BOOK REVIEWS


It is not easy to formulate a precise definition of the Muslim institution of the pious foundation, or waqf. There is, of course, a legal definition which has been developed by legal scholars in various kinds of treatises. However, legal rules reflect only one of the many aspects of the institution, since waqfs were not only a legal concept, but also, and perhaps primarily, tangible objects representing economic value and serving various religious and social purposes. The institution was used to create mosques, madrasas, mausolea and other religious buildings, and, equally, elements of the economic infrastructure such as khans, shops, souks. Moreover, economic assets such as workshops, mills, and tanneries were, as a rule, dedicated to waqfs, as were social gathering places such as coffee houses and bath houses. The different types of waqf were determined by the objects involved, by the identity of the founders and beneficiaries, and by the conditions for exploitation.

In recent years interest in waqfs has increased greatly and approaches to the institution have become more varied. The socio-historical dimension of waqfs, in particular, has become the focus of several case studies which have demonstrated the importance of linking waqfs to their social and economic contexts, rather than studying the concept as an exclusively legal construct. After all, over time waqfs came to represent a considerable economic value, and the endowment of properties became one of the main instruments for organizing their administration and their transfer from one generation to the next. Gradually waqfs developed into a complex system, subject to an elaborate set of rules, that linked economic and social mechanisms to the realm of religion.

The diversity of the waqf institution is shown in this special theme issue of the Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient. The volume contains an introduction by Daniel Crecelius and articles on foundations in Egypt, Ottoman Turkey, Mughal India and Late Ming China. The articles expose the waqf institution in its various guises and settings and suggest a variety of approaches to waqfs and pious foundations in general.

In the latest installment of a series of articles on the waqf of Jawhār al-Lālā in fifteenth century Egypt, Jean-Claude Garcin and Mustapha Anouar Taher present a historical analysis of the administration of a large waqf complex over a period of roughly ten years. The aim of the study is to show that the creation of a waqf did not transform economic assets into static objects dissociated from the framework of economic forces. To the contrary, the waqf institution continually profited from, and participated in, the dynamism of the market and was sensitive to economic fluctuations. The waqf complex was regularly reorganized and expanded as part of an economic
policy, and investments were made to ensure the prosperity of the endowment. Over time a mosaic of discrete properties was gathered together within the framework of the waqf, whose purpose can be characterized as a combination of piety, the support of specific religious aims, and the assemblage of an estate intended to provide a solid economic basis for the founder and his descendants. The authors demonstrate that the integration of pious aims with astute economic management was not the result of a personal whim, but rather an aspect of the essence of the waqf institution, which served as a means to link the domain of religion to that of the economy and personal interests to the welfare of the community.

A type of waqf which has been little studied is the so-called cash waqf, that is, the endowment of a sum of money whose returns are used for a pious purpose. The practice, which became widespread in Ottoman Turkey during the sixteenth century, was the subject of a fierce debate among the ‘ulamā’, but it was finally endorsed by the powerful mufti Ebu’s-Su’ud. In his article on the cash waqf in Bursa (1555-1823), Murat Çizakça first summarizes the legal discussion relating to the practice and then analyzes its economic aspects. He argues that it was probably the economic advantages of the cash waqf which led to its official acceptance. Cash waqfs were attractive because the interest on the capital was usually lower than the market rate, they were conducive to the redistribution of capital, and they provided large injections of capital into the urban economy. Çizakça relates the gradual decline in the popularity of cash waqfs to the inflexibility of interest rates, which did not follow economic fluctuations, and to increasing state control of waqfs in general.

In his article, Gregory Kozlowski argues that the waqf system in Mughal India was used by the authorities primarily to support a system of direct patronage of scholars. Whereas endowments in the Ottoman empire generally took a “spatial” form—madrasas and other religious buildings, endowments in India often took the form of financial grants and offices. Kozlowski argues that this was due to the structure of the religious elite and the specifically Indian tradition of education, which was not organized in a system of madrasas, but rather was the monopoly of certain scholarly families and Sufi orders. For this reason, the foundation of madrasas would have contributed little to the state’s control of the body of scholars and its ability to organize the corpus of ‘ulamā’ into an official hierarchy. A certain measure of control could be achieved only by penetrating existing networks of scholars.

In the closing article, Joanna F. Handlin Smith sheds light on charitable institutions in China, focusing on the foundation of a dispensary in the first half of the seventeenth century. She observes that in the late Ming period the general system of endowments changed from a state-controlled system of institutions to a system of private philanthropy. Whereas personal endowments previously had been kept secret and were directed mainly at monasteries, philanthropic initiatives now came to be widely publicized in an effort to enhance the pious reputation of the founders. As the example of the dispensary shows, foundations could result from the initiative of a group of volunteers who responded to specific needs within the population. Only at a later stage did these foundations assume an institutionalized form.