

Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt 1250-1517

Review Number:

271

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 January, 2002

Author:

Adam Sabra

ISBN:

9780521772914

Date of Publication:

2000

Price:

£37.50

Pages:

208pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.cambridge.org/uk/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521772914>

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Ron Buckley

N.B. Some older browsers may not render the accented characters which appear in the Arabic translations correctly. They should display correctly in Internet Explorer 6 and Netscape 6. It has not been possible to exactly replicate accents which appear below the text and where this has occurred and underline has been substituted.

Although the writing of the social history of medieval and pre-modern Europe began in earnest several decades ago there has been no analogous development in Middle Eastern studies. Sabra's book, which represents the first monograph dealing with poverty and charity within the pre-modern Middle East, is a move towards addressing this imbalance and is therefore to be heartily welcomed.

It is indeed immediately refreshing that the book does not focus on the political, military and educated classes whose activities form the subject of the majority of Middle Eastern histories - a case of all butter and no bread. Clearly, there is a very good reason why history concerns itself with the elites, quite aside from the inherent interest in the formative role their positions allowed them to play, since it is these with whom the sources are primarily concerned and these who had access to recording their histories and concerns in a durable form. The neglected classes of earlier times left few vestiges of their passing. The problem is, of course, that the more the historian moves away from the elites, the more complex the task of reconstructing the past becomes.

Sabra's book, in intent at least, is a social study, a study of poverty, but it is also a historical work and as

such the kind of data he is required to handle is different from that which would be acquired by a social scientist, and the means by which he gains access to that data is completely different. The social scientist may conduct interviews, set up sophisticated apparatus for the verification of hypotheses, engage at first hand with the subject matter and emerge with a statistical summation of the evidence. Historians, on the other hand, do not have direct access to their subject. The only questions which they can ask with any expectation of receiving answers are those questions which happen to be dealt with in the surviving documents. The historian is frequently obliged to reconstruct partially hypothetical accounts from fragmentary evidence. Rarely, if ever, does he have the kind of material that would satisfy the social scientist.

The fundamental value of approaching such problems, however, is in the speculative richness it adds to historical research and our understanding of societies in the past of the Middle East. The result may be that the conclusions are more tentative and tenuous, but the effort is nonetheless to be applauded.

Sabra has availed himself of a wide variety of sources through which he has often had to sift to arrive at a coherent account. These sources range from the major historical works dealing with the period such as Ibn Taghrībirdī's *al-Nujūm al-Zāhira fī Mulūk Misr wa al-Qāhira* and *al-Maqrūzī's al-Maw'iz wa al-Itibār fī Dhikr al-Khitat wa al-Athar* to the manuals of the market inspector written by al-Shayzarī, Ibn al-Ukhuwwa and Ibn Bassām. Many other minor works are also referred to, in addition to treatises on Islamic theology such as al-Ghazzālī's *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and Ibn al-Jawzī's *Talb's Ibl's*. Also included are travelogues written by visitors to Cairo which contain personal observations and eyewitness accounts relating to pious endowments which illustrate the services that the pious foundations (*waqf* pl. *awqaf*) offered to the poor, such as providing hospitals for free medical care, Islamic education, the provision of food and water, housing and the burial of the dead.

Despite the obvious industry of the author in collecting his data, he is necessarily often diverted from the study of the poor as a social phenomenon to theoretical discussions concerned with poverty. Like all historians, he is the servant of his evidence. Thus the concept of poverty is explored within medieval Islamic religious literature, particularly sufi. He identifies two basic schools of thought on the subject. The first may be typified by al-Ghazzālī who considered that the poor are inherently more virtuous than the wealthy since their poverty enables them to avoid the distractions of wealth and to concentrate on acquiring knowledge of God. For al-Ghazzālī, the satisfied poor were especially virtuous, and he quotes the Prophet as saying "No one is more virtuous than the poor, if he is content." The second school of thought may be typified by the Hanbalī scholar Ibn al-Jawzī who wrote "Poverty is an illness. He who is afflicted with it must endure it patiently and will be rewarded for his endurance. That is why the poor will enter Paradise five hundred years before the wealthy, due to the importance of their enduring the tribulation." These discussions are interesting and informative, but are naturally limited in the information they provide on poverty as a social phenomenon. Poverty was for some a religious ideal and was adopted voluntarily in the service of God, but it goes without saying that not all the poor renounced material well being for religious purposes.

The hiatus between ideas and measuring and demonstrating the influence of these ideas is indeed great, but Sabra does show how such theoretical discussions influenced the way in which the poor were regarded, in that the wealthy believed that by giving alms to the poor they could partake in some measure of their blessed status.

Sabra also discusses two groups within the urban poor frequently referred to in the sources: the *zu'r* or *zu'r*, loosely organized criminal gangs of neighbourhood "toughs", and the *harāfsh* who seem to have been an equally unstable element within society and who latterly became an organized band devoted to begging.

