“THERE ARE ‘ULAMĀ’, AND THEN THERE ARE ‘ULAMĀ’:
MINOR RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND MINOR
RELIGIOUS FUNCTIONARIES IN MEDIEVAL CAIRO

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Four and a half decades ago, at the outset of the career of A. L. Udovitch, the field of pre-modern Islamic social history barely existed. In the intervening years, the field has flourished, in part because of the scholarship of Udovitch himself as well as that of his students and other historians associated with the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, of which for many years he served as chair. To some degree, the accomplishments of Islamic social historians have paralleled those of their colleagues in other fields. From the 1960s until fairly recently, the domain of social history has dominated the discipline. Naturally, however, the contingencies of Islamic history and the sources from which it can be reconstructed have posed particular challenges and have shaped the specific contours of what we can tell about the social history of the pre-modern Islamic Middle East.

The most notable feature of pre-modern Islamic social history has been its focus on one particular social group, the ‘ulamā’. In most if not all societies, education and authority over the rituals and institutions of religious expression are factors helping to mark out particular social groups as distinctive. Nonetheless, the special prominence of the ‘ulamā’ in Islamic societies is widely acknowledged. That prominence is reflected, perhaps, in the fact that ‘ulamā’ is one of those Arabic terms that historians routinely render in transliterated, rather than translated form, as if no English approximation will adequately capture the parameters of this social group.

This emphasis on the ‘ulamā’ is somewhat problematic, at least for both the most ancient and most recent periods of Islamic history. The ‘ulamā’ were not there at the outset of Islamic history: they do not correspond neatly to any social stratum in pre-Islamic Mediterranean or southwest Asian societies, and there was hardly a distinctive group of scholars devoted to elaborating and transmitting the Islamic religious and legal sciences when those sciences themselves
were at best in only their most rudimentary stages. The issue of their origins and early development is one of the more intriguing open questions concerning early Islamic history—how, that is, a distinctive group of ‘ulamā’ emerged over the period of Umayyad and early Abbasid rule? In the modern period, too, the central social position of the ‘ulamā’ is not a given. In part this reflects changes in the structure of economic relations and political institutions, changes associated with the rise of a modern capitalist economy, a powerful state system, and the elites who dominate them. Of late, however, anthropologists, political scientists and others have also recognized new social networks and channels of religious authority in many contemporary Muslim societies. The individuals who populate those networks cannot easily be characterized as ‘ulamā’, and sometimes the authority they wield competes with that of scholars associated with more traditional religious institutions.

Nonetheless, for a period spanning the late eighth through the nineteenth centuries, the ‘ulamā’ certainly constituted an important social group in almost all Islamic societies, although of course the precise nature of their social identity and (in some cases) political power varied with particular historical conditions. They formed one component, perhaps the most important component, of those social groups Albert Hourani labeled the “notables” of Middle Eastern societies.¹ Even in the medieval period, when formal political power was usually held by a variety of military elites, many of them ethnically or culturally alien to the people over whom they ruled, the ‘ulamā’ served an important political role, as mediators between the rulers and the local populations who looked with reverence and respect upon the leading religious and legal scholars.²

Quite naturally, social historians have devoted considerable attention to the ‘ulamā’. In part, of course, this reflects the bias of the surviving sources, particularly the biographical dictionaries which constitute an indispensable source for medieval social history. The authors of those biographical dictionaries were, for the most part, scholars of the religious and legal sciences themselves, and their efforts to record the life stories of their contemporaries focused on the ‘ulamā’, who were (in their own not disinterested view) the “heirs