishapur* (Cambridge, MA, 1972); Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*; C. Petry, *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1981); C. Cahen, *Pre-Ottoman Turkey*, J. Jones-Williams trans. (London, 1968); R. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, 1980).

¹⁰ Lapidus, *Muslim Cities*, 107–15, 130–42, 189–90; Petry, *The Civilian Elite*, 321–3; J. Gilbert, “The ‘Ulama’ of Medieval Damascus and the International World of Islamic Scholarship,” Ph.D. Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 1977), 144.

and in the social functions of the *‘ulamā’*, we have yet to investigate relations between universal cultural practices and particular social strategies. This book is an inquiry into how the *a‘yān* of Damascus, over a 160-year period in the high Middle Ages, acquired and made use of knowledge in their strategies of social survival. By studying the social uses of knowledge, my aim is to raise and address a number of central problems in the social and cultural history of the high medieval Middle East. How did *a‘yān* households reproduce themselves in time? How did they defend themselves from predation by warriors? By what means did the *a‘yān* gain their useful loyalties and cultural distinction? What were the practices by which they competed with one another? How did they imagine the nature of the social universe and plot their trajectories within it? The answers to these questions, this study will suggest, lie not in the social, legal, and institutional structures and processes that have long attracted scholarly attention.¹¹ Nor can they be described satisfactorily as “informal” or “personal” without draining them of their particularity and complexity. Rather, these problems are better addressed by interpreting the social uses in historical time of cultural practices that scholars have often seen as universally “Islamic,” and without particular social uses.

Much of this study will cover what may appear to be well-trodden territory. The cultural practices that this book will examine are nearly universal in pre-modern Islamic societies, indeed in literate agrarian societies in general. Lecturing, reading, writing, reproducing texts, debating, discipleship, and scholarly friendship seem so widespread as to be marginal to the interests of social historians. These practices and relationships were similar to, and often influenced by, ancient rhetorical education, medieval scholasticism, and medieval Jewish education. It is not surprising therefore that scholars have studied the production of knowledge in the context of the history of education: in other places, it is where practices related to the production of knowledge often converge. However, in the case of Damascus I hope to show that we have often misinterpreted these practices precisely by studying them as “educational.” In Damascus, cultural practices associated with the production of knowledge had different meanings and uses. Placing these practices in their correct context reveals much about broader and unresolved issues concerning power, culture, and social relations.

This study focuses on the *a‘yān* in part because the sources on them are better than on the social history of other groups such as the warrior elite and (to a much greater extent) the common people. However, *a‘yān* households can be studied not only to advance our understanding of medieval Islamic scholarship, or the *‘ulamā’* as a social category, but also to address relations among power, culture, and social life on a more general level. Modern scholars

¹¹ See I. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd. edn. (Cambridge, 1984), xiv–xv; Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership*, 1–7 for two social historians who have turned to the study of culture and manners broadly defined as critical not only in themselves, but also as a means of understanding these other domains.

have generally drawn a hard and fast distinction between warrior elites (*amīrs*) and the *aʿyān*, and have seen their relationships to one another as a division of social and political labor.¹² However, this book will show how both *amīrs* and *aʿyān* had similar relations to rulers, similar forms of social and political competition, and imagined the social and political universes in similar ways. In particular, as I shall show in the following chapters, many of the cultural practices we have taken to be “educational” in the case of the *aʿyān* had much wider uses, and often characterized military households as well. We will also see, to the extent possible, how the common people made use of these practices. By using the limited information available on the common people, I hope both to question the extent to which these cultural practices were monopolized by the elite and to ask how universal practices were contested by particular groups.

In order to arrive at this argument the book will first devote a number of pages to discussing the nature of political power in Damascus, in the Middle East as a whole, and in the wider context of Eurasian history in the period. Two central concepts of the argument are what may be termed the “maladroit patrimonialism” of high medieval Middle Eastern rulers; and its relationship to “*fitna*,” or struggle, sometimes violent and sometimes not, carried out without reference to the “state” or interference from it. *Fitna* is a term with so many meanings that it should be discussed at the outset. Its meanings in the classical Arabic lexicons and in the Qurʾān and ḥadīth include “disorder,” “civil war,” “factional competition,” “sedition,” “madness,” “temptation,” and the sexual attractiveness of women, in all cases implying either a threat to legitimate order or a collapse into social, political, psychological, or sexual disorder. What this study hopes to accomplish is to demonstrate that while *fitna* was indeed feared as dangerously divisive and destructive, in concert with maladroit patrimonialism it remained nonetheless the inescapable environment and indeed the fundamental dynamic of politics and social life.

