The most cursory examination of many of the chronicles and histories of the medieval Islamic world suggests the importance of catastrophic events in the lives of the people of the Near East. One reads in the pages of Tabari, Ibn al-Athir, Ibn al-Djawzi, Makrizi, al-‘Ayni, and other historians of the numerous occurrences of severe weather, storms, earthquakes, floods, famine, epidemics of one disease or another, pest influxes, epizootics, and fires. For whatever reasons, with the noteworthy exception of Professor Michael Dols’ masterful treatment of the black death in the Middle East, modern Islamic historians seem to have paid scant attention to the nature and effects of disasters. Basing my work upon methods and suggestions to be found in the writings of Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, and other historians of the Annales school, I have gone through much of the published and manuscript materials for the period between 661 and 1500 and have collected data concerning the various catastrophes visited upon Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, and Iran. My purpose in so doing is to attempt to delineate the economic, psychological, and religious effects of these so-called “Acts of God”.

After collecting and examining this data over the past few years, I have concluded that the most plausible way in which to approach the problem is through a holistic analysis. As is obvious, for example, in the case of famine and epidemic, many of these phenomena are intimately related to each other, frequently in a causal way. Also, any assessment of economic or demographic effects must take into account the cumulative nature of these events. Perhaps a more significant connection of these phenomena may be posited through interpreting them as causal factors of...
stress. Stress is a word much bandied about in the United States today, due to the preoccupation in this country with coronary disease and nervous disorders of one form or another. There are reasons to think, however, that the problem of stress is not confined to modern urban, industrialized society. Studies of European history in the Middle Ages, e.g. at the time of the black death pandemic of 1348-49, as well as information supplied by the medieval Arabic authors indicate that medieval people, East and West, were prey to stress, although their reactions may well have differed from those of modern persons. Although research in this area is just beginning, there are reasons for believing that stress historically has been manifested in two major forms: ecstatic, enthusiastic, or deviationist religious practices or cults, or susceptibility to and triggering of epidemic disease stemming from physiological changes resulting from the human body's response to the negative stimuli associated with stress 4). For these reasons, it seems most appropriate to analyze the catastrophes as a group rather than to isolate and concentrate on one particular incident or class of incidents. I wish, then, to turn now to a discussion of the disasters which struck Mamlûk Egypt and suggest their meaning for the Egyptian rural dweller and, given the peasant's role as food supplier, for Egyptians generally.

Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie's *Times of Feast, Times of Famine* has done much to make historians aware of the value of and problems associated with the history of climate and the historical effects of weather change 5). Although a number of Ladurie's meteorological concepts are apparently not applicable to Egypt 6), one may gain from his work some ideas of the importance of weather alterations or irregularities for a given society. Numerous weather disturbances occurred in Egypt between 1250 and 1500. Rain played a part in the pattern of weather damage characteristic of the period. It is reported that rains in the 1290's “ruined” many places in Egypt 7). A hard rain of 1298 caused the destruction of a number of houses 8). In 1340 rain damaged goods in shops and, of particular importance in the present context, drowned animals in rural areas 9). The most noteworthy and usual effect of rain in the Egyptian countryside, however, was damage to the crops—a major instance of which occurred in upper Egypt in 1373 10). Loss of animals, dwellings, and crops meant real trouble for the peasant, and loss of crops, at least, was no doubt a source


6) The remarks about glaciation, for example, Ladurie, *Feast*, 129-226.


8) al-'Aynî, *'Ikhân*, XXIII, 322.
