CHAPTER 2

How to Measure Economic Growth in the Middle East?

A Framework of Inquiry for the Middle Islamic Period

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1 Introduction

How can one measure economic growth in the Middle Islamic period, and especially in the tenth and twelfth centuries? For the period prior to the fifteenth century, historians researching Islamic societies have few primary documents or archives at hand. In contrast to the scarcity of primary documents, secondary sources—namely, literary and historical accounts written after the events—are abundant. The situation is the reverse of that of the European Middle Ages, for which a comparatively rich body of archival material is available but few chronicles. Archaeology in Europe and knowledge about medieval material culture there is more developed than in the Middle East due to nationwide systems of archaeological services and a centuries-old tradition of antiquarianism and museums in Europe, whereas archaeology in the Middle East, excepting Israel, is still largely comprised of various—almost random—joint missions by Western institutions, though with specific research questions but not necessarily a systematic state-wide approach. This difference in the nature of the sources and approaches has led scholars of economic history in Europe and the Middle East to ask different sets of questions. Many such questions, however, are of mutual and common interest, such as those that seek to investigate and define the economic and cultural relations between the Islamic world and Europe, or, from studies that have taken a more comparative perspective, what are the pre-conditions for economic growth and decline

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1 This contribution presents the preliminary results of the project, ‘The new economic dynamics of the Zangid and Ayyūbid period’, supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG), with research carried out in the period 2004–2008, and outlines its methodological framework. The manuscript of this contribution was concluded 2010 and only few literature added since then.
within and across different societies? Medieval chronicles and biographical dictionaries in the Middle East rarely showed interest in such questions.

Eliyahu Ashtor, the pioneering economic historian, attempted to take a systematic approach to the measurement of economic change and prosperity. He drew extensively on Northern Italian archives as his main source for economic information on the Middle East, but such archives were prolific only from the late thirteenth century on. Ashtor and his disciples extracted as much economic data as possible from them and compared the information with medieval Arabic chronicles. They compiled extensive lists of prices and other economic information; however, their works include little in the way of reflections on the legal, economic, and terminological constraints underlying those figures. Given the state of scholarship examining Islamic numismatics at the time, for example, they were not able to define the coins precisely denoted on certain price tags in the archival and literary sources.

In 1971, Maurice Lombard tried to establish a theoretical framework that was able to explain the economic dynamics at work in the medieval Middle East, and especially that was able to account for urban expansion. He compared the development of a monetary economy with the growth of urban centres from the second/eighth through the fifth/eleventh centuries. From an elevated historical vantage point, Lombard considered economic interaction between Europe, Asia, and Africa, all of which was connected via the trade routes of the Mediterranean Sea and the water ways along the Volga River. He drew up a persuasive picture in which immense monetary flows effectively created ‘urbanity’, at least according to his theoretical considerations. The factual basis on which he made such claims, however, was rather slim and highly contingent on an idiosyncratic reading. He tried to resolve the problems he encountered when defining his economic factors, such as precious metal flows, as well as