By examining the relationship of maladroit patrimonialism to *fitna* we can understand the distinctive and often misunderstood character of high medieval Middle Eastern politics. Rulers lived in cities and recognized few impediments to seizing the wealth of others. Rulers also had the power to redistribute status and revenue sources continuously. However, we cannot consider them “despots” in any real sense of the term. Rulers had no monopoly of coercive force. Throughout the period under consideration, rulers never had the knowledge, the agencies, and the independent coercive power to coordinate and control the subordinate elites upon whom they depended to rule. Rather, power was diffused among the households of powerful *amīrs* and *aʿyān*. Rulers were dependent on the same households – of

¹² The most influential study in this respect is M.G.S. Hodgson’s discussion of the “dividing up of power,” in the “*aʿyān*-*amīr* system,” *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. II: *The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago, 1974), 64–9, 91–4, esp. 64.

both a‘yān and amīrs – whom they regularly subjugated to predation. Thus the peculiar character of high medieval Middle Eastern politics. The dynamic tension in high medieval Middle Eastern cities such as Damascus was between the diffusion of power and revenue sources among elite households on the one hand; and the physical propinquity of rulers, their ability to reassign revenue sources, and the relative absence of restraints on their seizure of property on the other. This tension is what gives fitna its explanatory utility.

Two major spheres of a‘yān social life – what we have formalized as “higher education” and the “suppression of heresy” – were both experienced by our subjects as arenas of fitna. In both cases they experienced fitna within the domain of knowledge much as amīrs did within the domain of war. This study will suggest that we look beyond the formal, public, and legalistic aspects of power and social life, and try instead to understand their abiding possibilities and constraints. By studying the competitive practices of fitna as exercised by both amīrs and a‘yān, we come to understand on a more general level what historians have formalized as the distinct spheres of “society,” “culture,” and the “state.” We can also undermine the anachronistic notion of the existence of “state” and “society” as distinct entities, and of political and social competition as the separate domains of amīrs and a‘yān respectively. Fitna, as we shall see in the course of this study, was not the temporary breakdown of a preexisting legitimate order, but in concert with maladroit patrimonialism formed the central dynamic of all elite social and political life. It imposed its logic on most of their political and social relationships.

Approaches to culture and society in the medieval Middle East

When Western scholars have studied medieval Middle Eastern peoples, they have brought with them an implicit theory, often a deterministic one, of relations between culture and social life. Europeans have long taken Islam as a historically transcendent object of inquiry. The constitution of Islam as a historical object began with the earliest European descriptions of the Middle East. Beginning with the crusades, and continuing into the present, it has often been Islam that “explains” the terrifying, pathetic, or exemplary otherness of Middle Eastern peoples.¹³ When we think about the “feudal” Latin West or “imperial” China it is an attribute of their political organization that we seize upon as emblematic of what is most important about them. But the words by which scholars represent the medieval Middle East – the Islamic World, Islam, Islamdom, the Muslim World – reveal how Western scholars have continued to take religious culture to represent the Middle East. Even today, a glance at journal or course titles will reveal the degree to which this concentration on religion continues to dominate the field.

¹³ See M. Rodinson, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, R. Veinus trans. (Seattle, 1987), 3–48, 60–71.

Like many generalizations, this focus on Islam both hides and reveals a truth. There is no doubt that many people in the pre-modern Middle East understood power and collective life with reference to the sacred, more so perhaps than is true of some other pre-modern societies. The a‘yān of medieval Middle Eastern societies styled themselves – and in our period supported themselves – as a religious elite. Rulers and warriors explained their strategies and sometimes understood them in religious terms. Moreover, the sources were shaped by a religious sensibility when they were not religious in intent, and cannot be interpreted without an understanding of their religious content.

