INTRODUCTION

1. Definition of the City

A study of the evolution of any urban center involves a consideration of the basic nature of urbanism. Just as civilization does not appear full-blown, apart from all of the folk culture which preceded it, so a city rarely appears in history with the characteristics of a developed town, even in rudimentary form. The evolution of the urban center, like that of civilization, does not proceed at a constant pace but rather comes about by fits and starts, affected always by the vicissitudes of fate and fortune to which all aspects of human existence are vulnerable.

The contribution of the city to civilization depends in large part upon its role as a communication center for the society it represents. To the city comes the wealth of the hinterland, material, intellectual, and spiritual. Thus the town serves as a focus for the interests which prevail in the cultural matrix and it becomes a symbol of that culture, giving rise to the strongest emotional attachments on the part of urban dwellers. Among people of the hinterland, residence in the city tends to become a symbol of ambition and accomplishment. The general question to which we are addressing ourselves, “What was the pattern of Cairene urbanism, socially, culturally, and physically?” can only be answered in terms of the kinds of interactions that prevailed between urban residents at various periods. It is also a question which has no answer unrelated to the mores of the society as a whole.

Consideration of the problem of the definition of the city reveals that the city cannot be understood as a geographic entity. It is true that it may be delimited by boundaries and even walls, just as it has a location and a certain size. These factors, however, have little significance in themselves and are important only in so far as they affect the social, economic, and cultural relations of urban residents. A city is a place of human activity, a place of clustering of human population. Traditional Cairo with a population of about 200,000-300,000, represented not only a clustering in terms of population but also a clustering in terms of interest, beginning with the juxtaposition of various ethnic groups with diverse cultural orientations and progressively organizing these elements and articulating their relations with one another. We cannot, however, rely on a particular social grouping or political organi-
zation to define our city. These are only part of the picture. The only way to discuss the city is in terms of the influences upon it which resulted from its constituent systems of communication, whether these were internal or extended outside. Geographically it is in the very nature of the city to have indispensable ties with its hinterland as well as with other urban centers of the world. The city is a nodal point of these interaction systems.

The patterns of human interaction which formed the basis of Cairene culture in the traditional period were profoundly affected by three major factors which continued to act as the given framework of all activity until modern times. These are the Near Eastern environment, Islamic culture, and the conditions of preindustrial technology.

A primary fact of life in the Near East which has had profound implications for the nature of settled life over the millennia is, of course, the scarcity of water. The traditional Near Eastern city was a fragile entity. From the beginning, the agricultural surplus upon which it subsisted depended upon canalization and storage of water as well as upon protection against nomadic incursions which always threatened settled territory. Historical accounts from ancient until modern times are full of periodic famines, disastrous to cities, which inevitably occurred upon the breaking down of authority. Cairo’s strategic position, moreover, on the trade routes from east to west and north and south, together with its control of the vast resources of Egypt made it an enticing prize for those who sought to rule the world. Little wonder then, that the city has always been a center of government and the seat of military rule. Little wonder also that this rule did not stop at the confines of the city itself, but extended outward to organize and protect the resources that were its very life's blood.

The cultural matrix of Islam accounts in large part for the characteristic form of the traditional city. The very term “madīna” (city) means a place where justice is administered and the place where the seat of authority is located. Other places may have larger populations or be centers of economic activity, but these are not madīnas. Let us note too, that the city in Islam must be a religious capital, for ultimately there is no justice or authority except from God. Thus the congregational mosque (jāmi‘) which carries importance for political activities is always found in the madīna.

The Islamic character of the city is nowhere so apparent as in the looseness of the urban structure. Authority was hierarchical, but within itself, Islam recognized no community but the community of believers
(umma). It is therefore not surprising that the Islamic city, in contrast to the city of Western tradition, is not a corporate entity in the legal sense. 1 Nor indeed, did any corporate institutions exist within the urban center for two fundamental reasons. In the first place there is no concept of corporation in Islamic law to compare with the concept in Roman law. The only legal “persons” known to Islamic law are estates, endowments (awqaf), and the public treasury. 2 There is even some question as to whether all craft “guilds” which existed in Ottoman times were really corporate. The very spirit of Islam militated against the formation of permanent groups of limited membership that could potentially compete with the all-inclusive solidarity of the community of believers. In the second place it was implicit in the definition of the city as a madina to have provisions within it for government and the

1 It is our view that the corporate city of Western tradition is as particular as the tradition of the legal outlook which gave rise to it. The Islamic city lies within a cultural matrix represented by another law. The proliferation of corporations in the narrow legal sense, moreover, is not at all characteristic of the majority of human societies. Indeed, ethnographically speaking, it appears that it is the autonomous municipality or city-state and the rather parochial mentality that goes with it that needs explaining. Moreover, it is not now unusual to hear Western urbanites of humanistic orientation proclaiming their “citizenship of the world” even as medieval Muslims felt some sense of unity with Muslims universally. Urban consciousness is thus not a necessary goal to be achieved in urban development.