In dealing with begging and almsgiving, the discussion once again largely concerns polemics within religious and literary works. Particular attention is paid to the sufi manuals which deal with the moral aspects of these activities for sufis: whether alms should be given and who should receive them. Sabra does, however, also investigate the role of the state in collecting and distributing the alms tax during the Ayyubid and early Mamluk periods. More colourful is the anecdotal material, for example that among the tricks that beggars use to obtain alms are "swearing oaths which cause one's skin to crawl", impersonating preachers or

sufis and taking off their clothes and walking naked among the people so as to dupe them into believing that they do not possess any clothes. A traveller to Cairo condemned "the importunity of their beggars, the multitude of blind mendicants, the abundance of pestering paupers, lacking a member or paralyzed, one-handed or one-footed, showing various diseases, or . with grave wounds or sores." Sabra also enlivens the narrative with descriptions of the trickeries of the Ban? S?s?n, a name given to a collection of con-men, professional beggars, tricksters and fake sufis dealt with in a variety of poetry and prose works and scripts for shadow plays.

As regards those who disperse alms, Sabra shows how the Mamluk state itself was occasionally involved in the care of the poor, for example by building the orphans' depository (*mawdi' al-hukm*) to safeguard the property of orphans and by occasionally freeing persons imprisoned for debt and settling their debts. Most acts of charity were, however, left to the consciences of individuals, and as might be expected the accounts generally relate to the sultans, the military leaders, the wealthy and influential, and have little to say about the charitable acts of the common man. Nonetheless, the discussion is informative and, in the case of acts of charity designed to ward off illnesses (of oneself, a friend or family member), particularly well documented and rich in detail.

One of the more interesting chapters, to my mind at least, concerns standards of living. Here, Sabra attempts to reconstruct the housing, clothing and food of the poor. To describe the housing conditions of the poor he is forced to refer to data primarily applicable to periods prior to or after the Mamluk period. Once again, contemporary anecdotal evidence is evocative. For example, a European traveller to Cairo in 1482-3 observes, "It is not even possible to lodge all of the population in the city. One sees many people living outside of the city in tents, pavilions, holes in the ground and pits. The people cannot live in the city due to lack of dwellings."

The problems due to the paucity of source material and surviving artefacts are even more acute when Sabra comes to describe the clothing worn by the urban poor. Thus, the author is obliged to rely principally on descriptions of clothing given to orphans and poor boys who studied at the Qur'anic schools where they received a free education in addition to cash allowances, food and clothing. Regarding his description of the dress of poor females, this is extrapolated from inventories of items belonging to deceased poor women at the end of the fourteenth century AD in Mamluk Jerusalem. This is supplemented with information regarding the estates of women peddlers active in Jerusalem during the same period. Thus Sabra is forced to generalise on the basis of small samples. On the whole the data is very limited and fraught with terminological difficulties. Whatever confidence one wishes to place in the conclusions, it does highlight the problems of dealing with social issues, and also the author's considerable efforts to make the sources speak. As elsewhere, he can only show what was possibly the case, not prove it; he can only persuade us to accept the generalisations, not convince us.

Sabra also attempts to estimate the purchasing power of the poor in medieval Cairo. Unfortunately, no data is available on the vast majority of the urban working population, but he is able to utilise new information contained in *waqf* documents which often state how much the employees (doormen, guards, custodians and so on) of these charitable foundations (such as mosques, sufi institutions and tombs) were paid. The author takes these salaries and compares them with the quoted prices of wheat, the bread from which formed the staple diet.

There are times when even the most assiduous historian must resign himself to his ignorance and admit it honestly, and as the author readily concedes, there are a number of inherent problems in his approach. These include the fact that the *waqf* employees were probably better off than many other poor persons in Cairo in that they received a regular monthly salary and sometimes a food allowance, and that the employees are all men and thus no account is taken of the pay of women and children who would also have contributed to the income of a poor family. Similarly problematic is verifying that the wages were actually paid, and the absence of a steady series of reliable quotations for the price of wheat for all periods. Nevertheless, the results are consistent enough and lead one plausibly to conclude that at least the *waqf* servants received a salary sufficient to provide for their families.

The chapter on food shortages is interesting, though perhaps not always directly relevant except for the obvious implication that the poor must have suffered. Sabra examines the causes of food shortages by means of ten detailed and well-documented case studies of food shortage and famine between 1250 and 1517. The amount of detail he is able to provide illustrates the preoccupation of the sources with the prices and shortages of wheat, which in turn illustrates the importance of the commodity. He examines the devastating effect that these shortages could have on the poor. Once again, anecdotal evidence is supplied, the contemporary chronicler Ibn al-Daw?d?r? remarking " [I] saw with my own eyes outside al-Barqiya gate outside al-Q?hira, in a trench outside the walls, a large group which resembled savage beasts who had lost any sign of humanity." Sabra goes on to discuss the measures taken by the Mamluk state to prevent and alleviate famine and the ways that the poor found to survive.

The historian of social history is forbidden from knowing anything that the past has not yielded to them. Thus, many aspects of the life of the poor in this period will forever remain unknown, many questions we would like to ask will never receive an answer. Since, as the author frequently concedes, there is little material available, one might suggest that the task never be started, that the history never be written. But historians should be able to produce sound and trustworthy history even when they are unable to see everything. Sabra has indeed produced a sound and trustworthy history.

While it must be acknowledged that the surviving material on Mamluk Egypt is particularly rich and includes historical works which often deal with social issues, the author's industry and success in identifying relevant sources and making them bear witness for his social history should hopefully encourage others to do likewise. As Sabra tantalisingly remarks, the sources for a study of the poor in the medieval Islamic world are in no way exhausted.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/271#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2567>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>