The study of the Islamic civilization, its rise and development throughout its history, has greatly been advanced in the last century. All the various aspects of Islamic civilization, its religion, tradition, poetry, philosophy, literature, law, art, and language have been thoroughly investigated and essential contributions have been made toward a better understanding of its manifold manifestations.

There is, however, one field in which no substantial advances can yet be registered, and which still remains greatly a terra incognita: the economic and social history of the Islamic civilization. It is true there exists now quite a number of studies on some aspects of the economic development of early and medieval Islam, but a comprehensive social and economic history of Islam has still to be written.¹)

Such a goal has to be preceded by specialized studies, monographical treatments of specific economic problems of the various regions and of the various periods of the Islamic world in order to pave the way and supply the basic material for the long over-due socio-economic history of Islam.

This study attempts to deal with but one phase of the economic history of the Islamic world and to survey, or rather re-examine, just one aspect, the spice and pepper trade of a group of Muslim merchants in Egypt, which was carried on from the 12th to the 15th century

¹) It is the realization of this very need felt by scholarly circles and the awareness of its urgent remedy that this Journal has been launched and that other monographic treatments of the social and economic history of the Islamic and Oriental world in general are now being undertaken.
between Egypt on the one side and Yemen, South Arabia and India on the other side.

For very few periods in Islamic history do we possess such an abundance of historical sources, such a mass of first-rate records, documents and texts as for the history of Egypt under the Ayyubid and Mamluk dynasty. In subjecting even a part of this vast Arabic source material to an analysis and investigation, to a thorough search for economic and social data, we meet frequently and repeatedly with the term Kārimī, which is used mostly in connection with and as a qualification of a merchant and occurs mainly in the form of “tājir al-Kārimī”, or, in plural, “tujjār al-Kārimī.”

This term, Kārimī, which has no meaning in Arabic, remains still unexplained and has thus far defied any attempt at a satisfactory and acceptable solution. The suggestion to explain the word as a designation of the very commodity in which the merchants did specialize—namely, pepper and other spices—does not hold ground; nor does the explanation that Kārimī is to be regarded as a corrupt form of the word “Kānem”, the name of a territory inhabited by Negro tribes in the West Sudan. This latter suggestion, though accepted by E. Quatremère over a century ago and then by other European scholars and has since then entered the Arabic dictionaries, is also untenable. Nothing in the sources supports such an explanation and everything speaks against it, since the merchants who were designated as “Kārimī” did

1) Ibn Baṭṭūta uses the rather strange plural form akārim; see later Note.