It is important to note, however, that it has been in the tradition of social anthropology since the days of Sir Henry Maine to apply the concept of corporation to such institutions as had regularly recruited membership, leadership, were focused upon particular interests, rights and duties shared by members, and were “eternal” in the eyes of society. The family in most folk societies is a prime example. Various organizations might become corporate under certain conditions, de facto rather than de jure. There is a kind of continuum, moreover, between the more or less temporary organization of factions and the “permanent” organization of corporations. Successful factions had success because they had corporate attributes. The existence of “corporate” institutions hung upon the interactions of persons who made up their membership; upon patterns of cooperation and competition within and without. Even as, except for a few instances, the semi-corporate groups which made up urban Islamic society tended not to be permanently institutionalized, so was their significance frequently of an ad hoc nature. Some factions lasted only a few months, but others lasted several generations. Alliances of persons from all sections of society gave rise to cliques and factions that directed the operation of legal institutions. One might say, in fact, that the legal institutions served the factions rather than the other way around. Cf. Jeremy Boissevain, “The Place of Non-groups in the Social Sciences,” Man, 3 (1968), pp. 542-556; Eric R. Wolf, “Kinship, Friendship, and Patron-Client Relations in Complex Societies,” The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies, edited by Michael Banton, A.S.A. Monograph, no. 4 (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), p. 16.

regulation of social life, provisions which extended to the hinterland. Since the power of the state was already rooted in the city, there was no need for special municipal government to arise, and since the Islamic state already managed local social and economic affairs through a flexible chain of command, there was no reason for permanent autonomous institutions within the city to develop.

A number of writers have pointed out that in Islam, hierarchical personal authority is regarded as essential to the normal pattern of social existence. Authority in large part is derived from status in the most general sense of the term. It is inseparable from the innumerable distinctions of kind as well as from the infinitesimal gradations of rank. The patterns of deference which traditionally characterize social interaction testify to this fact. At each level the strata of urban society were tied together by networks characterized not only by reciprocity but by a relatively well-defined hierarchy which related directly to bases of power, formal and informal. In this connection we will devote considerable attention to patron-client ties.

The second characteristic which emerges from the orientation of Islam concerns the role of the urban notables and the middle orders of society. The fact that the religious law (shari'ā) governed social and economic life encouraged a strong tie between religious notables (ʻulāmā) and the commercial sector. Religious men of learning married into rich bourgeois families and possessed a great degree of social and economic power through private investments as well as their control of endowments. These were able also to provide urban leadership both on the basis of the ideological resource that they controlled and their close connections with the society from which they sprang; for the scholars derived from all classes even as Islam applied to everyone without consideration of rank.

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4 Thus C. A. O. van Nieuwenhuijze writes: "The true fixation of authority as an all-permeating feature of Middle Eastern society, and the completion of society as an authority system ... ensues from the fact that not merely absolute status results in authority but also relative status. Whenever a subject A encounters a subject B who belongs to a social category rated higher than his own, there is a potential element of authority inherent in B's dealing with A" (Sociology of the Middle East (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 731).
Within broad limits, Islam also recognizes the validity of cultural differences. Nowhere do we see Islamic tolerance for diversity so vividly expressed as in the explicit recognition of the right of other religious groups, "The People of the Book" (Ahl al-Kitāb), Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, to carry on their beliefs and practices. In addition, the practice of adopting traditional administrative routines when these did not conflict with Islamic law allowed a great deal of flexibility in the pattern of social interaction.

Thus the only social entities having separate legal status resembling that of corporations were non-Muslim religious communities. Within Islam there was no community but the entire community of believers (umma); there was only the umma on the one hand and private individuals on the other. Semi-corporate bodies such as families, residential units, or clienteles partially filled the gap, but generally these competed with others for control of resources. Some regulations had to keep people from treading too firmly on other’s toes, but to a great extent, people were allowed to work out their existence in their own way.

