The years that followed the Ottoman conquest are still, in spite of the growing volume of research on the Ottoman period, a period about which we know little. On the one hand, there were dramatic consequences in terms of what happened to the Mamluk system, the Mamluk sultans and ruling class. The few studies of the period have tended to focus on these changes, that is on issues of a political and military nature. On the other hand, little is known about those whose position was lower on the social scale, those who were not part of the Mamluk military or political establishment, such as the civilian notables. Ibn Iyās’s account of the forced exile to Istanbul of a large number of qādis, administrators, religious figures and artisans has consequently been the focus of many of the narratives of the period. As a result, many issues regarding the social consequences of this conquest and the changes it brought to are still largely unexplored. There is an implicit recognition that 1517 had an impact of some sort on society, but this has not been considered in any depth.

Therefore the present study aims at looking at those social categories outside the Mamluk military establishment, which was hit so hard by the conquest. It attempts to consider the social impact of this important event and of some of the consequences of this conquest as they were felt by those who were outside the circles of power. It also asks whether we can see some levels of continuity among the ordinary urban dweller, the artisans and the traders of the city, between the last decades of the Mamluk sultanate and the first decades of Ottoman rule; if, in other words, at the lower levels of society we can see certain levels of continuity between these two political rules.

Admittedly, the problem of sources remains an obstacle. The Arabic chronicles of this period are scarce and, with the exception of Ibn Iyās, rather summary in nature and therefore they do not provide the answers we are looking for. And even though some court records date from the years following the conquest, the early registers are thin in their content.
and they lack detail. It would in fact appear that the courts were not as frequently used by the inhabitants of the city as it occurred later. The job of finding sources on the ordinary urban dweller has therefore continued to be a major obstacle for the social history of the early Ottoman period. Stanford Shaw, who studied the financial administration of Egypt through the Turkish Archives in Istanbul, had little to say about the social dimensions of the Ottoman conquest, although in many other ways, his book remains an indispensable source.

And yet among the archives of Cairo’s court records are some indications that shed light on these issues. They are to be found, not within these records themselves, but in the un-catalogued and loose papers from unidentified registers, or papers of unknown or uncertain origin, gathered in files under the name of Dašt. They are organized in a year-by-year basis. The first of these Dašt files dates from 928/1522, five years after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, and thus a few years earlier than the earliest extant court registers. Among the Dašt files of the first years of the conquest are some loose pages that came not from courts but from the pasha’s diwān, and were mistakenly filed with loose court papers. These are very important because diwān registers are rare, the earliest extant one dates from the mid-18th century, the large majority not having survived. Part of their importance lies in the fact that they contain information on the hisba, on the distribution of iltizāms. In addition, there are some cases of litigation and transactions. These diwān papers have been used by Mohsen Shuman and Ayman Muḥammad to study iltizām, but could be explored further.

In what way can these deeds help to answer some of the questions this paper focuses on? The answer is that they shed light on the direction in which a very important institution developed in the years following the conquest, namely the institution of iltizām, or tax farm. The system of tax grants, or tax concessions, had considerable social implications. Introduced in Egypt during the Ayyubid period, it continued to be used until Muḥammad ʿAlī abolished it in 1811. This tax system can be said to have been a significant factor in the socio-political history of Egypt and in shaping state society relations. These iqṭā’īs, granted by the state to a third party, were, until 1517, a major source of wealth for the Mamluk ruling class and, to a large extent, at the source of their political power. After 1517 this was no longer the case. With the coming of the Ottomans, this situation

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1 The earliest extant court records date from the year 934/1528, the court of al-Ṣālihiyya al-Naḡmīyya and the court of Miṣr al-Qadīma, see S. Milad, 1975, pp. 167-168.