Carl F. Petry


This is a timely book on an important topic by a leading scholar of the Mamluk period. In this well-researched study, Carl F. Petry sets out to explore the arena of crime and punishment in one of the central regions of the Islamic lands before the Ottoman takeover of 1516. The result is an enormous amount of information, often extremely interesting and at times transcending the limits of the topic, with occasional allusions to the situation in medieval Europe, and the retelling or translation of dozens of specific cases of alleged crimes, some several pages long (e.g., pp. 88–9). These have been selected from more than one thousand reports on criminal acts in Cairo and Damascus. At times the reader may feel overwhelmed by the data. A short review cannot do justice to this rich book.

There are, however, two major methodological problems with the book. First, Petry’s definition of crime is exceptionally broad. Second, by evoking the “underworld” in the title, he creates the expectation that he will expose the world of criminals at the bottom of society. In fact, what he discusses is by no means merely an “underworld”; much of the criminal activity documented here was perpetrated by the elite.

An introduction defining what constituted crime in pre-Mamluk Islamic society would have better prepared the reader to engage with the material than Petry’s current (excessively detailed) discussion of already well-known sources (sadly, however, Ibn Ṭawq, an exceptionally useful source for Damascus, is missing).

Despite Petry’s choice of a less than satisfactory definition of crime, which simply refers to “the chroniclers’ attribution of criminal gravity” to a given activity (p. 2), the chapter titles indicate that, by and large, he follows the classi-
cal categories of crime as they emerged in Islamic jurisprudence. This is not always the case, however; in chapter 4, on corruption and fraud, he prefers the criteria implied by Mamluk chroniclers (p. 120). The definition and parameters of crime are not the only issues that may raise conceptual disagreement. In my opinion chapters 2 and 8, as well as a few sub-sections in other chapters, do not actually belong in the present book. For example, in chapter 2, on public disturbances, the author analyzes riot and revolt, revisiting ground already covered by several scholars. Riots and revolts do not qualify as ‘crimes,’ whether in classical Islamic or in Western political and legal theories. And for good reason. Civil turbulence, especially when it occurs on a large scale, is something much larger than crime tout court. In fact, Petry acknowledges that in medieval societies violence was the means of resistance most readily available to the poor. The role played by Mamluk officers in instigating the masses fails to support Petry’s treatment of riots as criminal activities (pp. 45–6). If anything, such interventions provide further evidence of the manipulative power exerted by military elites on simple folk for the sake of personal gain.

Chapter 8 is devoted to political conspiracies, espionage and similar phenomena – dubbed “smart crimes” by Petry. Although these activities merit study, they are more complex than mere crime and form part of the political machinery. Similarly, chapter 4, “corruption and fraud,” does not deal with any social underworld, but rather with high regime officials, qadis and other functionaries with bourgeois or elite affiliations who manipulated, embezzled and gave or received bribes when administering charitable trusts (waqfs) and other assets (e.g., pp. 75, 121). Indeed, the sultan himself was occasionally implicated in such malfeasance. Furthermore, the reader is left unclear about the status of “fraudulent confiscation”; was the confiscation of assets a crime (as suggested by the chroniclers) or not (as in the eyes of the beneficiaries) (pp. 83, 86, 87)? Chapter 5 deals with moral vices, such as the drinking and sale of wine, non-normative sexual acts, and dress code violations. Here, again, the relationship with the established order was ambiguous; the sultans had a vested interest in the wine trade and on occasion sanctioned it, sometimes with farcical results, for instance, the habitual drunkenness of Mamluk soldiers was sometimes abetted by the regime. The chroniclers expressed revulsion at these phenomena and the persons who were part of them. One writer, for example, attributed a sultan’s violent end to his love of alcohol. Rape and fornication are also reported about elite persons. By comparison, ordinary inhabitants, according to the chroniclers, were involved in these vices only sporadically.

Four chapters analyze crime ‘proper,’ according to the categories recognized in classical fiqh. Chapter 3 deals with theft and brigandage, which were endemic and on the rise towards the end of the era, especially among Bedouin.