This particularistic, individualistic emphasis together with the recognition of the validity of diversity accounts in large part for the intense factionalism that invariably resulted in the periodic weakening of central authority discussed at length by Ibn Khaldūn. Consideration of the events that shaped traditional Cairo is difficult in terms of well-defined groups and institutions. The outcome was much more dependent upon the vicissitudes of factions and alliances within the population which, though they often fell into a general pattern, were fluid, even as the fabric of the social structure within which they took place was loosely woven.

The third set of facts that gave urban life its shape were the conditions of life in the preindustrial period. Principally these facts had basis in the limitations of technology. Long-range communication of information and resources was slow and difficult. The power of the military elite was relatively limited by the short range of the instruments of control. The rulers like the ruled depended primarily upon personal ties, if not always face to face communication, to achieve their ends. Local leaders could be regarded, on the one hand, as emanations of the ruler’s personality, acting on his behalf, on the other as representatives of their own clienteles. The urban complex was a vast network of such ties ranging from intimate friendships to less effective but more extended connections of persons who had only a second- or third-hand acquaintance with one another.
Relative autonomy of internal components, quarters, craft groups, and local associations was the keynote in the structure of the pre-industrial urban network. Since technology did not allow effective direct centralization in the modern sense, centralization was achieved indirectly through the formation of alliances and patron-client ties that extended throughout the fabric of society. In so far as the elite failed to accomplish these liaisons, the notables and bourgeoisie could control the city, temporarily asserting themselves as popular leaders *de facto* when the government was weak. Urban quarters thus were the most viable units of defense and organization. Even when there was no question of the power of the elite, the most efficient, in fact the only realistic method of administering the law and collecting taxes was through the recognition of local groups and of their leaders who were held personally responsible.

2. **The Social Components and the Social Hierarchy**

Our justification then, for treating the city from the point of view of continuity over so many centuries lies in the fact that the principal elements which formed the general framework of its social structure did not change. Muslim historians throughout the Middle Ages, as well as European travelers invariably outlined social classes of the same repeating pattern. They spoke of rank (*jah*) and of the "layers" (*tabaqât*) of society. The order was hierarchical:

Ranks are widely distributed among the people, and there are various levels of rank among them. At the top, they extend to the rulers above whom there is nobody. At the bottom they extend to those who have nothing to gain or to lose among their fellow men. In between there are numerous classes.  

The most prominent groupings were the elite (*al-khâṣṣā*); 6 the notables (*al-āṣyān*) including prominent and respected leaders whether in the field of religion (*al-ʿulamā*), commerce (the wealthy import-export merchants, *tujjār*), or local government (the leaders of religious minorities and/or urban quarters); respected men of lower rank (*an-

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6 The term "al-khâṣṣa," generally speaking, refers to the "upper crust" of cultured persons and to some extent overlapped "al-āṣyān." Since political leadership tended to be seated primarily in the military elite, however, "al-khâṣṣa" proper came to refer in the Mamlūk period especially to the sultan and his retinue, the highest ranking *amirs* and officials. Cf. Ira Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 80.
nās) such as the less wealthy merchants, specialists in crafts or medicine, property owners, and so forth; and “the masses” (al-cūmma) who were without education, property, wealth, or power. 7

The dimensions of social inequality had reference in the main to three resources or bases of power, the hierarchy being generally arranged according to relative access thereto. First, there was military power, controlled almost exclusively by the elite; second, there were economic resources, largely controlled by the elite but many of which were in the hands of the ā-dīn, and third, there was religious or ideological power, formally the domain of the ʿulamāʾ, but in reality emanating from all levels of society. Let us note that these resources under the conditions of the traditional heritage, were communicated through channels that followed a very general pattern. They were, moreover, interdependent and exchangeable and this exchangeability is what led to the formation of reciprocal ties within the community. Everyone needed some access to each of the three to make his way. Thus although the elite owned land, they were chiefly occupied with military concerns and had to depend upon merchants and other agents to carry on their business activities. Without the backing of the ʿulamāʾ they could not govern effectively; having no moral or legal force, they could not rule. The merchants depended upon the elite to provide protection of trade routes and caravans, while the ʿulamāʾ needed not only protection, but access to the financial resources of the elite and commercial sectors for the endowment of their establishment. It would be useless to argue for the primacy of one or the other of these resources. The need for food seems paramount, but so is the protection of life and limb. The traditional Muslim would also argue that both are possible only through the will of God.

