BOOK REVIEW

MUSLIM CITIES IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

Ira M. Lapidus

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Studies, few and far between, have been written on Muslim milieu of the Middle Ages.- Prof. Lapidus' book, since its first edition in 1967, has become a much-referred work.

The author finds both the sociological and historical approaches inadequate. The former stresses the similarities underlying pre-modern societies but cannot account for the evident differences. The latter accepts one feature of the urban experience as essential before establishing the larger context of relationships. So the author prefers to look at urban constitution and the total configuration of relationships by which organized urban social life was carried on, during the Mamluk era (1250-1517).

According to the author, there was no central agency for coordination or administration in large metropolises like Damascus, Aleppo and Cairo or important trade centers like Alexandria, Beirut and Tripoli. Instead, societal cohesion depended on patterns of social activity and organizations. In contra-distinction to European models, Muslim cities are viewed in terms of informal social interaction. The complex equilibrium between the state military elite, the 'ulama, the merchants or the local notables and organized bodies of commoners such as young men's gangs, neighbourhood societies and guilds are seen as the basis of societal order.

The 'ulama were the central core around which the community was built. Their ' judicial, managerial, legal, educational, secretarial, financial, commercial and familial authority grounded in the multiple dimensions of Muslim Law' made them, a 'multicompetent, undifferentiated and unspecialized communal elite'. Not a closed group. their ranks were, open to all, workers and craftsman included.

Mobility and entry, into the ranks of the learned shows consonance with the egalitarian, democratic, spirit of Islam. As they belonged to every social level, they imparted stability and cohesion to society: The 'ulama and the ruling Mamulks were closely tied to each other by familial and ideological bonds.

The central government encouraged local autonomy. Urban administration and responsibility for public services fell to local governors and amirs as a consequence of their military and fiscal duties. Their households were not merely bureaucratic branches of the state, but occupied strategic position in the maintenance of urban communal life. Potential source of private powers and influence, they were further entrenched in their position by the tax structure devised to support armies. As the Mamluks were paid part of - their salaries in' grain, they acquired a considerable role intra-urban economy. Their fiscal powers also gave them a vast generalised capacity to control the flow if scarce materials and to organise labour. They were not only patrons of local crafts and trades but also endowed religious and educational institutions, and undertook public works. Unlike earlier Saljuq and Ayyubid regimes they endowed all four schools of Sunni law. They did not behave like an alien military establishment but penetrated the wider urban society (p.77). Their political control merged with economic and social roles.

[n contrast to the two types of Western artisan guilds - the Western European which were voluntary and self-governing associations, and the Byzantine which were organised by the police powers of the state-- the muslim guilds were controlled by the muhtasibs. These market inspectors embodied both the religious concern for moral order and kept the fiscal condition of the state in view. The Muslim market was less highly organised than markets in. other contemporary Mediterranean civilizations (p.101) and afforded greater _room for individual enterprise.

The cause and nature of mass publications initiated by the zu'ar shows how highly organized these youth gangs were . in Mamluk cities. Potentially powerful counterpoise to state control, their activities increased as a result of economic decline. They became the backbone of massive resistances to taxation and represented the interest of their quarters and defended them against abuse. The harfsh, or organized beggars and vagabonds joined their

ranks. Also among them were street entertainers and sufis. The study, therefore, underlines the contrast between Muslim urban society and the European in the late middle ages. European society was highly segmented with a rigid class system. Muslim society on the other hand, was more fluid: class barriers were reduces by people who met, mixed and mingled with great ease. 'The differences in social organizations were at the root of important political differences' (p.186).

The present, a 'student edition' dispenses with the appendices, notes and bibliography of the original edition. The logic can only be understood as an attempt to make the book more accessible. But the lack is acute. The new bibliographical notes are an extension of, not a compensation for, those of the earlier edition. The summing up at the end of each chapter is a helpful devise and recapitulates the argument section/subject-wise.

The use of words with Christian connotations, monastery and convent, for Islamic institutions such as zaviya, tekke, or hhangah, when considered in relation to the sweep of the study, may seem of little importance.

And even when a negro begger is called a sufi Shaykh (p.106), and when sufis are stood in the rank of the zu'ar and the harfsh, one can ignore it. But there is sufficient confusion to warrant footnotes. Had the sufi brotherhoods deteriorated so drastically that beggars and vagabonds became spiritual guides? Or did the sufi prefer the company of the common man. If the latter, it is understandable in view of sufi ideals. If the former, then the possibility of pretenders cannot be ruled out. But the author is silent. The panoramic is preferred to nicer details. But such oversights become significant precisely because of the standard and worth of this book.

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