BOOK REVIEWS


This book contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature on social and economic conditions in Egypt during the period of Ottoman rule.¹ Its significance lies in its concentration on what is perhaps the most obscure period of Egypt’s history (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and in the author’s meticulous exploitation of little-used and hard-to-find documentation, including contemporary chronicles and biographical compendia, Arabic and Turkish manuscript sources, and—most importantly—a large number of deeds of endowment (waqfiyyāt). The book argues that, in spite of a façade of continuity with the Mamluk sultanate, Egypt witnessed incremental but important changes under Ottoman rule, from which the indigenous notability profited: “The reutilization of the military and administrative establishments, of the pious foundations, and of the Mamluk architectural heritage were successful because surviving Mamluks and the religious elite were for the most part willing to cooperate with the new regime” (p. 274).

The book begins, dissertation-like, with a somewhat tedious analysis of the sources available for the reconstruction of Egypt’s history in the first two centuries after the Ottoman conquest. The reliability and comparative value of the Arabic and Turkish works—by men such as Ibn Iyas, Muhammad al-Muhibbi, ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha‘rani, Evliya Celebi, and Mustafa ‘Ali, to name only a few—are examined. The author demonstrates a wide knowledge of both the published and unpublished sources, and has sifted her material carefully to avoid the common error of projecting backwards the trends which appeared in the much better-studied eighteenth century. Because of the work’s emphasis on the persons and institutions supported by pious endowments, the author justifies the use of waqf documents in lieu of a much more laborious exploration of Islamic court records, since the waqfiyyāt present a summary of the results of long and complex judicial proceedings.

The first half of the book, chapters two through seven, considers the conquest and organization of Ottoman Egypt in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Interesting details are offered concerning Ottoman-Mamluk relations before the conquest, which show significant contact between the Turks and their Arab neighbors prior to Selim’s conquests of 1516-17. Thus, from an ethnic or cultural perspective, the advent of Ottoman-Turkish rule represented no great or sudden transition. The Ottomans emphasized their faithfulness to what was best in the Mamluk past by ascribing many elements in their administrative code for Egypt, the Qanun Nama, to the venerable Mamluk Sultan, Qaytbay. Nevertheless, Ottoman rule brought about substantial alterations in Egypt’s governing institutions. The two most important officials, the pasha and chief qadi (qadi ‘askar), were Turks appointed from

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Istanbul whose retinues displaced certain of the leading Mamluk and indigenous elements. The centralization of the judicial administration under the chief qadi and the supremacy of the Hanafi madhhab, to which the Ottomans adhered, were resented by the Egyptians. However, Egyptian qadis continued to staff the court system, and many local jurists did very well for themselves under Ottoman rule. The presence in Egypt of a multiplicity of Sunni madhhabss created a secure niche for Egyptian muftis in particular. In all, the author notes greater possibilities for upward mobility under the Ottomans than had existed under the Mamluks; there was undoubtedly a more densely woven web of relations between the ruling elite and the subject classes. Part of the explanation lies in the gradual degradation of the Mamluk system itself from a system of recruitment and training to one of patronage and promotion, with affiliated elements playing an increasingly important role in a bifurcated network of military clans (the Fiqari and Qasimi factions).\(^2\) There was, in addition, the well-attested development of relations between the resident Ottoman regiments and the Cairo guilds.

Chapter five highlights several important facets of religious life in Ottoman Egypt. The Ottoman period witnessed the emergence of al-Azhar as the preeminent center of learning in Sunni Islam. This took place because the endowments of other colleges were exhausted while al-Azhar’s were consistently renewed and expanded by the Ottomans—perhaps, as the author quite plausibly suggests, because al-Azhar, unlike most other madrasas inherited from the Mamluk era, did not represent the prestige or lineage of a particular Mamluk household. The status of the naqib al-ashraf (incongruously occupied by a Turkish nominee before it came into the hands of the Bakri and Sadat families in the eighteenth century) was also enhanced during this time, as was that of the ashraf in general. The Ottomans sought to legitimize their rule through the granting of privileges to the Prophet’s living descendants, as well as through special care for shrines of persons who were close to the Prophet. Although Turkish sufism had relatively little effect on religious practice in Egypt, it is worth noting that the cult of Sayyida Zaynab was a product of Ottoman religious policy (p. 163).

The second part of the book (chapters eight through ten), dealing with the history of waqf and architecture in Ottoman Egypt, is the most original in terms of documentation and analysis. As Behrens-Abouseif points out, the history of Ottoman Cairo can scarcely be approached without an examination of the policies and practices with regard to waqf: “Almost no building was erected in Ottoman Cairo without the involvement of a waqf estate because virtually all of Cairo’s land and buildings had already been made waqf by the end of the Mamluk period” (p. 145). This reality presented the Ottomans with a problem. On the one hand, they wished to respect Islamic law, which made waqfs inviolable; on the other hand, they could not effectively administer a country without access to the revenues which were tied up in waqf. The dilemma was resolved in various ways. A survey of real property, including endowed estates, was ordered by Selim I. Although waqfs were theoretically irrevocable, properties could be taken over if the court ruled that they had been acquired illegally. Various subterfuges were also employed, which allowed