There is another more general marker of rank which should be mentioned, and perhaps this is even more diagnostic than the possession of any of the three resources although wealth, power, learning, and piety gave rise to it. We refer here to one’s ability to command services and to provide services for others. Thus Ibn Khaldūn wrote:

7 It is worth noting that there is considerable ambiguity in the way in which most of these terms were applied. Thus not only is there variation in the way in which “al-khāṣṣa” is used, but “an-nās” which means “people” sometimes included the rich merchants or even the elite. The vagueness of terminological reference tended to reflect the real fact that the society was by no means rigidly stratified and the social status of the individual was more seriously affected by his relationships in the power structure than by his technical classification.
Each class among the inhabitants of a town ... has power over the classes lower than it. Each member of a lower class seeks the support of rank from members of the next higher class, and those who gain it become more active among the people under their control in proportion to the profit they get out of it. 

A person of rank has the people approach him with their labor and property. (They do that) in order to obtain advantages. The labor and property through which they attempt to approach him is, in a way, given in exchange for the many good and bad things they may obtain (or avoid) with the aid of his rank.

He tells us too what the real difference is between merchants of high and low rank. Merchants of high rank are very wealthy but their wealth depends upon their having others work for them. A merchant of low rank may also be wealthy, but he has to involve himself in the conduct of his business affairs, not just direct them. Rank then, is something that cannot be defined simply with reference to the control of resources, nor even necessarily by family ties. Family and resources help, but these are conducive to rather than diagnostic of rank. Persons of rank were hospitable and generous, cultivated in speech and manners, wise, urbane, and sophisticated. In short, they were those who were able to make the right alliances, become clients of the right people and patrons of others; they were those who managed to find a place in the hierarchy from which they could attain their ends.

Needless to say there was nothing resembling “class consciousness” that was shared by persons occupying the same layer of society. An exception may be made in the case of the elite, since for the most part these formed a relatively small group, were usually of the same or similar ethnic origin, and tended to reside together following the same occupation. The ‘ulama may also have possessed a feeling of unity, since for most of the time we consider these were represented by a common establishment. The merchants, popular leaders, craftsmen,

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9 Ibid., p. 328.
10 Ibid., p. 329.
and the masses, however, were divided into many units representing many different occupations and orientations. Common interest groups at lower levels of society did from time to time arise, but this banding together was usually with regard to specific issues and never became permanent.

Nevertheless there were some groups within Cairene society that were united by a sentiment resembling "class consciousness" stemming from the fact that they were either legally recognized as separate communities or socially recognized by society at large as sets of persons who shared certain bodies of tradition. These groups are what we will call "status groups." Generally they may be seen as segments occupying more or less specific positions in a system of segments. The term "status" refers to their orientation in society which was not necessarily "high" or "low" but was "special." Such categories resulted ultimately from the universally accepted ideological framework; they were considered as "part of the nature of things." Islamic society recognized a community of believers, therefore persons who were not Muslim fell outside this community. Since the umma was defined through shared belief in Islam, so were the "People of the Book," Jews and Christians, divided according to their religion.

The special status of ethnic communities is harder to derive from Islam, but we have already seen that differences were not only recognized but respected. No differences are so outstanding as those of ethnic origin that are marked by custom, dress, and language as well as by physical features. It is true that status groups defined by nationality were much less tightly knit than those defined by religion, since the latter involved legal status while the former did not. In both cases, however, a stereotyping prevailed in the ordering of public social relations. It was usual for people of special statuses to follow certain occupations, although this was far from a strict rule. Thus many Copts tended to be bureaucrats, gold, and silversmiths, and makers of alcoholic beverages. Jews often engaged in business of various kinds, many becoming prominent merchants, bureaucrats, or even advisors and ambassadors of the elite. Persons belonging to special ethnic groups frequently capitalized on their national origin by going into trades related to goods coming from foreign lands and tended to reside in their own quarters. In that case their unity was encouraged as the government looked upon commercial groupings and quarters as units for tax collecting and social control.

We should emphasize, nevertheless, that while people of the same
status could have different professions, people of the same profession could have different statuses. *Members of all special status groups were represented at all levels of society*, with the single possible exception of the highest class. Thus social classes and status groups formed the warp and the weft of the social fabric. Special status guaranteed a degree of autonomy to a community and at the same time brought it into logical relation to other communities; hierarchy expressed the unity of society while connecting it to a universal conception of the nature of man.