However, having registered the importance of religion as an object of study, giving Islam the priority it has had brings with it several drawbacks. First, this approach has often obliterated differences among Middle Eastern societies that are distinct in other respects. Islamicists have looked for continuities among societies as different as the seventh-century Ḥijāz, ninth-century Baghdād, and fourteenth-century Damascus, and have often enshrined correspondences among them as truths about a single historical object. In addition, the Islamicist approach has tended to focus attention on origins (of ideas, groups, religious practices, etc.) as a category of historical explanation. Finally, by failing to situate relations between culture and society in specific historical contexts, the Islamicist approach has occasionally lapsed into an essentialism, one that seeks to explain all behavior with reference to a single cultural construct. Ignoring what it dismisses as local or pathological variations on a universal theme, or taking local practices as evidence for universal structures, this approach has regularly effaced the specific character of the societies it examines. It rarely asks how culture becomes a stake or a weapon in specific struggles. In short, Islamicist studies of the pre-modern Middle East have often erased differences among Middle Eastern societies, while constructing artificial and often misleading differences with Europe.

Recent studies of relations between society and culture have tried to escape the occasional universalism and essentialism of this approach. One strategy has been to bring to the study of the medieval Middle East some of the concepts and methods of European social and institutional history. A number of monographs have examined cities, bureaucracies, institutions of justice and social control, cultural institutions such as *madrasas* (“law colleges”) and *khanqāhs* (*ṣūfī* “convents”), groups such as sectarian communities, men’s associations (*futuwwas* and *aḥdāth*), legal schools (*madhhabs*), *ṣūfī* orders, and legal and administrative phenomena such as *waqf* (charitable foundation) and *iqṭā‘* (temporary land grant). These studies have put the historiography of the high medieval Middle East on a more self-conscious and comparative basis.

However, as promising as such approaches seemed at the outset, they have not worked as well as their proponents expected. The most sensitive studies of the period have realized that formal entities, agencies, institutions, and groups did not determine social relations in the medieval Middle East to the extent

they did in the Latin West. Studies of formal entities have advanced only partial explanations of the nature of political and social power, of how a‘yān households reproduced the conditions of their elite status, how they passed on their status and wealth to their descendants, how they constructed and imagined their social ties, and how they competed among themselves and against others. Where social historians began by calling into question some of the anachronistic assumptions of earlier Islamicist scholarship, some of their most important conclusions have been largely negative: formal entities and institutions did not determine social life in the expected manner. By lamenting the “corruption” or positing “informal” analogues to “formal” European practices and entities, we have yet to disengage from ideas we have learned to distrust.

The problem for historians is that after having taken terminology, methods, and concepts from European social history, we have often failed to question their applicability to societies outside Europe. When we attempt to describe a society so distant in time, the first task is to understand Europe’s historiographical practices in relation to Europe’s own practices of domination and social reproduction. When it has failed to take these fundamental differences into consideration, the modern historiography of the medieval Middle East has often imposed European social ideals on societies that cannot sustain them.

The problem of evidence

A similar problem arises when we look at the application of European methods of exploiting historical evidence to Islamic social history. If there is any medieval Middle Eastern city that seems open to the practices of social history, it is Damascus. There is perhaps more literary, epigraphic, and material evidence on Damascus in the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk periods than on any other city of the high medieval Middle East, with the possible exception of Cairo. Travelers’ accounts, chronicles, biographical dictionaries, buildings, street plans, inscriptions, coins, manuals for clerks and secretaries, and treatises on every aspect of intellectual life exist in large numbers. Damascus was also fortunate, from the perspective of historians, in having several generations of local historians and biographers. It would seem that the abundance, variety, and detail of the sources make Damascus an ideal subject for social historians.

Yet in the midst of apparent plenty, social and cultural historians of Damascus – together with historians of other cities of the medieval Middle East – have found the sources impoverished on many of the questions they most wanted to answer. The chronicles and biographical dictionaries convey little information on several of the critical problems that historians have tried to address, while these sources carry masses of information that historians have seen as marginal to their interests. Failing to find the desired information