THE POLICE AND THE PEOPLE IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY EGYPT

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In the summer of 1817 Mehmed 'Ali, Governor of Egypt for twelve years, appointed a new market inspector (muhtasib) for Cairo. Exasperated by repeated reports of irregularities and fraud in the markets of Cairo and frustrated by his previous muhtasib's inability to impose law and order he is reported to have said, “I have extended my authority to lands far and distant. I am feared by the bedouins, by highwaymen and by many others. Except by the rabble of Cairo; they are not deterred by my muhtasibs. They deserve to have a new muhtasib who will show them no mercy and give them no reprieve.” Soon after his appointment, the new market inspector set out implementing his draconian measures that were intended to bring order to the loose markets of Cairo: a counterfeiter of currency was hanged from one of the old gates of medieval Cairo (Bāb Zuwayla) with a coin hanging from his nose; butchers caught selling meat at prices higher than those set down by the Pasha’s divān had their noses slit by the muhtasib himself; and kunāfa merchants cheating in weight and prices were forced to sit on their hot pans while still on fire.1

This staging of spectacles of punishment to deter onlookers was not used only with the boisterous merchants of Cairo; the authorities had recourse to this kind of punishment in numerous other occasions and with different kinds of offenders. For example, in 1824 when Mehmed 'Ali started founding his new disciplined


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army by conscripting fellahin from the Sa‘id, a major rebellion broke out in which 30,000 men and women were reported to have taken part. In a desperate attempt to stop the rebellion from spreading to other provinces the Pasha (as Mehmed ‘Ali was simply known in Egypt) wrote to the Governor of Isna to hang some of the elderly or disabled at the entrances of villages to be a deterrent to others. Two years later when the government was still going ahead with its conscription policy and when conscription waves followed each other torrentially ravaging the countryside, men took desperate means to avoid being drafted into the army. One such method was for potential recruits to maim themselves in the hope of being declared medically unfit for military service. When the extent of maiming became known to the authorities, and when it was reported that it was often the wives and mothers who were assisting the men in these dramatic gestures, Mehmed ‘Ali ordered these women to be hanged at village entrances “so as to be an example to others.”

The spectacular use of the culprit’s body as a deterrent or as a site of retribution, however, had its own limitations. After all, even if the punishment was flogging and not hanging, the body of the culprit could sustain only a limited amount of pain that might or might not have been an effective deterrent. Furthermore, for this kind of punishment to work the spectacle had to be massive and the audience great, hence the public hangings in big squares in urban centers, and at village entrances in the countryside. This, again, had its limitations, since only a limited number of people could be present at any one moment to watch the spectacle. And if the severity and “enchanting” nature of the spectacle of the gallows was intended to be part of a gradually expanding repertoire of stories to be circulated by the spectators to those who were absent, then more abstract means were soon discovered that

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2 Ma‘iyya Saniyya, Turki: S/1/47/7, doc. no. 306, on 13 Sha‘bân 1239/14 April 1824. The choice of the elderly and disabled was explained by saying that “they were useless and could not perform any [valuable] task.” This and all subsequent archival documents are from the Egyptian National Archives, Dār al-Wathā‘iq al-Qawmiyya, Cairo.