This book is the outgrowth of a conference on the history of the medieval and modern Middle East, held 29 June 1999 at Bar-Ilan University. A wide range of topics was discussed at the conference, but in this collection of essays the focus is on the history of towns, urban society, and material culture.

The interplay between a town’s physical setting and its social and cultural values is at the heart of Nimrod Luz’s discussion of Mamluk Tripoli. He adopts a wide approach to the subject, trying to assess the relative importance of the Islamic component versus the local culture in shaping the urban and social essence of Mamluk Tripoli. Yehoshua Frenkel and Yaacov Lev deal with a similar topic, or, more precisely, with a certain aspect of the socio-religious make up of Islamic urban society: the role of the cadi. Frenkel points out that the cadi functioned also as a social moderator and that the scope of the cadi’s court extended beyond legal and religious matters. Lev focuses on the administrative and financial responsibilities of the cadi. The role of the cadi in urban society was complex, marked by contradictions. On the one hand, he did not have exclusive judicial authority; the chief of police and the supervisor of the markets, who also wielded judicial powers, circumscribed his authority. On the other hand, as administrator and social mediator, he had a considerable impact on the urban life, despite the encroachment of other officials on his judicial domain.

Jerusalem and Palestine at the time of the Crusades are at the focus of three essays in this volume—by Shimon Gat, Dan Bahat, and Michael Ehrlich. Gat has embarked on an ambitious task, redefining the history of Jerusalem and its population under the Seljukid rule. While relying on the work of Moshe Gil and the many Geniza documents published by him, Gat reinterprets them, concluding that the period of Seljukid rule was not as bleak has been described. In Gat’s view, many scholars have followed rather uncritically the sources and have exaggerated the amount of destruction attributed to the Seljuks. Along with the studies of Jean-Michel Mouton and Taef Kamal el-Azhari, Gat’s work constitutes an important contribution to the history of eleventh-century Syria and Palestine.
Bahat deals with a more limited but also a controversial aspect of the urban and social history of Mamluk Jerusalem: the location and functions of hospices and hospitals for Christian pilgrims to the town. Hospitals in medieval Europe offered more hospitality than medical care to the poor and travelers who used their services. The medicalization of the European medieval hospital was, in fact, a long and protracted process that continued well into the early-modern period. Hospitals established in the Holy Land during the Crusades resembled European hospitals, functioning as lodges and hospices for the poor and travelers. Pilgrims to the Holy Land needed both care and cure, and pilgrimage without the ability to provide these services in an orderly and institutionalized way would be unimaginable.

Ehrlich re-examines the question of Frankish urbanism in medieval Palestine. His starting point is Joshua Prawer’s views about the use of existing towns by the Crusaders and about the lack of Frankish impact on the urban scene of the Holy Land. Adopting a case-study approach, Ehrlich discusses the towns of Ramla, Tiberias, and Toron-Tibnin. He concludes that Frankish residence, in newly constructed quarters in and near preexisting settlements, had a manifold and enduring impact on urban life in Palestine.

The essays of Zohar Amar and Orit Shamir and Alisa Baginski are, to some extent, interconnected. Amar studies the production of paper within the context of the history of medieval Syria and Palestine. Paper and the papermaking industry were introduced to the area toward the end of the ninth century and are clearly attested to in the tenth century. Amar sees a strong link between the papermaking and textiles industries in the region. Cultivation of cotton spread in the region following the Muslim conquest, and cotton became the main raw material used by the local industry for the production of paper. Shamir and Baginski emphasize the remarkable variety of textile materials excavated in Israel and their diverse geographical origin and dates. In some excavations large quantities of used textiles have been found. These textiles reflect heavy use, being mended and patched many times. Yet, in medieval times, garments were valued and people, with the exception of the ruling circles perhaps, did not adopt a wear-and-throw mentality. Shamir and Baginski put forward the explanation that these textiles belonged to rag collectors or merchants who sold textiles to the papermaking industry.

Efraim Lev’s essay deals with a neglected topic: trade in medicinal substances in medieval Syria and Palestine. Much information
on this topic comes from the documents of the Cairo Geniza and, occasionally, from unexpected sources—such as an apothecary’s inventory from Edirne in 1549. This latter document catalogs the apothecary’s inventory, indicating a diverse stock of medicinal substances. Diversity is also the main conclusion of Lev’s study: medical materials came from a variety of mineral, animal, and plant sources, having wide geographical origins.

It is a pleasant duty to mention the contribution of a number of people at the Faculty of Jewish Studies, Bar-Ilan University, who supported this project from its beginnings. Eliezer Tauber, Chairman of the Department of Middle Eastern History, was the driving force behind the conference and was responsible for its success. Moshe Garsiel, the former Dean of the Faculty, and Joshua Schwartz, the current Dean, have extended invaluable help for the ongoing research activity of the Department of Middle Eastern History and its conferences. Yitzchak Kerner, the Administrative Head of the Faculty, provided advice, assistance, and encouragement all the way. I wish to thank them all. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Juleen Audrey Eichinger for her excellent work as the language editor of the manuscript and to Marcella Mulder at Brill for her advice and cooperation.